

# Rib king Big John tells it to the judge

By SCOTT WILLIAMS  
of the Journal Star

Big John Robinson sauntered into bankruptcy court Wednesday, hung his hat on a coat rack and apologized for being 10 minutes late.

"Did you forget about this today?" his attorney asked.

"Yeah, I never thought no more about it."

"Well, go have a seat over there behind those microphones."

"You mean I got to talk some?" Robinson inquired. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Just tell the truth."

And so it began — the lengthy process of reorganizing the business of a 65-year-old restaurateur who has stayed one step ahead of the government for the past four years.

Indebted to the Small Business Administration for more than \$1 million, Robinson appeared in court Wednesday to try to convince the SBA that his restaurant is worth saving.

If he succeeded, it probably was

because his story is simple — he is a chef who has a knack for concocting tasty barbecued ribs and a disdain for corporate busywork.

"I told you, I don't know anything about the books," Robinson said under questioning. "All I do is cook the meat."

SBA attorney Lawrence Rippe struggled for more than two hours to unearth the corporate foundation of Big John's Bar-B-Q, the restaurant Robinson has operated since his recipe for barbecued ribs became a streetcorner sensation in Peoria 35 years ago.

"The form of the business organization that you are operating under is what, Mr. Robinson?"

"Big John's Bar-B-Q," Robinson replied.

"Is it a partnership? A sole proprietorship?" Rippe persisted.

"Just me and Mary."

Testifying under oath, Robinson said he and his wife never really have operated as a corporation and probably will continue that informal ar-

angement if successful with their reorganization efforts.

The money they earn at the restaurant is used to pay their living expenses, he said, but all those transactions are handled by his wife.

Personally, Robinson said, he does not even draw a salary from the business.

"All they do is feed me and give me a little money to put gas in my truck or something like that," he said.

Robinson filed for Chapter 11 reorganization last month after being approached by attorney Barry Barash, one of the best-known and most successful bankruptcy lawyers in the area.

The bankruptcy filing, which represented Robinson's first real initiative to save his restaurant, pre-empted a government auction of Big John's Bar-B-Q by less than two weeks.

Robinson has become a folk hero of sorts by passively watching the government suffer numerous such

setbacks in the four years since Big John was declared in default of an SBA loan.

The businessman also owes about \$60,000 in back taxes, but the SBA was the only creditor to question him during Wednesday's proceeding.

In an apparent reference to the pre-empted auction, Rippe asked Robinson whether there was any specific timetable for his Chapter 11 filing.

"Nobody around the country is working, and nobody had any money to spend," Robinson answered. "It was getting tighter and tighter, so we had to do something different."

At one point, Rippe asked whether Robinson is up-to-date on the mortgage payments on his home.

Big John pointed into the audience and bounced the question off his mortgage representative, who informed Robinson that he missed the payment in April.

"All right, then," Robinson replied with a laugh. "The check's already in the mail."