

**Interview with Warren Gutaw**

**Interviewed by John Nettleton**

**Interviewed on November 12, 1985  
at the home of John Nettleton**

**John Nettleton - JN  
Warren Gutaw - WG**

JN: Warren, why don't you give us your pedigree, your name and where you live.

WG: I'm Warren Gutaw. I live at 605 5<sup>th</sup> Street South here in Moorhead.

JN: Where were you born?

WG: I was born in Moorhead.

JN: That was in what year?

WG: 1916.

JN: Many people in this town are Norwegian - what is your nationality?

WG: My mother was Norwegian, my father was German, so I'm half and half.

JN: We'd like to know about your educational background - where you went to grade school and whatever.

WG: I went to grade school at the Hopkins School in Moorhead, Lincoln School and Moorhead Senior High School. Moorhead Junior High also, of course. That's about the extent of my education, my formal education, except for classes that I took at Moorhead State University, and some other minor schooling efforts.

JN: You mentioned your parents' nationality. Were they born in the United States or were they immigrants?

WG: My father was born in April of 1880 in Whitehall, Wisconsin. His parents came from the Lubeck area of Germany.

JN: And on your mother's side?

WG: On mother's side, her folks came from Eidsvoll, where the Norwegian constitution

was signed and the Declaration of Independence of Norway away from Sweden. From a little place called Ness. Alloreaka [phonetic] in Norway. My other grandparents both came here in 1880. Both sides of the family.

JN: Warren, you're known well in Moorhead as a Moorhead business man. Many people have mentioned Warren Gutaw and we'd like to know how you got into business and things about business in the Moorhead community. What was your fathers business?

WG: My father was a chef, a pastry chef. He operated two restaurants in St. Paul, Minnesota. Moved up to Moorhead in 1911 and opened up a restaurant in 1912 in Moorhead. I remember the name of that, was called the Key City Lunchroom. It's the same location as Warren's Cafe quite a few years later. It was built on the same location.

JN: For the sake of the record, could you give us the address of that location?

WG: Yes, the address was 15 4<sup>th</sup> St North in Moorhead.

JN: So in 1911 and 1912, that was the year in which your father opened the Key City restaurant?

WG: That's right

JN: He ran that for how many years?

WG: He ran it until he passed away, which was in 1936.

JN: How did you enter the picture?

WG: I had been working with my father and when my father passed away, my mother and I had a conversation in which I pointed out that this was a crossroads in my life and that I wasn't just sure what I wanted to do. At the time in 1936, during the depths of the depression, she pointed out that a lot of people were starving and if I made a success of the restaurant business, I would always have food to eat. I think it was kind of a criteria of the times, that this was an important thing to have as insurance that you'd always have food on your table.

JN: How old were you then?

WG: I was 20.

JN: This was quite a burden thrust upon you at the tender age of 20. Let's see, you 'd have been out of high school three years perhaps, three or four years.

WG: Two years I think. 1934 I graduated.

JN: What role did your mother play in the restaurant?

WG: She and I formed a partnership, which we were both equal partners. We operated it

as a family business.

JN: Did she give you half of the business?

WG: She did in a way, although when my father passed away, of course, I was entitled to a share of the business at that time. She put enough of her interest into the business so we were fifty-fifty partners.

JN: Do you recall back to that time about how many people could be seated in that restaurant?

WG: I was thinking about that this morning, that might be one of your questions and I believe I came up with about 32 to 36 people.

JN: It is like a restaurant today? Did it have a counter and did it have booths and seats?

WG: Yes, it was that way. Of course, it was a family type operation. When I was growing up and I was staying at home, of course, and two of my sisters worked in the restaurant, my mother worked in the restaurant, I worked in the restaurant, and my dad worked in the restaurant, so it was a family operation. Besides that, we hired about four, five, or six other people.

JN: This suggests rather long hours. Do you remember what hours?

WG: Yes, fourteen hours a week. I mean 80 hours a week, and 14 hours a day was not uncommon. Although I never felt that I was, I can't think of the word right now. I never felt abused, because it was long hours. One of the things about the restaurant business is you do have the chance to meet a lot of interesting people. And time goes fast, so even if you put in fourteen hours, part of those fourteen hours you might say almost recreation. Visiting with the customers and people you did business with.

JN: I hope I'm not changing the subject too much, I want to follow that through but was this called a Key City Restaurant after your father died, or was that changed?

WG: No, that was the original name. The Key City Lunchroom.

JN: When did it change its name?

WG: It was when we tore the old building down and built a new one. That would be in 1946, when we tore the old building down and 1947 when we opened the new Warren's Cafe.

JN: Okay, so I did jump ahead to fast there. I want to go back to the 1936 with you and your two sisters and your mother. You said you did hire some help?

WG: Yes, my two sisters had already been married by this time and were no longer actively operating the restaurant right at that time.

JN: Can you indicate about the kind of wages that were paid your help at that time?

WG: I know we paid some of the cooks like a dollar a day, some of them even five dollars a week for a six day week. A dollar a day and board.

JN: And they were able to eat, also?

WG: When they were on duty. They weren't allowed to go off duty and then come back to eat.

JN: Social security was not a fringe benefit at that time, was it?

WG: No, I think social security started on January 1, 1937.

JN: Were there other fringe benefits for the employees other than eating and later social security? There weren't such things as insurance?

WG: No.

JN: What kind of clientele visited the Key City restaurant? Was this business people? Was it like coffees in the morning or was it a restaurant like an evening kind of restaurant?

WG: It was all of that. It was mostly - we catered to farmers a lot. We did do a real good farm business and then the neighbors, of course, attorneys, doctors, whatever. We'd get some business from them, also. But farmers were our target. If we could get the farmers to come eating, why, we knew we had it made. Farmers had good appetites and also working people have good appetites who are doctors, dentists, attorneys. A lot of times their appetites aren't so good, something is bothering them maybe in their life and they probably skip a meal rather than eat.

JN: Did attorneys and those professional people that had offices in that area, did they meet there on a regular basis for commiserating to talking and so on?

WG: Oh, yes, they would get together in a booth or at the counter and talk things over everyday.

JN: To what extent do you feel you were responsible for the atmosphere that would encourage people to come there? Did you work on that?

WG: Yes, I did. I made a practice of learning peoples names and calling them by their names when they would come in. I noticed that people seem to appreciate that. I think it kept them coming back saying, "Let's go to Warren's because he knows us." Maybe they didn't say this out loud, but I think this was in their head.

JN: So you paid special attention to that. Did you instruct your employees, waitresses and waiters?

WG: Yes, I instructed them to be friendly with the customers. Give them good service.

JN: They get an extra free cup of coffee, second cup, or was that.....

WG: No, we gave them all the coffee they could drink, and at that time it was a nickel a cup.

JN: I was going to ask that question, thank you. How much would a good steak be?

WG: We used to sell, now you might not believe it but its the truth, if you want to get a Bible out I would swear on it. We used to sell a T-bone steak including everything that went with it for thirty five cents.

JN: Including coffee?

WG: Including coffee and dessert.

JN: That's good that you mentioned that because it would be interesting to no who supplied the meat, potatoes, and what other restaurant supplies that were necessary. Could you speak to that?

WG: Yes, there was a butcher store right next door, Wensel Meat Market. We did a lot of business and, of course, we bought meat from the packers, too, like Armor, Swift, and Morrell. The potatoes we would buy from the farmers. We'd buy at least twenty sacks at a time usually. Twenty, hundred pound sacks. We did a really good business and we needed a lot of supplies to keep up with the food that was going out.

JN: How were the potatoes peeled?

WG: At that time they were peeled by hand.

JN: It was kind of labor intensive. There wasn't any such thing as a potato peeler.

WG: No, not until later on. Not until we built Warren's Cafe in '47, then we had potato peelers, the automatic ones.

JN: Were the steaks cut for you in the butcher shop?

WG: Sometimes they were although I liked cutting meat. That was my specialty, cutting meat and making hamburger and cutting roasts, steaks, and so forth.

JN: Perhaps some of the success for which you are known came from having a special steak at Warren's Cafe?

WG: Right, very true.

JN: You mentioned Armor and Swift, Morrell - they were not located in the Fargo Moorhead area, were they?

WG: They were located in Fargo, but Wensel's like I said, was right next door. We did a lot of business with Wensel's.

JN: Was their salesman that called on you from.....

WG: Yes, the packers called on me and also the grocery houses called on me, the wholesale grocers.

JN: Did you buy on the basis of price alone?

WG: Oh, no, we always had to have first quality.

JN: Did you ever buy on the basis of friendship with salespeople?

WG: Well, possibly. I think I made friends with a lot of them. I know that sometimes a salesman can do you a lot of good because they can recommend buys that might miss your attention. Sometimes specials come up - I know I took advantage of those when I could.

JN: That's very helpful. Let's begin to move forward in time. We have described very well the Key City Restaurant. It remained the Key City Restaurant until 1946, am I correct?

WG: That's correct.

JN: What made the change at this time?

WG: We were building an entirely new operation, an entirely new restaurant and we felt that it would be a good idea to modernize the name, too. The name Key City came from the fact that Fargo called itself the "Gate City" and Moorhead said well, we are the key to the gate. In other words we became the "Key City," the city of Moorhead.

JN: Parenthetically this is so very, very helpful. I've lived in the Fargo-Moorhead area for seventeen years and Gate City Savings and Loan, I have often wondered why it is called Gate City because I have not heard Fargo referred to as "Gate City." This is something that will be very helpful to people listening to this tape.

What prompted the need to rebuild? Was there a change in management, partnership arrangement, or were you just running out of space?

WG: It was a combination. Actually the building we were operating the Key City Lunchroom in was pretty much a worn out building. It was an old remodeled house to start with and turned into a restaurant after being remodeled, of course. It was really necessary to build a new building if we were going to stay in business.

JN: We...this is still your mother and you?

WG: My mother and I and at that time, of course, my wife. My wife Myrtle Sleeper joined me in wedlock in 1937. We didn't make any decisions without talking to her, too.

JN: But it was still a fifty-fifty partnership with your mother?

WG: My mother and I

JN: In building the building, did you own the land under the building?

WG: Yes.

JN: Did you buy that or was it.....

WG: It was part of the building.

JN: Was there a contractor that built the building for you?

WG: Yes, Emil Foss was the architects. We were Foss's first customer when he moved up here from Fergus Falls. Contractors name was Nasic [phonetic], Otto Nasic [phonetic]. He was the one that built the building for the new Warren's Cafe.

JN: Was it finished in 1947, at a cost of.....

WG: The building itself cost about \$25,000.

JN: It must of been a very, very nice.....

WG: That didn't include the fixtures, of course, and the equipment, just a shell you might say.

JN: That's a large investment for that period of time.

WG: Yes, it was. I borrowed the money from the First National Bank at 4.5%.

JN: Could you take a minute, Warren, to describe the restaurant in 1947 as to prices and the things that you had told me about the Key City?

WG: We still sold meals, you might say, at ridiculously low prices. At that time we would serve a complete Sunday dinner for a dollar and half. That included beverage, dessert, and whatever, you know. We sold big, thick malted milks made with real ice cream for twenty-five cents. Sundaes were still fifteen cents. Banana splits were thirty-five cents and we did cater to the farmer and serve the type of meals the farmers liked. We also catered to the colleges, and we'd derive a great part of our business from Concordia College and Moorhead State University. College kids really made our place go.

JN: Suppliers still remained the same, and wages at that time in 1946?

WG: Wages had increased to about forty cents an hour from about twenty-five cents previous years.

JN: Tips?

WG: Tips weren't generous but I'd say the tips helped.

JN: You still catered to the same people - attorneys adjacent.....

WG: Yes, we still did except that we did concentrate on the two colleges - Concordia and Moorhead State University. We'd advertise in their papers and put in specials and put in coupons to get the college kids to come down. It worked out real well.

JN: Did you ever extend credit?

WG: We never were asked much to extend credit. If somebody wanted to sign a slip we always let them. But we never really did formal credit.

JN: Now tell me what happened when your mother passed away in 1961?

WG: Wait a minute - 1951, 1941, I believe it was. My father passed away in '36 and my mother passed away in '43.

JN: Than the building was built after your mother passed away?

WG: Yes, my mother had already passed away.

JN: So then the building was built - I'm sorry, I must of confused it. To get it straight for the record, you became the sole owner proprietor at the death of your mother?

WG: Yes, this is true except for one thing. One of my sisters wanted to be in the restaurant business with me and we had worked together for a long time and we were both congenial with each other and we were good friends and liked each other so I took her in as a partner - my sister, Louise. Then when she remarried later on, she lost her husband, and then when she remarried later on, I bought her share.

JN: About what time was that, Warren?

WG: The '60's, yes, the late '60s.

JN: In building the building, was the loan and so on to the corporation or partnership, pardon me, or was it to Warren Gutaw?

WG: It was to Warren Gutaw.

JN: Following this period, did you branch out in any way to other restaurants?

WG: Yes, I operated a place in Detroit Lakes [Minnesota] called Curly's Club. And I operated a Court House Lunch in Moorhead. And I operated Virgie's Grill in Moorhead.

JN: Virgie's Grill and where was that located?

WG: That was located on Main Avenue just off of Eighth Street.

JN: And the other one was?

WG: The Court House Lunch in Moorhead Court House.

JN: And it was located in the Court House?

WG: Yes.

JN: As of this date November 1985, there is still a restaurant in the basement of the Court House. Did this follow what you had started?

WG: No, that restaurant had already been started. I just operated it for a number of years.

JN: So you were an operator rather than an owner?

WG: Of the Court House Lunch, yes.

JN: And of Virgie's, did you own that or operate that?

WG: Just operated it.

JN: So you were hired by.....

WG: I was hired by the court actually to operate it. The lady that owned the place was ill and they needed somebody to operate it until she recovered her health, which I did.

JN: Were you physically there each day?

WG: Yes, maybe not very long but I was there each day.

JN: So you hired the people to manage, to work and saw to the accounting and purchasing.

WG: I was responsible to the court for that.

JN: Virgie's, was that the same way. Who owned that?

WG: No, that's what we were talking about, Virgie's. I operated it as to the direction of the court, from the court direction.

JN: The Detroit Lakes.....

WG: That was Curly's Club it was called

JN: Were you hired there?

WG: No, I was the owner, but I hired a manger.

JN: How did that work out?

WG: It worked out real well. It was a profit making operation that worked out well.

JN: Is there other areas regarding the restaurant business that we should cover that I haven't asked questions about?

WG: I can remember when I was a little boy and the sheriff coming in to the Key City Cafe and he would stand by the stove. He had a big buffalo coat and this coat would shred steam because he was standing close to the stove and the steam would be coming off. He would always have lutefisk. Lutefisk was one of our big specialties in those days. This many Norwegians and Scandinavians in the area, we had a big business in lutefisk. Lutefisk and lefsa. I remember the sheriff coming in and ordering lutefisk and lefsa and then standing up by the stove trying to get warm and getting the dampness out of this coat. His buffalo coat.

JN: Who supplied Lutefisk?

WG: We would buy it through the fisheries like Booth's Fish. We would buy barrels of it at a time.

JN: Do you happen to know if lutefisk is available that way now?

WG: At any restaurants? Not that I know of. We served it everyday, from before Thanksgiving until about Ester. So we served it all during the winter months. Fresh oyster we served a lot of, too.

JN: Is lutefisk an expensive meal?

WG: At that time, it was thirty-five cents including the lefsa and beverage, potatoes, and everything that went with it.

JN: That was still when you could buy the biggest steak for one dollar. Obviously, as of today, you are not in the restaurant business.

WG: That's right.

JN: Can you tell us how you phased out of that?

WG: When urban renewal came along and bought me out and paid me off and tore down the old buildings. That's when I got into the real estate business, although I had an interest in real estate for a long time. I owned my own building and I bought several other downtown buildings. At that time, when urban renewal came along, I owned five downtown buildings. I was paid off like I said, the buildings were torn down and the new development was where Moorhead Center Mall is, what replaced it.

JN: The other four buildings, can you indicate for the record what businesses were in those buildings?

WG: I owned the building where Warren's Cafe was, of course, and where Wensel's Meat Market and the S & S Grocery. Then I owned two on Center Avenue. I owned where Bluebird Cafe, I ended up owning that building and the building next door to it where Mile Mattson had his furrier company.

JN: All of these buildings were in the urban renewal and were purchased, so that brings us to the year of about 1970?

WG: Yes, I think so, somewhere in there. Maybe not that far, maybe say 1968.

JN: Then you entered another business?

End of side 1

WG: 4<sup>th</sup> Street North, just a couple doors up from where the Warren's Cafe had been.

JN: You started out as a real estate salesman and then became a broker?

WG: Yes.

JN: As a broker how many salesmen did you have?

WG: We had four salesmen.

JN: You operated the Viking Realty from 19.....

WG: I operated the Viking Realty, I believe it was from about 1972 to about 1980.

JN: Did you sell that?

WG: Yes, I did. I sold it to Charlie Ambuehl and Sid Winroth about 1980.

JN: Yours has been a fine history of business in the Moorhead community. You carry with you a very good name. I am aware of that. It's been a real pleasure to visit with you concerning your business contribution in Moorhead. Is there anything you would like to add regarding your business or observations that you have about businesses in Moorhead as we conclude our tape?

WG: I'd certainly like to say that I appreciate all the customers, all the farmers and the working people and the professional people that were customers of mine. Without those customers, of course, we wouldn't have been successful in any of those enterprises. So with deep appreciation I feel towards all these people that patronize me and my family all these years.

JN: Thank you, Warren Gutaw.