

[0:00:00]

Suzie: ...president but it does relate to the garment business ironically because I grew up in these old buildings and loved them.

Interviewer 1: And I'm still stumbling on the name of your family company.

Suzie: It's called Frances, F-R-A-N-C-E-S G-E-E Garment Company and that was my mother's name.

Interviewer 1: Well that explains where that name came from.

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: And what was your father's name?

Suzie: Milton Gordon, M-I-L-T-O-N, Gordon, G-O-R-D-O-N.

[0:00:30]

Interviewer 1: And then you [unintelligible 0:00:36] your grandfather did you start...

Suzie: Yeah, look at you, you're quite amazing, you can remember everything. His name was Hyman Gordon, H-Y-M-A-N, Gordan.

Interviewer 1: And you said, "G-O-R-D-O-N?"

Suzie: D-O-N.

Interviewer 1: Yeah. And the company never changed its name.

Suzie: Well, it had a number of names, but probably as the years went by the one that ended up most familiar was that one, Frances Gee Garment Company.

[0:01:05]

Interviewer 1: Will you remind me if I forget something because I seem to be forgetting everything.

Interviewer 2: Well, let's do our pre-call.

Interviewer 1: I remembered that. Okay, almost forgot.

Interviewer 2: John and I we've done almost 100 of these; haven't we?

Suzie: So tell me who you've talked with?

Interviewer 2: Oh, gee, let's see, we started out with some people who used to work actually on the cutting floor.

Suzie: Good.

[0:01:30]

Interviewer 1: One of my favorite interviews was Steve Chick.

Suzie: Oh, I love Steve. Well, of course.

Interviewer 1: Who talked a lot about...

Suzie: The sales side.

Interviewer 1: ...the time on the road...

Suzie: Sure.

Interviewer 1: ...and then he talked a lot about the demise of the company, which I thought was real educational to me.

Suzie: Good.

Interviewer 1: I really got a kick out of that interview. But then the lady I was telling you about on the phone, I got a kick out of her...

Suzie: The designer?

Interviewer 1: ...her, too, yeah, she was cool.

Suzie: Oh, good.

Interviewer 1: I really liked her. Are we ready?

[0:02:00]

Suzie: Is that phone...

Interviewer 2: Are we going to let it ring?

Suzie: It'll always ring, but I wish I knew how to turn it off, but it'll stop in a minute.

Interviewer 2: Okay, great, yeah, we're ready.

Interviewer 1: I have to read this introduction and then we'll just have a conversation after I do that.

Suzie: Okay.

Interviewer 1: Welcome to another interview for the Kansas City Garment Industry Project. Today is February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, I'm John Dvorak and I'm interviewing Suzie Aron whose family business named the Frances Gee Company...

Suzie: Gee.

[0:02:30]

Interviewer 1: ...Gee Company made career apparel. The videographer is Mark Titus. Tell me how the business came into being.

Suzie: Well, my grandfather was one of those miracle immigrants that came over without even speaking English to America and eventually found himself in Topeka, Kansas looking for a job trying to figure out what to do...

[0:03:01] ...and migrated into Kansas City and got in the garment business. And I think there were a lot of historic reasons why a lot of Jewish people were in the garment business, and some of them were -- my other grandfather was also a tailor that when Jews had to get out of town pretty quick, they could grab their needle, put it in their lapel and be out of town. And in a lot of European cultures they were not allowed to own property and...

[0:03:30] ...it was one of those industries that was mobile and it seems like quite a few people comfortable with the going into that quote "family" business. When my grandfather got to America and started in the garment business it was very early, around the time that expansion of industrial opportunities were available, so they started making house dresses...

[0:04:00] ...which was, as we all know, Nelly Don was someone in Kansas City who was also at that time making house dresses and clothes for women that were beyond work clothes, or maybe were work clothes; so they started in that business.

Interviewer 1: What was your grandfather's name?

Suzie: Hyman Gordon.

Interviewer 1: And where did he come from?

Suzie: Russia.

Interviewer 1: About when did he arrive in the United States?

[0:04:30]

Suzie: God, what a good question. Well, probably he went back and forth for a while, but it was probably in the '30s and the '40s that he settled here, the family.

Interviewer 1: The 18 or the 1940s?

Suzie: Nineteen.

Interviewer 1: Nineteen?

Suzie: Hm-hm.

Interviewer 1: Had he been in the garment business in Europe.

Suzie: No, he was only 15 so he was just a scrambler. And he had an idea about -- he was very good with people, very interested in...

[0:05:00] ...you know, starting over in America, very optimistic about what he could do and I think his skills really were people skills, and the product ended up being what was available to him.

Interviewer 1: What do you know about the early days of the business?

Suzie: Of that business?

Interviewer 1: Of his business.

Suzie: Of his business. You know, a lot of it dinner table conversation.

[0:05:30] I think they -- it was a time in Kansas City where you could be an entrepreneur and start a business. And they all kind of worked together, they all -- as their network increased as they started developing an industry in the community, resources were -- adjunct resources became available.

[0:06:00] The people who sold zippers, who sold boxes, who sold the products necessary for being able to manufacture -- a big part of Kansas City's manufacturing was the coat and suit business, and my grandfather had a bunch of -- actually he was an investor in a number of companies that as he made some money he put money into other types of manufacturing. Different fabrics were different and...

[0:06:30] ...coat and suit business even though it was still manufacturing was a little different than what we did, which turned out to be work garments, grew into work garments as more and more women got into the workplace. Our company kind of developed a specialty for making clothes for waitresses, and for beauticians, nurses, I mean those were the jobs for women of those days.

[0:06:58]

Interviewer 1: His business did quite well all along?

Suzie: Yes, I mean everybody brings their own little special thing to it and I think as my grandfather laid out the business and the production side, and the sales side, and maybe the financing side, my father took the business a little different direction in that he recognized that when you have a lot of different patterns in fabric, you have extra production complexities.

[0:07:31] So he was really enamored with the idea of trying to simplify it; there were so many things already going on that were already complicated that he just

thought that if he worked in white fabrics then he wouldn't have the matching problems, he wouldn't be running out of patterns, and colors, and so he just wanted to simplify so he kind of focused on nurses uniforms.

Interviewer 1: Where was the business originally located?

[0:08:00]

Suzie: Gee, that's a great question. In the beginning I think the manufacturing really took part in little towns across Missouri. We had factories in Richmond and Higginsville so that they would do administration, and design, and sales, and financing in one place; and production primarily in these little towns.

Interviewer 1: Your grandfather had an office in the garment district?

Suzie: Well, we had a building -- we were not located where the other -- we were a little further to the east.

[0:08:34] We were on Grand and Admiral, whereas most of the coat and suit houses were around Broadway area.

Interviewer 1: So when did your father come into the business then?

Suzie: I think he grew up in it just kind of like I did, dinner table conversation, and he -- my father also was interested in, you know, living in Kansas City...

[0:09:00] ...and he was very good with people, and talking to people, and I think he just kind of got into the -- kind of grew into it. I'm not sure that he made a conscious choice as, "I'll do this versus being an attorney or a doctor." He just kind of spent his summers and eventually took over.

Interviewer 1: What was your father's name?

Suzie: Milton Gordon.

Interviewer 1: Did he take over the business at some point or was that sort of an evolutionary switch from your grandfather to your father?

[0:09:30]

Suzie: Yes, I think it was just an evolutionary switch. And my grandfather unfortunately had a really timely stroke, and that he was an extraordinarily active man, he was president of the synagogue, and president of the...

Interviewer 2: Which synagogue?

Suzie: Beth Shalom.

Interviewer 2: Thank you.

Suzie: And the old age home he was always involved with lots of -- I mean the beginnings of talks of Israel, lots of things that happened in our community.

[0:10:00] And, yes, he was always out raising money for causes and things and one day he just had a terrible stroke and he went from being one of the most active men in the city to unable to talk. And so my father was a young man and had no choice but to step up and step in and he did.

Interviewer 1: Do you know about what year that would have been?

Suzie: This is such an interesting interview. I feel like I immediately need to learn about my family.

[0:10:31]

Interviewer 1: Approximately.

Suzie: Okay, what year was it? Well, it probably was like -- I remember him being the most active and fully involved probably -- I was young, so probably late '40s, early '50s; early '50s probably.

Interviewer 1: So your father stepped in, took charge, and ran the business from then...

Suzie: Right.

Interviewer 1: ...from then on?

Suzie: Hm-hm. I don't think he had any choice.

[0:10:59]

Interviewer 1: Now you say at that time they had factories in Higginsville and Richmond?

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: Do you have any idea why they located production outside of Kansas City whereas a lot of production was in Kansas City?

Suzie: I think they had some production in Kansas City, but I think there was a labor available, obviously there were people who were looking in these little towns for business opportunities, and they just kind of -- it was an easy way to expand production.

[0:11:30] Probably the prices -- I don't think we were as involved in those really early days with the union as the union became very involved as a part of Kansas City production, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

Interviewer 1: That would have come after your father took over...

Suzie: My father was involved with that. I don't think my grandfather had as much -- that wasn't as much a challenge for him as it became for, I think, the rest of the guys in the garment business here.

[0:11:59]

Interviewer 1: What did your father do with the company; what did he change; what did he make better?

Suzie: He simplified it from lots of patterns and house dresses to really recognizing the working woman in Kansas City, and focused our business more on, again, the waitress, the different -- the beauty salons, the nurses.

[0:12:30]

Interviewer 1: He honed in on the career wear aspect...

Suzie: Absolutely.

Interviewer 1: ...of the business? Do you know why he did that; did he see a market niche?

Suzie: Yeah, I think there was a market niche. I mean we had a lot of coat and suit guys in town that were doing that kind of production, and I think he recognized an opportunity.

Interviewer 1: How did the business go in the '50s and the years immediately after your father...

Suzie: It went very fine. It was many years of growth for America...

[0:13:01] ...it was a very busy time when I think production increased for lots of different kinds of businesses in America where women had come away from the war experience with confidence and getting into a workplace, and I think more and more women -- there were more products to buy, women had -- it was easier for women to be working, so those industries that hired women; there was more spendable income so people did go to the beauty shop...

[0:13:31] ...there were people who went out to eat more; so there was really more customer recognition.

Interviewer 1: Did he make career wear mainly for women or was it also for men and boys or...

Suzie: In those days it was mostly women.

Interviewer 1: Can you describe what types of attire we're talking about here?

- Suzie: Oh, yes, I think if you look back at some of our old movies and we see waitresses with white uniforms and fluffy handkerchiefs, you know, in the pocket...
- [0:14:02] ...or a few -- you think of beauticians that wore things to protect their clothes because probably women were using permanent solutions and hair dyes and things that were damaging to clothes, people were looking to protect their wardrobes and so they -- same within hospitals, I think there was a growth in the medical field for all kinds of medical services beyond the traditional nurse...
- [0:14:33] ...there were operating wear, there was just -- career apparel was an area that expanded into a whole new level of opportunity beyond just what was in the retail store.
- Interviewer 1: Tell me how the business operated in the '50s; would your father have had designers along with the manufacturing; did he do...
- Suzie: Yeah, we did it all, mm-hm. There were stores that started carrying women's work clothes as opposed to just traditional -- in the beginning women didn't have a lot of options about clothes, and I think that was something that Nelly Don did was to expand the average woman's wardrobe beyond just a traditional -- something that you wear to maybe have more style. But I mean another dimension was the work garment...
- [0:15:29] ...and you would go to places like Sears, and I remember JC Penney, a lot of the big department stores back had grown into opportunities for women to buy things, so it expanded into having career apparel in the department store. So we had huge clients and volume shops whereas there was -- the distribution system were...
- [0:16:00] ...really expanded so that instead of production being a season's worth of a few garments to a few retail shops, I mean you had the opportunity to, as we used to say, "stack the fabric high," and production facilities allowed you to spread material and lay a pattern on top and cut many, many, many dozens at one time.
- [0:16:30] And then there was production sewing where people became specialists, and later I can tell you an interesting story about that as the garment company went down. Women who had spent 25, 30 years in the sewing business, really not having the confidence to be able to take their sewing skills and become dress makers because they only thought of themselves as collar makers, or sleeve makers, or...
- [0:16:59]



Interviewer 1: So your father, you used this system that was kind of popularized here, sort of assembly line system...

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: ...where one person did the sleeves...

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: ...and one person did the cuffs, or...

Suzie: Whole different production system that I think got developed when you really started having the opportunity to sell lots of dozens, many hundreds of dozens being made; and therefore I think the production facility of one woman who sat down at the machine and sewed the whole garment, that just didn't exist anymore.

[0:17:33]

Interviewer 1: What kind of employees did your father have?

Suzie: Mostly women and I think mostly women who were probably hard working, not spoiled but interested in trying to earn some extra money for the family.

Interviewer 1: Did he continue production plants in Higginsville and Richmond or did he expand that?

[0:18:05]

Suzie: You know, my father was one of the first manufacturers that had production facilities overseas. As things changed in the garment business in America a lot of tax benefits were given to American manufacturers for sewing overseas; so it was the beginning of the end, really.

[0:18:30] I think the production went to Puerto Rico, we had factories in Puerto Rico; we had factories in -- one of the early factories in Japan. My father started traveling around the world and making opportunities for large, better priced labor.

Interviewer 1: You say you had factories in Puerto Rico and Japan, did he actually set those up or...

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: ...did he contract with an already existing company?

[0:19:00]

Suzie: Both. I think in the very beginning he set them up, and I think -- we started buying a lot of things overseas, zippers, it became a real expansion beyond our regional community.

Interviewer 1: How did he sell the product; did he have, as a number of garment companies here had the salesmen who went around...

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: ...a circuit, so to speak?

Suzie: We had a regional sales manager, we had a sales teams of people who had different territories, someone on the east coast, someone on the west coast, someone in Texas, we had people -- Chicago; so wherever these large department stores were, sometimes all the buying was done in New York through Sears, other times there were mama-papa shops in small towns that needed to carry clothes for working women of their communities.

[0:20:05]

Interviewer 1: Who would some of the big customers have been; if you can say? Like would a Sears have been a big...

Suzie: Yeah, Sears was huge, they were really big.

Interviewer 1: Montgomery Wards?

Suzie: Montgomery Wards was very large.

Interviewer 1: Penney's?

Suzie: JC Penney's, all of that level of large department store; they had enough space within their store that they could...

[0:20:33] ...give some of their retail space to the working woman instead of just traditional women's clothing. And, of course, this was a really early time before sportswear, and before there was a big part of department stores inventory for children. There was really work clothes for working women that got as much store space as traditional housewares.

[0:21:02]

Interviewer 1: The finer department stores like Macy's would have existed back then, would they have carried some of that, too, or not?

Suzie: Macy's was kind of a crossover store. It was really -- it depends on which Macy's in which town; but it probably wouldn't have been as big a customer as somebody like Sears or, as you said, Montgomery Wards, Penney's.

[0:21:29]

Interviewer 1: Were there a lot of, I think today we call them, "uniform stores?"

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: Were there a lot of those kinds of stores in the '50s?

Suzie: Well actually my father ended up having a number of those stores. I think what he recognized at the end of a season you have broken sizes, and broken colors, and different colors, and didn't necessarily make a whole order for someone like Sears, they were -- so he put together a team of people that went around and opened small...

[0:22:00] ...mama-papa kinds of uniform shops all over the Midwest just to get rid of inventory, to cash out.

Interviewer 1: So the company actually owned retail stores?

Suzie: Yeah, we did.

Interviewer 1: That was not something that the Kansas City garment manufacturers generally did; was it?

Suzie: No, it wasn't. It was a way in which I think he was very clever to try to some of his old inventory back into getting rid of it and having some cash.

[0:22:32]

Interviewer 1: Did he sell in pretty well every state?

Suzie: Well he sold in every state that a store like Montgomery Wards and Sears would have been in.

Interviewer 1: So he was nationwide...

Suzie: Oh, definitely nationwide.

Interviewer 1: ...in his reach?

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Did he sell overseas at all?

Suzie: Probably might have sold a little bit overseas but not -- that wasn't a big part of distribution.

[0:23:02]

Interviewer 1: America was his...

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: ...main area?

Interviewer 2: What was the name of their retail outlets; was it Frances Gee; was that on their name?

Suzie: You know, I don't think so. I don't think they used my mother's name by then. That was a little bit later, probably in the '70s. I think they just had kind of AAA Uniforms, whatever was the first in the phone book.

[0:23:32]

Interviewer 1: Where would he have gotten his fabric?

Suzie: Well depending upon what was happening probably in New York, and so with the establishment of a working garment, the mills started coming up with alternative fabrics for if you work all day and have to come home and wash it, hang it up, and wear it again the next day...

[0:24:03] ...it's a different kind of use of a garment, than something you would just wear out to dinner, or wear around the house where you could just throw it in a machine and wash it. They needed to be able to have fabrics that were sturdy enough to stand up to lots of washings, and lots of irritation if you were dealing with rubbing against a counter, if you were, you know, they were really work garments so...

[0:24:34] ...eventually it was a big part of women's clothes and I think that new fabrics had to be developed all the time for -- I remember when double knit came in and some of the new weights of fabric that we started working with in order to be able to have this wash-and-wear factor of that that could really stand up to hard use.

[0:25:01]

Interviewer 1: I know a dollar in the '50s is not like a dollar today, but can you tell me approximately what would have been a good year for the company in total sales when he was doing well in the '50s and...

Suzie: Well I can only tell you that we always kind of prided ourselves on being able to deliver a \$10 pantsuit. [Unintelligible 0:25:23] was working hard and needed to have some clothes, they could buy a whole outfit for \$10 to wear to work. It was a...

[0:25:31]

Interviewer 1: Both top and bottom?

Suzie: Yeah, it was a really -- there was always a battle between the guys who were selling on the road who were looking for looking special as opposed to somebody else who was selling on the road, and they always wanted more labor, more trim, more design, and the production guys wanted it to just be a zipper, a collar, and two pockets, and they wanted to go to production fast.

[0:26:00] So we really didn't make a lot of fancy -- I mean they were work garments so they were really not labor intensive, they were meant to be functional, and it took a long time for specialty fabrics to come to the market.

Interviewer 1: Do you know what would have been a good year in gross sales?

Suzie: You know I'm trying to think -- I would say that...

[0:26:30] ...I really can't relate to what that number might be. I mean millions, obviously, we had 300 sewing machines, so we had a big -- large facilities, we had lots of people that were working, so it had to be a pretty substantial number.

Interviewer 1: You owned 300 sewing machines?

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Do you know roughly how many employees the company would have had in a good year?

Suzie: No, we had these huge Christmas parties when I was a kid and we would go down every Christmas to a factory and have -- giving everyone turkeys and that was as close as I came to those years of being aware of what was going on. There were long -- many, many long tables of hundreds and hundreds of people who were a part of the distribution system, so, gee, three or 400 people were working at least.

[0:27:28]

Interviewer 1: How would that have ranked the company among other...

Suzie: Well we were one of the largest in the country. We were easily one of the largest of that market of working women's garment. We were very significant.

Interviewer 1: You would have been large in terms of any garment maker in Kansas City; wouldn't you?

Suzie: Oh, yeah, definitely because the coat and suit business was so different. Number one, we were making a \$10 pantsuit so we had to depend on volume; and they were making beautiful fabrics and specialty labor...

[0:28:01] ...and they were not happy with production capacity that -- because they didn't need it. They were actually not one to be stuck at the end of the year

with lots of inventory either, and so they had a predictable amount of production that they were doing and then they had to switch to next year's design, next year's fabrics.

Interviewer 1: The \$10 pantsuit interests me.

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Any idea of what your father's profit would have been on a \$10 pantsuit?

[0:28:33]

Suzie: My father did well. I have to say we -- when you deal in volume it's a different situation and I was never aware of the fact that anybody was unhappy about what they were getting paid, and we had a very fine lifestyle.

Interviewer 2: Where did you grow up?

Suzie: Here in Kansas City.

Interviewer 2: I mean what part of town were you...

[0:28:59]

Suzie: Oh, I'm still in Brookside like everybody else.

Interviewer 2: Did you go to Southwest or...

Suzie: Yeah, Southwest.

Interviewer 2: Great, thank you.

Suzie: So we were a part of garment guys, and we all belonged to the same country club, and the men sat around the swimming pools and talked about all their issues, and ironically they all ended up, many of them, in the real estate business.

Interviewer 1: When did you come into the company; did you work down there as a kid at all?

[0:29:29]

Suzie: Well, you know, I was one of these kids in high school in the '50s -- a large company that my father had invested in here started making sportswear, young clothes for juniors, and that was a big switch in the garment business that there were clothes for teenagers. And I was very interested in the fact that they had clothes for teenagers because I wanted to dress fun...

[0:30:02] ...and look young, I mean I wasn't interested in looking like I was wearing my grandmother's clothes, so I always had an opinion about what was coming

out of that factory; not necessarily what was happening in our factory, but what was happening in the other factory. And then I remember becoming interested in women wearing pants for the first time that women were allowed to wear pants. And that was a big major shift for women to be able to wear pants. I mean there were restaurants that we couldn't go into if we weren't dressed in dresses.

[0:30:33] And I was very interested that this family that we had invested in and that this garment company we're not making pants for women, and I remember saying to my father -- or he took me to a board meeting one time and I was supposed to be very quiet and well-behaved and of course I've always been opinionated and I stood up and said, "Why aren't you guys making pants? We all want to wear pants." And so that shift finally came along.

[0:31:01]

Interviewer 1: That's funny. How old would you have been when you did that?

Suzie: I probably was 15, something like that. So I thought my father was going to kill me, but...

Interviewer 2: Precocious, huh?

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Did they pay any attention to you or was it a few more years before they started making slacks for women?

Suzie: You know, I always had an extraordinarily good relationship with my father. I think he appreciated my opinion and it probably never had occurred to him, and especially ironically I think in the business that we were in women needed to be shifting into wearing pants.

[0:31:32] I mean because we started making pants for -- obviously when you go into a hospital or you -- women are needing to bend over, lift up patients, and pants made a lot of sense.

Interviewer 1: Did you actually work in the company as a youth?

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: As a teenager?

Suzie: I grew up down there; I was always piddling around with the design department. We had an in-house design department downtown...

[0:32:00] ...and they were very generous to me, so of course I was always down there giving great interest into what they were doing, and how they were doing it, and what things looked like so I was very comfortable being there. When my

father would go on business trips often I was taken, our family went, whether he was in California doing business and I was going to Disneyland, I mean it was always part of dinner table conversation and it's very much a part of our lives.

[0:32:33] And then I personally became most involved because I was an art major and I was interested in creative things. I've always had an opinion about things and I went -- probably my most serious involvement was I went one time to a meeting with my husband...

[0:33:02] ...it was the early '70s, I was off in another career and not involved in a day-to-day relationship with the garment company, but I went with my husband who was a salesman, he'd also come into the company, had worked with the family business to a meeting that was the beginning of a company that was making fast food, it was the beginning of the fast food industry...

[0:33:30] ...and what happened was they couldn't find enough production. Usually restaurants maybe had, if it was a big restaurant maybe they just had one big restaurant, or maybe there were two or three, but there really was no industry where franchising had started. And there was a company out of Chicago that was very famous for having five restaurants and they were trying to figure out who they were.

[0:34:00] We were beginning to sell a few of our garments to restaurants that were trying to figure out who they were in terms of their identity and their image, and I went to this one meeting with my husband and we were considered a manufacturing resource because we were in career apparel and we also had a lot of machines. And so I went to this meeting and we thought we wouldn't really invest a lot of money and designing...

[0:34:34] ...for our competition for this company, but it was kind of an interesting group of people and I went to listen; and I was always interested in group dynamics and so the thought of companies getting together and working together on expanding, it was just interesting to me. So I decided I would design it and this was a company I was kind of familiar with.

[0:35:01] It was a growing little company called McDonald's. And so I put together a design concept -- I had young children at the time and I was watching Clarabelle Clown -- not Clarabelle, it was Ronald McDonald on television with my kids, and I got the idea that maybe...

Interviewer 2: Bozo the Clown, excuse me.

Suzie: No, that's okay. That may be the -- the company ought to really have their waitresses look a little bit like Ronald McDonald...



[0:35:32] ...then I could design a sportswear concept using the colors that would relate to Ronald McDonald.

Interviewer 1: Now the reason this came about was your husband was selling for the company?

Suzie: He was selling for our company.

Interviewer 1: And he had a meeting with somebody associated with McDonald's?

Suzie: McDonald's had bought a couple of uniforms from us that -- again, this was very early in the process...

[0:35:59] ...they had not really put together who they were for themselves either as the predictability being the goal of branding, but they were starting to explore who they might be for a larger distribution service. So they were exploring with manufacturers whether they were people who were dealing with bread or meat reproduction on a large scale basis. They were exploring with architects what buildings might look like.

[0:36:30] The whole distribution system all the way down from how do you go to deliver a product five stores to 20 stores to 100 stores, how do you work with people who might -- I mean a lot of people think McDonald's was in the hamburger business, but we know they're in the real estate business, so they really truly started figuring out where they were making their money and how it was going to work; and how they could deliver a product.

[0:37:00] People were starting to move into an area called "suburbia," and they needed restaurants. And there were all levels of distribution being explored by America in the '70s. And it was the growth of a huge new industry for America.

Interviewer 1: About what year would this have been that you and your [unintelligible 0:37:24] came together?

Suzie: Probably the early, maybe -- I think I won...

[0:37:30] ...well, to make a long story short, I won the competition and...

Interviewer 1: But about when would that have been?

Suzie: It was probably in the early '70s, late '60s, early '70s.

Interviewer 1: So then what happened as a result of that?

Suzie: What happened as a result is I became the resident expert at designing, imaging, and branding of clothes for the fast food industry as a whole. McDonald's was like -- I mean the growth of McDonald's was like, as you know...

[0:38:04] ...from five to dressing the U.S. Army. Pizza Hut, Tastee-Freeze, A&W, Boston, you know, Dunkin Donuts, it was a whole America and I traveled around the country with them.

Interviewer 1: Well at first you weren't even working full time for...

Suzie: Right.

Interviewer 1: ...the company...

Suzie: Right.

Interviewer 1: ...when this really got going?

Suzie: Right. I was just a...

[0:38:30] ...an observer that had an understanding of group dynamics.

Interviewer 1: But you had studied design?

Suzie: I was an art major but I had never really -- I wasn't a -- I could draw, and I could see, I had been an art collector; I had been involved with arts for a very long time. I had a degree in art and psychology.

Interviewer 1: Where did you go to school?

Suzie: UMKC.

[0:38:59] I got married very early; I was married at 20, had my first kid at 21, and I was always involved with business, and sales, and group dynamics, and design. The products changed but I was always involved with the group dynamics as a whole, and I think that's why I was able to sell on the road and work -- I was never particularly intimidated by people whether it was the president of the mama-papa chain...

[0:39:34] ...like A&W or a [unintelligible 0:39:35] corporation with McDonald's.

Interviewer 1: What was your husband's name?

Suzie: Gene Aron and he was also a salesman; he was very good with people; he was one of these guys that you could -- he'd call you on the phone if he didn't know you and within, you know, 15 minutes he were put through to the president.

Interviewer 1: Did he travel the country for the company?

Suzie: What we did was develop a side dimension...

[0:40:04] ...to the traditional ongoing manufacturing of career apparel. We started a division, which ended up taking over the whole company, which was the

development of the fast food franchise business because the production was so huge, and it made a lot of sense. I could go to New York and design fabrics with mills that were colors particularly just for Hardees, just for McDonald's, just for Burger King.

[0:40:32] I mean everybody had to have their own identity, their own image, their own look, and we were our own sales force. We didn't really need to -- we were really going to -- as the companies grew we were going to work directly the organization, we really were not dealing on the retail business anymore.

Interviewer 1: But prior to this your husband had traveled the country for the company?

Suzie: Yeah. He was used to selling garments.

[0:41:01]

Interviewer 1: I see. So gradually the fast food career apparel became so big that it became the company?

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Well what did your father think about the kids running off and doing this stuff?

Suzie: You know, I think my father recognized the big picture of the business and whether it was a shift from...

[0:41:31] ...manufacturing overseas to recognizing that this really was the new America, that there always was going to be retail stores, there was always going to be somebody who needed to service the nurses and the waitresses, but that there really was a whole new dynamic that was coming online.

[0:41:59] And I think he had to look at the financial, "Where do I put my money?" And I think as a businessman you look at your company's alternatives about what part to finance and the advantage, again, of having lots of machines and stacking them high, cutting the same size two and a size 40 out of the same fabric, the way in which you could nest the patterns and have them work together on the same fabric.

[0:42:30] And we could have lots of the same material stacked and sewn together, it was Henry Ford with the car all over again. I mean it was the production facility, the financing, the cash turnaround between you already sold the garment as opposed to putting it on a shelf and waiting for somebody to come in and buy it. I think my father was very smart in recognizing that things can change.

[0:43:00]

Interviewer 1: So did you then become a full-time...

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: ...person in the company? Did you travel not only to New York but also overseas as well because of the overseas factories, or...

Suzie: Oh, actually a funny story because we were probably the largest users of YKK zippers, which were Japanese zippers and that were imported into America. And the Japanese absolutely did not want to do business with women.

[0:43:32] They were the most gracious of suppliers that acted very welcoming to have someone from our company, they were always saying, "Come and see our factories in Japan. Please come." And then of course when it turned out that I was the one that was coming, oh my God they were back pedaling; they just couldn't figure out what they were going to do if a woman came into the factory in a management position.

[0:44:00] So I didn't really do a lot even though they were a huge supplier, I ended up taking myself to Japan but I never bothered to go to Osaka because it was quite clear that I wasn't welcomed. I wasn't really involved with that. Primarily my job was to help -- to be a listener, to help these corporations decide who their image was, how they really needed to function, and give them something that really worked for them whether it was a size two or a size 40.

[0:44:30] Something that would look good on someone who had to work hard during the day and rub against a counter, come home at night, wash it, and hang it up, and wear it the next day. I think every kid in the world in the '70s must have hated me. I mean you imagine standing next to those grills in those hot fabrics? I mean eventually we were able to get enough volume going that we could design for ourselves the kinds of fabrics that really worked for people who worked in those industries.

[0:44:59] But I was very much involved in more that aspect of it than I was in the other part.

Interviewer 1: So the company was doing pretty well in the '60s and the '70s I gather?

Suzie: Right, right.

Interviewer 1: We haven't talked about the union.

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: But the union would have come in in the '50s or the '60s?

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 1: Did that change anything for the company; bad, good, or...

Suzie: Well it changed it a lot in the fact that we went overseas for a lot of our production in one part of the company...

[0:45:34] ...but we still kept -- we were still a union shop in Kansas City.

Interviewer 1: So you continued to manufacture here in...

Suzie: Both. We were allowed to do both.

Interviewer 1: How were relations between management and the union?

Suzie: Probably the biggest problem for us was that the Kansas City labor union was dependent upon New York.

[0:46:00] The people in New York had a whole real different agenda of success for how they needed to function for garment companies in the East than a small company in the Midwest that had little shops in small towns like I described. But still they had a real strangle hold on their contingency of -- they didn't want to lose any power or any control, and it was a very difficult thing for -- there were people in our company that were union...

[0:46:31] ...and people who were not, so when strike happened, and fights would happen, and sometimes they were really brutal, people had to walk through picket lines to go to work where other ones couldn't work, and these were friends who used to work side-by-side with each other all the time.

Interviewer 1: Your company did have strikes?

Suzie: Yes. And I think in the end most of us went out of business because it just became too difficult.

[0:47:00]

Interviewer 1: So relations between the company and the union were not always good?

Suzie: It was always a difficult thing. It was probably what my father ended up doing that killed him -- was too much medicine is how he died, but I think for the part that if he had to choose again, if he was making a lot of money, "What do I want to do with my money?" It just became so aggravating dealing with the garment company that he shifted his money into real estate.

[0:47:29]

Interviewer 1: So would he have had a contract, then, with the local of the international Ladies Garment Workers Union?

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: And would that have covered all of his companies or all of his plants or just...

Suzie: The American.

Interviewer 1: Just the American plants? Well how did that relate, then, to your plants in other countries?

Suzie: I think there was -- and I don't know a lot about the answer to that question. I know that we had multiple simultaneous production.

[0:48:00] We had production in Puerto Rico and in Japan and we also had factories here in Kansas City so there must have been some agreements with the union that allowed for both facilities to happen.

Interviewer 1: Were the strikes that your father's company endured were they ever lengthy, or violent, or...

Suzie: I remember one time when I was a little kid my father coming home really, really late and everybody was worried...

[0:48:33] ...and I didn't know a lot about it at the time but I knew he was worried about physically being -- in danger from the union. And this was maybe very early in the '50s or late in the '40s. But most of the problems were just aggravation, constant aggravation for everybody.

[0:49:01]

Interviewer 1: When did things start to go sour?

Suzie: Well we had, again, an ironic external agenda that probably capped it and that was my father was a pilot here in Kansas City...

[0:49:32] ...and he was sitting at that evening with a bunch of friends and got a feeling - - he was kind of an intuitive guy that he needed to get out of there. And by the time he got to his car he started hearing the sirens, by the time he got home and turned on the TV he saw everybody he was there with died; and he had a heart attack that night and died the next day.

[0:50:01]

Interviewer 1: Really?

Suzie: So it was another enormous kind of quick agenda that influenced how and big decisions about what we were going to do after he died. And it was kind of a simultaneous having to do with a lot of personal family affairs that in the end...

[0:50:30] ...and a badly written will -- my brother ended up with the company instead of me, and I actually -- he had never worked in the company for years, but it

was an old, old bad will. And so I left the first day. I didn't have a good relationship with my brother and he didn't know anything about the company, and so...

Interviewer 1: Prior to your father's death was the company doing pretty well?

[0:50:59]

Suzie: Yeah, I think we were doing fine, but I think what we were recognizing was that for the amount of cash that we were putting out and the amount of return, and the difficulties with getting the union to understand that America -- America had made the choice that manufacturing wasn't going to happen anymore in America. It was almost at the end of all of the guys whether they were dealing in coats and suits, or we were dealing in local or foreign production...

[0:51:33] ...that manufacturing in America was really just about at the end of its life. And I think a really interesting fortunate thing that had happened for us was that because I had traveled with my husband all over the country and watching the growth of suburban real estate, and production, and how...

[0:52:00] ...the tide was really shifting towards a different America, and we recognized it. And we started shifting more of our cash into land and into buying real estate than we did investing in fabric. And at some point you just recognize where is this country going, and who are you for this country? And we shifted.

[0:52:29]

Interviewer 1: So your father prior to his death was not very happy with how things were going?

Suzie: No, I think we were all frustrated with the parts that didn't work, we still saw the advantage in the parts that did work, but we were in a process of making choices that instead of having only the garment business, our money was being reinvested in other alternatives to production.

[0:52:59]

Interviewer 1: Was he still manufacturing here in the Kansas City area...

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: ...along with overseas?

Suzie: Yes.

Interviewer 1: And he was still making money and...

Suzie: Oh, we were making plenty of money. The question is how do you want to reinvest your money? But we could see that it just wasn't making sense. The return on investment was not as good but we hadn't shifted into the garment business -- from the garment business into real estate, but we were just aware of it.

[0:53:29] And then a number of things happened: The union was really desperate in those days and they -- when my brother ended up getting the business, he really didn't understand the business and had a huge fight with the union and bankrupt the company.

Interviewer 1: So the union was part of the problem towards the end...

Suzie: Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer 1: ...but not the only problem?

Suzie: It was a big part -- I think a big part of it, it probably was the straw that broke the camel's back.

[0:54:00] It was like it never got -- the long term picture of manufacturing in America, it was there, you could see the end, you could see the desperateness of trying to hold together something that just wasn't working anymore. And it was true for all the boys. I mean I say "the boys," the men in the garment business. I mean one by one by one they were all falling.

[0:54:29]

Interviewer 1: Was your father upset at this trend he was seeing, or angry, or how was he feeling in his last few years...

Suzie: He was just so tired of being aggravated. He was worn out.

Interviewer 1: It just wasn't worth the fight anymore?

Suzie: He was fortunate enough that he didn't have to do it anymore. I mean he was -- it took years. I mean I'm making this seem quick, but the reality is you have a big success, and you have money, and you make a choice, "What do I do with it?"

[0:55:04] And, "Do I reinvest it here? Continue to reinvest it here?" Or do you look at alternatives? And this was a much easier alternative, and he was getting close to 70. And I think he could see we had a very unique and successful niche and lots of control, so it was tempting to stay in our business but he could also see that the prices of the union were just getting raised beyond anything that made any sense.

[0:55:34]



Interviewer 1: Was there any conversation about turning everything over to you?

Suzie: Well see my father died like my grandfather in just five minutes. There were a number of company names that showed control for us -- for me, but the will showed old company names and it was given to my brother.

[0:56:05]

Interviewer 1: So what happened after that then; you left the company?

Suzie: I left the company.

Interviewer 1: Did the company last very much longer?

Suzie: Another year-and-a-half.

Interviewer 1: Did it actually go bankrupt or did it just close down or...

Suzie: It just closed down. It was after a very brutal strike that my brother and the union had a big fight and they were on strike for many months, many, many months. And then I think the handwriting was really just like, "Do we start up again or do we just go?"

[0:56:33]

Interviewer 1: How do you feel when you look back at the demise of the company?

Suzie: I felt really sad for all of our workers. In fact, ironically, the union came to me when they were -- because it was happening all the way across the city, many people who had been with our company for 30, 40 years, lots of people that I worked with that I really cared about were out of a job.

[0:57:01] Many of these women didn't know what to do. The union actually came to me one time and asked me to meet with them and talk to the women about how they could find other jobs, what they could do. And I met with them and talked with them about how they could start their own small business, and make bridal clothes, or have -- as I told you earlier about how to deal with dress making, doing things like that.

[0:57:33] Because they had these skills they weren't retrained, the industry had disappeared, there were no other factories for them to go to. And so I met with them a couple of times and tried to talk to them and it was just -- they had thought of themselves as such specialists, many of them, that they just really didn't know what to do with themselves. It's a lot like what we're finding in America today about people recognizing what opportunities are out there and how we retrain yourself in a community where...

[0:58:03] ...your industry has gone, or closed, or they're just not who were you isn't who you are right now, and there was just a change in recognizing who all these people were all across the country; and it was all across the country.

Interviewer 1: Was the problem with the union related mostly to what they wanted in terms of wages and benefits or did it have to do with work rules, as well...

[0:58:35] ...or all of the above, or...

Suzie: I always heard things that you'd go into negotiations with 15 items on the list when they really only wanted two. So they would, like, kick their feet, scream and dance for the other 14, but really they slowly would give up two or three of those, and then three or four of those so that they could get the two they wanted. And I think the union, itself, is fighting for its life.

[0:59:00] I mean here was a whole industry of decision makers and powerful people who just saw the industries falling away; all production facilities, not just soft goods but hard goods; and they were trying to figure out who they were and I think they were trying to hang on to their own jobs.

Interviewer 1: Your company lasted longer than some of the other garment companies in Kansas City.

Suzie: Because I think we had a unique niche.

Interviewer 1: Could anything have been done to save the industry overall in Kansas City?

[0:59:33]

Suzie: Well a couple of things happened years later down the road. A couple of companies figured out -- and I don't know a lot about real detailed dynamics of this, but -- and then it would be an interesting follow-up for you, I think I could suggest some people you might want to talk to. But almost all manufacturing shifted, as you know, to Indonesia, to China, to Japan.

[1:00:03] The way in which people, like myself, and guys who were still left back here in the garment business, they bought everything overseas and brought it to America already finished and just did the distribution of it and the marketing of it. There was something -- like my father had to put his money up front in design...

[1:00:30] ...acquisition of fabric, the making of it, the financing of the sales force, and the distribution of it; the manufacturers that were survivors only had to pay for the garments once they were finished. And some of them brought them over and there were areas of warehousing where as long as the garments stayed in the basement...

[1:01:02] ...they never had to pay for them and they never had to pay upfront costs until they were sold. And so those guys that were able to save all of that early cash and only pay for something after it had been sold, and then they were only responsible for distribution, were able to stay in business and grow. And a couple of those people exist today in Kansas City.

[1:01:31] A lot of them do sports for colleges and high schools...

Interviewer 2: You mean like gear for sports and stuff...

Suzie: ...sports. It would be an interesting follow-up interview for you.

Interviewer 1: But they don't make anything themselves?

Suzie: They make it overseas. They buy it after it's been made. They have none of that out front cash -- and frankly I've been out of the garment business for 25 years...

[1:02:00] ...so I don't really know the answer to why they're still in business, what parts of the distribution system has allowed them to stay in the soft goods business, but that's the only way.

Interviewer 2: They do a lot of silk screening.

Suzie: Yes, they do.

Interviewer 2: And putting emblems on...

Suzie: They personalize an already finished garment.

Interviewer 2: Right, exactly.

Suzie: And we did that, too. I mean we had huge machines that personalized...

[1:02:30] ...we had giant machines that embroidered McDonald's that had imagery, personalized imagery like they do today. That part -- we did the finishing. But it's different than what they do.

Interviewer 1: But my question was: Could anything have been done to save the garment industry as your father knew it...

Suzie: No.

Interviewer 1: ...where there was actually manufacturing going on [unintelligible 1:02:58]?

Suzie: Not with the union's position, what it was.

[1:02:58]

Interviewer 1: Not with the wage levels of [unintelligible 1:03:02]...

Suzie: There was too much being asked, too much risk being taken for the financing involved, and the huge amounts -- I mean when you're dressing someone like the McDonald's and Pizza Hut, for us, I can only answer for myself. I know the garment guys that were coats and suits houses had a little bit different issues...

[1:03:29] ...but for us the amount of dollars that we had to outlay for preproduction costs before -- even though they were sold, the amount of money that we had to invest in inventory, and the handling of the inventory was enormous. And eventually it just didn't make sense.

Interviewer 1: So even if the companies had really modernized and gotten really efficient modern equipment...

Suzie: Which we did.

Interviewer 1: You did?

Suzie: Oh, yeah. When I was in New York...

[1:04:00] ...I mean when patterns were made, I mean there were huge computers that nested these patterns to make sure that how you laid out a garment on a stack of fabric, you might have been mixing a size 16 with a size two because the way in which you could utilize the use of a fabric was such that you would have less waste of the material. We looked at all of those kinds of things. It was a very definite use of contemporary...

[1:04:33] ...whether it was the designing of fabrics, the way in which -- it used to be that if you were going to design a fabric, it didn't make sense for a mill to run more than 1,500 yards of a particular fabric because the yards would be used up and the manufacturer was onto a new style. I mean you see that a lot in better dresses today and you hear about people that have really high end garment companies...

[1:05:03] ...like Ralph Lauren and Yves St. Laurent, big fashion houses. I mean how do they make decisions about: Is this a dress they cut out for 15 garments as opposed to a fabric that they make a one-of-a-kind and they sell it for \$20,000 for one dress? I mean those kinds of decisions about how you use your cash, how you use your production. I mean those were very sophisticated analyses that were done by people.

[1:05:33]

Interviewer 1: You think your father's company was about as efficient as it could have been at that time, then?

Suzie: Oh, I think you can always buy the latest piece of equipment, or you have to -  
- but there were many facets of how you decide to use your cash. And I think  
in the end it just wasn't worth the amount of money that it cost.

[1:06:01]

Interviewer 1: What would your father think today if he could be here and see that there's  
very little garment production [unintelligible 1:06:12]...

Suzie: He wouldn't be surprised. No, he would...

Interviewer 1: He saw today [unintelligible 1:06:18]...

Suzie: He saw it coming for years.

Interviewer 2: You made a comment earlier which struck me and that was the fact that at  
the time you moved some manufacturing overseas there were tax  
incentives...

Suzie: Yes.

[1:06:31]

Interviewer 2: ...to move...

Suzie: Yeah.

Interviewer 2: ...your factories?

Suzie: Out of America.

Interviewer 2: How counterintuitive is that?

Suzie: Well we did it over and over again for so many industries. I mean my  
goodness can you think of an industry we didn't reward for going overseas?

Interviewer 2: Well, you know, I don't understand how that happened and I was just curious  
to know if you had an insight today to why...

[1:06:55]

Suzie: Well America shifted -- I think there was a real use for unions at one time in  
America and I think it did a great job in the beginning. My grandmother came  
over here and worked in a sweat shop in New York City with many European  
women who -- you'd hear the horror stories...

Interviewer 2: Right.

Suzie: ...that people back -- and see the histories. I mean her life without a union would have been dangerous, simply dangerous. And it had its place and I think it went too far.

[1:07:30] The pendulum swung too far to the other side, and you lose track of the bigger picture. I mean how do we all win is what we're trying to look at when we're looking at an industry.

Interviewer 2: Sure.

Suzie: And we see it in negotiations today with our automobile companies, or any company related to manufacturing, it's all the same.

Interviewer 2: Can you imagine the outrage today if there were tax incentives...

[1:08:00] ...to move your company offshore because of the lack of jobs...

Suzie: [Unintelligible 1:08:07] have.

Interviewer 2: ...and all that?

Suzie: It's still happening. We have industries that have tax loopholes, that's not new.

Interviewer 2: Yeah, right.

Interviewer 1: The incentives have to do with what level of taxes you pay on overseas production overseas earnings as opposed to here in the United States; is that what you're saying?

[1:08:28]

Suzie: Well I think there must have been some evaluation of recognition of the fact that we were still selling, we were still distributing, there was some dollar value to having some component of manufacturing here, whether it was garments or automobiles, that maybe the cars were made in Japan or Korea, but the dealers were American.

[1:08:59] So I think there was always some kind of evaluation that was going on as to who are we for this game and how do we keep the balance? Sometimes we lose it.

Interviewer 1: We've about pumped this lady enough, but we'll finish up with kind of a philosophical question.

Suzie: Well is this what you wanted?

Interviewer 1: Oh, you were excellent.

Interviewer 2: Fascinating, yes.

[1:09:29]

Interviewer 1: Do you think the young people around Kansas City have any realization that we were once a major garment manufacturing center?

Suzie: Well being the president of the Crossroads and dealing in the restoration and rehabilitation of older buildings that were nonfunctional and had to find a new life for themselves, many of our young people are living today in some of those old factories...

[1:10:01] ...and like many of the lofts from New York to Los Angeles were in an old manufacturing facility that have found a new life with a new use. I think what we all like about those old buildings are the integrity of the spaces, the materials, and the design of the urban community.

[1:10:34] I think we all like those kinds of buildings and those kinds of spaces. And I think young people today might recognize the fact that they're living in buildings that had other agendas and have found a new agenda. And maybe in a very unique way now that they're all facing...

[1:11:01] ...ideas about who are they going to be and how they reinvent themselves maybe something positive will come from the fact that we all change and that we have to accept it; and take the part that works and move on with new choices.

Interviewer 1: Nice way to end the interview, which we just did.

Suzie: Okay.

[End of audio 1:11:30]