Albert Sebastian did not know what would become of his life when he left the Navy after World War II, but he knew one thing: he wanted to be his own boss. Today, 60 years later, that independent spirit remains alive and well in the local institutions that bear his name.

It all started in 1947 when Albert bought a piece of land on Riverside Drive in Beaver, about 30 miles northwest of Pittsburgh. Next, he sold his car to buy cement blocks, which he used to build a roadside restaurant he called Bert's Bar-B-Q. His wife, Julia, developed a Johnny Appleseed theme and decorated the interior with kerosene lamps, coffee grinders, and coffee cans she painted by hand. Their young sons Alex and David pitched in to help them serve ham and pork barbecue in its own juice (no tomato sauce), hand-cut fries, and huge servings of ice cream. Bert’s offered good, simple food at a fair price—and it quickly became a local favorite.

That institution could have died 10 years later, when in 1957 state officials took the restaurant’s parking lot to expand a highway, but Albert had other ideas. He took the proceeds from the sale of his land and purchased another plot in Beaver at 308 Leopard Lane. Short on cash, he used architectural plans for a house he was hoping to build and turned them into Bert’s Wooden Indian, a restaurant that thrived for the exact reasons its predecessor did.

Julia once again took the lead in decorating. This time, employing a country theme. She even found a real cigar-store wooden Indian (thus the name). David and
Alex stayed on, and the restaurant continued serving excellent food at reasonable prices.

Locals obviously appreciate that combination, because the restaurant hasn't changed much in the past 50 years. When I arrived on a recent Wednesday, I encountered that same wooden Indian guarding the entrance. There was David Sebastian, now grown, working the register.

The restaurant was bustling. Twenty booths and an equal number of tables were crammed with a wide-ranging clientele: gray-haired men and women, young families, professionals in coats and ties. The décor was equally eclectic. In addition to the wooden Indian, original fixtures include the cherry-wood tables and the hand-punched tin shades covering the lights over the lunch counter. (Julia commissioned their production by a local artisan.) Newer art included the handiwork of numerous children who had submitted their pages to a coloring contest the restaurant conducted.

Once the rush subsided, David Sebastian took time to explain the restaurant's success. Interestingly, he is convinced that it has as much to do with innovation as it does with tradition. "My mother and father were way ahead of their time in a lot of ways," he says.

Sebastian points out that his parents embraced the road-side diner concept early on, but when they switched to the Wooden Indian, they were very early entries in what has become known as the "casual dining" category. He's certainly right about that. The interior, which is dark, cozy, and dripping with local memorabilia, looks an awful lot like a TGI Fridays or an Applebees. The difference being, of course, that Bert's has looked like that for 50 years, and the memorabilia is real. Particularly noteworthy are dozens of historic photographs of his mother and father hard at work—and a wonderful painting of the original restaurant.

That authentic feel is reflected in the food. Bert's still sells the original family barbecue,
which David notes is a top seller. Also popular is the knee-weakening rootbeer float—with hand-dipped ice cream—served in a gargantuan glass that looks like a fish bowl. Then there is the “High School,” a decadent concoction that includes four scoops of ice-cream, four toppings, whipped cream, and a banana. “We don’t sell as many of them as we used to,” David says, “But a lot of people still ask for it. Especially people who have moved away and come back to visit. They like to stop in and see if we’re still the same Bert’s.”

“We are,” he adds with a smile. That’s not to say that Bert’s hasn’t changed with the times. David says the restaurant was one of the first to recognize the popularity of healthier fare, such as entrée salads, which are now a mainstay almost everywhere. Even with the salads, the house dressing remains the same, a popular sweet-and-sour developed by Julia decades ago.
All in all, Bert's is still a family affair. In 1968, David’s brother Alex returned from his own stint in the Navy and proposed adding an upscale establishment to the family business. That addition—which is attached directly to the original restaurant—became known as Bert’s Wooden Angel, and quickly gained fame for its wine list and fine dining options. Alex still manages the Wooden Angel.

Together, the Wooden Angel and the Wooden Indian have become a unique part of Western Pennsylvania’s social fabric. A visit there can be just about anything you want it to be: fine dining, an excellent and perfectly priced lunch, or even a trip down memory lane.

David Sebastian admits it can be hard to describe that combination, but in the end, he gives it a shot: “We’ve always just tried to be a great family restaurant.”

For more information (and a series of historical photos) visit www.bertswoodenindian.com or call (724) 774-7992.

Sam MacDonald was born and raised in Ridgway, Pennsylvania. His first book, The Agony of an American Wilderness (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) explores the explosive battle surrounding logging in the Allegheny National Forest. He lives with his wife and twin boys in Pittsburgh, where he is teaching composition and pursuing his MFA at the University of Pittsburgh.