

Kristen Eide-Tollefson
Narrator

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

December 6, 2018

The Book House, Minneapolis, MN

RH: Let's start with an introduction your name, your title as owner of the Book House, and the date.

KE: Kristen Eide-Tollefson. I'm the owner of the Book House. I have two young partners and the date today is December 6, 2018.

RH: Let's start with the basics. I'm Rob Hahn and I'm the producer of this oral history. What brought you to Dinkytown and when did you start the business?

KE: The bookstores brought me to Dinkytown and I was at the University in 1972 but I married a bookseller who was very involved in academic books selling them to libraries. In this very space where we are now there was a collective of dealers called Dinkytown Antiquarian. I came to Dinkytown to visit the bookstores here.

RH: How would you describe the vibe particularly among the bookstore owners at that time?

KE: Dinkytown had an extremely collective vibe; everyone was on the streets talking to each other—lots of small businesses. It was sort of a transition into the kinds of businesses that you would expect interest in in the '70s. There were Maya Market and Tom the Tailor and all these classic characters from Dinkytown in that era.

At that time one of the dealers who was in the group, Rob Wozniak who's a professor at the University, experienced the same thing we did that Reagan came into office and immediately cut off funding of the libraries. We had no outlet for all these academic books. So, Rob called my former husband and mentor, Jim Cummings, and said, "Hey, you want to go into Dinkytown? There's a new spot."

In two weeks we set up both of our stocks using old bookcases and the bookcases from the Dinkytown Dime and other infrastructure from the old Perrine's Bookstore which had recently gone out of business. There was a real turnover going on in Dinkytown.

RH: What year was this?

KE: 1976.

RH: Some of the characters in the book business: Melvin McCosh—what are your memories of him?

KE: Oh, Melvin McCosh. Melvin was the quintessential—he was legendary as a bookseller and as a character. He first opened in Dinkytown in the late '50s; he lived in a house on the corner of Fifth and 14th. There were books in the house; that was his first bookstore and then there was a rooming house upstairs. Some of Dinkytown's greatest characters from that period lived up there: Diamond Dave Whitaker lived up there. Joe Pack—all sorts of people lived up there.

Then he opened a regular store in the back of Bridgeman's, which is at Fourth and 14th. I don't know the exact date; maybe '58, and that was a major gathering place for people to talk and have

conversations about radical politics, culture and everything that was going on at the time. The story was that Dylan often slept on the floor and listened to all of this.

McCosh was a sardonic, brilliant character and he was famous for putting signs in his windows such as, "Homecomers Go Home." Or he would ask people if they wanted him to sign their books that they bought from him and he would sign it, "God." He was a very sardonic, fascinating Scotsman.

RH: I had read that he was a bit of a curmudgeon and that fits what you're describing; is that accurate?

KE: Yes, and he was more interested in the integrity of intellectual work than he was in making a sale. People would come up to him with a book and he would go, "Oh, you don't want that book; you want this," and he'd try to sell them something that was leagues above their level of understanding.

He endured; he was forced out by Bridgeman's and the famous sit-in; there was a famous sit-in in which a very large number of people participated when he was forced out and they protested at Bridgeman's and just went line after line and sat in Bridgeman's to protest his leaving. Since he hadn't been paying rent that didn't actually finally work and he left and went from there to the West Bank, which was a fascinating store. He was in the old firehouse there and then he went down to Dundas and finally out to Minnetonka.

RH: Another character, and I want to know your memories of him, the Walker: Phil Holland.

KE: Phil was everywhere; he was a walker. He walked the streets, he walked the campus and you probably have already heard that he had a prodigious memory. What's the word when someone is a genius? They're a genius in one particular area.

RH: Let's start over on that one; what are your memories of the Walker, Phil Holland?

KE: He was always well-dressed and he was in constant motion walking up and down the streets of Dinkytown, the campus. He had a phenomenal memory for statistics and baseball was one of his favorite topics. He could recite the statistics for baseball back decades.

RH: If you don't mind, let's start over again. I'll give you the question but if you could start using his name I think that would help. What are your memories of Phil Holland, the Walker?

KE: Phil Holland was a walker; he walked everywhere. He was always well-dressed and very upright in his posture and he walked the streets, the campus, all over Dinkytown. I don't know where else he went but he had a prodigious memory for statistics.

My most personal memory is that when we first came to Dinkytown, my former husband Jim Cummings and I, to open the Book House in Dinkytown he ran into Jim and he said, "University of Minnesota," and gave him the dates that he had been at the University. Jim had never spoken to him but he remembered Jim and he remembered when he had been there. That's the kind of memory he had.

He also, I believe, would make telephone calls that there was no one on the other end. I believe that was one of his peccadillos. He was a fascinating man; he was brilliant in this one specific way and he was in Dinkytown for decades; many, many of us knew him.

RH: Is it true to your recollection that he would give advice on myriad topics even if people didn't want that advice, be it the stock market or politics?

KE: Yes, anything that had to do with statistics. I never was accosted by him on political matters but he was very involved. Yes, it doesn't surprise me.

RH: What other characters stand out in your memory?

KE: Of course, Bruce who recently died; he was the character who had an encampment under the bridge for many, many years. Has anybody talked to you about him?

RH: No.

KE: We had a nickname for him, which I can't remember at the moment. He and his partner used to—she would sell things on the street, mostly jewelry I think and he would just sit there. He wore a top hat and they got around on bicycles. I remember one day we decided for preserve a store at Dinkytown to take a picture of him and asked his permission. Then we said, "Bruce, when did you first come to Dinkytown?" He said, "I came for the protest in '72 and I never left." He had a very eccentric dignity; he wasn't very talkative but was a major presence—an artistic presence. He was always garbed as was his partner and they both have recently died.

RH: Any other characters before we move on to another topic?

KE: I want to mention quickly the importance of the characters in Dinkytown. I guess you wouldn't call him a character but a figure: Mark Davidov who was one of the most important activists in the history of Minnesota. He lived in Florence Court; he was in Dinkytown a great deal and he would sit on the street and talk to people about community and talk to people about issues.

The characters have served a number of functions; one of them has been to just communicate the history of Dinkytown and their history to incoming students and incoming students and incoming students. Also, they kept a certain vigil on the streets; there was always someone on the street who knew what was going on, who knew when people were in trouble and there was a network on the streets that people could count on for support and for help. It was like a village; it was both a nuisance and a real treasure, the characters in Dinkytown.

RH: If my math is right, we're about 42 years removed from when you first set up shop here; how has it changed from the mid-'70s to 2018 in terms of the characters, the vibe, the student involvement?

KE: I would say that a lot of the characters, alumni, and figures from the '60s and '70s who created a lot of cultural and story fabric in Dinkytown have moved on. So, there is less of the old guard on the street. That's a very thoughtful question; it really is important to me. I guess it's a younger vibe; the vibe is younger. The energy here has always been student energy but we're missing some of that grounding—some of the old businesses that are gone and some of the old characters that are gone.

RH: Which is a perfect segue to talk about the organization Preserve Historic Dinkytown; tell me in general terms how that came about and what your role was in it.

KE: In 2012 we had a very busy five years between 2011 and 2015. In 2012 the old Marshall U High that became the UTECH Center and was a huge center of activity came down. In 2013 after the Book House moved because the Venue was built we had a grand reopening.

In 2012 when the Venue proposed to build where we are take out the Podium, the Book House, and the House of Hanson, Matt who is one of the manager owners here and the manager at the

coffee house created a campaign called Save Dinkytown along with some other students and people who worked in Dinkytown. That campaign almost won but it didn't; the Venue was built; Book House had to move—80,000 books—and we had our grand opening in 2013 here.

We advertised that we were going to have a Dinkytown history night. We didn't know what to expect and Eric Storlie who is now on the Preserve Dinkytown board turned up a dozen of the oldest of the old guard—people I had never even met. These are the old musicians and people who had lived in McCosh's rooming house who had been the music-makers in Dinkytown. A dozen of them came and told stories all night. We do have a recording of that.

Bill Savran was one of the people who came; he had a bookstore on the West Bank and he started Savran Rusoff here with Marley Rusoff. He said to me, "I have some negatives of the Scholar that I've never developed. I'm 73 years old; what am I going to do with them?" I said, "It sounds to me like you'd better develop them. And we'll have a little opening here with a little gallery and you can show them."

So, he said, "And maybe Spider John will come and play." I went, "Spider John Koerner?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Fine, okay." Not long after that I got a telephone call from Spokane, Washington; a man named Bob Zeller was calling. He said, "I hear Spider John is coming to play at the Book House and Bill Savran is going to show his pictures of the Scholar." I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm sending media in." I said, "Who are you?"

He used to be here in Minneapolis and has been collecting countercultural history for decades. He felt that this was an extremely important event in the context of counterculture history and proceeded to cofound with me, whom he assigned the Minnesota role, Preserve History Dinkytown.

The purpose was to preserve Dinkytown's history and character and the memories for the future so that they can continue to be made by all the students who continue to come. Bob's premise was that Dinkytown was an extremely important link in the whole counterculture movement and that it influenced the counterculture movement, which to our mind at that time was quite an exaggeration. But as interviews have unfolded and our research has demonstrated, he's absolutely right. That's really I think why you're here.

I have been the main organizer and our main event was to put together a Dinkytown reunion in time to influence the course of development in Dinkytown, which at that time was being pressured for a new—I'm sorry. I'm not doing well. This is complicated. I wrote it all down but I can't be reading it.

RH: You can just pick it up.

KE: I'm not sure how much detail to provide.

RH: We're good; I'll interject or something. Let's pick it up with a question; what was the feeling with regard to both development and establishment of Preserve Historic Dinkytown?

KE: There was a lot of tension involved because while a number of us were very interested in the Durand development for the hotel, it was going to take down a half-a-block of Dinkytown; Dinkytown was only four square blocks. There was not a lot of give and take with the community about the design or the details. So, there was a lot of tension within the business community; the business community was for development and at the same time there were a

number of people who did not want to see Dinkytown taken down building by building as has happened in Stadium Village.

What Preserve Historic Dinkytown did is to start collecting information about the counterculture history of Dinkytown because we wanted to weigh in on the technical historic significance of Dinkytown for the purposes of a potential designation of Dinkytown as an historic district. It had been studied by the City as a potential historic district. It was a recommendation of the recent small area plan that was in progress at that time too, that Dinkytown be examined as a potential small historic business district.

Preserve Historic Dinkytown took that on as a campaign but also to develop and bring together the larger community of people who love Dinkytown. I've been inspired to do this work because of the number of years I've been at the Book House and listened to people tell their stories about Dinkytown, listen to them tell about what a difference Dinkytown made in their lives.

We began writing, we began researching; Ossian (Or) started taking films and videos of the interviews and of the history. Eventually the work that we did became a document known as, Dinkytown: a Living History. It was actually appended to the City's own study for the historic designation. There's lots more controversy involved.

RH: In terms of the historic designation, what role did the organization and maybe you specifically have to play when it came to city politics?

KE: We worked very closely with Cordelia Pierson from Marcy-Holmes; she was the president at that time. The Dinkytown reunion of November, 2014, was intended as a kickoff to spark a resurgence of interest in an understanding of the importance of Dinkytown to the City and Jacob Frey was invited and he came. He spoke and he was a very challenging—he was of course now Mayor. He was our council member at that time and he was very much in favor of development, very much in favor of density and very skeptical about the designation of Dinkytown.

He told us later that without Preserve Historic Dinkytown there would not have been a designation; however, he's the one who created the compromise that allowed all of Dinkytown to support it. Barbara Camm and I and Cordelia were probably the key lobbyists for the development of the material and for the designation. Haila Maze wrote the study. Ossian did a video for the City Council, so it was an all-court effort. We probably gave two weeks of an announcement for the Dinkytown reunion; we had over 150 people come.

RH: What was your reaction personally and professionally when you got the historic designation?

KE: Tremendous relief; this had been at least a half-time job since 2012 trying to keep Dinkytown together during this transition. It's very satisfying to share that accomplishment and to have built despite the conflicts and the tensions to have built a community out of the divisions about Dinkytown between the neighborhood and the Preserve Historic Dinkytown people and the DBA. It's very gratifying to finally come together on it. I think we have a ways to go in terms of being able to really utilize the history of Dinkytown as part of the marketing of Dinkytown. We're on that path.

RH: I want to circle back in no particular order to things that we haven't covered that have popped into my mind. You mentioned Marshall University High School. I think it closed in '82 so, it was still in existence for about six years after you opened?

KE: Oh, yes.

RH: What did that contribute in your opinion to the neighborhood?

KE: Some of the most notable Dinkytown characters came out of Marshall U High; they had their 50th reunion while we were—I think it was two years ago we had a little reception for some of them. They were a handful; they were a really interesting bright group of kids who were not conventional in their behavior or in their thinking. Of course they loved the Book House but there was always commotion and they would stream into Dinkytown for lunch and stream back through when they were not supposed to be streaming back through. They brought a lot of vitality to Dinkytown.

RH: You mentioned Spider John Koerner; when you think of him what comes to mind?

KE: An era that I missed is what comes to my mind and real respect and gratitude for the role he played in the music of that time, which I just continue to learn about. One of the things I want to say is that the whole fabric and motive around Preserve Historic Dinkytown came out of and has been continued to be bound together by old friendships, enduring friendships that were made in Dinkytown. That's why there is a Preserve Historic Dinkytown because of these friendships, because of Bob Zeller's friendship with Dave Feehan because of Barbara's friendship with Laurie Savran, because of Ossian's friendship and connections.

When we formed Preserve Historic Dinkytown Bob sent us a list, which I have of extremely notable. Our founding board were very notable characters; Professor David Noble from the University who was so involved in the '70s issues. Red Nelson was on our advisory board; he was the owner of the 10 O'Clock Scholar. He sent us a list of all these people who have gone on to become famous and important who still consider Dinkytown their home. This network of friendships is still what feeds and sustains Dinkytown and Preserve Historic Dinkytown.

RH: Touching once again on the encroachment of development; what was your reaction and the reaction of others when House of Hanson decided to close?

KE: It was understandable that House of Hanson didn't want to try to compete with the promise of a brand new grocery store going into The Marshall across the street from her. The property was very valuable; those businesses and that corner were a real—we were institutions in the community and that corner was a very important part of Dinkytown. It was heartbreaking for us to have to close the Book House and for the Podium to leave and for the House of Hanson, which had been there for over 80 years to be gone. It certainly an understandable that the Hansons all wanted to sell. We fought it as hard and long as we could.

RH: Another institution that recently closed was Vescio's; what are your memories of Vescio's and what did it mean to the neighborhood?

KE: I think that Vescio's was one of the central meeting grounds of alumni from 50 years and more. Actually former Vice President Mondale was a regular visitor there and that's how we came to think of him as a potential champion for Preserve Historic Dinkytown as a designation. He and his group are just one of the many clusters of old friends and colleagues who continued to meet at Vescio's. The menu never changed and it was a family institution into two or three generations. That's the kind of business that Dinkytown sustained and was sustained by.

I have been mentioning recently to Dave Feehan as he puts together this roadmap for Dinkytown that we still have a number of businesses that are multigenerational businesses that are very old

businesses. The impression is, “Oh, everything’s turned over; Dinkytown is losing all its businesses.” That’s not true. This business is being passed on and there are a number of businesses that are still lifetime investments for their proprietors.

RH: How important was former Vice President Mondale’s role in helping get the historic preservation designation?

KE: It was very important. He came in at the end; we asked him to make a statement at the end. He was extremely, extremely supportive and the timing was absolutely perfect. We needed somebody who was high-profile with lots of credibility and with lots of integrity. He wrote an editorial, which coincidentally appeared the day before the vote and was very influential.

Also, Tom Webber, although he assured me that there was no relationship between the timing of the vote and his interview—the tour he took of Dinkytown. That came out and the Mondale editorial came out the week that the City Council decision was made. Though it had seemed like a really long slog for us through those years and through all those efforts, to have MPR and Vice President Mondale so visible in their support for Dinkytown—the interviews that MPR had were very supportive. It was very influential timing. It felt like the cavalry coming over the hill.

RH: What am I forgetting to ask that may be obvious or not so obvious that you want to add about the history and your time here?

KE: The fact that this interview and this project that you have is a carrying forward of the story that we started to try to tell and a story that needs to be told now and it needs to be told now is—Pat Coleman at the Historical Society challenged us to do, is one of the more meaningful pieces to me that the story is continuing.

I should acknowledge all the different contributions to Preserve Historic Dinkytown and one of those was the Loring Bar and Café now called. It was our gathering place; it was what gave our events a certain panache. We would have these lunches and talk. That’s the first time we met Ossian as he came and videoed our conversations.

They of course were part of the hosts of the big event—our reunion at the Varsity and we still meet there. We meet there now and again and coming up we have our annual holiday gathering in the Pasta Bar in this room right here, which is the west mezzanine right in the location where Dylan’s room was in the old Gray’s Drugstore.

Of course the Book House in Dinkytown played a very important role in communications and coordination and now is the home of the archive. We have hosted a number of returning Dinkytowners; probably the most famous was Diamond Dave Whitaker who came from San Francisco. As the word got out through Zeller and through others that we were reviewing Dinkytown’s history, it became a gathering point for people to come back and to be interviewed to be part of that history.

Diamond Dave Whitaker claims that he is the one who gave Dylan the copy of Bound for Glory and in fact sent him off on his trip to Greenwich Village. He went directly from Dinkytown to Greenwich Village to see Woody Guthrie and Diamond Dave came back and gave us quite a show. He did interviews; he did a tour. He took us to his old house where he lived with his girlfriend and Dylan stayed. He told us stories upon stories and encountered some of the old characters in Dinkytown; he and Al Milgrom had quite an exchange when he was here.

Then he connected with the more recent poets; he was hosted by Jim Lenfestey, which was very gracious. We had a lunch for him and people came back and visited him. That's the kind of event that Preserve Historic Dinkytown has had; we're really a loose amalgam of projects and it's always exciting to see what people want to do next.

RH: How about the Cara Letofsky walks, tours?

KE: Preserve Historic Dinkytown commissioned Cara Letofsky who is a local historian to do a Dinkytown tour—to put together the information around a Dinkytown tour. She did the first one back in 2015 and went on to get a grant with the Dinkytown Business Association to do a more extensive tour. That is now online and it is now in a pamphlet. That's one of the enduring visible accomplishments of our collaborations here in Dinkytown on the history. It's now available in an app on people's phones.

RH: What about the article that just came out in the Minnesota Daily that you collaborated on?

KE: One of the most interesting things about being an elder in Dinkytown is how many different eras of reporters come from the Daily to investigate; they always have a fresh perspective and ask questions about Dinkytown and its history. Jay Duggan from the Daily worked very hard to get a spot for his take on the developments in Dinkytown. He's very interested in the roadmap that's being created for the future of Dinkytown that's a collaboration of Marcy Holmes and Preserve Historic Dinkytown and the Dinkytown Business Association.

He had some very interesting observations about the students. One of the purposes of the roadmap is to bring the community of students and the community of businesses closer together. It's always been one of the goals of Preserve Historic Dinkytown; the continued vitality of the business district and the continued support of Dinkytown as a place for students.

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