

Respondent: I flew 35 missions, and we never had a guy wounded.

Interviewer: You never had much trouble, huh?

Male Voice: You took a lot of flak, but you never got hit by anything?

Respondent: Oh, I got hit. I came home a couple times with one engine out.

[0:00:30] The worst one – actually, it wasn't the worst mission. I came home shot up with a lot more holes. We lost more planes. But one of the last missions that we flew – and this was April of '45 – on what they call the [Brenner] Pass Railway, which was a railway that ran from Italy to Germany and Austria.

[0:01:06] And it was the Germans' main source of transportation. And we went up to hit a little town up in the Alps. And we went in at 25,000 feet. But the damn mountains were 12,000 feet high.

[0:01:29] So we were flying at 10,000 feet. And I got hit and lost – we lost two engines, only the both of them were on the same side, which is like rowing a boat with one oar, for about 2.5, 3 hours.

Male Voice: So were you having to crank the yoke like this the whole way?

[0:02:00]

Respondent: Oh yeah, that, and my copilot and I, we got one foot out on the rudder. An airplane tends to turn into a low wing, right?

Male Voice: I gotcha. So you both had to keep your foot on the rudder pedal?

Respondent: Since the engines that were shot out were on the left hand side, what we had to do was get the left wing up.

[0:02:32]

Male Voice: Oh, okay.

Interviewer: Did you go all the way back to England that way?

Male Voice: No, we were based in Italy. In southern Italy. But we were based down in southern Italy, and by the time – it was late in the war already, and there was a field that the British were running where they were flying at night, flying the Partisans, flying supplies up to the Partisans.

[0:03:05] And it was right on the Mediterranean coast just south of Pisa. And I was not going to try to cross the mountains, because we were based on the east coast of Italy, on the Tyrrhenian sea down near Bari, and I wasn't going to take that sucker across the mountains on two engines.

[0:03:33]

Interviewer: Have you flown in a B-17 since the war?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: There's still a few of them around.

Respondent: Yeah, a couple of them come here every once and a while.

Interviewer: I've always wanted to take one of those rides, but gosh, they cost \$450, and it's 20 minutes. So I still haven't quite gotten ready to do that.

[0:03:55] Well, why don't we start talking garment industry here? I'll turn on my little machine and just put it here.

Male Voice: Everybody said you were frail. You don't look frail to me.

Respondent: I'm not frail, I just can't walk.

Interviewer: Let me double check your last name. Is it K-A-I-S-E-R?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: And the name of your company was Bill Kaiser Company?

Respondent: Bill Kaiser Company, yeah.

[0:04:29]

Interviewer: You were born where?

Respondent: I was born in New York, in 1924.

Interviewer: What was the date?

Respondent: March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1924.

Male Voice: You still have that New York – that's what I hear.

Interviewer: And when did you come here to Kansas City?

Respondent: I came here to Kansas City in – the weekend of Thanksgiving in 1971.

[0:04:58]

Interviewer: So you're a relatively new resident.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, are we rolling?

Male Voice: We are.

Interviewer: Welcome to another interview for the Kansas City Garment Industry Project. Today is November 30, 2010. I'm John Dvorak, and I'm interviewing Bill Kaiser, who had a long career supplying equipment to various companies in the garment industry around the Midwest. Bill, I've talked to people in various aspects of the industry, but I've never talked to somebody who supplied the equipment.

[0:05:31] How did you get into that end of the business?

Respondent: I got into that because my family back in New York was involved in – at one level away, we were importers and manufacturers of replacement parts, aftermarket parts, for sewing machines.

[0:06:07] The original manufacturers such as Singer and a company called Union Special for years and years, they were completely vertical organizations. While they manufactured everything, they distributed all of their own equipment directly to the end user, which would have been the garment manufacturer or the furniture manufacturer, or anybody that would use the industrial equipment.

[0:06:46] Shoes, anything that would take a needle and a thread. And they developed, I would imagine – this is like hearsay on my part – after the Depression and even in the twenties, there developed a market for used machines and an industry of second hand car dealers, you know?

[0:07:17] There were second hand sewing machine dealers developed, and they were supplying a lot of the smaller factories that could not afford to buy new equipment. And they could get it for less money. And the Singer company, the manufacturing companies, would not supply replacement parts to rebuilders or people who were remanufacturing their equipment.

[0:07:55] They would make you pay the same list price that they would the manufacturer who was using the sewing machines. So they developed an aftermarket supply system. In the twenties and the thirties, most of it came from Europe.

Interviewer: And your family was in the business of serving the actual garment manufacturers?

[0:08:22]

Respondent: No, we actually dealt with the companies that – the local dealers who were dealing in used machinery, and they were selling the used machinery. We supplied parts and supplies aftermarket that were less expensive than buying

genuine parts. Sort of like buying an automobile part from Pep Boys instead of going to Chevrolet.

[0:08:52]

Interviewer: Did your family have its own company, or were they employees of someone?

Respondent: No, my grandfather and my father were in business in New York.

Interviewer: How far back did that go?

Respondent: I guess my grandfather started it in the twenties, and it lasted until about 1965 when after my grandfather passed away, there was a family situation where we sold the business to one of our larger competitors.

[0:09:43] Because there was a problem of inheritance involved.

Interviewer: So your grandfather started the business, and then your father moved into it. So as a kid then, you were...

Respondent: Well, I got into it after I got out of the University of Wisconsin. I didn't get into it until after World War II.

Interviewer: Oh, you didn't work in the family business in New York, then, right away?

Respondent: After World War II, I went back to school, finished school at Wisconsin.

[0:10:16] We got married and I stayed in that business until we sold it. And at that point in time, there was a company here in Kansas City. He had been a customer of ours, and he was looking for somebody. He was an older gentleman with very young children, and he was kind of looking for somebody who might come out here and eventually buy the business or get involved in it.

[0:10:56] It didn't work out, so after a couple years, I just started my own company.

Male Voice: What was his name?

Respondent: Ben Bloom.

Interviewer: What was the name of your family company in New York, by the way?

Respondent: It was just my grandfather's name. It was Jacob Goldfarb and Company.

Interviewer: So you were in the business, then, starting in, what, the late forties, approximately?

Respondent: Yeah, '47, '48.

[0:11:29]

Interviewer: And you came out here in about 1971?

Respondent: Right.

Interviewer: Did you do the same type of thing here that you did in New York?

Respondent: No, when I came out here, I got into a business that you might say the business out here was the retail business. When I say retail, I mean you're selling to the consumer.

[0:11:58] The consumer happened to be the guy who manufactured garments. But he was the consumer. On the other end of it, we were wholesalers selling to the dealer who sold to the consumer.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Now, you never sold to an individual like a woman who sewed in her [unintelligible].

Respondent: No, we never got into that part of the business. I was always involved strictly in manufacturing equipment, not household sewing machines.

[0:12:28]

Interviewer: Why did you come to Kansas City? Did you think this was an attractive area economically?

Respondent: You missed me. When we sold the family business to another company, they eventually sold out to a conglomerate, and it wasn't to my liking. I just didn't fit into that kind of a thing.

[0:12:56] And Ben Bloom offered me the opportunity to come out here to come in to work for him with the possibility of eventually possibly buying his business. For one reason or another, it didn't work after a couple years, and I left and started my own company.

Interviewer: Did you think Kansas City was a good place to be doing this type of work at that time?

Respondent: Well, when I came out, and I looked at the situation, it looked attractive enough for me to decide to take a chance on coming out here.

[0:13:35]

Interviewer: Tell me about the garment business in the broad Kansas City area when you came out here. What was the state of the industry at that point?

Respondent: The state of the industry, even at that point, the majority of the business was no longer – the majority of the customers were no longer local in Kansas City.

- [0:14:02] A lot of the people in the garment industry had started to set up factories in smaller cities in the five-state area. I say five state. It was Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, even some in Arkansas.
- [0:14:30] And they were the larger companies. And the Kansas City industry was primarily involved in ladies' garments. Be it dresses or coats and suits. There were a few making men's clothes.
- [0:15:00] One of the larger ones was making primarily young men's clothes, boys and young men's clothes. But the rest of it were pretty much ladies' garments, anywhere from dresses to coats.
- Interviewer: Was it pretty decentralized around these five or six states? Or was Kansas City kind of a hub? How did that work at that time?
- [0:15:29]
- Respondent: Kansas City, as I said, was making – primarily involved in ladies' garments. All around here you had people like the Lee Company making jeans, Lee jeans. They were headquartered here, but their factories were spread out all over Missouri. There was one in St. Joseph, one in Lebanon, one in Ottawa.
- [0:16:00] And outside of Lebanon, in a lot of the small towns like Richmond and a couple of [unintelligible] towns down there, they had satellite factories. That part of the business was there.
- Interviewer: The heyday of the garment industry in Kansas City was before you came here.
- Respondent: Yes, it was.
- Interviewer: Was it clear to you that there was a decline by the 1970s, or were the companies still doing pretty well?
- [0:16:31]
- Respondent: There were some that were still doing pretty well, but the amount of companies was decreasing on a regular basis.
- Male Voice: Excuse me, were you still supplying aftermarket sewing machine parts at this time?
- Respondent: We were supplying some aftermarket sewing machine parts, but we started — after World War II, there was the introduction of new equipment from both the Far East and from Europe.
- [0:17:07] The Singer company had still maintained its policies of, we do business only direct. They wouldn't recognize any dealer organizations. But some of these

foreign companies realized that there was a market here. They had started to develop a manufacturing industry of their own.

[0:17:36] Because after World War II, when they could not get new equipment, there was another part of the industry that was exporting used equipment to Japan, where the Japanese were starting to make garments and into Hong Kong and other areas of the Far East.

[0:18:03] And since they were buying used machinery for the greater part, they developed an industry of being able to make parts to repair and to maintain those used machines. Their industry grew to the point that when they started to be able to make so many parts, about the only other thing they needed were the castings to put the parts in, and they started making their own machines.

[0:18:29]

Male Voice: Now, when you came to Kansas City in 1971, were you selling parts to sewing machines?

Respondent: No, we were selling machines. Yes, when you're selling – even when you're in the business of selling machinery and equipment, there is always an aftermarket for parts that are constantly wearing out.

[0:19:03]

Male Voice: But that's what you did after you came to Mr. Bloom and you worked with Mr. Bloom for a couple years.

Respondent: Basically, we were in the machinery business. Of course, parts and supplies for the machines are a good deal of what you do, and on which you make some money.

Male Voice: Right, servicing your clients is where you were making your money.

[0:19:27]

Respondent: Yeah, servicing and maintaining their equipment.

Male Voice: And you're building your relationship with them.

Respondent: Yeah.

Male Voice: And how long did you do that?

Respondent: I started my own business in '74, and I closed it in the late nineties, by which time the sewing products industry had begun to leave this country.

[0:19:59]

Interviewer: Now, when you first got into business here in town, were there very many other companies doing what you did?

Respondent: There was one other company. He was kind of a one-man operation, and eventually, he came to work for me.

[0:20:26] And the other only company that was in it in a small way was Missouri Sewing Machine Company, which they were primarily suppliers of home use machines. But they did some business with small tailor shops and drapery shops and artisans who maintained maybe one or two machines, where our business was primarily with factories that were full production houses.

[0:21:02] Because in addition to sewing machines, we sold pressing equipment, we represented a company that made cloth cutting machines. You got to cut it, you know? And auxiliary equipment for that, machines that they called spreading machines. You know, goods all came on large rolls, and they had to spread them out on the table, and they cut them in many plies with these cloth cutting machines.

[0:21:37]

Interviewer: How was business in the seventies and eighties? Did you do pretty well?

Respondent: Yeah. Have no complaints.

Male Voice: Even with the outflow of the garment manufacturing here in Kansas City, you were able to maintain a high quality of business?

Respondent: Yes, because the majority of our business was not in Kansas City.

[0:22:04] The larger customers that we had were – in the smaller cities.

Male Voice: The satellite manufacturing places that you mentioned before, like Richmond?

Respondent: You know, like for example, the Lee Company, they had an office right here on 65<sup>th</sup> Street and I-75, in that large building.

[0:22:30] But they made no product there. That was management, design. The closest factory that made anything for the Lee Company was in St. Joseph or possibly you might say [unintelligible] and Olathe.

Interviewer: How many people did you employ, approximately, in your business?

Respondent: At one point, we employed about 20 people.

[0:22:58]

Interviewer: Would these have been people that traveled around?



Respondent: I had a technical staff of four or five people who used to assemble the equip, go out and install it, service it. And we had four salespeople out on the road. Because we had a lot of miles to cover, like if you were up in Nebraska.

[0:23:29] If you were calling on factories here in Kansas City, you could go up and down 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway and you could get to see 15 customers. When you went to Nebraska, it was 50 miles between customer number one and customer number two.

Interviewer: What were a couple of your big clients in the seventies and eighties?

[0:23:59]

Respondent: The Lee Company, Big Smith Overalls. There were companies up in Nebraska, some furniture companies. There was – over in eastern Missouri, Brown Shoe and a lot of the shoe companies.

[0:24:33] We did a lot of business in various types of sewing.

Interviewer: Oh, you even worked with shoe manufacturers?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: A couple of the big Kansas City names were Gay Gibson and Nelly Don. Did you do much work with them?

Respondent: Yeah, we did when they were here.

Interviewer: How were these companies to work with in the seventies and eighties?

[0:25:01] Did you have fun? Were they nice guys?

Respondent: They were nice guys in so far as that was concerned. I think that in addition to the high cost of labor, a lot of the companies that were here – I don't know if I'm going to hurt somebody's feelings – I never felt that they were very progressive.

[0:25:30] They were sewing on equipment, in 1970, that had been built before World War II. There were two things that had happened. Number one, the manufacturers in Japan, in Europe, and even the Singer Company, had developed equipment that was much faster, sewed at a higher rate of speed.

[0:26:05] A lot of things had become automated. And the one thing that was difficult to do with the people around here was to convince them that this is what they had to do.

Interviewer: Well, did you tell these guys maybe they needed a little more modern equipment?

Respondent: Yeah, but I wasn't that good a salesman with some of them.

[0:26:29]

Interviewer: Well, what was the situation? Were they just very conservative people that didn't want to change much?

Respondent: They felt that what they had was good companies that had been successful, and they just didn't feel like it was their advantage to invest in this new equipment.

[0:26:59]

And the other thing is, a lot of the companies that opened up in these smaller towns did so because of space. Here in Kansas City, you had factories that were in multilevel buildings, and the production went from one floor to another, up and down.

[0:27:29]

And people had to move up and down. The newer factories, when they built them out in the smaller towns, were all one level factories, and there was a flow. The piece goods flowed in one door, the finished product went out the back door.

Interviewer: And that was more efficient?

Respondent: Much more efficient. There were advances in automation that a lot of these people here did not think about doing.

[0:28:07]

The bigger companies actually employed engineers, time and motion study people.

Male Voice: Efficiency experts.

Respondent: Yeah. For example, if we could go to a company like the Lee Company and show them that we had a piece of equipment... [hold for leaf blower outside]

[0:29:07]

Male Voice: While I got a chance, I want to ask you, did you meet your wife at Wisconsin?

Respondent: No.

Male Voice: Is she from New York as well?

Respondent: Yeah, we went to high school together.

Male Voice: Yeah? What part of New York are you from?

Respondent: Brooklyn.

Male Voice: So Erasmus Hall?

Respondent: No, I went to James Madison. How do you know about Erasmus Hall?

Male Voice: That's where Barbra Streisand went to high school. That's why I know Erasmus Hall. Okay, we can go back.

[0:29:35]

Respondent: Okay, as I was saying, if you could go to a company like the Lee Company – and remember, it wasn't my idea. It was a company that I represented who came up with this equipment — and you could show them that you could save six seconds in sewing on a belt loop on a pair of jeans, they would pay you \$3,000 for that piece of equipment.

[0:30:07] Because the plant made 10,000 pair of pants a day.

Male Voice: And each one of them had like six belt loops on it.

Respondent: Six or eight belt loops.

Interviewer: So those seconds added up.

Male Voice: So you do the mathematics and figure out how long it would take them to save enough money.

[0:30:36] Their program at one time was that it was going to cost – they had a project. The idea was to get to the point where it cost them \$6 to make a pair of jeans.

Male Voice: Did they make it?

Respondent: Yes.

[0:30:58]

Male Voice: And then what would they retail that pair of jeans for?

Respondent: Well, you know...

Male Voice: Or what would they sell it to the retailer for?

Respondent: Remember, those factories worked on a strange kind of a figure. The plant was given a goal. Each plant had a plant manager. And not only Lee Company. A lot of these factories with multi plants did that.

[0:31:33] The plant produced a pair of pants or a dress for \$X. It then, on paper, sold it to the distributor division. Then the distributing division, through salesmen, sold it. So each section of the company needed to support itself and make a profit. That's where the profit came.

[0:32:07]

Interviewer: Is this equipment you sold pretty expensive stuff?

Respondent: Some of it was maybe only a couple hundred bucks, two, three hundred bucks, but when you started getting into automated equipment, it would get up to \$800, \$1,200, \$1,500. Some of it higher pieces of equipment, more sophisticated, would be a couple of thousand dollars.

[0:32:40] You have to realize that in a garment plant, every job is different. For example, the shirt that you're wearing, there was one machine that did nothing but sew on the buttons. There was another machine that did nothing but make the button holes.

[0:33:04] There was another machine that did nothing but sew on the belt loops. There was another machine that created the belt loops before the machine sewed it on. There was another machine that sewed the pockets onto the back of the pants. A different operation sewed the flies.

[0:33:30]

Male Voice: So they were all specialized machines.

Respondent: Garments were put together like automobiles.

Male Voice: On an assembly line?

Respondent: On an assembly line. In some factories, they eventually got to the point where it was really an assembly line because they would have a belt system carrying the product down the line to the next operation.

[0:34:02] In a less sophisticated one, they would have what they call bundle boys. The operator would finish with the pockets, he'd take that bundle and take it over to the one doing the cuffs.

Male Voice: What we used to see in the movies. The canvas cart with the wheels on the bottom, and they'd roll it to the next station?

Interviewer: And then you would be supplying all of these machines?

[0:34:26]

Respondent: And we supplied the auxiliary equipment as well. The baskets that they put them in.

Interviewer: You didn't supply the cloth?

Respondent: No.

Male Voice: And did you have relationships with all the other vendors that worked in the industry, like the fabric people and the cutting shear people? You probably sold scissors and stuff.

[0:34:55]

Respondent: We sold that.

Male Voice: Electric scissors and stuff.

Respondent: Yeah, the electric cutting machines. The cloth cutting machines. We represented a company that manufactured that out of [unintelligible].

Male Voice: Who was that?

Respondent: A company called Eastman Machine Company out of Buffalo, New York.

Male Voice: And did you have a lot of different manufacturers that you repped for here in Kansas City?

Respondent: Yes, different manufacturers of equipment.

Interviewer: Were most of them USA?

Respondent: In later years, no.

[0:35:28]

Interviewer: Or were most of them from overseas?

Respondent: Most of them from overseas. At the end, even today, the Singer Company doesn't make any equipment here in the United States. The Singer name is owned by a Chinese conglomerate.

Interviewer: How many companies roughly would you have represented in the seventies and eighties? Would it have been dozens?

[0:36:02]

Respondent: Well, we represented some companies on a regional basis. In other words, there was a machine manufacturer called Juki. We might have been their designated distributor for Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska.

Male Voice: So you had a region?

Respondent: We had a region that we represented them in.

[0:36:40]

Then there would be a guy in Chicago who might have Illinois, Indiana, Michigan. And somebody in Colorado, who would represent them in the western states, in California.

[0:36:58] Depending upon the density of the population, where we might have had five states, the guy in California who represented them in San Diego had more customers within 100 miles of San Diego than we had within a thousand square miles here.

[0:37:27]

Interviewer: Did you represent many companies?

Respondent: Yeah, there were different companies that we represented.

Interviewer: Dozens?

Respondent: Who made different types of machines. One company didn't make every style of machine.

Interviewer: Did you sell, in some way, to most of the garment companies in the Kansas and Missouri area?

[0:37:56] Were most of them your customers in some form or fashion?

Respondent: Yeah, they were our customers. But we had competition. There were people who did the same thing that we did who were situated in St. Louis. So there would be conflict.

Male Voice: You would actually have competition? Two guys would try to sell to the same retailer?

Respondent: Yeah, in certain areas.

[0:38:28] For the customer sometimes, as long as we were competitive, it would behoove them to do business with me here in Kansas City rather than go to St. Louis and buy some equipment, even if the guy gave it to him for 5% less, because the guy in St. Louis wasn't going to come here to service the machines.

[0:38:58]

Interviewer: Right, and you were always available to provide backed up technological help.

Respondent: Yeah.

Male Voice: Were you often called in by people who had made the mistake of buying machines from the St. Louis guys, and you had to come in and supply parts and fix them and stuff?

Respondent: No, I wouldn't say they made a mistake. They might buy a machine and eventually say, hey, we need you to come and service it, you know? We wouldn't refuse.

[0:39:26] No, we wouldn't say, you bought it from the guy in St. Louis, go to St. Louis. That's not a way to make friends and influence people.

Male Voice: Did you create service contracts and warranty contracts and stuff like that?

Respondent: We did not send service contracts. We found that this was too restrictive from that point of view.

[0:39:59] We'd service on an as you need it basis. Because you also have to know, a lot of the larger factories maintained their own technical staff. They had their own mechanics and technicians. Where we would get involved, even with those guys, is when we would introduce a new piece of equipment with some sophistication on it.

[0:40:35] Then it was our job to do the installation and to make these people familiar with it. It's sort of like if you bought a computer, you'd expect the guy to set it up.

Interviewer: Was there kind of a community in this industry? Did people get along and have relationships?

[0:41:03] Or was it not that type of an industry?

Respondent: Which part of the industry?

Interviewer: Well, the garment companies and you and your competitors.

Respondent: Well, you know, you had people in the garment industry – there was more than one company making ladies' coats and suits here in Kansas City, so they were probably competing with each other for part of the market.

[0:41:33] As I said before, there were other people selling the same kind of equipment that we did, and while they may not have tried to do business in Kansas City, if a guy was situated in Oklahoma City, it wouldn't be very much of a deal for him to go up to Carthage, Missouri.

[0:42:01] You tended to try to do business in an area that you felt you could cover.

Interviewer: What I was trying to get at was, some industries are pretty collegial, even though companies compete with one another. But other industries are kind of cutthroat and mean and nasty.

Respondent: No, no, it kind of depends.

[0:42:32] I had a lot of friends. I had people who represented the same companies that I did in Atlanta, and we would exchange information and work with each other if something needed to be developed. There was a congeniality.

[0:43:00] But there was also – if one company represented manufacturer A, and we represented manufacturer B, and we were both competing, because it was a similar kind of equipment, we were both competing to put the equipment in the factory. You would be a gentleman about it, but you were a competitor.

Interviewer: Right, but you were a gentleman about it.

[0:43:26]

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: You weren't staying up all night trying to figure out how to mess over another guy.

Respondent: No, no, no. We had a situation where – as you probably realize, we did a lot of business with the Lee Company. There were these machines that spread the material on the table. They were motorized. It got to the point where the denim manufacturers started to put the denim up in rolls that weighed 1,000 pounds.

[0:44:04] And the people who made the cloth spreading machines started to develop machinery that could handle a 1,000 pound roll of goods up and down the table. When the Lee Company was looking into this when the rolls started coming in that large sizes, I represented a company out of New York that made a machine like this.

[0:44:44] And there was a company in Tennessee that actually made a machine like it. And when the Lee Company decided to look into it, they had both of us put a machine up on trial in the factory, at the same time.

Interviewer: Which one won out?

Respondent: I did, fortunately.

Male Voice: Why was your machine better than the other machine?

Respondent: Well, that's a long story, but I have to tell you that at night, all of us were drinking in the same bar.

[0:45:23]

Interviewer: Well, that's nice to look bacteria and think that, isn't it?

Respondent: Yeah.



Interviewer: A lot of business is not like that anymore.

Respondent: No, but some of those guys are still my friends.

Male Voice: I've got to pursue this a little bit. Was there a subtle difference between your machine and the Tennessee machine, or was there a major difference between the two machines?

[0:45:46] Was one stronger than the other one?

Respondent: Well, there were two things that happened. It turned out that our machine was a little bit more accurate. It's hard for people to understand this. When you spread the goods on a table, you're spreading it in layers.

[0:46:15] Now, the idea behind cutting costs is to use as much of this material as you can.

Male Voice: As little waste as possible.

Respondent: As little waste as possible, because what you throw off – and you're paying \$5 a yard or \$2 a yard, and if you lose an inch of goods on a 90 yard spread that are 20 ply high... You you want to do the arithmetic?

Male Voice: Yeah, yeah, it's like 400 square inches of fabric or something like that that you're throwing away.

[0:47:01]

Respondent: Right. And these machines had electric eyes that would line them up. And the same thing on the end. When it went back and forth on the ply, if you couldn't keep the edges within a reasonable – you know, they were looking for a quarter to a half an inch.

[0:47:28]

Male Voice: And you were able to supply that quarter to a half an inch?

Respondent: Maybe we did a little bit better on that. Maybe our speed was a little bit better. But they did the engineering study. We put the machine in, and they did the engineering study.

Male Voice: And you won.

Respondent: And we won that one, but lost a couple.

Male Voice: That's cool.

Interviewer: You didn't win every one, huh?

Respondent: No, neither does Tiger Woods.

Interviewer: Apparently not, no.

[0:48:01]

Male Voice: Were these people who were making this machine out of New York, were they people that you knew when your father was in business, and your grandfather?

Respondent: No, I might have known them, but I didn't do any business with them in that part of [unintelligible]. They were manufacturers of just that type of equipment.

Interviewer: Well, I hate to bring up the bad stuff, but when did you first begin noticing that things weren't going as well as you might have liked?

[0:48:36]

Respondent: I would say in the early nineties. With the advent of the stuff coming out of China, India, Bangladesh and all these other places, number one, even people like the Lee Company, they started leaving the United States in the eighties.

[0:49:10] Their first move was into Mexico. Then they went down into the Caribbean.

Male Voice: Like Honduras?

Respondent: Yeah, Costa Rica. Levi Strauss today doesn't manufacture a pair of pants in this country.

[0:49:32]

Interviewer: Did you see this coming?

Respondent: Not fast enough.

Interviewer: Did anybody see it coming?

Respondent: I guess we all saw it coming and it got to the point... It happened earlier to the area that you primarily interested in here in the Kansas City area.

[0:50:09] I think what happened here – and the demise of the industry here – had a lot to do with the fact, with all due respect, some of these guys were smart business men and today are comfortable in their retirement and everything else, but they also saw the handwriting on the wall, and they knew when it was time to get out.

[0:50:36] But by the time that they saw the handwriting on the wall, it was too late. They didn't modernize. And then their markets changed here. The market that the Kansas City garment people had was a regional market. They sold

most of their things to the mom and pop stores in the small towns in Missouri and Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska.

[0:51:09] And with the advent of two things, the interstate highway, television, mail order, and box stores, they could not compete with the mass manufacturers who could supply these mass merchandisers.

[0:51:35]

Interviewer: Could something have been done before the decline set in to head off some of the decline?

Respondent: If it could be done, I didn't know how. I can't tell you, really.

Male Voice: Well, do you think if these guys who sat in their offices and refused to upgrade their machines and refused to modernize their factories, if they had done that in a timely manner, would that have prevented the movement to offshore of manufacturing?

[0:52:14]

Respondent: No.

Male Voice: They probably knew that.

Respondent: I'll tell you why. Because – and sometimes you see it on TV in one thing or another – because the offshore manufacturers, where they originally started out using what they had with regard to old equipment, they modernized everything. All of those factories offshore today are all modernized.

[0:52:46] And their wages are still...

Male Voice: The American worker earns a higher wage.

Respondent: But it happened even to some of the far eastern countries. Originally, Japan was a big supplier of garments. But when the Chinese market opened up, the Japanese merchandizers – first the Japanese were selling machines to China. Now the Japanese companies make their machines in China.

[0:53:24]

Interviewer: Well, but you were saying that some of these companies in Kansas City and around the Midwest were slow to become interested in more automation.

Respondent: Not all of them, but some of them.

Interviewer: But if they had been more interested and been right on top of it, could that have headed anything off?

Respondent: Maybe temporarily, because as I just said, the same modern equipment that they would have gone to buy, they would have been paying American wages.

[0:54:02] And that same equipment is being used in Bangladesh and in China and in India, and in all these other countries, where the wage differential is so great that they can't compete. It doesn't only happen in the garment industry. Buy a computer today. Where is it made?

[0:54:31]

Male Voice: China.

Interviewer: What were you hearing from the companies when the decline set in? Were they angry? Did you talk about it with them? Did you just ignore it?

Respondent: It wasn't a matter of ignoring it or talking about it.

[0:54:55] The whole situation, while it might have taken a little time, it was just something that was just slowly but surely deteriorating.

Male Voice: You actually were making money in the garment industry long after most of the Kansas City manufacturers had gone out of business. I mean, Nelly Don and all the Stern Brothers and all that, they had closed their doors years before you finally closed.

[0:55:26]

Respondent: Because at that time, there were still some of these bigger companies manufacturing outside of the metropolitan area. And our business – even when I first started in business, I would say maybe 15%, 20% of it might have been in the greater metropolitan area. When I say that – like Gay Gibson had a factory in Higginsville.

[0:56:00] That's still part of this community, you know?

Male Voice: It wasn't an overnight trip to go to Higginsville or Odessa.

Respondent: No, you're there in an hour and back. But the majority of our business was not coming from this area in the last ten years. It was the smallest part of our business.

[0:56:34]

Interviewer: Did your business then, of your company, just kind of step by step decline?

Respondent: Oh sure, yeah. It declined. And it's not only my business here in Kansas City.

[0:56:59] My colleagues in the industry in other cities that I knew. I've seen it happen in Chicago, in New York, in Dallas. They've just disappeared off the market.

There was a time that, for example, some of the companies that were the same type of business that we were, in Texas, were doing pretty good, because they were setting up factories in Mexico.

[0:57:36] But eventually what happened was, the machine manufacturers from Japan and from Europe, they established distributors in Mexico. So the American on the border was no longer able to compete with the guy even from Mexico City to Juarez.

[0:58:07] Forget about the difference between that being just outside El Paso. It was still across the border.

Interviewer: Could your company not expand into Mexico or the Caribbean? Did you think about that at the time?

Respondent: No. It was not practical, because there were companies in the Caribbean already.

[0:58:32] There were distributors. These companies, these machine manufacturers, had distributors in South America and Central America, in the Caribbean, in Puerto Rico. Nobody was doing any business in Cuba.

[0:58:55] They were the companies doing the same thing that we did.

Interviewer: How did you feel at that time when you saw things sort of going downhill? Were you sad?

Respondent: I wasn't very happy.

[0:59:28] In fact, I remember the statistics. At one point in the late eighties, the early nineties, in the state of Missouri, there were 20,000 people working in the sewn products industry. Now, I'm talking about shoes, t-shirts, dresses, pants, anything that you could consider sewn products.

[1:00:06]

Male Voice: Handbags, leather jackets, that kind of thing?

Respondent: Yeah, leather jackets, anything else like that. The last statistic that I got from somebody about three years ago told me that there are about 2,000.

Interviewer: What finally prompted you to close the business?

[1:00:28]

Respondent: I didn't want to lose any more money.

Interviewer: It was that bad?

Respondent: It was unrealistic to stay in business.

Male Voice: There was no profit there.

Respondent: No profit.

Interviewer: Well, you were beginning to get to retirement age at that point.

[1:00:54] I thought maybe you decided just to hang it up.

Respondent: Well, no. At one point, my son, who's an attorney, decided at one point that he didn't like the law, and he figured well, I'll come into the business with you, you know? And he did. But when we began to see the light at the end of the tunnel was not a light at the end of the tunnel, it was the train coming at you, he went back to practicing law.

[1:01:34]

Male Voice: Does he work here in Kansas City?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you sell the company?

Respondent: No, just closed it. I mean, who are you going to sell it to?

Interviewer: Did you do anything else in the industry after that? Or did you retire?

Respondent: I basically retired.

[1:01:55] There was a situation here where – a work clothes company here in town, they had a couple of factories.

Interviewer: Oh, Dutton Brookfield's company?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Unitog?

Respondent: Unitog. They had a factory in Lawrenceburg, and they sold it out to another company.

[1:02:32] Was it Sisco? Anyway, they sold it out, and I had just closed my business. But a couple people knew that I still had some contacts, so I took a longtime deal from them and just liquidated their equipment for them.

Interviewer: As you look back on it, you and your family were part of a really fascinating industry for a lot of years.

[1:03:09] That must please you, as you look back on it.

Respondent: Yeah, they were good times. And I'm sure if you talk to the families who have been in the manufacturing business here in the Kansas City area, they were very successful and some of them are still quite comfortable and leaders of the community, very active in the community.

[1:03:45] But they're no longer making clothes.

Interviewer: Well, I think that's about all the questions I had. Is there anything you want to add to wrap up our discussion?

Respondent: No, I think you've tapped me out.

Male Voice: I've got one more question for you.

Respondent: Go.

[1:04:07]

Male Voice: When the manufacturing of your machines that you sold here in Kansas City and the surrounding area moved from New York to Europe or Japan, did you get to travel to Europe and Japan?

Respondent: Well, the manufacturers didn't move from here. It was companies that were originally from Japan.

[1:04:29] Yeah, I made quite a few trips to the Far East.

Male Voice: Did you enjoy the trip, or was it just a pain to have to go over?

Respondent: Oh no, it was fun. The Japanese industry had formed an association of all the manufacturers, and they established a deal where they were running an international tradeshow every three years.

[1:05:05]

Male Voice: In Tokyo?

Respondent: In Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya. And they would invite us.

Male Voice: So they would take care of you while you were over there and make sure you had plenty of sake and Kobe beef and sushi.

Respondent: [unintelligible] the trips.

[1:05:30] Well, actually, I started going to Japan in the sixties after we merged our company with another company and we were buying a lot of parts. And we were also importing machines from Japan, so I used to go over there a lot on buying trips.

Male Voice: That's when you were working with your father, right?

Respondent: No, after we sold our family business, the other company I was with.

[1:05:54]

Male Voice: The conglomerate that you didn't like the corporate culture of, so you bailed?

Respondent: Yes. But when the companies that we represented, the Japanese manufacturers would invite their American distributors to go to these tradeshows, they would technically cover it from the tax point of view by holding a few meetings.

[1:06:26] And then on the way home, so that we wouldn't get tired for the long trip, we'd stop in Hawaii for about five days of golf.

Male Voice: Oh, right, just to relax after your strenuous trip to Japan, right?

Respondent: Yeah.

Male Voice: Sounds like a deal.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Let me ask one question before you turn the camera off. The garment industry in Kansas City and the region was a very important industry at one point. Do people today, do the younger people realize that? Or is that a part of the regions history that is kind of disappearing?

[1:07:10]

Respondent: It's a hard question for me to answer. It would be a supposition on my part. The ones who might realize it would be the younger members of the families who were active in the industry and whose parents and grandparents may have related to them what went on here over a period of time.

[1:07:50] I know – and again only hearsay – that there was a time in the thirties and the forties where at lunchtime on Broadway, it looked like Times Square with all the people coming out of their factories to go to lunch.

Interviewer: I've heard some of those stories.

Male Voice: You know, I think it's interesting that I moved here in 1955, and I was six years old, and I grew up here, I went to school with all of the children of these manufacturers.

[1:08:31] And I didn't know growing up as a teenager and a young kid in the fifties and sixties that Kansas City was a hub of the garment industry.



Respondent: Yeah, it used to be called the dollar dress town, because we started out making housecoats. And then they got a little fancier and one thing or another, and it was called...

Interviewer: Well, Nelly Don was not exactly the world's leader in fashion.

[1:09:04] But Nelly Don sold an awful lot of dresses.

Respondent: That's what it was. It was a housedress.

Male Voice: Right, they kind of invented that whole thing.

Respondent: That's right. Sears Roebuck and JC Penney.

Male Voice: Woolworth's. I didn't realize it until my father went into the restaurant business in the mid-sixties, and he had a restaurant down on Broadway.

[1:09:29] And he told me that it was where the hub of activity was.

Respondent: Well, the fellow that I came out here originally to go to work for, Ben Bloom. Ben Bloom I think was living in Chicago, and he worked for this company – the other company I told you about, Union Special.

[1:09:59] And Union Special was – Singer was the bigger one. Union Special was the number two. And Union Special sold Nelly Don a truckload or a trainload of machines to set up their factory here. And Ben Bloom came to Kansas City because Union Special got him to come here to take a job with Nelly Don because he knew how to maintain...

Male Voice: He was the in-house technician.

[1:10:36]

Respondent: In house technician.

Male Voice: Cool.

Respondent: That's what brought him to Kansas City.

Interviewer: I need to check a couple of things. Ben Bloom. How is that spelled? Is that B-L-O-O-M?

Respondent: You got him in the list here.

[1:10:57] B-L-O-O-M.

Interviewer: Okay, and your grandfather, you said, was Jacob...

Respondent: Goldfarb. G-O-L-D-F-A-R-B.

Male Voice: That's a famous name.

Interviewer: And then you referenced a Japanese company, Juki?

Respondent: It was a company called Juki, J-U-K-I, another company that, by the way, is in to other equipment that you find in the computer industry, believe it or not. Brother.

[1:11:31] Brother makes sewing machines.

Male Voice: Oh yeah, Brother sewing machines.

Interviewer: And then you referenced Union Special. Is that common spelling?

Respondent: Yeah. Special, yeah.

Interviewer: A little bit of an odd name. Okay.

Respondent: They were in Chicago.

Male Voice: My question about them is, did they have a better machine than Singer, or was it...

Respondent: They made different kinds.

[1:11:54] They kind of specialized in other areas. But some of this stuff, they competed with Singer. It's hard for me to explain it to you. There are two types of stitches, basic stitches, a lock stitch and a chain stitch. A lock stitch is sewn on a machine that has a bobbin in it.

Male Voice: Okay, like my mother's machine at home.

Respondent: Right. A chain stitch doesn't have a bobbin.

[1:12:27] It has a looper underneath that...

Male Voice: That locks the stitch at it goes on.

Respondent: That locks the stitch. But it's also a chain stitch is used in areas where they want it to be able to give a little bit. In different areas. If I had a pair of jeans, I could...

Male Voice: Here.

[1:13:02]

Respondent: See, now, this is one type of a stitch. That's a chain stitch. But it's done with four needles on a different kind of a machine.

Interviewer: The hem on your trousers there?

Respondent: Well, this was just a sewn in seam. I'm trying to find where the damn seam is.

[1:13:28] You'll find that that stitch, see, was put together the same kind of a way as opposed to this stitch on here. See?

Male Voice: So you had two different machines in order to do those two kinds of stitches.

Respondent: Yeah, and Union Special, their main area of success was in chain stitches.

[1:13:56] The kind of a machine, like for example, and they can have a single thread chain stitch – did you ever go buy a bag of grass seed, and you just pull the thing?

Male Voice: Zip the top off?

Respondent: And it zips off with one thread. There's only one thread holding it.

Male Voice: Okay. You got any more?

Interviewer: No. Bill, I'd like to ask you if you would sign this release form. I don't know if Sibyl mentioned that to you.