

## Web page weaves together building's rich history

By Albert Amateau

Residents of The Albert, where rock bands and their groupies hung out and where a colorful restaurateur offered tours of Greenwich Village in "a sightseeing train" designed by Salvador Dali a generation ago, have been bitten by the history bug.

And they're still eager to learn more about the complex of four buildings at the corner of University Place and E. 10th St. that was built between the 1860's and the 1920's.

"We're finding things about the building from different sources all the time," said Arlene Goldman, board president of The Albert, which was converted from the old Hotel Albert into a residential co-op in 1975. She reminded a reporter for The Villager that the newspaper's editorial office in the 1940's was in the hotel basement.

Last year, the board commissioned Anthony Robbins to look into the origins of the Hotel Albert, and in May 2010, Robbins completed a 102-page history of the buildings. Goldman said that by the end of this month the Robbins history and other memorabilia and photos will be online at a new Web site, [www.thehotelalbert.com](http://www.thehotelalbert.com).

The Web site will be a work in progress, said Goldman. Village neighbors with memorabilia, clippings, photos and personal memories about The Albert can e-mail them to [yourstory@thehotelalbert.com](mailto:yourstory@thehotelalbert.com).

"Tony [Robbins] is still finding new information," she said. "As things come in we'll add them, but we want to get the Web site live as soon as possible," said Goldman, whose interest in city lore has led her to become a member of the Municipal Art Society.

The Web site will show classic black-and-white photos from more than 50 years ago by Robert Otter of the former Albert French Restaurant on University Place at E. 10th St. Ned Otter, the photographer's son (who maintains the Web site [www.robertotter.com](http://www.robertotter.com)) and a vendor at various outdoor Village locations, including at the annual Washington Square Art Exhibit, made the photos available for The Albert Web site.

Albert residents Yael Alpert, Debbie Glasserman and Paul Maidment have been looking for cyber links to historic documents for the Web site, which now extends to seven pages.



*Photo by Albert Amateau*

Arlene Goldman and Liam McCormack sifting through old postcards, menus and other memorabilia from The Albert.



*Photo by Robert Otter, courtesy of Ned Otter*

The Albert French Restaurant circa 1963 sported a model of the Eiffel Tower in its sidewalk cafe.

Liam McCormack, The Albert's superintendent, has become a devoted contributor to the building's historic trove.

A Life magazine page from 1963 shows Joseph Brody, the Czech-born restaurateur who owned the Albert French Restaurant, picketing the State Liquor Authority in a tux and top hat, charging the authority with corruption. It was Brody who ran the sightseeing train — with a tractor pulling two cars designed by Dali — around the Village in 1959, according to Robbins's history. Press notices of the time said the tours ran at the whim of the operator. In 1960, a red school bus replaced the train, and in October of that year, the city put a halt to the tours because they were not licensed. Brody donated the bus to the Bronx Zoo. In 1968, Brody featured an all-you-can-eat steak dinner at the Albert French Restaurant for \$3.25.

What started in 1882 as a respectable seven-story commercial hotel built by Albert S. Rosenbaum, who made his fortune with a San Francisco tobacco company and presumably gave his first name to the hotel, grew in subsequent years. In 1892, the adjacent five-story St. Stephen's Hotel on E. 11th St., built sometime before 1866, was connected to The Albert. A 12-story addition was built on University Place in 1903, and in 1922, the five-story addition on the northeast corner of E. 10th St. and University Place was built.

The Albert was where the New York State Anti-Saloon League had its 1901 convention. The New York Latin Club and its affiliate the New York Classics Club (for scholars of ancient Greek) met there in the early 20th century, along with the state Chemistry Teachers Club. For \$1 a day (for a room with a bath down the hall) and \$2 a day for a room with bath, guests could stay in "the only absolutely fireproof hotel below 23rd St." in 1906. The dining room had a 75-cent dinner — bluefish, sautéed chicken, roast beef or baked ham, with blue point oysters or soup, for starters.

In 1906, Ivan Ivanovich Norodny of the Russian Military Revolutionary Party stayed at The Albert for a while. The poet Hart Crane was a guest there in 1919 and again in 1926 while writing his symphonic poem "Brooklyn Bridge." Thomas Wolfe, who was an English instructor at New York University four blocks away, stayed at The Albert in the 1920's. In "Of Time and the River" Wolfe called it the Hotel Leopold. The writer Richard Wright was a guest at The Albert for a day in 1949 before sailing for France.

But in 1960, Anais Nin, the novelist who was a guest for a while, wrote that The Albert was "full of students, all night saxophones — bathroom down the hall." In the following years, The Albert was known for "harboring rock groups and ragamuffins for sex of every description." The Paul Butterfield Blues Band were guests; Canned Heat jammed there with Cream. The Mamas & the Papas, The Lovin' Spoonful, Mothers of Invention, Tim Buckley and Jim Morrison all hung out at The Albert with their groupies.

However, by 1972 The Albert was described as a welfare hotel and many of its rooms were converting to single-room-occupancy (S.R.O.). In 1974, there were 141 crimes and misdemeanors reported at The Albert, including 58 burglaries, 13 robberies, three rapes and a homicide, according to the Robbins history.

Gentrification came in 1975 when Rockrose Development Corporation acquired the buildings for \$1.5 million and spent \$2.8 million for renovation, plus \$1 million for financing.

But the change did not come without struggle; the previous landlord began evicting and buying out old tenants. The number of tenants was reduced from 350 to 35 by the time the renovation began. The neighborhood was split between those who supported the tenants and a group supporting the landlord.

A compromise was reached when tenants who refused to leave come hell or high water agreed to move into one of the buildings while the other three buildings were renovated, and then move into renovated apartments. One holdout was an 80-year-old woman who had been a hotel guest in 1948.

At its height as a hotel, The Albert had 500 rooms. The renovation created 204 co-op units.

"We have 192 units now after a few of us combined adjacent apartments," Goldman said this week. There are also six tenants from the old days. "But none of them are original hotel residents," she said.