

Fletcher Powell interviewing (John) Pete Savute at his restaurant on North Broadway in Wichita, it's June 3rd, 2013.

Let me have you say your name and tell me what you do.

My name is John Savute and I own Savute's Italian Restaurant.

Tell me a little bit about the history of the restaurant—how it got started and maybe a little bit through the years.

OK. The restaurant was started in 1944. My dad and my grandpa were the, uh, they did start the operation. They used—they were truck drivers and, uh, they got tired of working, my grand—my aunt had started a restaurant called Aroma Italian Restaurant on north Broadway, and they wanted somebody to run it, or take it over. And so my dad and my grandpa come up to Wichita and they ran it for a couple of weeks and he says, 'man, Pete, I make a hundred dollars in one week, and it was easy.' So they sold the restaurant—er, sold the trucks and started a restaurant and that's how it all began.

You said they came up to Wichita, where were they?

They were from southeast Kansas, around Columbus, Cherokee, Roseland, that area.

OK. So, that was in the mid-1940s and, um, they—your grandfather and father took it over and then they—was it in this very location?

No, no, it was north of here, it was in a little house. In fact, the house is still in, is still, uh, over on Park Place where they moved it, rented it out.

And so how long was it in that house and then when did you move down this way?

About a year and a half. And then they had made enough money to buy some property. And it was either going to be the Rock Castle, which is at 37th, or this property here which had a motel. But the motel was full here. So they said, 'well hell, heck, let's go ahead and buy this one cause it's got—the money's coming in.' So they bought it and everything else is history.

And so, so this building has been in use since, I guess, the late '40s.

Yeah.

And it's sort of expanded over time.

Mmm-hmm, yeah, yeah. The motel burned down, and then they, uh, so they just made a parking lot out of it, started adding on to the restaurant.

And so when did you get involved?

I've been in the business my whole life. Always, always had a job. And then in 1972 I graduated from high school and I played some pro baseball, then I came home and went to work.

Right here at the restaurant?

Yeah, mmm-hmm.

I noticed that you've got a menu up here that is, uh, the name of the restaurant is 'Rosie's.'

That was my aunt, that's who they bought the restaurant off of. Rosie.

Did they change it to Savute's directly after buying it?

Well, they changed it when they turned it into a corporation, to Savute's. For many years just a partnership, and so they had—tax reasons, they went to a corporation.

Ok. Do you have any recollection of about when that might have been?

Early '70s. '60s. I don't really remember.

So, also looking around here, you have tons and tons and tons of photos and drawings of airplanes and pilots and aviation-related photos. How did the aviation theme come about here? Your father and grandfather were truck drivers.

4:43

Yeah. Well, my dad, he wanted to be an electrical engineer. So he was going to school at Wichita when he came back, took a couple years of college, then my grandpa talked him out of—getting out of college and going to work with him, and, uh, then he got involved with aviation, he was a pretty bright guy, my dad, and so he—his friends were aviators. That's what they did, you know, they'd work on the airplanes and so... aviation really built the restaurant. Just a lot of people would come in from Cessna, Boeing, uh... and good people, you know? A lot of people from Newton helped build the restaurant too, it just—in those days there weren't very many restaurants.

Ok. Because your restaurant is sort of on the complete opposite end of town from a lot of the airplane manufacturers, so was it that personal connection with your father?

I think so, I think so. Everybody came in was a pilot, and they still are, there's just a lot of pilots that come in. But a lot of them are dying off, too, you know, it's been a

long time. But on a Sunday night or a Wednesday night, or—there's always somebody that flies an airplane here. Always.

And so it's been that way basically the entire time.

Yes. Yep.

You feel like you've had a pretty loyal customer base because of that through the years?

Yes. Yes. Completely.

And so tell me about how you got a lot of these pictures.

They give them to us. I've got probably enough, more stuff over here where I store things, to start another restaurant like this. And this is the original one, there's other places that have come up that are aviation-oriented, but, uh, this is the original place. There's no place like this anywhere.

This is the place where the pilots come—

Sure. If they're gonna come to Wichita and they're a pilot, they'll end up here eventually, just to say they've been here. And I'm so proud of that, and very lucky.

You said that you've had, through the years, people from Boeing and Cessna coming. Was that something that you could tell—did you have conversations with people knowing that they maybe worked for Boeing, um, how was that something that was clear to you?

Well, I'll tell you—they would come in and they would look around and they would see the seats—we bought the, uh, seats from a guy from Boeing. You know, they were going to remodel the 707, or 727 I think it was. So, he says, 'hey John? We've got these seats, do you want them?' so that's when we built the club. So, we, my dad and I, we went and we bought these seats from—they almost gave them to us anyway, they were just gonna throw them away, but, uh, that—yeah, last night there was a guy in was, uh... some of the guys that were flying the B-17 out at Jabara were in last night.

I saw that flying the other day, on Saturday.

Yeah, beautiful aircraft. But, as far as where they worked, you didn't ask where they worked, it was none of my business and eventually get to know 'em, you do—like H.A. Mary who used to have Southwest Grease Company, he used to come in all the time, he bought the first Beech 18 they built, brand new airplane, but—and he hung around with Cessna and Walter Beech, they used to play poker together. So, you get to know these guys, you know, and they're just good people.

It seems like you'd hear a lot of stories through your years here.

Oh, I forgot 'em.

Yeah!

I'm almost 60 years old now.

So many stories that you forget them. You said that you got the seats for this other room from a guy from Boeing. Tell me about this room, because we can't see it, of course.

Called the Stick-and-Rudder Club. And we built it right before liquor-by-the-drink come into Wichita, cause Dad knew that this was going to happen. Had to buy a liquor card, I don't know if you remember that, had to buy a card and you—10 days and you could come in and drink.

Do you remember about when this was?

Uh, '75, maybe? '74? '76? Somewhere like that. And, uh, uh, so we didn't know, he didn't know what he wanted to call it, you know, it's easy to call it 'The Flying Club' or 'The Airmen's Club,' but he wanted something special. And the Stick-and-Rudder is a book that you will read in the old days to learn how to fly. And that's why it's called the Stick-and-Rudder Club. And, uh, so anyway, all these, this paraphernalia that we have in there, it was all given to Dad. And he didn't go out and ask them for it, but they just wanted to donate it to the operation. And, uh, that's what kinda makes it unique. And it still is. I've got a lot of stuff I could put in there. And sometimes I'll switch it around, you know, so guys come in and they'll see it and feel pretty proud about it.

And all the seats in there are airplane seats.

10:01

Yeah, they're airliner seats. So, I know there was a magazine here a couple of years ago, they—the things to do in Wichita that you said you have done in Wichita. And one of them was to sit in the airliner seats in the Stick-and-Rudder Club, which is, I thought was pretty cool.

Did you ever have any family members work for Boeing? Or for any of the aircraft companies?

I had an uncle that used to work for Boeing. In fact, yeah, you've always had a lot of relations work there, that—I mean, it was, it's—you know, hell, Boeing, Wichita would be a small town, let's face it and uh, you know, cause Cessna comes through,

and Beech comes through, and you've got the other operations, but, uh, yeah, you've had a lot of—a lot of relations worked for them, they got their start there and then they might have went to college and then finished up doing other things, and, um... But Boeing's big time, it's just... it's a problem they're leaving.

And actually I want to talk about that in just a moment. But could you ever tell—Boeing, like a lot of aircraft companies, has that weird thing where sometimes they're doing great and sometimes they're not going so great and they lay a lot of people off. Could you ever see that kind of thing at your restaurant?

Sure, sure. And it would hurt the restaurant a bit. Especially during the summer, you know, cause a lot of these guys would, uh, plan their vacations or something like that, then have to hold their money, they wouldn't come out and eat very often. But we've always kept our prices pretty decent where anybody could afford to come out and eat at my place. Still do.

Yeah, so you could see, like—cause, you know, sometimes there are layoffs that last for a year or so, and you really could see those dips?

Sure. Sure. And the good thing about it, when that would happen, you'd get good people that would apply for work, too. I would get some really pretty good waitresses and people, just wanted some work.

Right, some work between the layoff—

Right, says, 'you know, Mr. Savute, I was working at Boeing, I've been laid off, I'd sure like to help you out.' So you'd get some good, bright people to help you out, there.

It seems like you would know that they were probably pretty good workers.

Yep. Yep.

Uh, you mentioned a little bit about how important Boeing's been for Wichita, were you—what was your personal reaction when you found out they were leaving town?

I, well, I didn't think it was going to happen. And, uh, I, I—Wichita shouldn't have let it happen. I mean, that's what it amounts to. And I know they're, that they talk about the, giving them tax breaks and stuff like that, and, you gotta do that, cause they—big money makes money for everybody, and I don't care what anybody says. You gotta have the big companies here. If Koch left—uh, Industries, every—look how many jobs they would lose. You know, when Beech sold to, uh, Raytheon, you know, Raytheon, everybody worried about it. But, uh, no, it's a mistake. Shouldn't let it happen, but it's gonna happen.

Do you have any speculation on what that might mean for the city, with them gone?

Well, when you lose 25,000 jobs, that's about what they employed, what could happen is maybe another company would come in and hire these guys, and that's probably what's gonna—we hope it would happen. A foreign country's probably gonna come in and start something. But it's gonna be a problem. But a lot of those guys are on retirement age anyway. So, who knows?

Looking back at what Boeing's meant here, talk a little bit about what you feel like they have done in and for Wichita.

Well, it helped build my business, our business, there's no doubt about it. The people that have worked for them, they just—and they pay good, Boeing has a good wage. And, uh, great retirement, uh, it just—gonna be tough, I don't know how to explain it any more than that, it, um, you're not gonna see the railroads going through like they do, you know, used to see those big jets on those flat cars, going up, going north, there, northeast, northwest. You, uh... it's not gonna happen. It's gonna be hard. And Wichita better get aware of it.

Let's say we're 20, 30 years down the line. Looking back, what do you think Boeing's legacy in Wichita might be?

15:12

I think that, uh, we were lucky. That's all it is, you know, they, uh, during the war, they were, uh, the main man. Built a lot of B-17s here. It's too bad. Like this guy right here, ol' Chauncey, Charles Chauncey worked at Boeing. And he flew that B-17 there. He just—lotta respect for him. And he knew the big shots, too. He was in the other night. That's why I wanted you to come in Wednesday night, meet these guys.

I called you last week to set up this interview, we've pretty much covered the things I was looking for, but I don't know if there's anything you had rolling around in your head between the time I talked to you and now that maybe you wanted to mention.

Just, uh... Savute's restaurant has always catered to the aviation industry, and especially people from Boeing and McConnell, and Beech and Cessna. And we've been very lucky because we've had that clientele here. And, uh, you know, I'm 60 years, 59 years old, I'm getting ready to start playing golf and fish a lot, so with it, uh, we thank 'em, we thank the city and aviation, cause this is our, this is our—I'm a pilot, you know, this is our hobby. It's a great hobby.

How long have you been a pilot?

Oh, I learned how to fly in high school. Almost had to.

Really? Being in this family?

It was a must, yeah. It was... my dad just said, 'come on, let's go.' And see, in those days, in the '50s, my dad learned how to fly an airplane that had a lot of class to it, you know, and now, you, uh, you learn how to fly and you click it into the computer and you can do your thing, but in those days, you put your finger on the map and you didn't take your finger off where you were till you got there. That's how you learned how to fly and you told the flight service station if you got into weather and they would tell you where the high and the lows were. And you would always fly to a high because it was clear. So, it's—and you worked on your own airplane, too. So it, uh... a lot of that's gone.

You said that you're ready to play golf. Do you have anybody ready to take over the restaurant when you're finished?

No, it's probably over with when I'm gone. Yeah. It's the way it is. I know my daughters don't want it. I got a neat grandson that might.

If you can hold on?

Yeah.