

1-24-2012

Interview with Susan Ramser

Anna Becker

Susan Ramser

Diane Fulton

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Recommended Citation

Becker, Anna; Ramser, Susan; and Fulton, Diane, "Interview with Susan Ramser" (2012). *Interviews*. 7.
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Accession number: PS-MS-TR-BECKER-012412

Researcher's name: Anna Becker

Event: Interview with Susan Ramser

Place: The Alcove Restaurant & Lounge

116 S. Main Street, Mt. Vernon, OH 43050

Co-workers present: none

AB: Anna Becker

SR: Susan Ramser

DF: Diane Fulton

AB: I'm just going to do a quick intro then we'll get into this. This is Anna Becker, today is Tuesday, January 24, 2012 and I'm interviewing Susan Ramser about the Alcove Restaurant.

So just starting off I don't know that much about the restaurant. I was wondering if you could give me a brief history to the best of your knowledge.

SR: Okay. I've only been involved with the Alcove probably for the past five or six years. Um, I'll go a little bit into how that came about. Um, while Diane is here I'd like to introduce you to Diane. This is Anna and she's uh...for Howard Sacks' class at Kenyon. She – they are researching public gathering spaces in Mount Vernon. So, how many years have you been at the Alcove or involved with the Alcove.

DF: Almost thirty.

SR: Diane knows a lot more than I do. So um are you okay with talking to Anna sometime?

DF: Sure. And then I did tell her also about the Historical Society, they have things out there.

SR: Right, so if you could quickly give her your contact information so she has that.

DF: It's Diane Fulton, and it's 393-2774 or 501-5537.

AB: Ok great.

DF: Or you can reach me at the Alcove – I'm always here [laughter].

SR: Oh, we do is go home once in a while. Not very often cus we need her but - [laughter].

Um my involvement came about, and I can find you the exact dates if you need them, but um the Alcove has been in downtown Mount Vernon for exactly one hundred years. As our cup says this is our hundredth anniversary. [Laughter] So um...you know I'd known about the Alcove for years, I'd eaten here. Um when I came back to Knox County in the early 80s, it was pretty much like I remembered it. And then um...the owner, who was the owner...I don't know when he bought it – Tom Metcalf, I don't know when he bought it, you'll have to ask Diane when he purchased the Alcove. Um...he was managing it and he sold it to his head chef. And they ran it –

the chef and his wife ran it for a few years, David Body, I think her name was Kathy but I'm not sure. And they decided they weren't able to keep it open and they closed the restaurant. So Tom came to a number of people in town, just really feeling strongly – Tom had always been very, very active in downtown community life...um active in the chamber, active in just all kinds of downtown activities. So he came to a number of people and asked if they'd be willing to invest with him in reopening the Alcove. So I was one of the investors. If you want more information about how that was put together or anything, you should contact my brother, Mark Ramser. And I'll give you the company number, it's (740) 392-2941 and that will be answered at Ohio Cumberland Gas, and you can just ask for Mark. Um so we all...like I said he put together his investment group and the Alcove reopened. Um...Tom passed away about two or three years ago but we're still here. We made it to year one hundred [laughter] and hopefully we'll keep going.

AB: So were you involved in the revitalization of it, or we're you – beyond the investing?

SR: Yes, the main thing I did was I did for the murals that are in the dining room. That was one thing we decided we wanted to do because the Alcove is a historic restaurant. We wanted to really show people that and we wanted to show people something of Knox County's history and tie it into the Alcove restaurant. So I mean you'll see in the lobby there's various aspects of Alcove history. Um...you know, there's a displace case out there that has candy molds because it actually started as Candyland. And then my understanding is the Candyland building, which is where they actually started a hundred years ago, um it burned sometime I think either in the late 20s or early 30s, so this existing building was then built to replace Candyland. So this building is not one hundred years old but Candyland was on this side. And I think right outside the Library door there um...Candyland was basically a soda and candy shop. They may have served sandwiches and I'm sure things changed from time to time but if you look it looks like a soda fountain – you know the old wrought iron chairs and everything, so you can look at that picture. Um...so you know, we did some you know standard things but we decided we wanted to do murals on the walls of the main dining room. So I kind of took the lead in that and I did all the research. And the way I went about that - picked a theme for each wall and then found photographs from history that I thought were relevant to that theme and then worked with a local artist, Nancy Donaldson. And she painted the five-sidewall murals, we still got one that's blank that never got finished, and also the two end ones, which were basically from a postcard that was looking south down the square from Main Street.

[Whistling, friend enters and asks: Did you ever leave?

SR: Leave, why would I leave? They have food here, they have restrooms, oh gee they don't have a shower I guess I'll have to leave sometime.

Friend: Yeah eventually, they do have a big deep sink though.

SR: That's very true, thanks for mentioning that Kelley.]

SR: Um...so I worked with Nancy um...like I said I did the research to get the photographs, we kind of laid them out – and actually the way we did those she had like a projector that you take a picture and put under this and it would then project the photograph on the wall. And so we'd,

you know, work with that until we got it kind of the size and then she painted them just using that photograph as like she'd sketch outline it. And then she painted each of the scenes. So um...one of them is - why don't we go in there and do this rather than me trying to do it from memory. We'll take the tape recorder in there later – or unless you want to do it right now.

AB: No, we can do it after, that's fine.

SR: Okay.

AB: So you talked about the murals as one thing you did during the revitalization process, were there other changes that they made too?

SR: That – that was the main thing. Um...you know we did just some updating of finishes and things like that but that was the main different thing we did.

AB: Okay. So kind of in your opinion how is the Alcove part of the community of Mount Vernon, how it is involved with it's history?

SR: Um...well, for one this it's been the oldest, continuously operating restaurant in Mount Vernon. Um the only other one that might have even come close probably was Mazza's, and they closed five or six years ago – don't quote me on any of these dates without checking them, okay? I'm not good at keeping numbers in my head. I'm an engineer and we just go look up numbers, we don't remember them. So um...I mean it's just – it's been a part of downtown life for a hundred years. And, you know, I've traveled a lot in Europe and over there a hundred years is nothing but, you know in Ohio a hundred years is s pretty big deal. Um...so that was part of the reason we felt just it was really important to get it reopened and to continue. We we're only closed I think for maybe – it was a matter of months I mean it was less than a year that it was actually closed.

Um... I mean various um service groups use it; I mean they have plaques out in the lobby. Rotary meets on Tuesday, Kiwanis meets on Monday, um...I think Exchange meets here, I'm not sure when. Um other groups use it on a more informal basis. There's everything from the Red Hat Ladies to I mean I see families in here having birthdays for grandparents or birthdays for sons or daughters. You can sort of almost recognize them because there's the big round top table like right in the middle and that's usually where they are – cus it seats the most people. Or the big long rectangular table right behind that. So when you need a large group – if your group isn't large enough to, you know, go up stairs to one of the rooms up there, um the banquet room or the Garden Room, they'll be at one of those two tables. Because those tables can seat like eight up to I don't know...fourteen people each, so they're good for family groups.

AB: You obviously mentioned there are a lot of - the community uses this space quite a bit. What do you see as the future of the restaurant? Is it continuing down the same path kind of?

SR: You know we hesitate to change the things that are traditional. But I think we recognize that, you know, nothing ever stays the same. I'm not sure what the next five years will bring. I mean we have all kinds of ideas; it's a matter of figuring out what are the right ideas. And I mean

we've looked at, you know, a couple of architectural studies. I mean we know we need to get an elevator in here because our upstairs rooms are not handicapped accessible, um well except in the very most minimal way. There is actually an elevator in the kitchen, but it's really designed for taking food. Um there's actually a basement, some facilities in the basement cooking – not really a cooking facilities, a prep facilities. The main kitchen is on this floor and then there's a banquet kitchen up stairs. So the elevator is really designed for taking food between those three floors, not for customers. So I mean that's something we've looked at. How do we put an elevator in here and not, you know, change things in a negative way? So we don't have any specific plans to go ahead with that yet but we know that will probably have to come in the next few years. So it's things like that, figuring out what things are important that you don't want to change, what things are important that you need to change that you need to figure out the best way to do it...so you don't lose things that you have that are important.

AB: Earlier you briefly mentioned some of the civic groups that meet here. Do you have any idea for how long they've been meeting here? Is this kind of their traditional place?

SR: I don't know but like Diane would be a really good resource. I mean she's been here thirty years. So if she says Rotary was meeting here thirty years ago, she's probably right. Now I think there's a picture right outside the door here of Rotary I'm not sure what year it was, we'll look when we walk into the dining room, I want to think it was in the 50s maybe – maybe not quite that old. So I'm assuming it's been that long, but I don't know for sure. That's before my time.

AB: And then kind of segueing into the arts, I heard that they have dinner theater here.

SR: They do and there's a poster right outside for the next one coming up. They're doing *Lost in Yonkers*. And the person you should talk to about the dinner theaters is Bruce Jacklin, J-a-c-k-l-i-n, and let me see if I have his – well ask me about his number later and I'll try to get it before you leave. Um Bruce has been really active in local theater productions for a number of years and he's currently running the dinner theater. He's doesn't direct all of them, sometimes they have other directors, but I think he's the best person for you to talk to about dinner theater.

AB: Have you ever attended dinner theater here?

SR: Oh all the time.

AB: And who comes? Is it fairly successful?

SR: Um you ought to get a ticket and come.

AB: There you go.

SR: And you know I kind of would suggest that. I mean it would probably be okay to maybe interview a few people at the dinner theater. Ask them why they come, ask them where they're from, ask them why they come, have they been here before, would they come back, did they like the meal, did they not like the meal, did they think we should serve something besides fudge ball for desert? Those are your assignment questions for me.

AB: Thank you, that's very helpful. So in your time as owner and just hanging around the restaurant –

SR: Now I'm just, just a part owner, you understand that. Mark will yeah, he'll...

AB: In your time involved with the restaurant have you noticed a group of regulars, people that frequent here?

SR: Yeah, there are always regulars, particularly in the Library, which of course is the bar you understand. Yeah it's you know one of those little things you know you can tell somebody, "Oh, I'm going to the Library." [Laughter] There are definitely regulars here. Um and again it might be good – there are a couple nights when we do certain things. So this is the current thing, um there are definitely people here who are always here for Shrimp Tuesday. So you know that would be a different crowd than probably the people that come for Wednesday Sliders, um I need to come for Monday Wings – I love wings. Um the wings and the nachos I think are sort of new, but the shrimp has been going on a long time, so that would probably be the most regular crowd. And again I would suggest you come and talk to some of those people. I mean you know get yourself – you're not twenty-one are you?

AB: I am actually.

SR: Are you? Okay well you can actually get yourself a beer [laughter] or a glass of wine or whatever you want and just hang out. And I think people will probably be very willing to talk with you. Depending on who's in here I would be glad to introduce you to whoever is running the bar that night. It probably would either be Diane or Tammy, or we do have a couple new people that are serving bar. They might be willing to introduce you to a few people that they know to be regulars and just you know tell them what you're doing and they may say: "I don't want it to be known that I'm in here." Or they may tell you that they've been coming in here for the last fifteen years and tell you everything that's happened for the last fifteen years. You're just going to have to play that one by ear.

AB: Definitely. Well, I think that's it mostly I just had some general questions for now. Is there anything else you like to add or share?

SR: Well we'll do you want to do a little tour if you want? Have you been in the restaurant before?

AB: No, this is my first time.

SR: Okay, well why don't we do just a little tour.

[Moved into the dining room, from the Library, to take a tour of the restaurant and see the murals in the main dining room.]