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Bouws, J Russel Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Janet Watson
Nancy Vande Water
INTERVIEWEE: J. Russel Bouws
INTERVIEWERS: Janet Watson, Nancy Vande Water
DATE: Sept. 27, 1977  TIME: 1:00 P.M.
PLACE: Russ' Eastown Restaurant
INTERVIEW: #1
# OF TAPE SIDES: 2

BRIEF SUMMARY OF TOPICS
- Discussion of J. Russel Bouws' youth
- Discussion of first restaurant and enlargement of business
- Continuation of broadening the business
- Philosophy of Russ'
- Employees and clientele
- Figures in food production
- Discussion of civic activities
- Conclusion
J. Russel Bouws: You ask me what you would like me to talk about
and I'll answer.

Janet Watson: Have you always lived in Holland?

J.B. I was brought up on a farm in Noordsloos, and attended a rural
school north of Zeeland. I think our class had 11 members.
This was a big class for a rural school at that time.

Nancy Vande Water: Really?

J.B. Out of those 11, in those day when you were 14 you were really
finished with your education. Not very many of the 11 went on
to high school. Myself being small at the time, my folks fig-
ured I better get something on top [pointed to head] because
I wouldn't be able to do much physical work. So they thought
I should go to high school. I went to high school for one day,
but being from the country it didn't go over too well. I quit
the second day. So I thought it over that weekend, and I did
go back next Monday. I had to go to the principal of the school
and ask if I could get back in. He said it was fine and I got
back into high school and graduated in 1932. From there I went
back to the farm. This was my ambition, to stay right there on
the farm. I was perfectly content there. However, those were
depression days and being from a large family of nine children,
my parents thought I better get out and work. One by one all
the children went off to the city to find jobs. I guess I
hung around the farm a little too long. My brother Rich work-
ed in Holland and drove by a little sandwich shop daily,
which usually had a few cars parked by it. He knew it was
sale and checked up on it. So he and my father (I didn't
really know much about it,) figured this was a good place
to put me.
The shop was known as Doc's Barbeque and it didn't impress me one bit. Being perfectly happy at home, I ignored their plans for the shop. Anyway, without my O.K. or anything, they just bought it! At the time I was working on a thrashing rig. They informed me that they had bought the shop, and had paid $147.00 for it.

J.W.: Really, for the entire thing?
J.B.: For the equipment, stock and everything. [Laughs] It was on leased land, and was a building about 12 feet by 14 feet. For a sink it had a bottom part of a washer. The former owner had washed dishes in the bottom of a Maytag washer. There was an old wooden counter with about five wooden kitchen chairs. It also had an oil cloth topped table, -I remember that. It had a little wood burning stove for heat, and a three-burner gasoline stove to cook on. Also, it had an electric refrigerator, 4 1/2 cubic feet, which was the only decent piece of equipment that came with the place. So, that's the way we started. Up to that time, I never really had an idea what a hamburger looked like, let alone having to put one together. Before I started in this business in this business, I had eaten just one hamburger in my life. I went to Zeeland once, on my bicycle from the country, I had squeezed a dime from somewhere (I don't know where I got it) and bought a hamburger from Louie's Lunch Room. I can still remember standing there munching on that hamburger. This was really a treat. Our restaurant was called Russ' Lunch at that time and I had eaten only one hamburger in my life. We bought the shop from Doc Hansen, and I can
remember asking him how to cut a bun in half. He took one look at me and shook his head. Here I was going to run this stand or lunch room and didn't even know how to cut a bun in half. Anyway, that's the way he left me. That's where I took over. Sales ran about $3.00 to $5.00 a day. That was total gross sales.

J.W.: Did you say you only had one table? Who came to eat there?

J.B.: The clientele consisted of truck drivers and young people, 15 and 16, just out of grade school. They didn't know what to do with themselves so they just wasted time. They came to hang out. We had a pinball machine and music box. Finally we threw out the pinball machine and music box and our sales doubled. I still was only making $5.00 to $15 a week, but I really thought I was doing great when sales doubled from one year to the next.

J.W.: When you got rid of the pinball machine?

J.B.: Yea, that's right.

J.W.: How much did it cost to make the food each day, what was your profit?

J.B.: The profit percent was pretty good. Because I was the only employee, I didn't have to pay out any wages. I was in business two weeks and the place was broken into. For several weeks in a row after that, they broke in and stole all the candy and cigarettes. So then my dad came along and said I would have to stay there. I put a little addition on and moved in. I slept right there. I lived right there for about three or four years until I was married. I was just out of high school and 19 years old.
But, things kept getting a little better and I remember putting the first 20.00 dollars in the bank after being in business for about four or five months. Boy I saved every dime. I watched every dime.

N.V.: What is the comparison to prices then and now?

J.B.: Hamburgers are now 55 cents, so they have increased five times, which really isn't that much. Back then wages were about 20 to 30 cents an hour. Shops and factories paid about 30 or 35 cents, while the tops was 40. Food really has not increased as much as many other things. The first year I was in business, there was one night I had off when I paid 50 cents in wages for two hours. That was Feb.1935 and I had been froze right to the business for a whole month. I slept there and opened up there, about seven or eight, and stayed open till midnight. And then I'd sleep there. Of course during many hours of the day there wasn't much to do, other than doing a little repair work. In those days you just didn't know any better. I tried to get jobs different places. I can remember going to the sugar beet company, to Hart and Cooley, and different shops in an attempt to get out of the restaurant business. But I was so tied up with the restaurant I never got much of a chance to go out and look for another job. Anyway, I hung in there, and as the years went by, things began to get better. After about two or three years I was making a living wage. So I stayed with it, always looking for new ideas and thoughts. I got ideas and thoughts together by noticing how others did it.
I looked at how other successful restaurants operated and I was always envious of others who had nicer and better places. I was married in 1940.

J.W.: Did you move out of the back of the restaurant then?
J.B.: Yes, we built a home and raised a family. In 1946 I was asked to vacate the old spot of the restaurant. I bought the spot where I am now (Eastown), which was just a few blocks down from the old place and across the street. In 1947 we moved the old building over here. We then operated out of that same building for about two years. Next we built quite an elaborate building in 1948. It wasn't until we moved to this corner that we really started to move.

J.W.: What do you think raised your sales, just moving across the street?
J.B.: Better facilities and location raised our sales. The market was always there but I just hadn't gone out and gone after it. I'll think you'll find that today in a lot of businesses around Holland. There is a market, but they don't go after it. Until you do something like this, you don't really consider it. At this time it was just after the war in 1946-47 and there were about ten or 12 drive-in restaurants with car service. We had a lot of competition and survived, along with three or four other successful ones because we stayed with it.

J.W.: Did you always have car service?
Yes, I always had car service, even when I bought the place in 1934.
At that time I was the cook, car hop, dishwasher and fountain attendant. It was a one man show.

J.W.: When you opened this new place did you hire new people?
J.B.: Yes, of course.

N.V.: What is your secret to success? Why do people come back?
J.B.: Oh, what's the secret? Just a lot of common sense. I never went to college to learn this trade. You have to like people and strive to do something a little bit better than someone else. We always went around a lot and looked for mistakes in other businesses. We tried to do a little better, correcting our mistakes and learning by experience. Quality of the food is number one. Service is another thing. We are a service orientated business and if you can serve good food and look for things that people can't make at home too well, like strawberry tarts you are one step ahead. We have developed our own dressings. The difference in cost between a cheap product and a good product is very minor. When you come to the end, it is far better to serve something that costs a little more and is good. We do keep our prices down to the very minimum so people can eat out. As soon as we price ourselves out of the class people can afford, we are losing our volume. We want to keep our prices down, so that the difference between eating at home and eating at Russ' won't be that much. To keep our prices down has always been our philosophy. The profit margin doesn't have to be that much, but it has to be fair. If your keep your places full and keep your employees active that's the difference of success right there.
H.V.: Where do you get your food from? Do you make it in this building?

J.B.: We make all our soups, chicken, potato and vegetable year round. Some of the soups are recipes by our employees. All our soups are made from scratch right here in the commissary. Every week we roast about 60 white rock roasters for our soup alone. This soup is then transferred to all our restaurants. Chilli and coleslaw are also made here. We have our own recipes. All our dressings are made from scratch in the commissary.

H.V.: Do you have your own trucks?

J.B.: We have two of our own trucks on the road every day. We bake all the pie crusts here at the commissary, but some of the pies are baked at the individual restaurants so they will be fresh daily. We bake the crusts in the morning. By 8 a.m. they are in the oven and by 10 a.m. they are in Grand Haven, fresh daily. We roast our own pork, beef and turkey. About 60 to 80 turkey a week are for out sandwiches, which are also distributed to the other restaurants. We process about 500 pounds of mushrooms each week. In the commissary we employ about 18 persons fulltime, working two shifts.

H.V.: How many employees do you have working in one restaurant?

J.B.: We have 60 to 85 employees in each restaurant. Half are about full time, and half are part time. We employ a lot of part time help at night. We don't like to see our employees working five or six nights a week. You don't usually get the best employees that way. So we try to
get the housewives who can spare one or two nights a week to supplement their husband’s income.

N.V.: How many restaurants do you have?

J.B.: We have one in Muskegon, one in Grand Haven, two in Holland and are presently building one in Kalamazoo. We have three franchise unit in Grand Rapids. All our restaurants work from the same menu and we try to keep the same philosophy operating all of them. Howard De Haan owns the three franchise units.

J.W.: After you built your first restaurant, when did you get to the point where you felt confident enough to build a second restaurant?

J.B.: It was in Muskegon in 1965. We really didn’t start moving much until 1965. Next came Grand Rapids franchise, then Northtown, in 1973. We built in Grand Haven and on Plainfield Avenue in Grand Rapids in 1975. In ’76 we built again in Grand Rapids. Now Kalamazoo is under construction. They all do very well as far as business. Of course some are bigger than other so they naturally do more business. Last-town has the biggest volume of business. Muskegon runs pretty close to it.

J.W.: When you opened your second restaurant, did you have to go into debt and was there any doubt whether you would make it?

J.B.: Yes, we were pretty apprehensive in 1965 and that was a big step because it was a very expensive had a good call right from the start. It’s a real challenge to get a restaurant moving and get things organized.
It just doesn't happen easily. It takes time.

J.W.: Were many of your employees your brothers and sisters?
J.B.: No, it was just me and my brother. I have to give my brother, Gord, some recognition. He's the youngest in the family and started helping when he was 12 years old. After he was in 1946 when he returned from service, he joined Russ' and has been with us ever since. He has helped us more than anyone else and has been right in on everything. Stan Voss, who came with us about 1970, also helped a lot. I can truly say Gord has done as much or more for Russ' than anyone can imagine. He's been right through it all.

J.W.: Are your sons in your business now?
J.B.: I have two boys. One, a graduate from MSU, acts as a supervisor and helps in planning. He is going to Kalamazoo when that restaurant opens. My other son, Brian, is manager of Eastown and does a real good job.

J.W.: Was there any time when you were worried whether you'd make it?

J.B.: I tell you, we just didn't think about those things. I had nothing to start with, so there was no great loss involved. I paid my father back, I'm sure of that. We never went into debt. We always worked on a cash basis. When we built the new restaurant we took out a loan but our philosophy was to get the debts out of the way. We could maybe grow a lot faster if we had somebody else build the building and gamble, and lease the building back from them. If you want to grow that's the way to do it. If you don't have to have all your money tied up in buildings then you can just stay with the equipment.
If you sign a lease though, you have to stay with that lease, and that's where a lot of businesses can go under.

J.W.: How long did you work at Russ' Lunch before you could afford to build the larger one?

J.B.: I worked there about 13 years. We were brought up to lay everything aside, and when I'd buy something I usually had the money ready to lay down for it.

J.W.: How many tables did your second restaurant have?

J.B.: At that time I guess it would seat about 35. We put two additions on this restaurant. We grew slowly until after the war. But after the war people's habits changed and they started eating out more. When we moved from each building and when we enlarged, our sales respectively enlarged. Right now all total we have 560 employees. Our own restaurants have about 400, that's excluding the franchises.

J.W.: Do you have any type of special employees that you look for?

J.B.: We try to screen our employees carefully. You can tell by an interview what kind of background they are coming from. Their attitudes, their make-up, even the kind of car they drive. Not how old it is, but how clean it is. We hire very few minors. We do have a few for car service, but not even a half a dozen. We are about the only restaurant that still has outgoing car service in the state, or maybe even the busiest in the whole country. I went to the west coast two years ago and couldn't find a drive-in restaurant anywhere!
I went to the west coast where they all originated, and now they are closing! I wanted to see what they were doing because I thought we would have to follow the crowd and close. The ones that are open out west are usually mediocre and certainly not the best. When I came home I thought maybe we would have to think of phasing out car service. But when we came back here, (this was three years ago) we had our biggest year ever in car service. People still come to Russ' to eat outside. My son said too, "Well we're not going to give it up!" We're not going to get rid of it, not if we're trying to better our services. It's been real good. Just because the others have done it, doesn't mean we have to.

N.V.: Do you know how many people come in the restaurant in one day?

J.B.: The average day outside in the car service runs between 1,000 and 2,600-2,700 just under the canopy. Just a month ago we counted and we had close to three thousand. That was on a super day. They come and go. When people come to Russ' they don't come to sit for two hours like at Point West. They have a sandwich and are on there way again. The canopies are nice for a lot of people that are laid up, sick or disabled older people. You'll see all kinds of people that can't get out of their car so they eat in their car. Inside we don't serve quite as mant, but almost.

N.V.: Do you know how many hamburgers you go through every day?

J.B.: I can't tell you that right now. I used to keep a real
close tab on it, but now our menu is so varied its hard.

J.W.: When you first started did you use the same recipes as you do now?

J.B.: Basically they are all the same. We have developed some over the years, like our lemon pie. We use all fresh lemons for it. Or our apple pie. We peel all all our own apples and use approximately a ton—about 2,000 pounds a week in this restaurant. It is ground fresh daily.

N.V.: What civic activities are you involved in?

J.B.: I am involved in church activities and HEDCOR, which is Holland economic development. I serve on the West Michigan Tourist Association, National Restaurant Association, Fish and Game Club, Chamber of Commerce and Board of Directors of Peoples Bank. Also I’m involved in real estate. I was involved in the Hope College drive “Looking Ahead With Hope” headed by Dr. Lubbers. I had the privilege of serving as grand marshal of the tulip parade last May.