

[0:00:00]

Melissa: Record. Okay. Good morning, gentlemen. Are we doing good? Okay. My name's Melissa [Spegus] and I'm delighted to have you here this morning so we can find out some of your history in the garment industry here in Kansas City. And if I may ask you to introduce yourselves to the camera so they know your name and the companies that you have worked with and had in the past.

[0:00:30]

Lou: Okay. My name is Lou Lesky. I was involved in the Kansas City Custom Garment Company, former 10<sup>th</sup> & Central. And I started there right out of high school. I was a stock boy one summer.

Melissa: Dare I ask what year that was?

Lou: Let's see. Graduated from in high school in 1939, I think.

[0:01:00]

I was a stock boy there for a while. And I went into other things but came back to the Garment Company because my brother-in-law was involved in the same company too. And he tailored men's clothing, basically. When the war came on we got involved in the uniform business.

[0:01:30]

And made uniforms for - some military uniforms, some uniforms for the security people when they opened up the war plant up in Eudora, Kansas with the [unintelligible] uniforms for the security people. And that's when I came back into it. That must've been in the 1940, I guess, 1950s.

[0:02:05]

Melissa: Early 40s.

Lou: And I also made uniforms for the Greyhound bus drivers all across the country. We had salesmen assigned to the drivers, the drivers [unintelligible] uniforms. And we custom made uniforms for them.

[0:02:31]

We made uniforms for bakeries and other people.

Melissa: We've seen a lot of competition in Kansas City area.

Lou: Other than Kansas City though, I think there were three uniform companies. There was [Caphartt] Uniform Company. What was the other one? The third

one was basically in the band uniform business. We made all of our uniforms on a custom basis.

[0:03:02]

[Unintelligible] into the bakery, drivers' uniforms.

Melissa: And how long were you with the company?

Lou: Like I said, for a while I was a stock boy and went to other things. I was driving on the road for a guy. Then I came back because the company was growing at the time.

[0:03:35]

Just before the war I came back to the company, World War II. Just before World War II I came back to the company. One of the owners had passed away. And I knew quite a bit about the stock work, the fabrics that are used and all. At that time, [unintelligible] early civilian business.

[0:04:03]

And we sent out fashion plates and sample boxes to tailors all across the country. They would measure the customers in their old country town and send in the orders to us. We would custom make them and ship them out. So each season, spring and fall, we would send out sample boxes of swatches to these tailor shops, and they would send in their orders.

[0:04:30]

And I was familiar with all of that, so that's how I got back into the garment company. And that went on until I went into the service in 1943, I think it was. And when I came back one of the former owners of the company had passed away, and I became involved in the business that way. I had an interest in the business.

[0:05:00]

Then we really got into the commercial uniform business. And like I said, we made uniforms for these bus drivers and for the bakery [unintelligible] and things like that.

Melissa: How long was the company in existence?

Lou: To the best of my knowledge, I probably have information at home, because I've got some of the original papers from the founding of the company, the founding owners of the company.

[0:05:30]

When we closed up in - I can't remember the year right now. But anyway, I took some of the mementos of the company back home with me. So I have some of those things. But I think they originated probably in the early 20s. Max [Goldberger] and Joe [Goldberger] were two brothers. They had moved here from Chicago.

[0:06:03]

And they formed a tailoring company. I think they were over on 12<sup>th</sup> street at first and then they moved over here to 10<sup>th</sup> and Central. And they had a four-story building and they had a cutting room on the fourth floor. Manufacturing was on the second and third floor. And the retail store was on the first floor.

Melissa: So you also had a retail operation?

Lou: Yes. That was later on. At first, it was the Kansas City Custom Making Company.

[0:06:33]

They just made for other people, other tailors, and then they branched into the retail business as well.

Melissa: Do you remember when the company closed its door?

Lou: I can probably give you that information, but I don't know. I don't remember when. It came into a point where the business was going down.

[0:07:02]

The little country tailors were not in business anymore. They had gone out probably during the war years because there was no demand for it. The uniform business was going down. It was difficult to get competent help. Because the tailoring business is a precise business that you have to have knowledge.

[0:07:29]

A machine operator can run the machine, but the tailoring has to be done in a precise way. So that was part of it. It must have been...

Melissa: We'll get that detail later. So Elmer, can I ask you about your history in the fashion business?

Elmer: We were married in 1948, here in Kansas City. And after we were married we went back to Miami, Oklahoma...

[0:08:04]

...where I was in the retail business with my parents and brother. And we had three stores. I ran one of them. And we finished our fiscal year in February '49. I left the business that came, came to Kansas City.

[0:08:30]

Melissa: Why did you choose Kansas City?

Elmer: Because Betty was originally from Kansas City. Her family was still here. And shortly after I came here in February, I went to New York and bought linens and formed a [white goods] goods company at 10<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. And we were in business there for two or three years, and then we moved to 914 Broadway.

[0:09:04]

Melissa: I remember that building.

Elmer: We shared the building with Bemis Bag Company. And also in the building was -- they came later -- Jerry and [B. Anthen], and they represented Thread USA to the manufacturing business.

[0:09:30]

And Al Yeddis had a floor here in that building, and he was manufacturing - I think he was manufacturing uniforms for the athletic department in schools throughout the company, or to businesses. I don't know what all. And after we were there for a few years, we moved to 911, to 411 West Campbell, which is right across the alley from here.

[0:10:05]

This building, which is now condominiums or something. And we shared the building there with the water company. And we were there for several years and all. I bought this building.

[0:10:32]

Never moved into it, but we owned it until we sold it. And then after we [unintelligible] 10<sup>th</sup> street, we moved out to 3829 Main street where we - next to the Netherland Hotel.

Melissa: Which I think is still there today.

Elmer: The building's still there. They turned it into condominiums.

[0:11:02]

I operated that business, a white goods company there for up until I left the business at 1988. But in the meantime, we had bought another white goods company down in Dallas, Texas. [Unintelligible] Textile. And also during that same time, my two sons joined the business.

[0:11:32]

And we were all there until 1988 when I left the business and the boys ran it. And then they closed it out in 2001 or 2.

Melissa: And why did they close?

Elmer: I don't know. I really don't know. I never did know why [unintelligible]. But they had some difficulties and all that.

[0:12:00]

So we just liquidated it. And that was the end of it.

Melissa: Where was it located then?

Elmer: 3829 Main street. We owned the building and all that. And the boys just dissolved it all. That was it.

Melissa: So what are they doing now?

Elmer: One of them is working out of his home and selling to the traded, you'd call it.

[0:12:32]

But it's over the phone. The other one is in the same business. They're in business together. They work in different locations, but they're working on that. That's the whole story on it.

Melissa: Did you notice, I think there's a serious theme about our industry. You get into the fashion industry, be it men's or women's wear, and you seem to - dry goods, and you seem to be there forever.

[0:13:01]

Is it hard to leave? Was it hard for you to retire?

Elmer: No.

Melissa: Good. That was an easy answer. Did it help having the boys involved?

Elmer: No.

Melissa: Didn't matter?

Elmer: Driving down here today, the first time I'd seen it, [unintelligible] down the building back there, us and the water company.

[0:13:35]

Melissa: All this change.

Elmer: All the change. And looking out the window here, that building there, I don't know what it is. I've never seen it before. The Coates House across the street, one thing is still there.

Melissa: And now it's apartments at this point. I understand.

Elmer: It's just a different world.

Melissa: Does this building still give you the same feeling?

[0:14:00]

Elmer: Oh, yes.

Melissa: So it hasn't changed all that much?

Elmer: It's back there, the time that we were - all of us, Jack [Mandlebaum] was in this building. Louie Goldberg was in this building. Sherman Dreiseszun was in this building.

[0:14:29]

Melissa: There's your powers that...

Elmer: I never did see this floor.

Melissa: Let me ask, you two have known each other for so very many years. Can you tell us a little bit about how you met and a little bit about your...

Lou: I didn't know Elmer from Oklahoma. But when he came up here on business we got acquainted.

Melissa: And when you say on Broadway, which building were you located in?

Lou: On 10<sup>th</sup> and Central.

Melissa: Tenth and Central.

Lou: The old one, West 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

[0:15:05]

Melissa: So did you meet over coffee, bump into each other on the street?

Lou: Probably at Sidney's down at the next corner. Sidney's was on the corner.

Elmer: Sidney's was right there down on the corner.

Lou: Everybody met there at lunch.

Elmer: Yeah. I can't think of their names. Had the children's wear.

[0:15:34]

Their home's out on Ward Parkway.

Elmer: [Plotskys]. Bob Plotsky lived up there.

Elmer: No. We had that building there. [Unintelligible] had the babywear business there.

Melissa: And that was on Broadway, wasn't it?

[0:16:00]

Lou: Yeah.

Melissa: There was a restaurant, I understand, in the area called Tallman's. Did I pronounce that correctly? [Morey] Tallman's Grill?

Lou: Yeah. That was on 8<sup>th</sup> and Central.

Melissa: And I wonder if that building still exists.

Lou: I don't know.

Elmer: On the corner there.

Lou: Yeah. [Morey] Tallman's, and right next door to the Plotskys building where they make children...

Elmer: Kansas City Boy's Wear.

[0:16:30]

Lou: Kansas City Boy's Wear. Bob Plotsky, Morton Plotsky.

Melissa: And who are some of the other people that you remember from those days, garments industry?

Lou: Broadway was primarily a women's wear area. We were probably the only men's wear manufacturers on this side.

[0:17:00]

They had children's wear.

Elmer: Cable South Gordon.

Lou: Cable South. That was a distributor. They did not manufacture.

Melissa: How many manufactures do you think we had at our peak here?

Lou: If you go to women's wear, a loft was a factory. Louis Walters.

Melissa: Do you remember Fox Manufacturing?

[0:17:30]

Lou: Fox was down on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Washington.

Elmer: Who is that?

Lou: Fox.

Elmer: Oh, yeah.

Lou: He was on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Washington. Maurice Coat was in the second building.

Melissa: Did you remember textile distributors? On 8<sup>th</sup> and Broadway?

[0:18:01]

Elmer: [Unintelligible] Dexter.

Melissa: Hipsh. It was Hipsh.

Lou: Hipsh. Right.

Female: And I remember Fitz Dry Goods.

Lou: Fitz Dry Goods was just west of Broadway, one block west on 8<sup>th</sup> Street. All these buildings were all textile people, one way or another.

Elmer: Who was in the cap manufacturing?

Lou: The Yeddis family.

[0:18:31]

Elmer: No, no. There was another one.

Lou: Kansas City Cap was on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Broadway on the third or fourth floor. Abe Yeddis and Al Yeddis and Morris Yeddis, and with his father. It's hard to remember another hat manufacturer down here.

[0:19:00]

Melissa: And you both operated nationally, is that correct? I know that you did.

Lou: Our business was national out of this location.

Melissa: And tell me Elmer, do you still have some of your company's records? Do the boys maybe still have some?

Elmer: The boys may have some. I don't know. I'd have to check with them. I don't know.

Melissa: You kind of left them with the kids.

Elmer: I'll look it up.

[0:19:29]

Melissa: That would be so wonderful. We're trying to archive the history of the industry here in Kansas City. Any of that kind of information would be so helpful.

Female: What was the economic climate during the times that you all had your businesses down in this area? Was it a thriving time in terms of economics, distribution was plentiful, everybody happy?

[0:19:59]

Or did you see people struggling? Were the unions a part of what you were doing?

Lou: There was good and bad. There were years it was really thriving.

Elmer: Who had the fur?

Lou: Egan Seiden. He was there for 100 years.

Elmer: The one on the corner over here.

Melissa: And they're still there?

Lou: The business is there.

Melissa: Yeah. True. True.

[0:20:34]

Elmer: Seiden's is still in business?

Lou: The business is still there but it's not the family anymore.

Melissa: What were the best years that you remember? Was there a decade or a series of a number of years that you remember was the best years?

Lou: When I came into the business, really, initially, it was really a good business, because I think we were coming out of sort of a depression.

[0:21:04]

And people were buying. I think that's probably the reasoning that they had started the retail business on their own too, because, prior to that, it was Gate City Tailoring Company, and it was really tailors to the trade. So they didn't do any retail sales here. But I think after the depression, I think that's when the retail business...

[0:21:30]

Female: What did you mean tailors to the trade?

Lou: We sold to tailors in the country towns who have a little tailor shop. We would send them swatches of samples of various fabric. We'd send them a picture book, fashion book, [plaitery], twice a year, really. Spring and fall. And we'd send out new samples. Send them the order plans. They would measure a customer, send the measurements to us. We would cut the fabric, make the suit, and send it back to the tailor.

[0:22:04]

The tailor would put his label in it and that was his business.

Melissa: Did you distribute locally, nationally, internationally, regionally? And how did you get your information out?

Elmer: We served the hotels and hospitals and the nursing homes throughout the country, to some of the state governments and to state governments, state hospitals, and so forth and so on.

[0:22:35]

We sold sheets and towels and blankets and bedspreads, diapers. All types of linens, tablecloths, napkins.

Melissa: How did people find out about you? How did companies find out about you? Did you have a large sales force?

[0:23:00]

Elmer: We bought lists. And we put out a mailing and to [Unintelligible] and so forth. And then we had people on the telephone that were calling to the different institutions and different hotels and so forth.

Female: How many people did you have on your sales staff?

[0:23:30]

Elmer: Four or five.

Female: And did they pretty much stay in the office?

Elmer: All in the office.

Female: Yeah. They didn't hit the road?

Elmer: No.

Melissa: Talk a little bit about everything being manual back then as opposed to on the computer and cellphones today.

Elmer: We didn't have computers in those days.

Lou: We knew of computers then.

Female: An adding machine was deluxe.

Elmer: We had a thing called the telephone.

Lou: We bought a first computer for doing billing and writing checks and things like that.

[0:24:03]

There was nothing more than an electric typewriter that ran on a disk. That was all to it. And tapes. We had a punch tape that came out at the end of the day, and we knew what was done.

Female: And what year would that have been? Early 80s? I remember my mother called it the brown box on the front desk.

Lou: It had to be in an air-conditioned area, because it got too hot.

[0:24:32]

Female: Yeah.

Melissa: Really?

Female: So as the small towns changed, it impacted your business.

Lou: It impacted parts of the business, right, because we branched off into the uniform end of the business, making commercial uniforms.

Female: So that's what kind of saved you?

Lou: Yeah.

Female: And what happened in the small towns? Was it that department stores took over or people left the towns?

[0:25:03]

Lou: I think a lot of it was that ready-to-wear stores were selling suits, and the tailor lost the business. It went down gradually. It just went down.

Female: It was much less expensive to buy ready-to-wear.

Lou: And they walk out with it right now. They don't have to wait two weeks for it.

Melissa: So did the unions affect you, either one of you, at all?

Lou: It had an effect on us, because, number one...

[0:25:35]

...it was different to get qualified tapers. It's a trade that takes a long time to learn. The union expected us to be able to pay the wages that they were paying in New York, where you had experienced people. They had to come to us. We had to train. And after they were trained, they went down to the ladies garment workers and said...

[0:26:02]

...“We're experienced operators.” So we lost them there. It was a difficult time.

Female: I'm familiar with the ILGWU. Which union did you belong to?

Lou: American [Unintelligible].

Female: It was a different union. Yeah.

Lou: Yes. Amalgamated Clothing Worker's Union.

Female: Amalgamated.

Lou: Yeah.

Melissa: Amalgamated. So how many unions were there in Kansas City?

[0:26:30]

Lou: The women's wear was entirely different than the men's wear.

Melissa: So there were two unions?

Lou: Yes. I think ourselves and - there was another uniform manufacturer here in town that...

Female: Milton Gordon?

Lou: Who?

Female: Was it Milton?

Lou: No.

[0:27:00]

Lou: I think Milton Gordon was dresses, weren't they? Milton Gordon was dresses, I believe.

Female: But I thought they were uniforms too in the end? Maybe in the end?

Lou: Women's wear. I think they were under women's wear.

Female: Can you name some companies that you manufactured uniforms for?

Lou: We made military uniforms. We made uniforms for the government for their security people. We made uniforms for the Greyhound Corporation, interstate bakeries here in town.

[0:27:34]

We shipped uniforms to all their drivers. We had several small bakeries up through Iowa and Minnesota that we made driver's uniforms for. In those days, the driver would go into a store to set up his stock of breads and cakes and everything. He went in like a businessman. It was quite different in those days. The companies demanded that men look good.

[0:28:04]

So it was a different era.

Female: So tell me what you loved the most about the industry that each one of you were in. What did you love the most?

Elmer: [Unintelligible] sales.

Female: Huh?

Elmer: [Unintelligible].

Lou: You smiled when there was business and you frowned when there wasn't.

Elmer: It was the morning mail, then also the girls that would telephone call to the different hotels...

[0:28:35]

...and motels around the country and so forth. And then we would make trips down to Oklahoma City to the state of Oklahoma, and they would have openings for their units and all of that. And we would sell to them and all buy it. There was a thing, the most beautiful part of the whole business.

[0:29:05]

And then you'd see the checks come in.

Female: Yeah. A trip to the bank is the best part.

Melissa: That's beautiful. What would you recommend to somebody today wanting to go into garment industry? What advice could you give to somebody?

Lou: I don't think that the small person can open a shop and be successful today, because we've got so many imports in the clothing business.

[0:29:35]

Everything is made out of the country. And little mills are no longer in this country. The fabric mills are no longer in this country. And it's very, very difficult today for the small person to open up a shop.

Melissa: So do you see emerging designers as more almost like a tailor again, where they're doing more specific, small pieces that are one of a kind?

[0:30:05]

Do you see that as what the future holds for somebody who wants to be in the industry today?

Lou: The small individual can have a couple small clientele people come in and ask for something to be made. But to run an operation that's significant is very, very difficult, because there's so much import.

[0:30:35]

Elmer: Our [source of] merchandise was mills, like [Dan River] Mills, West Point Petrol, [Steven's] and all of them. And today there isn't a mill in the country. Not a one. [Unintelligible] and all that. Nobody makes sheets. Nobody makes towels. Nobody makes any of those things.

[0:31:00]

And it is all made overseas. My sons sit on the telephone, sell, what I mean is, they get an order and they have to go to what turns out to be a jobber in this country.

Female: What you used to be.

Elmer: Like us, [unintelligible] but who is selling not only to the hotels and that, they don't bother with them.

[0:31:34]

They're selling to the people like us that are in business. And what I mean is, to get an order, what I mean is, whatever it might be, they have to go to a jobber here to find it. And that jobber has it or he doesn't have it. If he doesn't have it, he has to order it from someplace in China...

[0:32:04]

Any of those countries over there. India, any country you want to mention. Here is a cap made in Bangladesh. And by the time that they send me over there, they make it.

[0:32:29]

After they make it, it takes six weeks to ship it to this country to get it here. So you're looking at possibly anywhere from two to three months after you get it for if you have any sizable order. And the thing about it is, the thing that surprises me and all that is the fact that we have none of those mills...