



**Leonard Vann**

**January 16, 2001**

**for**

**Southwest Seattle Historical Society**

**by**

**JonLee Joseph**

# **Leonard Vann**

**Interviewed by: JonLee Joseph**

**January 16, 2001**

**1st Oral Interview**

**Seattle, Washington**

**JonLee:** January 16th, the year 2001. This is JonLee. I'm meeting with Leonard Vann in Seattle, Washington.

We're "live."

And so, I'd like to ask you some questions and have you respond. You had talked last time about how the restaurant got started. Would you talk about that and where Vann's Restaurant was?

**Leonard Vann:** It was located in the Admiral District on the present grounds of the Safeway store at Admiral Way, across the street from Lafayette Grade School. The reason it was located there, 'cause it was in close proximity to the high school. To begin with it was not a restaurant, it was just a place for the young folks at West Seattle High School to gather and had kind of a gym affect. And maybe like a soda fountain, candy bars and so forth, for the kids just to gather. Like a beanery might be. And it wasn't until, oh, a year, maybe approximately a year later, that my grandmother started to cook roasts and hams and so forth. My cousin, who was my, actually, my, yeah, my cousin, and my dad's younger brother were going to school

across the street at Lafayette. He'd go home for lunch. Then with his little wagon he'd bring the meat, the roasts, the hams, and what not, up to the restaurant. They would slice them and serve sandwiches and that was the beginning of starting to serve food.

**JonLee:** Was that when Lafayette was the castle where it had three--

**Leonard Vann:** Correct, correct, correct. That's what it was. That was back in 1922. There was a group of Puget Power linemen, that every noon, would show up there to eat lunch. And my Dad and my uncle had a very soft spot in their heart for that Puget Power crew. Because at that time, people don't realize, that we had competition in Seattle as far as power was concerned. Puget Power and City Light used the same poles and the same lines almost. And you could have one business that was on Puget Power, right next door would be City Light. And there was that type of competition for years. Until finally City Light bought out Puget Power and they left the city area and then it was just strictly City Light. Now, it was kind of an athletic program that they had there in the restaurant in the back room. They had a punching bag to hit. They had actually supported smokers. They sponsored baseball and football people. They did quite a bit of sports activities around the community. And then they formed, or they were part of forming what they called the West Seattle Athletic Club, which is really the forerunner of the Seattle Seahawks, actually. 'Cause it ended up at that time that every community had their own football team. Whether it was Seattle, whether it was Tacoma, whether it was Bellingham or, Everett or, they



all had them. Enumclaw, Bremerton and the like. We'd all travel, every Sunday they would travel to one of the towns or some of them would come here and they'd play a football game.

**JonLee:** Now, when the, what was it called, then? Was it called Vann's?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, Vann Brothers was the name, right, at that time.

**JonLee:** You mentioned that it was in a little building which has since been moved.

**Leonard Vann:** Right. That building is still standing. It was on the premises, or on the grounds, where the Safeway store is today. It is the only building that has been saved. It was moved over to Admiral Way right along, just north, at the north end, or the north side of the Admiral Way bridge. So, it's still there. It's now a dental clinic. But it's still there. And that is the original building that the restaurant was housed in.

**JonLee:** It's not a large building.

**Leonard Vann:** No. No.

**JonLee:** So, from there, where did they move?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, in 1928 they moved down to the present location on Alaska Street. Not the present location, but, on Alaska Street, which is a sports bar right now. And then it was in 1934, I



believe it was, that Prohibition was off, after the '32 election, and they wanted to have beer and wine and they were located too close to the front door of Jefferson School. So they had to find a new location. So they moved over to where the present location is right now, 4542 California Avenue. Which was previously a shoe store located in between Woolworth's Ten Cent Store and Kresses Ten Cent Store.

**JonLee:** So, then at that time, in 1934, the restaurant developed into a family-style, well you had a sporting goods store--

**Leonard Vann:** It was a family-style restaurant prior to that. That's when it evolved from my cousin bringing up the meat that my grandmother cooked. That's what started it going as a restaurant and then they also started in sporting goods. And they had the first franchise, for example, for Johnson Outboard Motors in the area. They used to sell guns and fishing tackle and rent skis and this type of thing, 'cause we didn't have too many sporting goods stores in the area. So they were into that for years.

**JonLee:** So when did they decide to let go of that part of the business?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, they had a decision to make when we went liquor-by-the-drink. We only had beer and wine for years and then they said we could have liquor-by-the-drink. And they had to make a decision. Are we going to expand the sporting goods, which is going to take a lot of inventory? Or do we stay with the liquor and expand that, which in a sense assists and helps our food business? So, they decided well, we'll stay, get a

liquor license, and stay with that and we'll get rid of the, we didn't have room or they didn't have room for as much inventory in sporting goods as you would have to have.

**JonLee:** So, Vann's Restaurant was open from 1922 to 1990, that's what I have in my notes, right?

**Leonard Vann:** Roughly.

**JonLee:** So, that's how many generations of Vann's worked in there?

**Leonard Vann:** Four generations, counting my grandmother! There was my dad and my uncle, my cousin and myself and my son. So that was [pause] that was the three generations there. We've had four generations go through West Seattle, attend West Seattle High School. My dad, my cousin, myself, my brother and my children and grandchildren. We've done pretty well as far as keeping West Seattle going [laughs].

**JonLee:** That's true! Now, when you, then after the restaurant changed and moved to its location where it was until you decided not to have a restaurant there any more, what were the other things that were changing? Where did your clientele come from? Was it drawn from the neighborhood as well as outside the neighborhood? Would you address that, please?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, it did come from all over. We had the type of food in some, for example, breaded veal cutlets, we had people come from Issaquah, from clear from the north end on a regular basis just because of the *real* breaded veal cutlets



and that type of thing. We were really a neighborhood restaurant. We depended upon repeat trade to make it. And my dad and my uncle started the business under the premise that we serve good food, you keep it clean, the place clean, and give good service at, you know, moderate prices. And the people are going to come back. And that's basically what happened.

**JonLee:** Would you tell that story for the tape this time about the health inspector bringing a friend of his to your restaurant?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, my dad told me this story. He says that the health inspector came in, he says, "I had a visitor," he said, "from the East." And I think he said New York, I'm not sure where it was. But he says, "I told this" he said he told this friend who came in, "I'm going to take you to the cleanest restaurant in the city of Seattle." And we thought that was very good, nice feather in our cap at that point. And that, see, that's what my dad and my uncle wanted to do. To have a good clean restaurant. They always felt that, my dad would say, "Check the rest rooms. If the rest rooms are clean, you're probably going to have a very clean operation." And I think that's a pretty good yard stick down through the years.

**JonLee:** I use it. When I go to public places.

**Leonard Vann:** It seemed to work out pretty well. We've had a lot of repeat customers down through the years. One customer in particular, I can recall, would come in five times a day. I almost wanted to take an insurance policy out on him. He'd



come in for breakfast, he'd come back for coffee break, he'd come in for lunch, he'd come back for an afternoon coffee break and then he'd come in the evening for dinner and maybe a drink or two.

**JonLee:** Was he a single man?

**Leonard Vann:** Single man, yes. And he could get enough variety in the restaurant that he could come back everyday, and that many times a day. Because the variety was there.

**JonLee:** And he didn't cook then?

**Leonard Vann:** He didn't cook, no. He depended on us to feed him.

**JonLee:** Do you want to give his name or do you want to protect?...

**Leonard Vann:** No I won't, I won't give his name.

**JonLee:** But I like, that's good for your business. That's wonderful.

**Leonard Vann:** I suggest we take an insurance policy out on a person like that! [laughs]

**JonLee:** It speaks well--

**Leonard Vann:** That's what we thought, yes.

**JonLee:** Would you talk a bit about your involvement with the business because you were carrying a pretty heavy load elsewhere as well as--

**Leonard Vann:** I started, I got my education, my basic education from Washington State University. It was a cow college then. And a Master's Degree from University of Washington in education. I started teaching in the Seattle School District in 1952. And I was on the original faculty of Sharples Junior High School. And I would teach, not at the beginning, but I would just work weekends in the beginning. But later on, when my dad wanted to kind of get out of the business, I would teach all day and come to work at the restaurant a full shift after teaching. So, I would start seven o'clock in the morning, and I would finish teaching at three-thirty, four o'clock, come right to work and work from say, five o'clock clear through to one the next morning. And I did that for several years. So that was the beginning.

**JonLee:** What did you teach?

**Leonard Vann:** I taught mechanical drawing and mathematics in the shops. Then eventually in, I ended up in the late '60's and early '70's as Vice Principal of a junior high school down on Delridge Way, Boren Junior High. Then I would I come to the business in the morning, open it up, make the deposits, get the coffee going, lights on, heat going, so forth. And then leave and go to school for the day and come back again at night. In the afternoon and maybe not work a full shift, but several hours. Did that for several years.

**JonLee:** Did your family know who you were, when you came home?

**Leonard Vann:** [laughs] Well, we communicated via the telephone, I'll put it that way.

**JonLee:** Did they remember who you were? Who's this strange man coming home? No, I'm kind of joshing with you.

**Leonard Vann:** I hear you.

**JonLee:** But you didn't get a lot of sleep.

**Leonard Vann:** No, I got enough. I got through it.

**JonLee:** And your son, you mentioned worked in the restaurant for a while.

**Leonard Vann:** I had been in the Marine Corps before I went to college and my son decided at age seventeen beginning, or eighteen, he was going, after he graduated from high school, he joined the Marine Corps. He did very well. He ended up being trained as a court recorder. And then he ran the law library down in Camp Pendleton, California, the Marine Corps. And when he got out, well, he got married while he was in, as a young man, eighteen years old. And decided that, he went to college for a while, and then he came into the business with me, as a partner. We bought out my cousin, so it was just he and I that were running the business and by then I'd lost my dad and



my uncle, both. So, it was just my cousin and I and then we bought him out and my son then was my partner.

**JonLee:** And then he was there pretty much full time?

**Leonard Vann:** Yeah, he was there, yeah he was full time, you bet. And he was President of the Junction Merchant's Association. He was very well thought of and did an excellent job in the community. But then he decided he wanted to spend more time with his family. He had three boys and so, "I just can't spend these kind of hours in the restaurant business, I'd like to spend more time." So we decided, "Well, if you don't want this, then maybe we'd better sell it." Which we did. So, we put it up for sale and sold it to a family by the name of Foley. And they were quite a good sized family and they ran it for a while and decided they didn't want to keep it, either. So, they sold it. The person who bought it from them, ran it right straight into the ground. So, we had some problems there, we got it back so then we re-sold it and the present people, East Indian, are there now.

**JonLee:** There's actually two Maharaj Restaurants that I know of in Seattle. One in the Greenwood area and then this one in West Seattle.

**Leonard Vann:** Well, they had another one on Elliot Avenue and the building has since been torn down. Gone. And they had a third one, the one that I remember, was out on Highway 99 out near the Redondo Exit.

**JonLee:** Is it the same family?

**Leonard Vann:** Yes. This is all the same family. That's the place where I went, first of all, to see if I wanted to go ahead and allow East Indian cuisine. They tried American cuisine. And it wasn't working. They were not familiar with it. So they said, If we're gonna go broke, or whatever, let us do it with something that we're familiar with. And so, I went out, my wife and I and checked it out, and liked it.

**JonLee:** Oh, it's delicious.

**Leonard Vann:** Oh yeah, it is, it really is. If you like that cuisine, I mean it's, it is excellent. And John Hinterberg has reviewed it, I guess, a couple of times and come out with excellent reviews.

**JonLee:** So, to what do you attribute the success of the restaurant for three generations?

**Leonard Vann:** I attribute it to the fact that family members are in management were there practically around the clock. And were on top of things and would see if things were kept up and done. And meticulous in keeping the standards that my dad and my uncle had established and seeing that that was done.

**JonLee:** And what did you do when there were problems? Such as somebody who drank too much or not just drank too much , but started talking loudly and--

**Leonard Vann:** Well, you would try to deal with it in a nice friendly way. You don't like to get belligerent with people. I mean, that's your livelihood.

**JonLee:** Okay, Joe, you've had enough, go home.

**Leonard Vann:** Each case is an individual case and you couldn't just put a blanket--

**JonLee:** But because you knew them it made a difference, didn't it?

**Leonard Vann:** Sometimes you knew them, you know, but sometimes you didn't, too. They were complete strangers, but you'd try to do the best you could. It worked out pretty well. We had, well, I attribute the success really to the help was just super. We had people, for example, a waitress with us, retired with thirty-two years. A bartender with twenty-five. And cooks with over twenty and twenty five years. That type of thing. I mean, you don't keep people like that, for that long, unless you treat them right.

**JonLee:** Treat them well and pay them enough.

**Leonard Vann:** That's correct.

**JonLee:** So you must have done both those things.

**Leonard Vann:** Well, one of the major problems that we had in the area, one of the reasons we decided to sell, too, was that we were three restaurants in the area that were union. All the rest were non-



union. And there were thirty-eight in the greater West Seattle area that developed in the matter of a few short years and all non-union. Well, I had a difficult time to compete with the non-union houses that didn't have to pay the health and welfare and the wages and so forth. So, that created a problem.

**JonLee:** Now, your family decided to buy that building that Maharaj Restaurant is in now. Can you talk about that and how that happened?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, it came up for sale and I don't know if my dad and my uncle even knew it was up for sale, but a friend of theirs at that time named Vern Coulon was in real estate, commercial real estate, and he came to them and just about got down on his knees and begged them to buy the building. They just couldn't see from their standpoint, growing up through the Depression and so forth, that real estate was the thing to do. But he finally convinced him to buy it, the smartest move they ever made. Because they were then their own landlords and they handled that very well. Oh, incidentally, in the restaurant business my dad and my uncle were partners, complete partners. My uncle was never married. My dad had a wife and two children, okay? So he could take advantage, you might say, of food, or whatever, from merchandise, over my uncle. That's not the way they operated. They agreed that whatever they would do, they would pay, out of their own pocket, for whatever they took out of the restaurant. I don't care if it was a candy bar or a cup of coffee, or whatever, they paid out of their own pocket. So at the end of the month, if there was any money left over, they could split it down the

middle, evenly, and they'd both be even. And it worked.  
Yeah, you bet. And it worked very well.

**JonLee:** Now, would you talk too, about the organization that you, I think it's very, very visionary to think about parking at the Junction, now that everyone has cars. Would you talk a little bit about the organization that you joined in with a couple, a number of people, what did you call it the West Side?

**Leonard Vann:** The West Seattle Trusteed Properties.

**JonLee:** The West Seattle Trusteed Properties. In order to have enough parking for customers and clients.

**Leonard Vann:** It started out, that, of course, we didn't have any parking meters in the area, we didn't have many places that the employees could park. And so, first of all they started to build, to buy some property and fix it so we could have some employee parking. Well, that lasted about six months or a year, because they found out that we really needed it more for customers' parking. And then parking meters came in and they found out that the merchants in many cases were parking on the street and plugging the meters, so that wasn't working too well, either. So, we had to do something to provide parking for customers. And that's when Fritz Lind who was then manager of the People's Bank, that was located on the corner of California and Alaska, on the south east corner. He put together kind of a group with Frank Holert and my dad and my uncle and several of the other business men around the area and they decided to



incorporate, we had the Articles of Incorporation and buy this property and convert it into parking lots. Well, now, we own four parking lots in the area.

**JonLee:** Would you describe where they are?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, one of them is on 42nd on the 4500 block directly behind the old Penny's building. I think there's a hundred and two parking stalls in that. Another one is located behind the liquor store over on 44th Avenue SW, and I forget how many stalls we have there. Then the other, one of the other ones is located on the south west corner of 44th and Alaska. And that's where the old fire and police station used to be. And just directly south of that right behind Northwest Art and Frame is the other parking lot.

**JonLee:** Don't you think that that has contributed to keeping those businesses alive?

**Leonard Vann:** Oh, we know it has. You can attribute the cost of one parking stall to about \$30,000 a year. And that's not enough probably, per business. They will produce that much business and income for the area, each stall, is valued about that much. So, we have resurfaced them a couple of times, and restriped them and reconfigured some of the lots. And so we added additional parking stalls. And you know we leased this out to the Junction Merchants Association, who in turn pays about \$3,500 a month, roughly, give or take a little, to Trusteed Properties, and out of that we pay our taxes and do some upkeep and so forth. We don't really make any money on it.



But, and we sold stock the stock, we really don't purchase it back, because it has no value in that, there is a book price, but really no value to the stock owners.

**JonLee:** Well, it's holding it in trust.

**Leonard Vann:** Yeah, it is, right. If we would ever sell the property, then we would have some money. But we don't ever intend to sell it. That's not the purpose of it. If we sold it we would not have the parking.

**JonLee:** Now, I know it's a little far fetched to bring it up, but why do you think Admiral Way businesses didn't do anything similar to this?

**Leonard Vann:** They didn't have the ownership structure, I don't think, at the time. That's part of our problem today, even at the Junction. We have absentee ownership in many cases. And that doesn't help us at all. It's fractured up into the small parcels. And I think that's what's true down at Admiral Way. Mark Garten is the one, the major one who has bought the theatre and that corner with the service station, and so forth. And he owns the other corner also, over there behind the, includes the Benbow Restaurant. And I think the whole half of that block, clear down to the corner across from the library--

**JonLee:** He owns Benbows?

**Leonard Vann:** The building, yes. Oh yes.

**JonLee:** I have an appointment to see, I thought the owner of the Benbow, Neysa--

**Leonard Vann:** Neysa? No, no.

**JonLee:** Then she owns the business.

**Leonard Vann:** Right, yeah, exactly. It's Mark Garten who owns all that area there. But, because they didn't think far enough ahead on it, I guess, in small fractured, they had an awful time, Mark didn't buy that the theatre and the gas station for some time that sat empty. There for a long time before it was finally purchased.

**JonLee:** Did he own across the street from the theatre where there used to be a parking lot where there is now a retirement home?

**Leonard Vann:** No, that was, I think that was owned by the bank. I'm pretty sure it was owned by the bank. That was what, Rainier Bank? To begin with and then if it changed hands after that--

**JonLee:** It's hard for me to keep track.

**Leonard Vann:** Yeah, I know, there was a friend of mine that used to be down at the old Rainier Bank that went up there as manager. So that's why I think it was--

**JonLee:** Wells Fargo, perhaps?

**Leonard Vann:** Well that came later. That was all, no, it wasn't Wells Fargo. From the Junction, the Rainier Bank, it was down there. One of the assistant managers went up and managed that bank. Anyhow. That's just my guess. Another thing that's happened I think at Admiral Way, too, and that was years ago, they can't help it now, but when that earthquake hit us in about '49, it knocked down the old castle

**JonLee:** School.

**Leonard Vann:** Yeah, Lafayette School, where I attended school as a youngster. They rebuilt it, right on California Avenue and they vacated part of 44th Avenue behind it and expanded the playground. At the time, I guess that they almost had to do that. But as you look back on it now, it's a shame they had to put the school right out in the middle of the business section. Or on the edge there at least where you can't expand. And that's just 20-20 hindsight, I guess. And it's the same way with this assisted living program, Admiral Heights, that just opened up. Why did they have to build there? Why couldn't that have been just easily off a street or two, or whatever, off the beaten path?

**JonLee:** Maybe zoning? Who's to say.

**Leonard Vann:** Well, okay, but you could also apply for rezoning and get things done.

**JonLee:** So I think there are short term visions and longer term visions.



**Leonard Vann:** They tried to get the City Council to get involved, as far as assisting in parking there to, and for some reason they didn't want anything to do with it. I don't know if they're going to help Mark now with some underground parking, so we can get more down there.

**JonLee:** Build it back to the Neighborhood Council.

**Leonard Vann:** That's going to really hurt the business in the area. I think Admiral Way has done a great job of expansion down there. Super.

**JonLee:** When the Admiral Thriftway and the Safeway and the shops and the bank, it's very easy to be walking around there and Linda's Flowers, I like her. There's two bakeries, I've never been in the wedding cake one, Meany's, or something like that. The other one I have been to.

**Leonard Vann:** That changed hands, here, just not too long ago.

**JonLee:** In the last few months.

**Leonard Vann:** Or six months, or whatever. It hasn't been long. He's still with them, or did at least, was with them, trying to teach them, 'cause they'd never been in the bakery business before.

**JonLee:** I know. Isn't it amazing that they would buy a bakery business?

**Leonard Vann:** Exactly. So, I don't know where the funds came from to do that and why they would want to take that kind of a gamble. The gal that took over Blake's Bakery, two years back, I tried to help her out, to give her some help, and I just couldn't do it. The equipment in there was old and the floors were sagging. She was doing the right thing, she was going after it correctly, I thought. She had some stores that she was serving daily. Some big ones with hot fresh rolls and the like. And was expanding her business in that way.

**JonLee:** What happened then, did she go out of business and Husky buy that--

**Leonard Vann:** Actually, she kind of gave up. She got hold of Carl who was up, living up north and said, I just can't do it. And she was on her second child, she had her first child, and he tried to help her out a bit and cut back, I guess on her rent, and he would come down and help her occasionally. And then the second youngster came along and she just couldn't do that and keep the family going too. So, she just wasn't making enough to make it worthwhile. 'Cause that bakery business, you had to be there in the middle of the night, to get things going.

**JonLee:** Right, to start the dough to rise and. So, is it gone now?

**Leonard Vann:** Oh, no, no, no. Borrecchini's.

**JonLee:** Oh, Borrecchini's.

**Leonard Vann:** Borrecchini's purchased it now, and are doing great. But see, they also have the knowledge and the background and another store out there on Rainier Avenue. So, it worked out fine. Husky, you know, the Millers have just done great.

**JonLee:** Oh, that's such a fun place.

**Leonard Vann:** Well, you know, they own a good chunk of the Junction now.

**JonLee:** Good. Good.

**Leonard Vann:** Yeah, they've done a good job there.

**JonLee:** Yes, they've got very personable people working there, they've got high quality goods, and delicious. Both their ice cream, the chocolate, sandwiches, that once in a while I go in and buy, they have something out. You know, you can pick up a piece of bruchetta, thinly sliced bread that's been toasted with tomatoes and cheese. You know it's just delicious.

**Leonard Vann:** Well, they've been there as long as I can remember. I can remember as a youngster myself, a little kid, I was in one of the first Hi-You(?) parades and at the end of the parade we got to go into Husky get an ice cream, you know, boy, that was the highlight of my life. That was in the '30's, so.

**JonLee:** And that business has been in the same family, hasn't it?



**Leonard Vann:** Oh yes. Miller's have, I can remember Jack and I remember his dad before him.

**JonLee:** Do you think his father's still, about?

**Leonard Vann:** No. No.

**JonLee:** So are there any other West Seattle stories that you'd like to share at this time, on tape?

**Leonard Vann:** Well, I can't think of any right off hand.

**JonLee:** Well, this has been great.

**Leonard Vann:** I'm sure that I'll think of others later on. That's the way of it.

**JonLee:** Well, I thank you very much.

End of Interview.

# Leonard Vann

Volunteer Photographer Regina Frye

	B & W Film	Color	Special Order Prints	
06/09/01 Photo session at home	1.00			
06/09/01 B&W Film (2 x 5.30)				\$11.00
06/09/01 Coscto - process file (2x7.59)	2.00			\$16.00
06/16/01 NW Art Frame - matting (2x4.00)	2.00			
Deliver photos to SSHS	1.00		\$8.00	\$8.00
				\$35.00
				\$35.00

Total Time 7.00  
Total Mileage 28.00



Restaurant - W.S. businessman