[0:00:34]

Interviewer: Let me first of all double check the spelling of your last name, sir.

Respondent: G-I-B-I-A-N.

Interviewer: And you go by Marvin? M-A-R-V-I-N?

Respondent: Yes. Right.

Interviewer: What is your day of birth?

Respondent: 10/5/27.

Interviewer: And you were born where?

Respondent: Born at 4105 Montgall in Kansas City, Missouri.

[0:01:00]

Interviewer: Lived in the Kansas City area all your life?

Respondent: Yes sir, except when I was in the navy.

Interviewer: I will read a little script here at the start, and then we'll get going on our conversation.

Welcome to another interview for the Kansas City Garment Industry Project. Today is January 14, 2011.

[0:01:29] I'm John Dvorak, and I'm interviewing Marvin Gibian, whose family was the owner of a long-time sportswear business in Kansas City. The videographer is Chas Titus. Marvin, selling sportswear, I guess, must have been one of your earliest memories in life?

Respondent: Well, it wasn't exactly sportswear. It was men's and boys' furnishings. Jackets, slacks, shirts, as compared to sportswear as you may know it to be.

[0:02:00]

Interviewer: What did you call it?

Respondent: Wholesale men's and boys' wear.

Interviewer: What were some of your early memories?

Respondent: Traveling with my dad in the summer on occasion. When he went out on road trips, I would go with him and sit in the car while he called on customers or go and have hot roast beef sandwiches with mashed potatoes and gravy.

[0:02:34]

Interviewer: That sounds like a nice memory, the roast beef sandwiches part of it. Tell me how all of this began. Your father came here from Russia?

Respondent: My father was born in 1884. He came to the United States at the age of 16 by himself, although a brother and a sister had preceded him.

[0:03:01] His brother in Chicago, a sister in Kansas City. He was the youngest of about eight or nine siblings, and the deal at that time was to get out of Russia or you would be conscripted in the Russian army for 25 years. So he came to the States. For about the first six or nine months of his life here, he lived with his brother, Abe, in Chicago and went to night school to learn English.

[0:03:32] He then moved to Kansas City, because his sister, Esther Rothenberg, was already here settled with a family. So I don't know the circumstances that precipitated him moving here, but that's what he did, and that was about – well, he came here in 1900, and he wasn't in Chicago for more than a year, so he probably came here in about 1901, 1902.

[0:04:01] And he met my mother, and they were married in 1911. Next month would be their 100th wedding anniversary, February 2, 1911. I don't know what he did, because he never shared those things with me, in those early years, but he was always in the apparel business, men's apparel business, in the wholesale end of it.

[0:04:34] He worked for a firm I think was known as H. Levi and Company, which is one of the several men's wholesalers on Broadway. There were numerous of them. I'd be glad to share the names with you if you want.

[0:04:54] He worked there until January 1, 1927, when he and a man by the name of I.W. Jarus opened a wholesale house known as Jarus and Gibian, at 804 Broadway. And they stayed in business until through the Depression and until about I think 1938 or 1939, when they dissolved the business, became too one-sided.

[0:05:31] My dad was doing all the work and Jarus was playing bridge. That's the story I heard. He was an expert. He was a contract bridge player. At that time, my dad took over the business. Jarus and Gibian obviously was not a name that he wanted to pursue, because Jarus was out of it and Jarus eventually went into, I think, the women's dress business, also in Kansas City.

[0:05:58] But my dad had a vendor in Columbus, Mississippi known as the Seminole Manufacturing Company. No, I'll take that back. No, they came from Seminole, Oklahoma to Columbus, Mississippi. They manufactured pants. And at that time, my dad went down there to negotiate to buy some merchandise and he needed a label, and they had an unused label, which was Oakwood.

[0:06:28] So he adapted that and became Oakwood Sportswear. That's how the name came about.

Interviewer: Was Oakwood two words?

Respondent: No, one word, Oakwood Sportswear.

Interviewer: So when your father came to the United States, he did not come with skills, because he was still a teenager.

Respondent: He was 16 years old, and he didn't speak English.

Interviewer: Do you know what his interest in the apparel business was?

Respondent: I think at that time, a lot of the Jewish immigrants had migrated to the apparel business.

[0:07:04] And I don't know the circumstances, but that's where he ended up.

Interviewer: He was just sort of reacting to the community, you think?

Respondent: I would think so, yes, and maybe some advice given to him by someone else. I don't know.

Interviewer: What skills did he have that made him good in the apparel business, do you think?

Respondent: He was a schmoozer. My dad was a good talker.

[0:07:26] He made friends in the business, customers, readily, and they liked him.

Interviewer: We talked about your dad, but we didn't, I don't think, say his name.

Respondent: Ben Gibian. Actually, it was Benjamin Gibian, but it was Ben Gibian. The family name in Europe was Gibianski, spelled with an S-K-I.

[0:08:02]

Interviewer: Now, when did you begin thinking of going into the business?

Respondent: Oh, I was never particularly an A student, and after about two years of college, one year of junior college in Kansas City and one year at KCU, which is now UMKC, I decided that wasn't for me.

[0:08:33] Actually, about in 1948, right before my wife and I were married, I joined the business. That's after I came home from the navy and did a year at UMKC.

Interviewer: Now, by then, Jarus was gone.

Respondent: Yeah, he was out of the picture.

Interviewer: And it was Oakwood.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: About when did it become Oakwood?

[0:08:58]

Respondent: That was probably in ’38 or ’39.

Interviewer: Had the business been successful in the thirties, do you know?

Respondent: Actually, it was fairly successful considering that there was a depression. At that time, the method of distribution, so to speak, from the manufacturer to the retailer, went through the wholesaler, because the manufacturers in the East did not have the wherewithal or the ability to go out and call on the mom and pop stores, which was basically the bread and butter of the wholesalers, at least in the Kansas City area.

[0:09:36] And so at that time, the wholesaler bought merchandise from the manufacturer and then resold it to the retailer, who then resold it to the consumer. And that was basically, as I said, because the manufacturers couldn’t afford to go out in the sticks and go to [unintelligible] Oklahoma and Seminole, Oklahoma and Paul’s Valley and Coffeyville and all those little towns to distribute.

[0:10:08]

Interviewer: So that was the business model for your father in the thirties, then, to go around to these smaller communities?

Respondent: Yeah, he traveled basically in a pattern going north and south on both sides of the state line in Missouri and Kansas down into Oklahoma.

[0:10:30] Various parts of Oklahoma and a little bit of the Oklahoma Panhandle and a little bit of a few cities in western Texas, such as Lubbock and Wichita Falls.

Interviewer: Now, he would have been totally independent and so setting the territory was his decision, then, I take it?

Respondent: Yes. What they say about the bank robbers?

[0:10:59] Why do you rob banks? Because that’s where the money is. They sought out primarily the little mom and pop clothing stores – in the small towns were 95% Jewish owned at that time.

Interviewer: All over the territory?

Respondent: Most of the territory, yeah, that's correct. And so that was sort of an entrée to calling on them because you had something in common with them.

[0:11:30]

Interviewer: Tell us what he would have sold in the thirties.

Respondent: He sold men's pants, work shirts, t-shirts, sports shirts, jackets, leather jackets and cloth jackets, primarily.

Interviewer: No hats or overcoats or shoes?

Respondent: No, nothing. That was called, I think, the haberdashery line.

[0:11:58] No, nothing like that.

Interviewer: Where did he get those products?

Respondent: Well, one was the manufacturer in Columbus, Mississippi that he went to who was a big pant manufacturer who supplied him with merchandise. There were various manufacturers throughout the east. There was a leather jacket manufacturer in St. Louis who was a very substantial supplier of merchandise to my dad.

[0:12:34] And then there were many, many clothing manufacturers in the east looking for distribution through wholesalers, so that's how that all came about.

Interviewer: So he didn't concentrate on just one or two manufacturers, he had a pretty large number.

Respondent: He had somebody he bought shirts from, somebody who bought pants from, somebody who he bought jackets from.

[0:13:01] You know, most of those manufacturers probably had one product that they really emphasized on.

Interviewer: What quality were these products?

Respondent: They were working class quality products. It wasn't a Woolf Brothers, and it wasn't a Nordstrom, so to speak.

[0:13:30] It was – the working man would come into a little store and buy what he needed to do whatever his chores were.

Interviewer: Did he sell any products that were manufactured in the Kansas City area?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Respondent: There were manufacturers in the Kansas City area primarily of women's wear, not of menswear.

[0:14:03] And that's why. There were a lot of women's suit and coat manufacturers here, women's dress manufacturers here. It was a center for that. But there was no one here who manufactured leather jackets or slacks or sports shirts or anything like that.

Interviewer: Some of the companies at least that were manufacturing here in Kansas City also went out and did their own selling.

[0:14:29] They had a sales force, which is a different model that what you're describing.

Respondent: They did. Primarily, I think the women's suit and coat garment industry had their own salesmen out and calling on various areas of the country.

Interviewer: Do you know, in the thirties, did your father relate to the manufacturers here in Kansas City at all?

[0:15:01] Were they kind of a large [unintelligible] industry?

Respondent: The only way he related – because 95% of them were Jewish, so they all had something in common, and basically, they were all within the same two or three block area between 8th and 10th on Broadway, in that general area. So you know, you'd see somebody at lunch sometimes, or you'd see somebody at a religious service. That's what brought them together.

[0:15:31] They weren't necessarily socially friendly. They were not unfriendly, they just were not socially friendly.

Interviewer: They knew each other.

Respondent: They knew each other, that's correct.

Interviewer: You would not describe them as a tight club or anything like that.

Respondent: No, no. Don't forget, at least in the menswear part of it, they were sort of basically competitive. The wholesalers in the menswear here, of which I have a list of them, they were friendly competitors.

[0:16:02] Because they called on the same customers.

Interviewer: Were they real friendly, or just partly friendly?

Respondent: I would say they were partly friendly, yeah. There was no animosity. They went their own way, that's all.

Interviewer: It was a collegial group, though, at least.

Respondent: Yes, that's right. Yes, that's correct.

[0:16:24]

Interviewer: Not a cutthroat situation.

Respondent: No, no.

Interviewer: The Kansas City garment manufacturers were pretty successful down through the years, and certainly they were in the thirties. Would you describe your father's business as pretty successful too at that time?

Respondent: As I said before, my father during the thirties, when he was in a partnership with I.W. Jarus, they always made a living.

[0:16:55] There was always ample food on our table. My mother had a car, a 1933 Buick, that I remember. My father then had a smaller car that he used to travel on the road. So we lived in a home, which at that time – there were a lot of people who, I think, lived in apartments and rented.

[0:17:31] My parents always owned the home they lived in, which was 4105 Montgall.

Interviewer: He did well.

Respondent: He didn't do well. He did okay. He made a living.

Interviewer: You said he was located at 8th and Broadway at that time?

Respondent: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: What was the address, do you remember?

[0:17:55]

Respondent: This was 804-806 Broadway.

Interviewer: Well, what happened in World War II? Did the business change?

Respondent: Business skyrocketed in World War II

Interviewer: Really?

Respondent: Yeah, because it was a demand for merchandise. We went from unemployment in the thirties and bread lines and guys selling apples on the street corners to full employment in war factories.

[0:18:29] And that produced spendable income and business was very good during the war years.

Interviewer: Was he able to get his products okay?

Respondent: Yes, he was.

Interviewer: And what year, do you recall, did it become Oakwood?

Respondent: Well, I said earlier, I think in either ’38 or ’39.

Interviewer: Just before the war?

Respondent: Yes, that was before the war, yeah.

[0:18:57]

Interviewer: And then you came into the picture right after the war?

Respondent: Well, I went in the navy in the early part of 1945 and came out in 1946 and went to Kansas City University for a year or so, and then met Evelyn. And that was about in – we got married in January of 1949, and I had made actually a trip with my dad previous to that in October of 1948.

[0:19:35]

Female Voice: To New York, to [Bonn].

Respondent: No, Evelyn.

Interviewer: Where did you go on that first trip?

Respondent: We went to Tulsa, where we had a sample room. At that time, you opened a sample room in a hotel and invited customers in the area to come in and see your samples and place orders.

[0:20:00]

Interviewer: So you didn’t always go to an individual store, then? You might have the stores come to you?

Respondent: At that instance, the stores came to you, but generally, you went to the stores.

Interviewer: Tell me how that would work in the hotel. There weren’t Holiday Inns.

Respondent: There were sample rooms.

Interviewer: You’d just rent a room?

Respondent: You rented a large room, and there was usually a couple of racks in there to hang your samples on and a bed and a bathroom, and it was a sleeping room and a sample room.

[0:20:33] Those were readily available in hotels at that time.

Interviewer: And then you invited the stores that were your clients to come and visit you?

Respondent: That's correct.

Interviewer: And they would hopefully get orders.

Respondent: That's right. That was the name of the game.

Interviewer: Take orders?

Respondent: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: Did you have concerns about going into a family business, or did you like it? Were your memories of it good?

Respondent: I really didn't know much else.

[0:20:58] I didn't have any concerns about it. My dad was in the business, and my father was 44, I believe, when I was born, so by the time I was 15 or 16, he was already almost 60 or over. So he didn't have anyone else. He had some son-in-laws who were not involved in the business at all.

[0:21:30] So I sort of just, by natural movement, I ended up with him.

Interviewer: But did you like the business at that point in time?

Respondent: Yeah, I did.

Interviewer: Did you think of doing something else? Or were you always thinking about this?

Respondent: No, I think at that time, I was satisfied in the garment business with my dad.

[0:21:57]

Interviewer: So you two worked together, then, for a while?

Respondent: Yes, from 1949 until 1964.

Interviewer: Oh, you worked together that entire period?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: How was it working with your dad?

Respondent: Up and down. The last few years were terrible.

Interviewer: I meant more on a personal…

Respondent: That's what I said, up and down, the last few years were terrible.

Interviewer: Well, let's start off with the fifties, which were hopefully decent years.

[0:22:27] How was the business after World War II, as the country recovered from the war? What changed about the business?

Respondent: There were some fluctuations. Following the war, there was a downfall, somewhat. Not a depression, but a recession, between let's say '46 and '48 or '49. Business fell off.

[0:22:57] It was still manageable, but not to the extent that it was during the war. And then in 1950, things picked up again because of the Korean incident. And that created a stimulus because merchants panicked and they thought that there was not going to be any merchandise available, and there was a lot of buying at that time. That was a stimulus to the business, to all these wholesale businesses.

[0:23:29] If one did well, the others did well. If none of them did, none of them did very well. And that stayed on for several years, as long as there was the Korean conflict. After that time, business leveled off, and you began to see a change in the whole structure.

[0:23:56] The mom and pop stores were disappearing by either they were all dying off or they just succumbed to competition. And the greatest impact was the box stores, the Walmarts. When the Walmarts started opening up, people didn't have to go to the little store and buy a pair of socks or a sports shirt. They went to Walmart, and Walmart – not conquered, but took over a good deal of the market.

[0:24:34] And so Walmart didn't need a wholesaler. Walmart bought from the same people, the same manufacturers, that Oakwood Sportswear bought from. So there was no middle man profit to consider at that point. So competitively, the wholesaler was at a disadvantage because at that time, the retailers, the manufacturers were calling on the remaining retail outlets themselves, in addition to Walmart in the market.

[0:25:12]

Interviewer: Well, as the fifties began, and you were in the business, were you still following the same model in that you traveled around a certain territory and sold to the smaller stores?

Respondent: I did at that time, but we had some other outlets for our merchandise too in Kansas City.

[0:25:37] See, you had three large mail order houses in Kansas City, Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, and a lesser known one, National Bellas Hess in North Kansas City. And they consumed a lot of merchandise, because their

catalogs would go out, and sometimes they would not be able to foresee their needs, so they would come to the local markets and buy merchandise that they could have readily available, could have in their warehouses the following day, literally.

[0:26:16] So that was an outlet, and those stores, those organizations, provided quite a bit of business to all of the wholesalers in Kansas City at that time.

Interviewer: So some of the products you sold would have gone all over the United States and perhaps even beyond, through those?

[0:26:36]

Respondent: Maybe, I don’t know. You don't care where they go after you ship them to them. They do whatever they want.

Interviewer: But through those mail order houses, you…

Respondent: Yeah, through those mail order houses. And in addition to that, they had numerous retail stores. Sears Roebuck had a large retail store one time on the Plaza, which you probably remember.

[0:26:57] Well, we were able to, off and on, sell them cases of merchandise, promotional merchandise. Montgomery Ward had a basement operation out on St. John and Belmont, and they used merchandise there. Low end merchandise. National Bellas Hess just bought merchandise to fill in for their catalog needs. They didn’t have any retail outlets in Kansas City.

[0:27:29] They had one man there who sold surplus merchandise for them, but that had nothing to do with it. The entrée to the mail order houses enabled us to call on some of the Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck retail stores in Memphis, in Dallas.

[0:28:00] There was one in Greensboro, North Carolina, but that was a mail order. Minneapolis. Montgomery Ward in Chicago. They used certain amounts of merchandise to fill in to cover their catalog needs.

Interviewer: So in the fifties, what states would you travel to regularly to to sell?

[0:28:29]

Respondent: I would travel to parts of Missouri, parts of Kansas, parts of Oklahoma, and a little bit of the western part of Texas.

Interviewer: And then would you occasionally get to some of those other cities that you just mentioned, like Minneapolis?

Respondent: No, my dad usually did most of that. He had the entrée to those places.

Interviewer: Is that about as far afield as the company stretched at that time?

Respondent: Yes.

[0:28:56]

Interviewer: How big was the company after the war? How many employees did you have?

Respondent: We had my father, myself, a bookkeeper, and a shipping clerk.

Interviewer: That was it?

Respondent: That's it.

Interviewer: Well, you guys worked hard then, didn't you?

Respondent: Yeah, we did. I used to sell and pack.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Respondent: Well, I'd go out and sell merchandise and sometimes I'd come back in and pack it up.

Interviewer: Oh, so you did practically everything?

[0:29:30]

Respondent: I remember as a teenager going down and helping my dad out after school filling orders.

Interviewer: Now, were there a lot of companies in Kansas City that did this type of thing at that time?

Respondent: Yes.

[0:29:47] There was the Fitz Dry Goods Company, HD Poindexter, [Kayliss and Alport], H. Levi and Company, who my dad worked for, Textile Distributors, which was previously [Karl Hitch] Furnishing Goods Company, and an outfit known as Allied Clothiers and Jobbers, and they were a buying syndicate for a group of stores in northern Missouri and Iowa and Nebraska, and a company known as Herman [Weill] Company. They all did the same thing.

[0:30:25]

Interviewer: They all operated in roughly the same fashion?

Respondent: Mm-hm. We were probably the smallest of any of them.

Interviewer: I was going to ask what size you were by comparison.

Respondent: We were the smallest.

Interviewer: You were not a terribly large company, then?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Well, how did things go in the fifties? You began to see some problems with the loss of…

Respondent: Yes, toward the end of the fifties, we saw that competition was growing stronger because of our markets were diminishing.

[0:31:03] The stores that we used to call on were no longer there, and sometimes you could replace them, sometimes you couldn't. So if your markets diminish, you've either got to go out and find something else or suffer with it. So we did a little of both. We relied somewhat on the fill-in merchandising with the mail order houses.

[0:31:29] Sears and [Monkey] and National. And then hopefully, selling to some of their retail outlets such as, as I said, Sears on the Plaza and Sears in Dallas.

Interviewer: At this time, were you still buying all of your goods domestically?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: There was little or no foreign made?

[0:31:58]

Respondent: No, I take that back. No, there was foreign made merchandise. Yes, there was.

Interviewer: But primarily, it would have been domestic?

Respondent: Primarily, it was still domestic, yeah.

Interviewer: What were your feelings when you began to see that foreign made merchandise come in? Did you have any hint of what would ultimately happen?

Respondent: Yeah, I knew it was going to fold up. I knew it was. But I stayed there primarily to help my dad out. I knew that there was going to be a demise.

[0:32:28] All of these names that I read to you, they're all out of business. They all went out of business.

Interviewer: All for the same reason?

Respondent: I don't know. I can't account for that, but I know they were all gone.

Interviewer: But they were all losing the small mom and pop stores, and they were all beginning to fall victim to the manufacturer dealing directly with the big store?

Respondent: The retailers, mm-hm. That's right.

[0:32:55]

Interviewer: What year, approximately, would you say you began to see real trouble? Was it in the fifties, or was it even into the sixties?

Respondent: It was probably about 1960, I'd say. Late fifties, 1960.

Interviewer: What did you think about it at that time? What was going through your mind?

Respondent: What was going through my mind was what I was going to do.

[0:33:28] I had given some thought to – I'd been approached by a retail group in Kansas City to come with them, but I knew that my dad would – I wanted my dad really to close the business. At one time, I wanted him to, but he would not do that, mainly because my mother thought it was insane.

[0:33:57] And I knew that if I left, he would just sort of…

Female Voice: Lose the business.

Respondent: Well, not lose it, but just it would sort of crumble around him, so to speak.

Interviewer: He was pretty old by then, wasn't he?

Respondent: My father was 80 in 1964, when he died, so in 1960, he was already 75 years old, yes.

Interviewer: You didn't want to just abandon him at that point in his life.

[0:34:29]

Respondent: That's right. And my mother would not listen to any reason as to, you know, let's get out of this and let's take whatever pound of flesh we have and get out, because she didn't want my dad hanging around the house all day.

Interviewer: So this was the down period that you referenced earlier?

Respondent: Mm-hm.

[0:34:58]

Interviewer: How difficult was it?

Respondent: Wasn't easy. But we managed.

Interviewer: Is it painful to look back at those years?

Respondent: Not necessarily painful, I just wish maybe they had listened a little more and closed the business.

Interviewer: It wasn't really that he or you guys did anything wrong, was it?

[0:35:29] It was just the environment and the times.

Respondent: We were a victim of the environment and victim of the times, that's correct.

Interviewer: Was there anything that you look back on that could have been done to change the business model, for example, to preserve the business for a while?

Respondent: My dad was too old, and I don't think that I had the foresight at that time to even consider what to change it to, to tell you the truth.

[0:36:01] The only options would have been possibly to go more retail. I mean, actually open a retail store. But it wasn't practical.

Interviewer: As you look back on it, there really was nothing practical to have done?

Respondent: No, there wasn't.

Interviewer: Well, what happened, then in '64?

[0:36:33]

Respondent: Two things happened. My father died in 1964.

Interviewer: Oh, the business was still open when he passed away?

Respondent: Yes, it was. Yes. And it was declining already at that time, and I had an offer in a completely unrelated field, which I eventually ended up with.

[0:36:57] And I decided to pull up stakes at that time, and I think we closed the business July 1, 1964, which was about three months after my father died.

Interviewer: Was it pretty tough to close those doors the final time?

Respondent: No, I was glad, because it became a…

Female Voice: Burden.

Respondent: It was a drag.

[0:37:28]

Interviewer: Where were you located at that point?

Respondent: 804-806 Broadway.

Interviewer: Never changed the address? What was happening around you at that time? Were you noticing some of these other businesses already gone, or did they hold on a little while longer?

Respondent: They held on a little while longer, yeah. They did.

Interviewer: Do you know if some of them changed in any way to survive?

Respondent: I sort of lost touch with them, to tell you the truth about it. I was out of it, and I was in a different area, in a different stage in my life at that time, and I really didn't pay too much attention to what was happening.

[0:38:09]

Interviewer: Are there companies like this at all today, or is everything just so different today?

Respondent: There may be some wholesalers left in the country. There probably are. Somewhere or another, there's always a need for something like that.

[0:38:29] Maybe not on any extensive scale, but depending on the area that you're in and your ability to find enough customers to service, it's possible.

Interviewer: Now, towards the end, were you still buying most of your products domestically?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: So you would have gone to, what, New York or Columbus, Mississippi or wherever?

[0:39:00]

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: So the big influx of foreign-made textiles was after you were…

Respondent: Yeah, I think it was primarily after that, yes.

Interviewer: What would your father think about that if he were here today and realized there's so little domestic product available?

Respondent: He probably couldn't have even fathomed it. I don't think he could have.

[0:39:27] He was a good businessman, but he did not have a lot of foresight, if that's the right term. He knew how to sell, and he knew his customers, but he did not have the overall wherewithal to foresee the influx of foreign made merchandise.

[0:40:10]

Interviewer: I kind of hear you saying that he was real good at today and tomorrow, but not so good at next month and next year. Is that kind of what you're…?

Respondent: Yeah, that could be. Yeah.

Interviewer: Of course, a lot of people are like that.

Respondent: Mm-hm.

[0:40:26]

Interviewer: What would he think about the fact that you have to go to these massive stores, Walmart Super Center, to buy clothes today? Could he even comprehend that, do you think?

Respondent: Probably not. Although I did know at one time – I had met and actually did a very, very small amount of business with Sam Walton at one time, when Walton had just I think one store in Bentonville, Arkansas.

[0:40:57] He and a fellow by the name of John Lindsey who lived in Neosho, Walton had a plant at that time, and they'd fly into Kansas City and look around for merchandise. That was the beginning of the Walmarts.

Interviewer: So you sold them some merchandise?

Respondent: Once or twice we did. They were sort of exploring in Kansas City.

[0:41:27] Lindsey and I were good friends, the guy from Neosho, but Walton, even at that time, he was above us.

Interviewer: Did you meet him?

Respondent: I did meet him one time, yes. Yes, I did once.

Interviewer: And you say at that time they had the one big store?

Respondent: I think it was in Bentonville, Arkansas. I think so. This is going back already now almost 60 years ago for me.

[0:41:55]

Interviewer: You had no hint that he would become…

Respondent: No, he had a nice store, and he was doing business, and that's all I knew.

Interviewer: Were you in the store?

Respondent: No, I was never in the store. Never was.

Interviewer: So he was just another…

Respondent: Walk in.

Interviewer: Another store for you at that time.

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: I asked what your father would think about what's going on today with foreign clothing and all of these big stores. What do you think as someone who's actually experienced all of that?

[0:42:29]

Respondent: Well, it's made an unbelievable impact. I would have liked to have seen more domestic production as compared to all the foreign goods that's coming in here. But obviously, it fulfils a need. It's a lot cheaper, obviously, than in many instances that the domestic manufacturer can produce it. And that's the name of the game, what you can bring in at a lower cost and market at retail.

[0:43:03]

Interviewer: So you don't particularly hate it, then?

Respondent: No, I don't hate it. It's a fact of life, that's all.

Interviewer: It's pretty sad that we can't get any of this stuff manufactured in the U.S., isn't it?

Respondent: I don't think that -- the cost of producing it here probably is excessive as compared to the cost of producing it and shipping it in.

[0:43:34]

Female Voice: It's the unions.

Interviewer: Well, let me take a hint from Evelyn. Did you think the union influence has been good or bad?

Respondent: The unions have a place in life. Those guys have to be protected too. You can't let the manufacturers just run roughshod over their employees and work them 60 or 80 hours a week or something like that.

[0:43:59] There's a time and place for it. It's got to find itself in the market. But be that as it may, it's supply and demand.

Interviewer: Your company went out of business, you said, in '64.

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: And the Kansas City garment industry manufacturing part of it was already in some trouble at that point.

Respondent: They succumbed to imports.

[0:44:26]

Interviewer: And then they went out of business some years later. Do you think about any of that when you go down to drive by 8th and Broadway?

Respondent: Oh, sure I do, yeah. I've got a good friend of mine who we always sit and talk about it. A fella who, he sold trimmings and various sundry things to the garment industry. And he still likes to talk about what happened down there. The demise came about from imported garments.

[0:44:59]

Interviewer: Do you feel bad at all when you drive down there and see your old building?

Respondent: No, I don't feel bad. It's just a building, that's all. I don't feel bad about it.

Interviewer: Not a lot of nostalgia?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Do you think there needs to be more done in Kansas City to preserve the memories and the knowledge of the garment industry as a whole?

[0:45:31]

Respondent: Well, if you ask Sybil, probably yes.

Interviewer: I'm asking you.

Respondent: I think there's a place for it, because at one time, the women's side of the garment industry in Kansas City was probably the second largest in the United States, next only to New York City. So there is something there that is worthy of historical significance, yes. I do believe there is.

[0:46:01]

Interviewer: Doesn't seem to me that we've done a very good job of preserving the memories.

Respondent: Because there's nobody left to do it. Harvey Fried is probably one of the ones who's more involved in it than anybody else is, and Harvey and I grew up together.

Interviewer: Who is he?

Respondent: Harvey Fried was the Fried-Siegel Company.

[0:46:30]

Interviewer: I forgot to ask you what you did after the business closed? What did you go into?

Respondent: I became a vice president with Mercantile Bank and Trust Company of Kansas City, which ultimately became U.S. Bank. And I stayed there until 1996, when I retired from there. And I've worked part time for the last 15 years for the Bank of Blue Valley in Overland Park, Kansas, doing business development and public relations.

[0:47:03]

Interviewer: So you've been a banker, then, for the last part of your life?

Respondent: Since 1964, yes.

Interviewer: Was that a difficult transition?

Respondent: Somewhat, yeah. But it flowed.

Interviewer: Did you ever miss the garment business?

Respondent: Not one bit. You don't miss something when the last few years, you're suffering and seeing it go down.

[0:47:31] You just want out.

Interviewer: But it was a pretty good business for your father up until…

Respondent: Yeah, we all made a living out of it. Yeah, we did, until the last few years, yeah.

Interviewer: Well, you've come to the end of my questions, and I think I've probably squeezed you enough for one morning.

[0:47:57]

Respondent: I hope I answered them….

Interviewer: Why don't we cut off the tape there.