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DEVELOPMENT

Gibson Smith hits magic 40

Realty company's rise parallels city's growth from regional to international

DOUG SMITH



Companies fortunate enough to enjoy longevity generally observe anniversaries at landmark intervals: 25, 50 and 100 years.

But at Charlotte's Gibson Smith Realty, 40 is the magic number.

That's because the three owners believe the firm's four decades in business closely parallel Charlotte's rise from a small Southern city to a banking center.

I was impressed with their file folder full of research.

When Gibson Smith left Belk Stores as real estate director to found Gibson Smith Realty Co. in 1964, Charlotte's population was around 230,000, the tallest building was 20 stories, Interstate 77 hadn't opened to the S.C. line and the airport had no international flights.

"Who would have believed 40 years ago that we would have a 60-story tower with a bank headquarters, two interstates through the city and flights to Europe," said Gibson Smith Realty President Ward Mullis, who has guided the firm for the past 22 years.

Today, the citywide population is estimated at 614,330 and the countywide population at 801,137.

"The influx has changed our business by bringing people here from all parts of the country," Mullis said. "It has changed our residential mix dramatically. Forty years ago you didn't go to the grocery store and hear people speaking three different languages."

If you're having difficulty visualizing 1964, Mullis' staff compiled a few noteworthy facts to jog your memory:

- Movie stars Nicolas Cage, Keanu Reeves, Rob Lowe and Russell Crowe were born.
- The Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show for the first time.
- The first Ford Mustang rolled off the assembly line.
- The surgeon general warned that smoking may be hazardous to your health.
- President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law.

What's surprising to Mullis is that amid 40 years of rapid change, Gibson Smith Realty "is not greatly different. We are probably about the same size (in staff). Gib, and I after him, chose not to get really big."

What has changed, he said, is the volume of business, the productivity of brokers and the size of the deals.

"Back in the early 1970s we still had membership in the Million Dollar Club," Mullis said. "That's where you got status for doing a million-dollar deal. Of course, a million-dollar deal is not that big anymore."

In his first full year at Gibson Smith, he led the company with slightly more than \$1 million in sales.

During those years, Mullis said, the total sales for the six brokers in the office was about \$6 million annually. This year, Gibson Smith's five-broker office expects sales to exceed \$65 million.

Technology also has changed the business.

"Years ago when we listed a property, we delivered photos and a mock-up of a flier to the printer, waited for it to be printed, then

mailed hard copies to prospects we thought might be interested," Mullis said. "Today, we create a full-color electronic brochure in-house and anyone in the world can look at it in a matter of seconds."

Valuing relationships

Mullis joined Gibson Smith in 1972 and now owns the firm with two partners: vice presidents John Jones, who arrived in 1981, and H.P. "Smitty" Smith, who came in 1992. The late founder, who served as president until 1982, sold the firm upon his retirement to Mullis, Jones and Richard Lewis. When Lewis retired, Smitty Smith bought his interest.

"We've always had three partners," Mullis said. "The only time that has changed is when one of the partners retired."

The principals resisted the 1990s rush by local real estate firms to affiliate with national partners to gain access to a wider market.

"We never felt it was necessary," Smitty Smith said. "We always felt the relationships, the customers and clients we had maintained all those years were the value to us. We never felt the value was in a company flag out of Houston or Chicago."

Smith -- the newest partner -- said he was drawn to the firm in part by Mullis' recognized leadership in the industry -- "he helped write the ethics code."

Union County roots

Mullis, who was born in Union County -- "23 miles due east of The Square" -- served in the Marine Corps in Washington, D.C., during the Korean War and graduated from Carolina Business College.

"I enjoyed my time in Washington," he said. "I could go to the Smithsonian on weekends and spend a whole day -- it was quite an education for a left-handed plowboy from Union County."

After his discharge, he joined furniture maker Shaw Manufacturing Co. in Charlotte and rose to executive vice president before joining Gibson Smith.

"That was my second job," he said. "I've had only two jobs in all of my years."

At industry events, members often seek out Mullis' table where they know they'll get a portion of wit with a meal.

That's something he honed over lunchtime discussions with the city's notable architects, judges and historians during years of dining at the Charlotte City Club "bull pen" table.

"I tell people that I have a PSL at the City Club and that's where I got my Phd -- piled higher and deeper," he said.

At age 74, Mullis plans to remain active in the company as it prepares for the next 40 years.

"I enjoy what I do. I'm in good health. I don't even think about retirement," he said.

Doug Smith