

# Kansas City Garment Industry Project

## Transcript of Interview with Steve Chick

John A. Dvorak: Welcome to another interview for the Kansas City garment industry project. Today is May 18, 2010. I'm John Dvorak and I'm interviewing Steve Chick, who worked for many years in his family company, Youthcraft Coats. The videographer is Mark Titus. Steve, tell me a little bit about the founding of Youthcraft, and what led to its founding.

Steve Chick: Okay. The company was founded by Leon Karosen, who was a nephew of Louis Walter. And ah, there was a prior company called Louis Walter and Betty Jean Coats, and that was run by his brother Julius. That started in the '30s, and they, Leon went off to war, to the Second World War, and when he came back, he could not really get into the coat business, it was my understanding, because of, there was a fabric shortage. And so they started the company in 1946. It was incorporated in Delaware, called Youthcraft. It was basically a junior suit house. My father had been with Stern-Slegman-Prins, which was Betty Rose Coats. Everyone used female names. And he was a coat man with them, that's what they did, coats. And so he joined Leon as a partner and, I don't know exactly whether it was right at that time in 1950, he was not a full partner, he was a minority partner. It was my understanding that he owned 25 percent of the company at that time. Dad was sales manager, his title at that time was sales manager. Through the whole company's life he was the only sales manager. His title eventually became executive vice president. But, that's what he did. What my father did was to design the line, what we called designing the line. He was not a designer as such, but, his father—my grandfather—had been a men's tailor. And my father would shop stores for garments that were selling well in the coat departments. He might buy something because he liked the look of the collar, or the way the shoulder looked, or maybe it was an entire style. Then he would work with a pattern maker, who we called designers. They, then, would make a pattern based on making the entire coat, or maybe just a part of the coat. They would then try it on models. That's how the line was created. Then my dad. . . he worked with Leon. Leon was the production person, Leon was out in the factory working with the staff there, that made piece work. They put it together by pieces.

Q Your father was named Robert Chick?

A Correct.

Q Did he and you talk about the business when you were a youth, were you well-acquainted with the business?

A Yes, I mean, I remember when I was a little kid, Stern-Slegman-Prins was located in North Kansas City. It's interesting, it's now condominiums. It was funny, I was thinking about this yesterday, I remember there was a plastic model—as a kid this was interesting to me—of their new building, which ended up on, between Linwood and 31<sup>st</sup> Street on Gillham and the building is still there, and so is the tall building in North Kansas City, on Armour. And I guess that building opened around 1950. And, ah, what I remember about Youthcraft then, was as a kid, going down to 311 W. 8<sup>th</sup>, and that's where the original building was and where we originally started. That was called Kansas City Boyswear, it was owned by the Plotsky's. We were then, I've forgotten, on one or two floors. It was a small building. And as a kid, I remember the fabrics, and I remember that my dad had an office, probably not as big as this

one. The windows faced a brick wall. As a kid, that's what I remembered then.

Q Do you know what drove your dad, what he liked about the garment business and the coat business?

A Let me tell you about the coat business in general, and what I remember. As the business grew, and what I think what my dad liked about it, he originally traveled in Iowa and Illinois for Stern-Slegman and Betty Rose. And when you would go in, and when I started in the business, you would go into a store, you were a star. You were, this was the biggest purchase that a ready-to-wear store would make was coats, they were more expensive than dresses. It's really before the sportswear business. People carried coats, suits, and dresses in these stores. And so if you went into a ready-to-wear store in Iowa or Illinois, or wherever it was, you only saw them twice a year, at a spring season and a fall season. In the dress business, then, there were four seasons, and what they called transitional, holiday. And you didn't have that in coats. So people would come in, the salesmen, and it was important, because this was their major purchase that they would buy from a single vendor. You felt like something. When I traveled, and I guess when my dad was in that, when I would come into the store I didn't generally just see the buyer, I saw the owner of the store, if it was a larger store I saw the general manager, or the divisional, or the GM, in many cases, the owners. It was an important purchase for them.

Q How did the company do in the early days, the late '40s and '50s?

A Well, in the '50s, like I said, we were in 311. They did some manufacturing there, and, ah, I mean the whole thing was done there. But it was a small operation, and as it became larger and hired more salesmen and covered larger areas, they joined up with Louis Walter, at 416 W. 8<sup>th</sup>. It's interesting that it's condominiums today, it was actually the first building that turned condominium in the garment area. And Louis Walter was a sales company. Youthcraft was a sales company. Neither one of them, then, manufactured their own garments. There was a company called Coronet. And Coronet was, what would you call it, Coronet manufactured the coats for both companies. That way they had a larger volume. At this 416 W. 8<sup>th</sup>, on the first floor was Louis Walter and Betty Jean Coats, their offices, and their receiving room, and their shipping room. And on the second floor was Youthcraft with the same thing. Coronet, the president of Coronet was Harry Karosen. Harry Karosen was the father of Leon and Julius Karosen. And the, I'm trying to think of what his title was, Virgil Gibbs was the father-in-law of Leon Karosen. And Virgil was really an accountant. And what he did was, he took the sales records of both companies and determined the cutting. On the top floor, which would have been the sixth floor I believe, was the cutting room. And that cutting room cut garments for both companies. They were sales companies. Interesting, you know.

Q So did Youthcraft never actually manufacture coats?

A Well, we'll get to that. As we got bigger, Louis Walter got smaller. Renee Chick and Robert Chick, Renee was my stepmother. And she was the designer in the same capacity that my father was with Youthcraft, she was the designer for Louis Walter. And in 1963 they actually separated and eventually she got out of the business for a year, got back into the business. They ended up getting a divorce. During that period of time, I know our sales, and I had joined the company and I was traveling, and our sales had skyrocketed and their sales

had gone in the opposite direction. So we decided, we being Youthcraft, that we needed more space. And we moved to the Poindexter Building at 801 Broadway. They continued to stay, they being Louis Walter, stayed in their building. We separated completely. I would tell you I know there was jealousy between the two brothers. Because one, the older one, his business had gone the other direction, and ours had skyrocketed. Our building, the Poindexter Building, was the second floor through the seven floor, not the entire building, the first floor was still Poindexter. Then there were two sub-basements and we had nothing to do with them. But that was an enormous building for garments. There were two freight elevators and three other elevators, I think, in that building at that time and each floor was 28,000 square feet. It was just much larger, and our business called for that. At our peak at 801 Broadway we had over 700 employees. It was, I know, the biggest company in town.

Q Why was it so successful?

A I think, my dad always said it was three ways. First of all, we designed a beautiful garment. Secondly, we had the right sales people. And we manufactured it, and it was done on time and it sold in the stores. We had, I guess, a very good sales force, the right product, and we had the manufacturing. All three of them. Dad always said none was more important than the other.

Q So at some point in the '50s you began manufacturing your own products?

A No, it was in the '60s.

Q Before that, you would have designed the coat but then turned the design over to Coronet?

A We turned the pattern to Coronet. The pattern would have been made. My dad would look at a garment and say: "Okay, I'm doing it this way and this way." Then his designer would then make a pattern. Then they would put the pattern on a model and correct it, you know, first it would have been on just a form, and then they would bring in a real model. My stepmother did some corrections, what we called corrections. She was perfect. She had been a model at Swanson's. The garments would then be made on her.

Q And then Coronet was not a sales company, they manufactured?

A They only manufactured everything.

Q Where did the fabric come from?

A Oh, for the most part in those years, it would come from New York. We did have some imported fabrics. We got into the fake fur business and did really well with it. We were probably one of the first ones that bought from a French company, I remember called Tisabel. And there was a German company as well. I think it was in 1971 and '72, my dad and his wife and Leon and his wife traveled to Europe to meet the people even though they would come here. And they traveled there to make purchases. And other people did too.

Q Do you know, was Kansas City and Youthcraft a fashion trend setter or were we more utilitarian, and followed what New York was doing?

A No, we were a trend setter. We sold, like all of the other companies in Kansas City, the companies sold mainly mom and pop stores. That was really what the basis of the business

was, except for people like Brand & Puritz, they sold chains, but less expensive chains. We sold, and so did like Fashionbilt and Stern-Slegman Betty Rose, the basis of their business was small towns and small stores. Now by small towns, that could be 50,000 people. But it was much easier, those people were, in many cases didn't travel to New York. They would travel to the Chicago market, that was the big one, they would travel to Charlotte, that was big then, bigger than Atlanta. Charlotte I understand is nonexistent and now people go to Atlanta. It was too expensive for many of the small towns to travel to New York. In many cases I think they'd probably be intimidated unless they had a New York buying office. And we sold these mom and pop stores, but in the '60s, when I started coming in there, I was young and, young and perhaps stupid, not afraid to walk into a big-city store, and that's what I did. So we started then, in Texas as well, we started selling these big better stores. And we had the right merchandise. It was just trying to get in the door. And that's what we did. That's what made our business grow.

Q Did Youthcraft coats, in the best of the times, were they sold all over the United States?

A Yes.

Q Were there parts of the United States that you concentrated on, or was it truly a nationwide product?

A Well, it was a nationwide product, but the big part of our business was in the southeast, which I covered, and in Texas, Oklahoma, that was huge for us. We did far more business there than we did, let's say, in Missouri and Kansas.

Q Now you said the company had about 700 employees in the best of times. Can you give me an idea of what those employees did? Were most of them involved in manufacturing, or most in sales, or how did that break down?

A No, at the most we had at one time 13 salesmen. So, the office people were small, I could probably figure it out, I don't know, between the corp people in the office and the sales people it probably wouldn't have numbered more than 30. So you had over 650, something like that at our peak, in manufacturing. Youthcraft, in the '60s and '70s when we moved into the Poindexter Building, the top floor was nothing but cutting room—28,000 square feet. They said it was the largest, and this isn't meant for ego or what, but it was the largest cutting floor in the United States that made coats. There's nothing like it. I mean, that was almost a city block. And there were four tables that cut garments up there.

Q Was all your manufacturing in that building, at that time?

A Yes, at that time, yes.

Q Did you use the method that Kansas City popularized sort of, the assembly line method as opposed to one worker doing an entire coat?

A Yeah. My grandfather made a men's suit from collar to cuff. What we did was piece work. People would, they had the basket that rolled, and they were paid by the, sewers were paid by the number of pieces that they could do. One might just put together the collar. One might put together the right sleeve. At some point you put together the whole thing. We pressed everything. I think, probably, the two highest paid people at that point would have been the pressers, and people putting on, we did a lot of real fur collared work. And those were highly

skilled people. But it was the pressers, everything before it went out of our company, before it was packed, everything was pressed. And everything looked perfect when it left. When they were packed, they were packed with tissue paper. It was fascinating to see how that was done.

Q Did you make both men's and women's coats?

A Oh no, no, only women's.

Q Did you make any other clothing?

A We made suits. We always, suits were always a part of our business, because it had started as a junior suithouse. But I think that ended very quickly when my father joined. But then eventually we got back into the suit business.

Q Women's suits?

A Women's. Better. What was considered better. At one time we bought a company or two in New York that made suits. And they were made under our label. But again, I was trying to think of the name, but they were better suits. And that included the two-piece suit, let's say, the skirt and the jacket and a blouse as well. Some of them didn't have blouses.

Q Where did your coats rank in the overall scheme of things? Were they considered on the expensive side or on the less expensive side?

A No, we were always expensive. We were high-end.

Q You were not the most expensive?

A We would have been in Kansas City the most expensive. Ah, there was another company here called Fashionbilt, they were one of the last ones actually to go out of business here. And they made a cashmere coat, cashmere being a precious fiber, and they sold better stores. Theirs were considered more basic type. We also made rainwear, and again, ours were high end. We made leather coats. Or, we sold leather coats under our design, but those were made in Korea. And it was never a successful end, I don't think they ever really made any money on it. We sold some, but it was never a big part of our business. What had happened, and maybe I'm getting ahead of you, Louis Walter ended up closing in Kansas City and moved to California. One thing that they did was to get into the leather business. That was the idea of Renee Chick. And their leather and suede coats were made in Spain, and they were beautifully done, they fit beautifully, and somehow they got on "Price is Right" as a giveaway. It was an interesting story. They were very pretty coats. All of a sudden, that skyrocketed them back into business. They were, from what I understand it, when they moved to California, they were practically gone. And this all of a sudden revitalized them, and they also came up with a cashmere-like synthetic fabric that was fantastic for the southern states. Southern states, where we did the majority of our business, never wanted a heavy coat. Coats in New York were many times done with an inner lining, for warmth. And we offered that to our northern clients and eastern clients. But the majority of our business, Kansas City firms sold in the south. And that's a very short season. So if you came up with a light-weight coat, and women in those days they wore suits, and they put a coat on over a suit, and it was adequate for them, so they were always looking for a lightweight fabric. And we manufactured that too.

Q Were your coats wool?

A Oh yeah, we did wool and we did later, we got into synthetics.

Q How many years would you say were good for the company?

A By good, I'm assuming that you mean good sales. It never seemed bad to me, even in the late '80s, because my business was still good. I just got tired, I just didn't want to travel anymore. Our business was still good, it wasn't as good, but I would guess in the early '80s it really changed. And, ah, it was hard, what happened in Kansas City happened in all the other towns. You had these mom and pop stores that were going out of business. And you didn't have new people coming into the business. As far as time frame, the '60s, most of the '70s were fantastic.

Q We're the '50s pretty good too?

A Well, I wasn't really there in the '50s, but the '50s were growth years for us, because they started in 1950 as I mentioned earlier, and at some point in the '50s we moved from one place to a much larger place, then moved again in the '60s.

Q What I was trying to get clear, it wasn't just the company had two or three good years. There were many many years when the company did well.

A Oh yeah, yeah.

Q What would in a typical year be an approximation for gross sales?

A We did at our peak \$21 million.

Q Where that would have ranked you in terms of both the Kansas City garment industry and the national industry?

A Well, it was big. In the late '60s, our company was, became part of a holding company called CBK Industries. And that was the brainchild of a man whose last name was Dominick. He was then the president of Traders Bank. We became a tradeable commodity on the American Stock Exchange over that. Because they were then a holding company of Youthcraft. And so what Youthcraft then did is we went into the New York market and we bought several other coat companies. Actually we bought the oldest company in the United States then, was called Lassie Junior Coats. This was a company that made a boy coat, what was called a boy coat, this was a camel hair, a double-breasted notch-collared coat with a belt in the back. We bought that company. That coat came out I think at the end or sometime during the First World War. That's how old that company was. And we bought that company as a tax write off in the late '60s or early '70s, I've forgotten. They owned another company. We bought them. What also made Youthcraft popular was in 1965, we went into what was called the car-coat business, this is a short coat meant to be worn I guess as a casual coat with slacks. You have to keep in mind, in the '60s when I would travel into towns like Nashville or Dyersburg, or any small town in West Virginia that I would go into, I would go into there and they would sit down to work with me and the women would be wearing hats. I mean, it was such a different thing. If we went out to lunch, they'd put on their white gloves. You felt great, because they would come in and they were all dressed up to see you. It was fun. If you went out to eat, you went to, of course we took them, and going to the best place in town,

and everyone was dressed up. It was a different thing. In 1965 my father wanted to get into the car-coat business. There was a manufacturer called Penguin in Minneapolis that made car-coats. They made a higher priced car-coat. By that, I would tell you they sold between \$50 and \$60 for the most part. And so we got into that business in 1965, and we made a corduroy, these are short coats, car-coats, we made a short coat for \$14.75 was our cheapest one and the most expensive one was \$29.75. And at \$29.75 that could sell at 40 percent markup, it would be \$49.99 in stores. Some of the better stores would mark them \$55 or \$60. That put us in competition with Penguin. All of a sudden, we took that line out in January, this was a fall line, strictly made for fall, we took that line out then when, especially when I traveled, sometime it snowed terribly, and it was hard to get around. That line took off. What sold the best in it were things from \$25.75 to \$29.75. The more expensive ones sold the best. And that was probably the turning point of what made us big: Country Pacer Coats. And that line that you traveled with for like, January, February and maybe the first week in March, and at the end of March, first of April, you went out with Youthcraft, which was the dress coat line.

Q Now you joined the company in 1963?

A Correct.

Q As a salesman?

A Correct. It was probably 1962 even. I went there as, I traveled as an assistant to the salesman. The only way you could get a line is if someone dropped dead or if you killed them. So, I traveled with about six different guys. One of them had a bad heart condition, and after my driving, I can tell you, and his wife calling him, he was from Seattle, WA. His wife used to call him at three o'clock in the morning. We never slept of course in the same room, but it was always adjoining or next, and I always heard the phone ring. He was always taking nitroglycerin pills. After I finished with him, he decided to retire. And he wasn't that old. His name was Joe Kaufman. And he was probably 50 years old. And he retired and I took his line, I got his line, that was Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio.

Q By line do you mean a series of stores?

A I took his territory.

Q So what did you do then, did you just go from town to town?

A I went from town to town. But I always traveled by appointment. And some, and I remember traveling with him, and he would never make an appointment. He would just, for the most part, sometimes he would make an appointment, but he generally would just show up and sometimes they might be working with another person. I remember the first trip I made was to Paducah, KY. I always knew to get there early. And I had planned to go to this store, they were already a client, and I got there, and it was the first day of their sale, and I knew, this was called Paducah Dry Goods, it was 1965, it was in January, and I figured there were people waiting to get into the store, outside there was a crowd. And so I turned around and drove down to another town that was close by, where I had observed this store before, and I remember, I got down there very early, and I saw this car, which was a competitor from, actually it happened to be Louis Walter, they already had the store. I went in there, and I was a young kid. I got a place to park right in front, went in, talked them into looking at the line, wheeled the line in, and as I was in the car getting the stuff out and I see this guy, I've

forgotten his name, from Louis Walter, who was my competitor. I got in there before him. I remember, they never sold them again. You know, I went in there and I sold them, and it was kind of fun to do. But I'm sure the same thing happened to me, too.

Q Now you would go into what, a department store or a store that sold only women's clothing?

A Yeah, and some were department stores, many, I remember that particular store was like an old-time department store. It carried everything, even what they called notions then. But they carried men's and women's. But where we did best was generally with a specialty store, like someplace they would have The Style Shop, and they carried strictly women's. And, ah, we traveled differently then. My father insisted that we look good when we traveled. So we all had Cadillac limousines. We all traveled in Cadillac limousines, the entire sales force.

Q Company owned?

A No, we were all commission people. They would give us an advance on your earnings so that you could pay for your expenses on the road. But we were strictly commission. So whatever it cost you on the road, that's what it cost you. And in those days, we made a deal with Greenlease Cadillac here in Kansas City, and we leased these Cadillac limousines, and you'd take out the backseats and we had racks that were made and the garments would fit on those, and they'd be in bags, and they'd be packed. I remember at some point, the largest line we ever had had 156 different styles in it, and at the end we might have 70, 80. These were all different styles, and available in maybe one color to six colors.

Q So you would take into the store manager 100 garments, or whatever the number was, and it would be one example of all your coats?

A Yes, we made size 10's. I think today they make size 6's as samples, maybe 4's even. But to be a coat model, what they called a coat model, she had to have big shoulders. Actually, when I first started they made size 12's. And that was a big gal, you know, even then. Then they went down to size 10's and our sample sizes were 10's. You have to keep in mind, too, like in the '60s, we made fur collared coats. Some of them were foxes or lynx. And these were big, and when you had them in a bag—you could get maybe up to eight in a bag—and specially made hangers—and the hanger had a steel rod that would go through it—I traveled with, let's say, with all of those. By the second year I traveled also with an assistant that did the driving and the packing, I mean not that I wouldn't do it, too, because it took that many people. I traveled with a model most of time.

Q A model?

A Yeah, to put the garments on. Then, I had three rolling racks in the trunk, and these are big, ours had, for a coat rack, because they were heavy, the wheels were probably five inches around and heavy. And people that had dresses, they had small wheels. Again, you're dealing with a coat that weighed three or four pounds. In each bag, there might be 12 to 16, an average of probably 14 garments in a bag, sitting on a rack, five racks could go on one of these rolling racks coming in there. And you know in most of the cases you'd take in eight to 12 bags. Then you'd set it up. Now, what I tried to do, in most cases, and I did this myself, and so did Nate Plattner, who worked for us in Texas, is that we went into, I would set up in a motel or a hotel in a suite, and I would travel with lights, I had a Stanley Steemer that



steamed the coats at night. You know, sometimes I would be there for a day, but many times two or three days in different towns. We were so big, we were so important to these stores, that they would drive in, you know, 50 to 100 miles into Jackson, TN, into Nashville, into Bluefield, WV, into these different towns. The client would come to see me, and it was an occasion for them. We would schmooze. That was all the fun part of the business.

Q So you might go to the store or the store owner might come to you?

A Might come to me, yeah, the buyer.

Q When you traveled the country selling, were you in direct competition with sales people from other companies?

A Oh, of course, yeah.

Q Did you see each other?

A I always worked by appointment, so it would be rare for me to see, and I did go to Chicago in the very beginning and they had a market there, at the Merchandise Mart, I went there in the very beginning, it was a more expensive thing to do. I didn't feel that it added anything to my business. But in later years, because my territory was so big, I went to Charlotte, and I actually went to Atlanta as well, and you know I got business from, maybe a little bit of new business. But it was kind of fun and a little bit different to do. I had to plan my trips around people making appointments that wouldn't be at the show, or I would be at that particular show. I also went to New York and I set up in the Essex House and I worked with New York people. That was before we had a New York showroom. We bought a company in New York, which was Lassie, and they had New York representation, and that was one of the reasons we bought them, besides they were a \$600,000 tax write-off that year, because that's how much business they had lost, or how much they'd lost in business. And they had an office on the fourth floor of the 512 Building. There were two primary coat buildings in New York—512 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 520 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. And they were on the fourth floor there. So we made a showroom there, and we then had New York representation. But even before that, I decided to go into New York and I did work with New York stores, but I had stores from Rochester and Albany that came there and worked with me, and stores from Pennsylvania that worked with me in New York. It was cheap for me. I did a lot of business. It was also somewhat of a vacation.

Q Was the competition gentlemanly or were you really out there hustling to get business and sell yourself over the other companies?

A It just was never hard for me. I don't know. You know, again, I think I was young and maybe innocent. We were in direct competition with New York. I never considered the people in Kansas City as my competitors. I considered New York, I think you had to look at it in a bigger way: New York was our competition strictly. In the beginning we were in competition, let's say, with Louis Walter and perhaps some with Betty Rose. But Betty Rose was a far less expensive line, they had been around a lot longer than we had, probably, easily 20 to 30 years longer. But we were a different type of company. We just, we were more aggressive. None of us were afraid to go into better stores. We were always looking for new business.

Q How did you feel, you were a young guy, you were going around the United States, New York, Chicago, selling a top quality coat, how did you feel?

A I thought I was god. You could go into these small stores, and we were like movie stars going in. I traveled, in the beginning, I was 23-years-old when I got the line to go out and to sell it. I traveled with my wife, who was gorgeous, she was 22 years old, I was 23. We would pull up in a town like Logan, WV, where people would move their cars. It was hard to get a place to park. The stores were busy. You'd pull up in front and someone would go in: "Could someone move this car so we could get out." They'd move the car. She was dressed in a beautiful suit with jewelry, and her hair was up, and she was very pretty. I had a custom made suit on. We were like movie stars there. For that store owner-store buyer, again, this was their large purchase. We made money for them. If we didn't make any money, they wouldn't be that anxious to see us. And again, we only came around twice a year basically, until we came out with the short coat or car-coat line, and then it was three times. So, you know, they were happy to see us, and when you're young and think that you can do anything anyway, it was relatively easy.

Q How many weeks a year would you be on the road roughly?

A I would travel, ah, the fall line that we traveled was April and May and I was back in June. The spring line we would travel in September and October, actually mid-September to the first week, second week in November. When I first traveled, lines came out a little bit later. I remember traveling, the first time I ever went out with Joe Kaufman, I was in Evanston, IN, when the Kennedy funeral was going on. But that was the last I ever remember traveling that late. So then, you would be off June, July and August. And in the beginning we didn't have the car-coat line. So then you'd be off January, February and March, and you'd be off November and December, basically. We traveled four months a year. I traveled as fast as I could because time meant money that you'd be spending.

Q What did you do the other months of the year?

A I played golf. I played California and spend seven weeks sitting at the beach. I went to Mexico for a month or six weeks.

Q You wouldn't work the telephones?

A It wasn't really necessary then. You would call, you kept in somewhat touch with the larger stores that, let's say they bought 10 pieces of Style 1,000, and they sold six of them, and they would go to reorder it to fill it in. The little stores never did that to a big degree. Some of the better small stores did, but they would call in their orders. There weren't fax machines then. They would generally call in their orders. Many times they would put a stamp on it and send us an order.

Q Boy things have sure changed haven't they?

A They've changed a lot yes.

Q You didn't sell to Walmart, did you?

A No we didn't sell to Walmart. There weren't any. There was, the cheapest store that I remember selling to, was a store just outside of Nashville, but I would never tell anybody that I sold them, but they were really nice people, their name was McAdoo, I remember that. It

was originally McAdoo's 5 and 10. But I think the reason it started was that the owner, who I remember was this good-looking dark-haired woman, she wanted to get something for herself. And she tried to order something and we told her she had to buy the line, and so she said "Okay, send it in." They had two stores, one in Lebanon and one in some town, I think Springfield, it was north of Nashville, really were inexpensive stores. And then we sold another store called Belk, in Tennessee. Again, we were really their high-end. That ended up being part of the Belk chain, which is quite a chain. But this was in a small town and we sold several of them. We were always their high end. It was fun to sell them, they were nice people.

Q When did you begin to feel that things weren't going quite as well as they had been?

A I can tell you exactly. I came into the stores one time. We were always in a prime location in a store, in a department store. We were first floor, near an elevator, in a great spot. One day I come in to one of these stores that we sold, this was actually in Baltimore, a store called Stewart and Co. I'm looking for the coat department, and it is moved to the second floor. And so I said to the buyer, I said "What's going on here, why are we up here on the second floor?" And he said: "Well, you know, sportswear, the sportswear what they call the changes, the amount of turns that they make in sportswear, was at five to six turns a year. And coat departments only change twice a year. And so the stores began to realize that the turn is where they make their money, was how many times they could change their stock. And so, that's when it started to change. And then one time I went into a store in Nashville, a mercantile store, and I looked for the coat department, and the coat department had been moved over in front of the office area. It moved away from even the second floor, top of the elevator. I called my dad, and I said: "The business is really changing." These small town stores are in many cases the son or a daughter, they didn't want to go into that business anymore. It was like the restaurant business, you know they were married to it. They worked too hard, it was too hard to make a buck. Stores that weren't changing were let's say in a small town of 10,000 to 20,000 people, the stores were all located around the center part of the downtown. And, ah, all of a sudden they started building shopping centers out on the bypass. And if that store downtown didn't move out there, in many cases they owned their building downtown, so they didn't want to move. If they didn't go out to the shopping center, then they were slowly going out of business in the downtown area. And that's what I started to see was the change, these mom and pop stores were going out of business. If they went out of business, you didn't really have anyone to replace them with. Then, what happened too, with the chains, when you look at it today, it's the same stores, it's Macy's and it's Dillard's. We started selling Dillard's years ago, when they started coming out in business, they started out in Texas. They were a major client of ours. And, you know, we stayed with them. But then stores started changing, where the chains, they didn't really go out of business, but they were gobbled up by other people.

Q So it was a combination of changes in the stores and changes in what people wanted to wear?

A I don't think it was what people wanted to wear. What also changed, too, for us, we made a classier better garment. We made a garment with hand-bound button holes, and all of a sudden, you know, and I guess this was in the early '80s, or maybe it was in the late '70s, those were expensive. That took a certain type of person to make that hand-bound button

hole. And, all of a sudden I look at a coat, and here's a coat that was going to sell for \$200 in a store perhaps, or \$300, and, this was over 30 years ago, and all of a sudden it's made with a machine-bound button hole because we've eliminated that woman. We had three generations of people in our place. You know, it became expensive. And so, to cut corners, I think that had something to do with it. And we were trying to be competitive and we were making things.

Q You talked to your father about this, how did you all feel when you saw some of these changes occurring?

A I don't know, at that point, personally I had gone through a divorce, and I really had begun to lose interest. My kids lived with me and I tried not to travel as much. I always had an assistant with me, and I was having an assistant do some of the smaller towns, and then I would come, you know, I would fly in and out. I just didn't want to travel as much as I used to because I had kids that were growing up, and teenagers, and so I was in and out of town. I told my father in 1980 as I saw the business changing, I said: "I'm giving you five years notice. I will be out of this." And that was 30 years ago. I actually left in '86, and then they closed.

Q Did you notice the company going downhill in the '80s?

A I don't like the word "downhill." Our sales were diminishing, and so were our clients. It was harder to work with buyers in these big cities. Coats were just not as important. They weren't the money maker that they were 10 and 20, 30 years before that. They used to be a big money maker. And they just weren't a volume, the stores weren't making the money there in the coats as they used to. We would tell them to promote them. We would do special pricing, if your orders were placed early, you know, this coat will be \$20 off, \$10 or \$20 off of the wholesale. And, ah, then, but we would tell them when retailing it, to retail it at the higher level. And then discounting, everything started to be, you couldn't sell coats at regular price anymore. Because everyone was discounting them. So, we suggested, and I did especially, to try and be competitive that they needed to be promoting the coats more. It used to be that there were two sales a year. Then there was a sale every month, or there was a sale very day. It was different, to try and get the volume, and to get new things in there all the time, you had to promote things. And these small towns, these mom and pop stores, they weren't brought up like that. And that was a big change. And it wasn't just in the coats, I think it was throughout. And then there weren't people that wanted to go in and do retail anymore. It became a tough business. It wasn't as much, what I always used to say, fun, it used to be a lot of fun. Things became far more expensive. I remembered traveling, I stayed in a lot of Holiday Inn's. And they were as low as \$8, \$6 a night. Ten and \$12 was maybe the most you would spend. Then all of a sudden it become \$40, \$50 for the same room essentially. And, ah, if I had an assistant, and my assistant, I paid all of his expenses and his salary, well, it was for a four-month-a-year job that was \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year that I was paying 30 years ago.

Q Was it inevitable then did you conclude that the business was just no longer going to be successful?

A I didn't think the business was going to be the money maker that it was when we were so-called stars, when we were a big flash. We at one point, you get accustomed to traveling a certain way, I always had an assistant, I always had a suite, you know, a couple, two to three

rooms. Then I realized, you know, I'm not making as much money. I'm not doing the volume. They even tried increasing our commission to cover certain things. Expenses got to be quite high. I don't know how people travel today. I don't think there's, there's hardly any real traveling salesmen like there used to be. You go back to the '30s, when my dad traveled, and the '40s, then me in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, it was in the '80s, all of a sudden it was hard to make the same living but we lived the same way. But we had, Youthcraft, we had a private plane. My father would come into, meet me in major towns, which were Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Atlanta, Birmingham, Baltimore. He would fly in a private plane with two pilots. It seated 22 people. That's the way we traveled. Here I am, of course, in a limousine with staff. You know, I traveled with a model and an assistant.

Q Now your father was with the company when it closed?

A Yes, he was.

Q But you were not?

A No, I was not. I had gotten out of it a couple of years before and just sort of was able to not do anything. I told my dad that I was going to go in the restaurant business. And my father looked at me and he says: "You're going to be a waiter?" I thought it was always funny. My dad at one time said to me: "One day this will all be yours." I said: "No you're the minor partner, it's not going to all be mine." I didn't have the interest in it anymore. I needed to make a change.

Q When did you leave the company, what year approximately?

A I think it was '86, and they were out business in '88.

Q Are you familiar with what happened in the final couple of years, what went into their thinking, to close the business?

A Well, ah, there were a number of factors. But, as far as me, I wouldn't want to tell you anything that might be erroneous. The talk was that Youthcraft owed a pile of money to the Women's Garment Workers fund, and this was one of the, probably the deciding factor. We were also starting, what happened too, is that we moved from 801 Broadway to 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue in North Kansas City, 210 16<sup>th</sup> Ave. What we did there is that we had a large shipping room and some hand finishing that was done. But for the most part our garments were not made in Kansas City anymore. Because we found a less expensive way to make them. That's when all of a sudden I said: "Where are these garments coming from? What happened to Josephine Brancato?" We had a huge amount of Italian people, and what were called dp's. I remember we had women with tattoos that they'd been in Auschwitz. We had a lot of those people. In many cases, they had gotten older and retired. Still, every once in a while, I read in the paper so and so used to work at Youthcraft and she was 90-something years old or what. But people retired, and they were hard to replace. And, plus, you know we always paid a good wage for those people. They couldn't afford them anymore. Business started to deteriorate, we started to manufacture our garments in other ways, which basically was in New York.

Q How did your father feel when the business finally closed?

A My father was so depressed over that, and personal things with his partner, that my dad basically had no control over, that he was a very unhappy man. When he died, he was

extremely depressed. My father died of a rare blood disease that hits, according to Gus Eisemann, who was his doctor, hits two people in 100,000. And the interesting thing was, my father's best friend in the business was Marty Lowlicht, who was the coat buyer for Mercantile Stores in New York. Marty died six weeks after my dad of the same disease. It hit him and Gus Eisemann told me that he would last about a year and a half, and he lasted a little over 19 months.

Q You were out of the business by then, but how did you feel when the business closed?

A Oh, you know, it was a sad thing, but I had already gone on. I had gone into the restaurant business. That was exciting and new and we were wildly popular. I talked to my dad every day, several times a day. He just was kind of a lost soul. That was his life. My dad worked six days a week. He worked, you know, Monday through Saturday. That was his thing, and he loved the business. And I have letters that he wrote, my dad put out a bulletin every single week to the salesmen, and then, when we weren't traveling, you still got a bulletin, it came special delivery, and told you what was going on with Youthcraft, what was happening with Country Pacer, and we had another line called Voyager West, which was our raincoat line, it was never wildly popular, but we sold some. Then we made a leather line, we had a leather line, we designed the coats and those were made in Korea. I forgot to even mention that. But they weren't popular like the ones that came out of Louis Walter. Those were called Julie de Roma. I don't think they were as well made. We would send one of our factory people, his name was Max Helfand, to Korea. He would be over there for six week overseeing the manufacture of these leather coats. And one time we made rainwear in Taiwan. Again, better, not cheap, but better, but it was never the same thing. People liked our label that says "Made in the USA." It was different, totally different for me to see us making garments that were not made in Kansas City.

Q A final question, could anything have been done to change what happened? Could Youthcraft have been continuing in business today? Or were there just so many changes that that really wasn't feasible?

A I don't know, I mean, there are still people making garments. So why couldn't we be there you know? I think we could. Maybe they still could be today. But manufacturing and sewing are two different things. I think anybody can sew anything. I mean, I proved that myself. But as far as manufacturing, and manufacturing something like when I first started, the type of garment that we made, and then what happened in the '80s, and the type of garment that we were making then, were two different things. They were not entirely different but they weren't the same. But the main thing that changed was the way the stores were purchasing, and the way the customer was buying. That was the difference. It's a totally different thing. You could still manufacture garments today and you're going to sell. Someone is making coats. But the customer isn't buying them in the same way. What sold with us, was a woman's full length coat. They were cloth. They might have had fur collars on them. When they were the best were when people were buying mink-collared coats. That was the most popular thing that we ever made. Those sold at regular price in stores. The styles changed. Today you've got, when I see things, I think for the most part, they're much heavier. You have people like, my kids live in Atlanta. My daughter because she is used to wearing coats, will wear a short-coat. My daughter-in-law, I never see her in a coat. It could be 30 degrees there and she's going to just wear something else.

*(transcript has been edited slightly for clarity)*

**guest: Steve Chick, Kansas City, MO former salesman, Youthcraft**

**interview date: May 18, 2010**

**interviewer: John A. Dvorak, Kansas City**

**videographer: Mark Titus, Prairie Village**