



PENINSULA TIMES TRIBUNE, Friday, March 20, 1981—B

Times Tribune staff photo by Bob Andries

John Head was born poor but never felt impoverished. Now he has a long list of accomplishments, including a thriving store.



# How John Head's hard work, tenacity paid off

By Ann Gibbons  
Times Tribune staff

MENLO PARK — He's the son of a Southern black cook. He's the father of a math professor.

He's the neighborhood grocer, and the suave fellow who ran a nightclub north of Chicago until the Internal Revenue Service shut it down.

He's also the first black man to be president of the Menlo Park Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce.

John Head is the 58-year-old proprietor of Head's Market, a grocery store the size of a two-car garage that's located on the

## Peninsula profile

eastern end of Willow Road, just before the Dumbarton Bridge.

His friends know him as an exemplary citizen. He's a polished figure dressed in grey pinstripes, with a Chamber of Commerce president pin fastened to his suit lapel, a Red Cross donor's tiepin attached to his tie and a Rotary Club president's nametag pinned to his shirt.

He spends three full days

every week with a gavel and microphone, sitting on the executive boards of the Boy's Club, the Girl's Club, Red Cross, United Way, the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary.

Every day of the year except Martin Luther King's birthday, he sells enough groceries, liquor and sundries to own a San Jose home, two Mercedes Benzes and to pay for his oldest children's college tuition — the most important luxury of all for the man who was unable to attend college until he was middle-aged.

His eyes sparkle when he speaks of his oldest daughter, who is a math instructor at Po-

mona College in Southern California.

He was born poor, the son of a cook for wealthy cotton farmers in Indianola, Miss.

But he seldom felt impoverished.

"I was treated 100 percent like I was a member of the family," he said.

John remembers long Mississippi delta days when he played in the cotton fields and ate his mother's cooking at a long, wooden dinner table with the cotton grower's family.

Please see HEAD, B-5

## HEAD

Continued from B-1

"Every day of my childhood there were children to play with and a huge backyard and grounds to run around in," he said. "There was no end to the toys that were mine to enjoy."

Good as it was, there was no future for him on the cotton farm.

At age 16, he ran away from home to "find gold in the streets of Chicago, to live in the bright lights," he said.

He found a job as a dishwasher, as a soldier in the U.S. Army, as a Winnebago County Sheriff's deputy, as a cigarette vendor and as a dry cleaner's operator.

It wasn't until he had finally opened his own business — a nightclub — in Rockford, Ill., that he sent for his mother.

It was in that nightclub, the Lexington Club, that John met his wife, Christine.

She was a nurse from San Francisco who couldn't figure out how to play the Lexington's jukebox.

"Don't you know how to play that?" he asked her.

When she told him that she didn't usually frequent places like his club, he asked her out.

They married, bore the first two of their eight children — and lost almost everything they owned.

The Internal Revenue Service was an organization unknown to John Head — until it repossessed his club and home, he said.

It was time to move to San Francisco, an "extremely beautiful" city he had visited once.

John and Christine packed their kids and the few possessions they still owned into a station wagon and drove westward.

When they arrived in San Francisco, John was hired as a maintenance man at San Francisco International Airport.

He worked, and his family grew. They managed to save \$2,000, just enough money to open a storefront grocery store in 1964.

It was a Reader's Digest article that gave him the courage to spend his savings buying and selling groceries. He'd read about a housewife who'd made a fortune in groceries.

It's seldom as easy as it sounds, however. His first grocery store, next door to the one he now owns, burned down two years after he opened it.

And, it happened again this week to his new store. A 14-year-old set fire to the market "because he wanted to watch it burn."

After 17 years of business in Belle Haven, it'll take more than a fire to push John out of town.

"I'd like to keep working here to see Menlo Park remain as a unique city for retired people and families, where small businesses can thrive," he said.

He'd like to see more businesses east of the Bayshore Freeway thrive like his own.

But few other black businessmen have followed his example and joined the Menlo Park Rotary and Chamber of Commerce, a step that he says helped him acquire some loans, stimulated his business and generally made him more successful.

John said he's faced few problems as the only black member of those organizations.

"I don't face anymore discrimination in my life than a woman does in hers," he said. "If you are a minority you can't let it handicap you."

He has a reputation, in fact, as a great joke teller and often uses himself as the butt of the joke to dissolve tension, or just to get a laugh.

While his volunteer work and membership in service groups have obviously been good for business, they have been good for him too.

"I meet so many people who are interesting to talk to," he said. "I learn to listen, to live, to do more with my time and to cooperate with other people."

"You learn about people."