

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

December 5, 2008  
Al Kordiak (AK)  
Todd Mahon (TM)

TM: This is Todd Mahon, executive director at the Anoka County Historical Society interviewing former Anoka County commissioner, Al Kordiak, on Friday, December 5<sup>th</sup> at the Kordiak Company Income Tax/Real Estate in Columbia Heights. So, we'll just go into the questions.

AK: We don't do any real estate; we've just had that sign up there for about 30 years, now.

TM: I'm going start off kind of like in the early years. Ask you a little bit about Columbia Heights, growing up, and things like that, and we'll work our way into politics and all of that. Tell me, where were you born?

AK: I was born on 44<sup>th</sup> and 2-1/2 Street, on the edge of Columbia Heights.

TM: Oh, yeah?

AK: On the border of Columbia Heights and what was then Fridley Township. And there was nothing around there; nothing around there but just wide open prairie or oak trees.

My grandfather had a little house there, and we spent quite a bit of time at his house. Unfortunately, he, nor my grandmother, spoke English, and so that's the reason I had to be able to speak Slovak.

That's where I was born, and then I spent most of my younger years on 42<sup>nd</sup> and Central, just right down the street.

TM: Not far from here.

AK: But I worked at the grocery store, here, for several years, for a Jewish fellow who was really, really good to me. And I worked not only every day after school all through high school, but I worked my lunch hours all through high school.

TM: Do you remember his name? The guy that owned it?

AK: Yeah, Abe Levitt.

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

AK: He was a wonderful guy. He was so good to me. And generally I owed him more than he owned me because whenever I needed money – I came from a very poor family.

TM: Sure.

AK: And so whenever I needed money for school or books or something, I'd go to Abe, and borrow it from Abe, and Abe would write it down, and at the end of the week, he'd figure out who owes who how much.

Now, I ran for state representative in 1950. I was defeated the first time. At that time, our legislative district included all of Anoka and all of Isanti County. It was that big of a legislative district. And I had 21 people tell me I didn't have a chance. I didn't have too much. Isanti was primarily Scandinavian.

TM: Yeah.

AK: And everybody'd tell me, "Al, don't even go into Isanti County. Those Scandinavians are not going to vote for you." But I went up there. Went to Cambridge and Braham and Isanti; all those little areas, trying to get enough votes to get elected, but I didn't make it. I came down real strong here in the south end of the county, and that's why, in the next election, I ran for county commissioner.

TM: Okay.

AK: If I stutter or something, it's because I used to stutter real bad.

TM: Oh, okay. We'll maybe we'll get you to talk about that. Let's go back a little bit. Your grandparents immigrated here?

AK: Yes.

TM: From?

AK: From Czechoslovakia. Most of the Kordiaks, Todd, are still back in Czechoslovakia.

TM: Okay. So, what year were you born in?

AK: 1928

TM: And you had other siblings?

AK: Yes. There were seven of us. Seven children, and my mother and father were nine of us.

TM: Right. And there aren't many grand mansions here in Columbia Heights, so I assume it was a small house that you grew up in.

AK: It was a small house, yeah. It was a small house. We all slept in one room upstairs.

TM: Okay.

AK: All of us in one room upstairs. But they knew how to save money. My mother and father went back to Czechoslovakia thirteen times.

TM: Really?

AK: Yes. Even as poor as he was. But my mother knew how to save every conceivable penny you can save.

TM: So it sounds like your parents taught you quite a bit.

AK: Oh, sure. My parents were fiercely anti-Communist. Now you're too young to remember how terrible it was during the Communist regime, back then when the Communists took over most of Europe. They were just death on the people over there.

TM: Yes.

AK: And each time I went over there, I'd get in some kind of a problem because I didn't quite conform to the way the Communists said that you had to be over there. So I was very active in the anti-Communist movement here.

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1947, a friend of mine, here, from Columbia Heights, who was very much of a leftist, but a good friend of mine – he said he had a ticket – an extra ticket. He could get me into a Communist rally that was gonna be held on 724 Fourth Avenue South, and that was the U.E. Union Hall.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: It was so left wing, that the AFL-CIO eventually kicked them out of the union.

TM: Okay.

AK: And formed a rival IUE. So I went to that Communist meeting, and I was bitter all the time I was sitting there waiting for the national head of the party to come. It wasn't publicized in the newspaper at all. But the national head of the party was William D. Foster. And William D. Foster came in, everybody got up and cheered. And then I told my buddy, I said, "Norris, pretend like you don't know me cuz I don't want to embarrass you," but I remained standing up, and I said some bad things to William D. Foster.

And I'm screaming at him.

TM: What were you saying? If it needs to be cleaned up, feel free to clean it up.

AK: No, I says, "You dirty, rotten, filthy Communist. How dare you preach that filthy Communist filth and garbage standing before our great American flag?" And then I made the mistake in adding onto it, "Long live Franco, long live Perone" Well, Franco

was the Spanish victor of Spain, and I got a letter from Franco, and a picture from Franco. I still have it.

TM: Really.

AK: And it was just – the whole thing took a minute, but then they had me up off my feet and head first I was going out the hall, and they took me out into the hallway, and they beat the hell out of me.

TM: Oh, really.

AK: And rolled me down the steps, and I don't know why the cops came in just about then, but there were two policemen came in. And they said, "Who did it?" and I said, "Those two guys right there." Well, it turned out that one of them was Samuel K. Davis, and he was, at that time, the candidate on the Communist ticket for governor of Minnesota. We had a lot of Communists here at that time. And the other guy was Lionel Bergman. He ran the Communist Daily Worker newspaper. And geeze, I went to work the next day – I worked at General Electric Company. That word "E" is all shook up, I'm telling you.

TM: No, that's fine.

AK: Geeze, I came to work, and they says, "Holy smoke, Kordiak. Did you see you made the front page in the paper, today?" I said, "I did?" I said, "Why?" "Well, it said they arrested the candidate for governor of Minnesota. He's in jail. One on the Communist ticket." And they brought the newspaper out and showed it to me. Well then we had a trial. But from that trial, all kind of things happened. I ended up – there were a number of people sat in the booth reserved for defendants of the Communist party...

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: Testifying against me. That I was a threat to the Communist party. I used force and violence, and I had a large group from Columbia Heights that followed me, and that they would do, you know, whatever I asked them to do, and that I was a threat. And one even said that I would blow up the Communist party headquarters. And then, there was a girl came in the courtroom and, geeze, I was so glad to see somebody that I knew from the Catholic Church over here. I went over to talk to her. "Oh, Georgiana, it's so nice to see you," cuz I was so scared about the whole thing. I was all alone. And then a guy in a black hat and black suit, he come up to me and he says, "Don't talk to that girl." "Oh, she's a good friend of mine." He said, "Well, she's testifying for the Community party against you this afternoon." "Oh, no. Why?" He said, "Did you get a letter from General Franco?" And, "She's gonna testify that you got the letter." See, I couldn't read it cuz it was Spanish, so I took it to our Catholic Youth Club. And she was there, and she was there when I showed it to the priest - asked if he could interpret it for me. So she was left wing, and so she ended up as a defense witness.

TM: Wow!

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

AK: And then my associate professor at the University from Columbia Heights, he testified against me. And amazingly, in 1947 was a crucial period of American history where they were trying to make sure that nobody else in the world got the secrets to the atomic bomb.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: And there were a number of people who were arrested, jailed - Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were hung or electrocuted for being spies. So what happens? One of the people that testified for the Communist party - my neighbor in Columbia Heights - son had worked for the Atomic Energy Commissioner. So I called the FBI, and I told the FBI, "If you want some interesting information, just look up State of Minnesota versus Samuel K. Davis, and you will see that one of the defendants for the Communist party is now working for the Atomic Energy Commissioner.

Surprisingly, the SWP had their headquarters on the second floor of the Army-Navy Surplus Store on Fourth and Hennepin, two blocks from where my wife and I worked. And I started going down there. And I'd go upstairs and I'd read and pretend like I'm really interested in the Party, and they invited me to come down for the New Years Eve party, and I brought a bunch of guys from Columbia Heights down with me for the New Years Eve party. They told me I could bring friends if they were of the same political beliefs as I was.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: And my friends were, but they weren't Communists.

TM: Yeah.

AK: And then I was an informer for the FBI for awhile.

TM: So, I understand you testified in DC, correct?

AK: Yes.

TM: Is that? Was that with your lawyer?

AK: The U.S. Loyalty Board and then it's called the HUAC - the House Un-American Activities Committee.

TM: Is that related to your informing for the FBI? Is that at that time?

AK: No.

TM: I'm sorry. Then finish your story about informing for the FBI.

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

AK: Well, no, that was about it. They just asked me if I would follow anybody out who was in the library or the headquarters of the SWP, and take down the license number, so I would just close my book and follow somebody down the steps and take down his license number, and when I got a few of them, I'd give them to the FBI.

But then, I was going to run for State Representative, which I did.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: And I thought, geeze, they asked me to join the Party. "Geeze, I'll join the Party on one condition." I said, "You give me a letter telling me that you asked me to join the Party so I'd have something saying I did this for the FBI. I don't want anybody out here to say that I was a member of SWP."

TM: Yeah. Yeah.

AK: He said, "We can't do that." I said, "Well, then I can't do it either." And that was the end of it.

TM: Okay. So, then you go on in what, fifty two, and testify before the HUAC? When was the year?

AK: Well, let's see. My son, Jim, was born in 1951, and the day that he was born, I wasn't even here. I was in Washington, DC.

TM: Okay. And so what were you testifying about, specifically?

AK: Just that this guy was over here...

TM: Okay.

AK: ...was very active with the Communist Movement, and there are things you can't prove, but there was a guy by the name of Nelson Perry, and he was the head of American Youth for Democracy. It used to be called the Young Communist League, but then they changed it so it sounded better, and this Nelson Perry and this guy that testified against me, were together. I saw them buddy-buddying all the time at the University.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: So I knew that there was a close relationship. And then when he testified against me in court, I was shocked. You know, he was neighbor, coming down and testifying against me for no reason at all, and not against me, but for the Communist Party.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: But then I ran for the House, and that didn't work out, and four years later, I ran for commissioner, and I ran against the incumbent, and he was a good guy.

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

TM: Uh-huh. What was his name?

AK: His name was Alvin Ittner, and Alvin Ittner lived right behind the Kassler's Grocery Store, where I worked.

TM: Okay.

AK: Knew his wife real well, and he was the Chairman of the Board, and he was on the Columbia Heights School District Board - or District 13, not Columbia - for District 13, which includes part of Fridley. He was very well liked, and a lot of people said, "Al, you don't stand a chance beating Alvin Ittner."

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: But I did.

TM: You're a young man when you run for office, and obviously, you ran four years for an office. Of course, you're a young man then. And you're 24-25 years old when you're running for county commissioner. Was that an issue in the campaign?

AK: Yes. Yeah, a lot of people said, "Hey, you're too young." You know, that's a retired man's job. You know, in those days, people are 60-65, they'd run for public office,

TM: Was it expensive?

AK: Oh, yeah. Leave me tell you. I had never - I've ran nine times - I've never had nor would I accept a party endorsement, and I never, but never, received ten cents in a political contribution.

TM: Really!

AK: Yeah. Well, I didn't have to. Once I got elected county commissioner, I never had an opponent again in seven consecutive elections.

TM: Well, I want to ask about that, too.

AK: It's surprising that nobody ever, ever filed.

TM: When you first ran in 1954, did you even think about that you'd be there for a second term? Why did you run? I mean, did you want a career?

AK: I just wanted to get in politics.

TM: Okay.

AK: I was interested in politics, and I belonged to a club called the Columbia Heights Civic

Improvement Association, and they were complaining that “Geeze, Anoka’s running everything; Columbia Heights doesn’t amount to a hill of beans in this county.”

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: And I heard that enough. I think maybe I should run for county commissioner and try to change that.

I remember when I was working for Electric Machinery, where I got elected county commissioner, and when they found out I got elected county commissioner, and I was gonna have to take time off to go to the county commissioner meetings, my boss came up to me and says, “Sorry, Al, you’re gonna have to leave the company. We can’t have you just taking off and leaving and going anytime the county board wants to meet.”

TM: Right.

AK: I thought, “Geeze, I’m in a heck of a spot.” I’ve got five kids now. The county commissioner job paid about \$2,400. I’m losing a job that I like, and word got to our comptroller treasurer, and fortunately, his brother, he was Bob Swanson, and fortunately his brother was Elva Swanson, and he was the county commissioner in Hennepin County.

TM: Okay.

AK: So he got the word out: Kordiak keeps his job as long as he puts in 40 hours a week, so they said, “Al, we got the word. You can take off for your county commissioner meetings, but you must punch the clock, and you must put in 40 hours a week.” So I was working nights, and I was working Sundays, I was working Saturday.

TM: What was your job there?

AK: It was in the Service Department.

TM: Okay.

AK: But, you know, in those days, the county commissioners would do some unusual things like all of a sudden in the middle of a meeting somebody would say, “Well, hey, this ditch over here has got to be fixed up. Let’s go out and take a look at it.” And those old guys, they could take off and go take and see how the ditch was, and for me, every minute that I spent...

TM: Every minute you’re up there, you had to make up back here.

AK: Had to make up at nighttime.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: So I’d go to the office almost every morning, one hour early.



Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: And I remember, just to show you how traffic was, Electric Machinery was down on 8<sup>th</sup> and Central. I used to punch out at 8:25, and I'd would get up to the courthouse at nine o'clock. Lot of times I'd sit there for half hour before the other guys would show up, and when I got to be the chairman, I slammed that gavel down at nine o'clock, even if there was nobody else there. The auditor told me one time, "Al, you can't start the meeting if there's nobody here." "Yeah," I said. The county attorney is there, the highway department is here, the newspapers are here, and we're starting the meeting," so I'd ask the highway engineer to give his report, and the county attorney to give his report, and pretty soon the other commissioners started wondering, "what the hell's going on? The meeting's going on already?" So all of a sudden everybody was there at nine o'clock.

TM: So how long did it take before they started showing up on time?

AK: Pretty quick.

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

December 14, 2008  
Al Kordiak (AK)  
and Jim Kordiak (JK)  
Todd Mahon (TM)

TM: Last week, we talked a little bit about the beginning of the county administrators office.

AK: Well, you see, when I started, I was doing an awful lot of writing letters to people, and writing letters to agencies, and we didn't have a secretary. There was nobody to do it. There was no county administration office. Who's gonna do it?

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: So I asked the county assessor, Ed Schwartz, if I could - cuz she took shorthand - if I could dictate letters to her on occasions, and then she could mail them down here.

TM: Okay. This the county assessor that you were dictating letters to?

AK: Yeah. Yeah. So the assessor's secretary would type up the letters, and she'd mail them to me, and I'd sign them, and then I sent them out. And the county commissioners said that that would be okay. But then, as the work got heavier and heavier and heavier, and the county government started to grow and grow and grow, then I knew that we were going have to have somebody working for the county board, but there was no such thing in Minnesota as a county administrator. There weren't any. Even Hennepin and Ramsey didn't have one.

TM: Right.

AK: So I had picked out the term "county administrator," and got the approval, and I told you Bob Johnson told me, "Hey, Al, the law doesn't allow for a county administrator, but you can designate him as a County Federal Aids coordinator, and give him the same responsibility, cuz you can hire a Federal Aids coordinator." So Bernie Steffen, who was our first administrator, started as a Federal Aids coordinator, and then we went to the legislature and got approval to get a county administrator, and then we changed his title.

I know it's on the recorder, but if I tell you something, Todd, you raise your right hand. You must not repeat this.

TM: I won't repeat it, myself.

AK: Okay.

TM: So for the record, my right hand is raised as we speak.

AK: When the new administration building was finished - the first one - we had to hire an engineer cuz they had big boilers and I don't know anything about mechanical stuff, but

furnaces and everything. So we advertised [inaudible] There were about 20 people applied. Our county auditor - cuz we had no administrator - he narrowed the list down to five. Well, we set up an evening meeting to interview the five people. So we went to, still, the old courthouse. We used to meet in the courtroom. The judges would set their courts and leave certain days open so the commissioners could meet, so we met right in the courtroom.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: Four people showed up. Five - you know, we narrowed it down to five. We sent notices to the five that the meeting is held on that night. Four of them showed up. So we interviewed each of the four, and they all looked pretty good. Well, after we interviewed the four, one of the county commissioners was Friedolf Gustafson, he said he made a motion that we vote to select the engineer or the janitor by secret ballot. Well, I didn't know much about policy here, but I couldn't imagine why would you vote by - why would you have a secret ballot to vote for a janitor?

TM: Hmm.

AK: But it passed. There was a second and it passed, and okay. So when the ballots were counted, I voted for one guy. Ed Fields voted for another guy. And the other three guys all voted for the man that didn't show up. And I couldn't understand, but I thought that's the way it is. Three of them voted for a guy that didn't show up.

On the way out of the courthouse - and it was dark, and I said, "Ed, what the heck happened? How could the man that didn't even show up get the vote?" He said, "Al, don't you know?" I says, "No." He said, "All four that showed up were Catholics."

TM: Mmm.

AK: "And the one that didn't show up, wasn't." And none of them would vote for a Catholic. They just, you know...I said, "Aw, Ed, I don't believe that." "Well, Al, you are gonna be here long enough around so you'll find out." Well, then what happened, when the guy showed up for work, we found out - we used to call it the Insane Asylum - we used to have the Anoka County Insane Asylum. He'd just been released from the Insane Asylum. And when he came for work, they gave him a big mop.

TM: Okay.

AK: And a pail, and they told him to clean up the hall. Well, he kept going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. He never moved. He just kept staying in the same spot, so somebody ran in and told the county auditor - cuz he used to sit at our meetings, because we didn't have any administrator - says, "Geeze, you'd better get that guy in the hall. He's crazy!" And so they got him out of the hall, and we were moving some of the furniture from the old courthouse to the new administrative building, and we wanted to tape this up so that we could paint the rest of it.

TM: Sure.

AK: And they gave him a roll of tape, and he kept going around and around and around and around this whole - so then they knew the guy was off. Well, then they fired him. The only thing is they didn't call me and tell me that there was gonna be a meeting. So John Elfelt, the Welfare director, called me and said, "Al, you know, those county commissioners - they broke two laws. Number one - he's being hired on six month's probation, and Number two - you have to be notified of the meeting."

TM: Right.

AK: They can't hold a meeting without telling you about it. At the county board meeting, if we're all there, we can decide to set a meeting on a certain day. But if somebody isn't there, you've gotta give them 10-days written notice.

So then I started raising hell. When I saw that they did that to me. So I said, "I'm gonna take it to the Anoka newspaper. I'm gonna raise all kind of hell. I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna do that." And then the county highway engineer and, I think it was Judge Green, came down to my office down here, and he said, "Al, those guys are really panicking." The other board members. He said, "I think you taught them a lesson. Why don't you leave it go?" And I says, "Okay."

AK: I told you about when I started, and the highway engineer was there?

TM: No, we talked about...

AK: We hired a new highway engineer, and I stuttered much worse before than I do now. I used to stutter terribly when I was young.

TM: Yeah, we talked about at General Electric and how they allowed you to answer the phones...

AK: Instead of saying "General Electric," I could say, "G.E."

TM: Really.

AK: But the highway engineer, he was giving a report and when I responded to him, I talked to him, and I was stuttering. Well, he thought I was laughing at him. So he went to Ken Campbell, the auditor, and says, "Geeze, I can't believe it that Kordiak would laugh at me when I making a presentation before the board." Campbell told him, "He wasn't laughing at you. He stutters same as you do."

TM: Oh, so the engineer...?

AK: So then we became the best of friends, the two of us.

(Laughter)

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

- TM: Well, yeah. It's funny how those alliances can start and form. So we've even talked about five-member board and seven-member board. Do you remember what year it was that the commissioners expanded from five members to seven members?
- AK: No. But it's the one time in my life that the governor of the State of Minnesota called me.
- TM: Okay.
- AK: In this stage, sometimes I might take a nap. I'd tell my wife, "Don't wake me up unless the governor calls." I still say that.
- TM: So why was the governor calling about this?
- AK: Well, one time, you know, I told her, "I'm taking a nap. Hey, don't wake me up unless the governor calls." I'd sleep for maybe an hour. "Gol damn it," she said. "Al, wake up. Honestly, it's the governor, Elmer L. Anderson."
- TM: Okay.
- AK: Elmer Anderson used to own some newspapers out there.
- TM: Mmmhmm. Yeah.
- AK: And hey, what paper was it, Todd, that he owed?
- TM: Well, he only - I don't remember if he called it ECM, or if they take the name ECM now, but he owned those and then he was involved in other publishing. I can't remember the names of all the newspapers.
- AK: Yeah, up in Princeton, and...
- TM: Yeah.
- AK: He said he had this bill to expand the county board from five to seven. He said, "Al, what do you want? If you want me to veto it, I'll veto it." I said, "No, Governor, go ahead. The county's growing very, very rapidly, and if everyone is involved actively with their constituents, these seven would be fine." And I knew that some of them were very strongly for seven. The legislators were strong for seven. So, I told him, "Hey, go ahead and sign it," and he did.
- TM: Were there any of the commissioners that were opposed to it, or was there opposition within the county about it?
- AK: No, no. No, they were all for it. They kept their districts intact.

Anoka County Historical Society Oral History  
Interview with Albert A. Kordiak by Todd Mahon  
December 7 and 14, 2009

TM: What brought you to decision to retire from the county board in 1986?

AK: Oh, I worked so hard, you know. I worked since I was eight years old.

TM: Mmmhmm.

AK: I worked constantly. I told you I worked through high school. Every lunch hour. Every lunch hour of high school for four years. So I've worked pretty hard. I was getting tired about that time, and I thought, Well...and Jim was getting old enough to run. If Jim hadn't agreed to run, I probably would have run again.

TM: Well, Jim, you probably don't get the opportunity to ask Dad a question with the recorder on, so I don't know if you've thought of anything that you think should be asked for the record, or mentioned for the record?

JK: Well, we've covered a lot of ground - a lot of interesting ground. Many of these stories I've heard, but not all of them. Certainly, there are many, many more embedded in county government throughout the years that he could share that are always kind of fun and interesting to listen to. I'll say again that his grasp of names and history - you know, he remembered - what did he say? He remembered what year it was that Fields came on the county board. It was decades ago, and he remembers what year it was, clearly.

TM: Mmmhmm.

JK: But he's got an amazing grasp of Anoka County history, and he saw it from its early, early inception to today, so he saw an awful lot happen.