

Reminiscences of James Sobotka

October 12, 2006

Interview conducted by Forrest Barber

BARBER: Well, good morning. This is Forrest Barber and we're here at the Alliance Public Library on the 12th of October, 2006. And this fine fellow over here with the grimace on his face is Jim Sobotka. Good morning, Jim.

SOBOTKA: Good morning.

BARBER: What we're doing here or finally doing is the Alliance history, Alliance Memory oral and video interviews. This was started way in the past back in the '70s by Lyle Crist, Harriet Clem, and of course the biggest contributor back then was Yost Osborne. So this is our first attempt this morning. And I volunteered to come in and do some work on Taylorcraft the history of aviation in Alliance. And, in particular I decided to also research the bars of downtown Main Street and in looking around I got to thinking, "Gee, we haven't done much in history in 50 years." Jim here and his family came here to Alliance in 1968 and he has quite a bit of knowledge. So, we're going to be talking with Jim this morning and we're gonna talk about anything he wants to talk about. First of all, Jim, why don't we just give a who you are and what you do and where your family came from and what you're doing now.

SOBOTKA: Hello. My name is Jim Sobotka. My father was from Salem. My mom was from Sebring. They started the restaurant business in 1968. We were down on the corner of Linden and Prospect. We were there from 1968 to 1974. We moved to our present location and we opened in July of 1974. We've been there since 1974. This is October 12, 2006. My dad started

the business. It was a hobby for him to cook. He loved to cook. He would do a lot of benefits. A lot of the private clubs he would do benefits for them. He started the steak fries at the VFW of Sebring in 1964. And, my uncle who ran the Alliance Recreation suggested that he open up a restaurant. And he had the old Rathskellar down in the basement and it was empty, vacant. So, we went in there in 1967 and started working there and we opened up in February 1968, and, February 23rd 1968. I was a senior in high school and he started a business and we were there 'til February 23rd of 1974. And, we opened the new restaurant on July 16th of 1974. About a 4 month period we weren't in business as far as the restaurant goes. We also had a TV store in Salem. Cornie's Steak House: My father's first name was Cornell and his nickname was Cornie so that is where the name comes from. We've been at the present location since 1974. Business is run by my sisters, myself and my mom. My one sister Tammy is the chef. My other sister helps in the management as a server. We all work together in the management part of it. I tend bar and do the scheduling and do a lot of things. We all share the work equally. We also do outside catering. So, there is a lot of history I know about downtown Alliance being there that many years.

BARBER: Yes, and one of the things we must mention is who is this uncle of yours that had the Rathskellar down there?

SOBOTKA: Tony Dawson.

BARBER: And, we're going to be trying to interview Tony. At the moment he is suffering from ill health I know. But he is an even older bartender in town than you are by many years, course. And that was down at 51 North Linden. Was the Alliance Rec Center and then down in the

basement was the Rathskellar and there was a couple of other names for it. So, that is where Cornie's got its start. And now, right now you're up there on Main Street, one of the nicest places there is on Main Street to eat at. And, you've been there how many years again? What year did you come there again?

SOBOTKA: Came there in 1974 so that would be 32 years.

BARBER: Sure, 32 years. And, these histories that we're doing here -- the last ones were done back then. So, everything that you've done down there since then is history for us. I know also you're involved heavily in coaching kids in the baseball and I know you have a son that did pretty well down at Cincinnati. But, let's get back to the bars now. 'Cause down there at 51 North Linden we had the Alliance Rec Center. Describe it and who was running what and what was going on there.

SOBOTKA: The Alliance Recreation was run by Tony Dawson and John Dolac. They had a bowling alley there. I think there were 20 lanes there, upstairs and downstairs: 12 upstairs and 8 down. And, they had a lounge as well. And, I don't know how long they were there. I think Mathias's owned it before that. I'm not sure how far back that was. That was back probably in the '50s, maybe even the '40s.

BARBER: Yes, these are some of the things that I'll be tracing with my looking things up and we'll do sort of a compilation of this sometime because these names downtown changed quite a little bit. Up south of you at that time, I think, was not the Lexington bar still running?

SOBOTKA: No, it was closed.

BARBER: The Lex was closed at that time. Amazing.

SOBOTKA: Yeah, because the Rec closed in 1971 and we didn't leave there until 1973.

BARBER: Oh, and you still were down...

SOBOTKA: Yeah, when the Rec closed.

BARBER: Ok, what was your decision to come up to where you are now?

SOBOTKA: The L & L owned the building. And the building, my father took me into the building, it had been vacant for 10 years. It was Cunningham Furniture. They left there in 1964 and it was vacant and he asked me what I thought about it. I said, "For what?" and he said, "For a restaurant." And, I said, "I think it will work." And, we went in there and we had one carpenter and a plumber and an electrician and my dad and I and my brother we started in December of '73 and we opened in July of '74. And L & L owned the building and it was Cunningham Furniture prior to us but it had been vacant and everything was [unintelligible], it had been vacant for 10 years. And, before that it was...It has a history of different things. It was a dance hall, a billiard hall. Originally it was built [by] John Drake in 1900 it was built; it was a furniture store.

BARBER: So, you have researched a bit. Thank you. Those things I didn't even know about.

SOBOTKA: The building was built in 1900.

BARBER: Now, one thing that you did down there, in my mind, fairly recently, but probably at least 10 years ago was you remodeled inside and had the ornate ceilings redone.

SOBOTKA: Right, the ceiling was put up in 1900.

BARBER: Tell us a little bit about that.

SOBOTKA: Well, we ...the ceiling when we first went in the building in 1974, we painted it black, thinking that would make the room smaller when it actually made it look like infinity. And, then about seven years ago, we redid the ceiling and we painted it a hunter green, we outlined it in burgundy and we antiqued the whole...we antiqued a lot of it. And, it brought back the old style ceiling and that's the first thing people see when they walk in now. Because there are so many buildings on Main Street that have that kind of a ceiling that have been covered, torn down, destroyed and, you know, when you look at something that was built in 1900, the building was built in 1900, and when you look at the architecture outside the building and you look at the architecture inside the building, and it's amazing how ornate—that's probably the best word that I can use to describe it—how ornate all that work was because all that tin work 'cause it's all metal. It's not plaster. And, it's...it's held the test of time. It's 106 years old.

BARBER: I think if it's possible we are gonna come down and take some photographs down there and then incorporate them with this oral history of that work that was done cause those tin ceilings are just beautiful. Jim, we're gonna take just a wee little bit of a break here while we compile our thoughts. And, we're gonna get going here in a moment. And, we are recording here right now. OK, so we're back on the record here again, Jim. We decided to go back down on North Linden, the Alliance Rec and Cornie's Steak House and that started up. Tell us a little bit how that operated.

SOBOTKA: Well, Tony and John Dolac (?), they operated the restaurant and the lounge. They had like a snack bar up there and bowling alley with 20 lanes. And, we opened the restaurant, he...we operated off his liquor license and he ran the bar. He had someone tend bar for it. He did it when we first opened. My father did the cooking and my mom was a server along with some other family members. We had a small staff. As it progressed, we had a chef, Richard Carmen was the chef. He came from Chicago. He was the chef there with us for some time. Then eventually we took over the bar because at that time the bar wasn't doing that much business. We'd stay open until 4:30 in the morning. We stopped serving liquor and we'd serve food right up until like 4:30 in the morning there. My dad just did everything he could to make it work. Then 1971 the Alliance Recreation closed. Prior to that, I think about a year before that, Tony left that business. Tony Dawson left the business and so the relationship with the Recreation, we had to get our own liquor license and we bought our liquor license from Dee's(?) Tavern in 197--, would have been '71 I think, no '70, '71 or '72, some—probably '72. I think in that area. So we had our own license and, of course, we had to establish our own address and that was 68 Prospect...er...Linden, 68 Linden. 'Cause theirs was 51 and we were 68. We just had to establish that 'cause you have to have a different address for a liquor license and then we operated there until February of '74. And, we moved from there up to 158 East Main Street, where we are at now. And, we were closed from February to July. We opened in July of '74. It was about 4 month or 5 months there. In that time Tony had left there and he went to the Alliance Country Club and from the Alliance Country Club I believe he went to the Elks. From the Elks he went to Las Vegas and then there is more history there but that's pretty much all I know.

BARBER: I might add that we are gonna be interviewing Tony Dawson. I think I mentioned that before. Right now he's having some health problems. But I dearly will love to get your Uncle Tony on tape here, too. Ok, let's go ahead and continue on coming up on to Main Street there.

SOBOTKA: Well, we came up on to Main Street and the building itself was ...there was ...they've done some changes downtown and the thing is when we came up on Main there was a lot more business downtown than there is now. It's, you know, downtown USA has done what our downtown has done. And, it's, it's...you know, we have been one of the mainstays downtown. Everybody, a lot of businesses have moved off Main Street. They have done some improvements downtown.

BARBER: When you came back up on to Main Street at that point in time, there were 14 bars, taverns, or restaurants on Main Street. And, of course, we've seen the decline and that's part of this history people will be looking back on 100 years from now and seeing how this worked. Cornie's, Cornie's Steak House is quite unique. Tell us a little bit about the recipes. Now, your dad developed certain things. And, where did some of those come from?

SOBOTKA: A lot of it was experimenting on us as kids.

BARBER: Oh.

SOBOTKA: We, you know, we, he cut all his own beef. We still cut all our own beef. We do our steaks on charcoal and he built a.., he took a bathtub from Mullins in Salem, cut it in half, welded a piece in the center of it and we still use it today. It is lined with fire brick. We still use

it today. It was built in 1968. The tub has a gas line going in and that's just primarily to light the charcoal. It's not really to cook with. And then use charcoal, we go through about a ton of charcoal every two months. We still cook with charcoal. The seasonings we use are the seasonings he developed and the charcoal you can't duplicate that taste. That's something that...you know there's a lot of companies that make products that tell you that they can but they can't. By cutting everything, we use all choice beef. We don't buy anything. We buy the best we can buy and that's part of the reason why we're still in business on Main Street. The quality of what we sell and the service in what we sell is why we remain in business. In spite of what everybody else is moving out on to State Street. My family has made a lot of friends in the community because of our business. It started out as business customers and become a lot of friends and I'm on...now being in the business as long as we have, I am waiting on fourth generations now. There's several families that come to the restaurant and that I'm into the fourth generation. And, I've made so many friends and the community has supported us so much. I know that we're part of history now.

BARBER: Certainly. And, one of the reasons I am getting into this exact operation and menus and where ideas and things come from—and, we'll continue with this in a moment—is researching things like the Cottage Pub and the old Jeanette's restaurant and digging up the old menus and where some of these names and dishes and the drinks came from. We'll now have the positive thoughts from Jim Sobotka on Cornie's. I know you have very good drinks down there. We've often mentioned about the best margaritas in the world. And, the other items that you have down there and I know you are constantly expanding your menu. And, it is just a beautiful place to go to down there. Talk about Tammy a little bit. She comes up with some...

SOBOTKA: My sister, Tammy, she...when I, we first started in business, I worked in the kitchen 'cause I was 17 or 18. I was 17. I worked in the kitchen through probably the first 3 or 4 years we were in business. I learned how to become a broiler cook. I'd cut beef, cook steaks. I can broil stuff in the broiler, but my sister, Tammy, she comes up with a lot of different dishes. She makes all the soups fresh, the desserts. She's really a chef. I'm not a chef. I'm a broiler cook. I'm a bartender. She, on the other hand, has hundreds of books, hundreds of recipes that she's used, that she's developed, different dishes that she does: lemon peppered fish, smothered chicken, mushrooms—chicken mushrooms just to name a few. Different kind of toppings on steaks. They do outside catering as well. She makes all the desserts. There is just a myriad of desserts that she makes that people come for. Sometimes they'll go to another restaurant and have dinner and come to our place for dessert. A lot of the desserts that we have are two people desserts. They're too big for one person and so you can share the dessert. You know we have a chocolate lava. Now we have fresh apple dumplings. There's always something that she is doing that is a signature as far as desserts go and the soups, too, the soups that she makes.

BARBER: You are one the few places in town that has a dessert tray. Your chocolate lava is obscene. That ought to be for about four people. You've got another sister down there, Pam. What's her specialties?

SOBOTKA: Well, she does a lot of the planning for all the catering and parties and stuff. She's the organizer. She helps...you know, we...you know, like I said before, we share the load and she is very strong into the catering part of it, the planning of the help. Her and my sister both, they have been an integral part of the business—and have been an integral part of the business ever since they have been old enough to be part of it. My dad passed away in 1976. They were

12 and 14, I believe, when my dad died. And, they grew up in the business. They've become a part of it. And, they've become part of it at a very early age. And, they've been actively involved in the running and the operation of the business. Both of them have. And, we have a good relationship because we've been able to share that.

BARBER: We have another famous person down there, RJ.

SOBOTKA: My mom.

BARBER: Tell us about your mom. That is Ruth Jane.

SOBOTKA: Ruth Jane Sobotka, that's my mother. She goes by RJ. That's her...she is probably the... one of the greatest ladies I've ever known in my life. Along with my dad was... he is probably the smartest, wisest man that I have ever known. My mom has a personality that sparkles. She made a point of becoming friends with even strangers. She didn't know a stranger in her life. Everybody became a friend of hers. She taught me that. She has the love of life that a lot of people that have never had the opportunity to experience. She was a great teacher to me, a great mom. Is a great mom still, to this day. She's been stalwart to the whole family. You know my grandmother, her mother, raised five children by herself. And, my mom was the only girl out of five children. She had the glowing personality that sometimes I have. [Laughs] My mom is, you know, naturally every child is a combination of both parents. My mom is the soft, genuine, caring person that comes out of me once in a while. And, she would do for anyone and sacrifice for herself. That's kind of person that she is. She would be more concerned about somebody else than her own person. And, she is the greatest lady that I know.

BARBER: Yeah, RJ would be down there on the weekends. She would greet people coming in and she was always smiling. And, as we know now, she has a little poor health but she is down there quite a bit. And, we all enjoy visiting with RJ. Jim, can you think about switching over now to you, your wife, and your family? Who is your wife? What does she do? And, tell us about your boy?

SOBOTKA: My wife, she is the secretary at Regina Coeli.. She is the secretary for the principal of the school there. She has been for several years now. My son lives in Dayton. He has been down there. He went to Wright State. He graduated from Wright State. He lives and works down there now. He was involved in athletics in Alliance. He played baseball and soccer. He was a good athlete and good student. My greatest accomplishment.

BARBER: Well, great. We better tell everybody what his name is.

SOBOTKA: Matthew Sobotka.

BARBER: Matthew. Of course, and when you go down to the ...uh... Cornie's Steak House, you'll see a picture of Matthew. It is an amazing action shot showing him pitching also. OK, I'm going to shut down here for a moment. And, we are now recording. It goes directly...Ok, we're back again with Jim and what we're gonna do is go over a little bit more of the involvement of his immediate family. So, tell us a little bit about Connie.

SOBOTKA: My wife Connie. She's done the books for years. She's the one that tells me how I'm doing. She's the ...the book work is probably one of the most arduous parts of the business, any business really. She does it and I don't know what I would do without her as a wife and as

this part of the business because it's so integral. My son is in Dayton, he played baseball for Alliance High School. He...in fact, he tied the record for most wins in one season his senior year. My wife, she is involved with the school, Regina Coeli. She's been there, she worked at Alliance High prior to that. And, part of the reason was because we could be involved with our son and we were involved with his growth. Started when the Alliance Community Soccer League started. He was 6 years old and I was part of that. I coached traveling team that came out of the Alliance Community Soccer league as part of the league. Now there were other teams that were traveling, team and league teams before that. But we were the first team, under 14 year old team to actually come out of the open tryouts in the Alliance Community Soccer League. That started, would have been in 1986. And, Matt started playing Hot Stove baseball in 1989. I was involved with that, involved in coaching with that for probably 14 years, 14 or 15 years. The last two years that I coached, I coached at Sebring but it was still Hot Stove. The first twelve years was in Alliance. It was twelve years that he was involved in it. And, he also played American Legion baseball, too. He went on...he played high school baseball and went on to college. He graduated from Wright State. In..well, it would have been...graduated from Alliance in '98 so he graduated from Wright State in 2004 because he went for 6 years. He is my greatest accomplishment.

BARBER: Oh, Matthew is a great kid. Oh, and we touched on this Hot Stove. And, we are gonna do a special series on Hot Stove. We're gonna go back to the very history of it 'cause it is unique here to Alliance. Well, Jim, we just wanted to pick up on some of those little lost points there. And, I'm gonna shut down here again for just a moment. And, this might just conclude it here for the day.