

Respondent: Bill is what most people call me. My mother would call me William when she was mad.

Interviewer: I'll just call you Bill then.

Respondent: That's fine.

Interviewer: And it is K-O-R-T? No E?

Respondent: Correct. No E.

Interviewer: And what is the date of birth?

Respondent: July 7, 1946.

[0:00:38]

Interviewer: Welcome to another interview for the Kansas City Garment Industry Project. Today is January 12, 2011. I'm John Dvorak, and I'm interviewing Bill Kort, who was once a bundle boy for Brand and Puritz, the Kansas City garment manufacturer. The videographer is David [Pekow].

[0:01:01] Bill, how long have you lived in Hallbrook?

Respondent: Probably about nine years.

Interviewer: And you're in the financial industry with Wells Fargo?

Respondent: Correct.

Interviewer: What do you do for Wells Fargo?

Respondent: I am an institutional broker. I sell our research product to various and sundry institutional clients, banks, insurance companies, mutual funds.

[0:01:26]

Interviewer: Are you struck by the fact that you're in the financial industry and you live in Hallbrook, yet once you were a bundle boy for a clothing manufacturer?

Respondent: No, not really. I started my career with H.O. Peet Kansas City in 1970, and they were purchased by a company called Kidder Peabody, who later was purchased by GE. But what was interesting about it was, the guy that was the CEO of Kidder Peabody, I believe, got his masters in history.

[0:02:03] So I think there's no real way you can associate people being in the financial industry with their background, my checkered background having been a bundle boy.

Interviewer: Well, start off by telling us, what is a bundle boy, and how did you become one?

Respondent: Well, I was kind of fortunate. I think I was either 15 or 16 years old.

[0:02:27] When I grew up, we were very lucky. We lived down the street from Arthur and Betty Brand, and Bruce Brand, their eldest son, was my best friend from the age of five on. And so I spent a lot of time at the Brand house. My normal summer jobs essentially were cutting the lawn at the Kort House, my family's house.

[0:02:54] Not to be confused with the courthouse downtown. People do do that sometimes. At any rate, we have a – knowing them, my father continued to urge me to get a job other than cutting the yard. And one summer, I asked Arthur Brand if I could have a job down at the factory, and he agreed. And that was the job that I got. They didn't need any supervisory personnel at the time, or I'm sure he would have put me in something a little bit higher up.

[0:03:30]

Interviewer: How old were you?

Respondent: I think 15 or 16 years old.

Interviewer: You were a little weak on clothing design at that point?

Respondent: I had no concept of anything to do with it, other than Dad was saying, you should get a job. And this was a perfect opportunity to make a dollar. I think it was a dollar an hour — it may have been \$0.85, I'm not sure — and get out of the house during the day.

Interviewer: What was Arthur Brand at that time?

[0:03:54]

Respondent: I think Arthur at the time was the president of the firm. I think Hyman had – maybe Hyman was still chief executive officer. I'm not sure. I know Hyman – I think he was still active in the business, but I don't know how active. Essentially, Arthur was kind of top management to my way of thinking.

Interviewer: Where were you living at that time? What neighborhood?

Respondent: Over on 56th Street between Wornall and Ward Parkway.

[0:04:27]

Interviewer: And so you knew Mr. Brand personally?

Respondent: I knew Arthur, yeah, and I had met and visited with Hyman briefly. He was significantly older. Again, Bruce was my friend, so I was down at the Brand house a lot.

Interviewer: As a teenaged boy, did you have any conception of what the garment industry was at that point?

Respondent: Not really, other than I can remember old comments and radio ads talking about the garment industry.

[0:05:02] Something like, every fifth woman or every third woman in the United States wore a garment made in Kansas City. But other than that, it really never struck me how important it was.

Interviewer: So you were just a teenaged boy, and you needed a job?

Respondent: That was it. It wasn't that I was going to make my grand contribution in the garment industry. I needed a job, and it was a great place to go.

Interviewer: So, what is a bundle boy?

[0:05:27]

Respondent: Well, what my job was, essentially, was to take pieces of piece goods, of clothing like the fronts and the backs to various stations where seamstresses or seamsters would put them together or do certain processes, put buttons on coats, make buttonholes. Each one of these had separate stations, so I'd lug big bundles of pre-finished goods around from various stations through the process of manufacturing.

[0:05:59] They didn't have a conveyor. Essentially, I was the conveyor.

Interviewer: Essentially, this was an assembly line without a moving line?

Respondent: That's correct.

Interviewer: And you kind of were the force that moved things along?

Respondent: That's right. When the person who put the buttonholes in finished putting the buttonholes in, I'd move it on to somebody to put the buttons on, for example.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of bundle boys?

[0:06:27]

Respondent: I don't remember. I think I was it. And I'm not sure that this wasn't something relegated to someone else. I'm not sure that this wasn't a make work project for Bill Kort. There may have been other people in the organization that had other responsibilities that would do this too. So I don't remember anybody

else doing this when I was down there. It may have been the responsibility of the individual seamster or seamstress to move the goods from point A to point B after they finished. I don't know.

[0:06:57]

Interviewer: This would have been the lowest level job in the manufacturing?

Respondent: I'd say pretty much, yes, the lowest.

Interviewer: Did you like it?

Respondent: Yeah, it was okay. It was hot, it was hard work. I was glad to have a job. We had some very good – I was friendly with the family. Bruce Brand worked there too, but he was in a slightly higher-level position.

[0:07:26]

He was in the air-conditioned office doing a project for his dad, which I think involved the computer. I think Brand and Puritz was pretty advanced in its time. This was like in the early 1960s, and if I'm not mistaken, they had a mainframe, and old IBM mainframe computer that essentially used punch cards to get the data into the machine. So I think Bruce was working on projects that might have been associated with that.

[0:07:56]

Interviewer: And I forgot to ask you what year this would have been that you went there.

Respondent: Well, let's see. 1962, 1963, I think. That would have put me at 16 years. Maybe 1961, '62, that timeframe.

Interviewer: Where did you work?

Respondent: At about 8th and Broadway. It was right across the street from Folger's Coffee. It was on 8th Street.

Interviewer: Is that what we call Lucas Place today?

Respondent: It could be, yeah.

Interviewer: High rise, old manufacturing building?

[0:08:27]

Respondent: Yeah, I think that's right. Did they have a nightclub in there at one time? Yeah. I'm not sure who rehabbed the building and turned it into a condo, but I think that's the building, yes.

Interviewer: Tell us what it was like, because people today have no conception of the old garment manufacturers, even though the buildings are still there. Was the entire building Brand and Puritz, or most of it?

Respondent: I am not absolutely sure of that.

[0:08:59] They had different lines, and I'm not sure if they had all the building occupied or if they sublet part of the building to another garment manufacturer. But I remember the floor that I worked on, they basically made coats.

Interviewer: Women's coats?

Respondent: Women's coats. And it was not air conditioned. They had very large fans running.

[0:09:26] It was in the summertime, and you know how hot it can get here in the summertime, so in that respect, it was uncomfortable but livable. And when Folger's Coffee would roast up a bunch of beans, you'd have this tremendously strong aroma of roasting coffee beans in the air, and there was a lot – and when you're hauling these woolen coats around, there's a lot of lint and stuff. So it was uncomfortable, but the people that I worked with were very nice to me.

[0:09:57] And you know, I did my job, and nobody got too mad at me.

Interviewer: Was it a sweatshop?

Respondent: Well, certainly in the case of, people sweated, but they were not – what I saw, what I perceived was, they all had a good time. It was not the – there was not any kind of antagonistic management labor relations issue.

[0:10:29] I think the people that were there liked to be there, or at least they did not resent being there, and they didn't resent their working conditions. And again, I perceived it to be a fairly happy workplace.

Interviewer: The atmosphere was positive?

Respondent: The atmosphere was positive, yeah.

Interviewer: What type of people did you work with?

Respondent: Well, I think we had a mixture of – well, we had some Hispanic people who were – I don't know new to the country, but they still spoke with accents.

[0:11:05] We had people who were survivors of the Holocaust who were working down there, basically people who might have been skilled in the trade from their past lives. They were just nice working class people.

Interviewer: Was it a pretty diverse workplace?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: There were Caucasians?

[0:11:26]

Respondent: Yes, Caucasians and Blacks, and it was a nice – my remembrance is, I never felt that there was any hostility there back and forth between the guy who was the manager on the floor and his employees. Again, it's a long time ago, but I never felt anything but it was a fairly cordial and nice environment for all, including me.

[0:11:56] And obviously, I'm sure they realized I was an interloper from the suburbs that didn't have to be there.

Interviewer: Was English the spoken language?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: You mentioned there were some Holocaust survivors there. The garment industry was known as a place where Jews who came over from Europe tended to go to work, and you did notice that?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Why was that so, do you think?

[0:12:27]

Respondent: Well, you know, it may be in retrospect. These are people – well, first of all, my wife Regina, her parents were survivors, so we go back over – Regina and I go back 42 years in terms of our knowing each other. So that was only a very short period of time after. You know, 1968 versus 1962.

[0:12:59] I can remember people being in parties and groups with her family and other Holocaust survivors, the accents. I'm not sure if I saw tattoos, but there was a community that stayed together and was pretty close, of survivors. You would notice it in those types of crowds.

Interviewer: But you were not an immigrant yourself? Or your family?

Respondent: No. Regina was born here in Kansas City, and so was I.

[0:13:34] And my family was all born here.

Interviewer: Well, how long did you hold this job?

Respondent: Probably two months at a time. I'm not sure if I did it two years in a row or just one year in a row, if one year cured me of being in the garment industry

because it was hot, hard, sweaty work, or if I did it two years. But generally, for a couple of months, maybe June, maybe second week in June to second week in August.

[0:14:03] And then back to school.

Interviewer: And you think your wage may have been a dollar an hour?

Respondent: You know, I'm thinking a dollar. I'm not sure of that. It could have been less than a dollar, but I'm thinking a dollar is the number. \$8 a day seems like a fair wage for a guy carrying bundles around.

Interviewer: What did you think?

Respondent: Well, at the time, things were tad bit cheaper.

[0:14:28] Unfortunately, as a youth, I picked up the habit of smoking, and I remember they were \$0.25 a pack, so you could buy a pack of cigarettes or four for a dollar. And you could buy Cokes for a lot less. Maybe Winstons cost a buck and a quarter or something, you know? It was a relatively, as you well know, cheaper time to live.

[0:14:55]

Interviewer: So this was not a bad job for a kid at that point?

Respondent: It was not a bad job. It got me out of the house. I think after that maybe I started working at a place — my next summer jobs were working in retail, in air-conditioned stores.

Interviewer: Now, you would have been too young to have been involved with the union?

Respondent: Absolutely. I was not a union member.

Interviewer: Did you even have any conception of a union at that point?

Respondent: No.

[0:15:29] I had no idea of it. Again, the shop itself appeared to be a very peaceful and cordial place. The people working there I guess liked working for Brand and Puritz, and Brand and Puritz was a decent place for them to work.

[0:15:56]

Interviewer: Who would give you your direction? You would go in in the morning, and your job was to carry sleeves or pockets or whatever around?

Respondent: Yeah, actually, I'm thinking — and again, my memory fades a little bit, but it may be when somebody finished a process, they'd call me, and I'd pick it up

and move it to the next station. In other words, if somebody was putting sleeves on, and they finished ten coats, I'd pick up the ten coat bundle and move it on to get the buttonholes.

[0:16:31] And they might call me.

Interviewer: Did you deal with the finished product at all?

Respondent: No. I may have carried it and put it someplace once finished, but that's it.

Interviewer: Do you know what products you were working on?

Respondent: Oh god, you know, if you name names of various and sundry lines — I think one of the lines they had was called Briny Marlin.

[0:17:07] And it may have been named after one of — have you got any...?

Interviewer: I thought I had a list here, but I've misplaced it. Mary Lane?

Respondent: Mary Lane is a Brand and Puritz line.

Interviewer: That was a big coat line.

Respondent: Yeah, I think that was a Brand and Puritz line. Again, that sure sounds familiar.

Interviewer: And then there were some children's — the names escape me right now.

[0:17:31]

Respondent: Well, the one that kind of comes to my mind, that I think was a Brand and Puritz line, I don't know what it was — coats, or kids, or what — Briny Marlin. B-R-I-N-Y M-A-R-L-I-N I think was the way it was spelled. But I don't recollect.

Interviewer: Do you know that some of those coats are still available today on the internet? Have you ever looked?

Respondent: No, I have not.

[0:18:00]

Interviewer: Mary Lane coats are available.

Respondent: Pretty amazing. Well, I know at one time they had the contract for the TWA stewardess uniforms, and I'm thinking it was about that time that Brand and Puritz was making those.

Interviewer: Actually, they had that contract for a long time. It would have been part of that. Would you have worked on some of that too?

Respondent: I doubt it. I don't know. I don't remember working on uniforms. My main area of what I did was heavier wool coats.

[0:18:33]

Interviewer: You don't have any?

Respondent: No. Again, they were all women's coats. They weren't men's coats, they were women's, I think.

Interviewer: You didn't want a souvenir?

Respondent: No. You know, I look better in the topcoats they were selling down at Woolf Brothers, and I don't think those were Brand and Puritz vintage.

[0:19:00]

Interviewer: You should look on the internet, because there might be a coat that you worked on, you may have carried the collar or something.

Respondent: Fancy? I may have carried.

Interviewer: One of their specialties was fur collars. Did you carry any fur collars that you remember?

Respondent: I don't think so. I think basically what I was working on were heavier wool cloth coats.

Interviewer: What did you know about the company overall? Was it considered a good company? Was it a big company?

[0:19:27]

Respondent: You know, at the time, I thought it was a big company with big markets. And my personal association with the Brand family and their work in the community, they're people that I admired a lot. So I had nothing but good feelings about them. The fact that they gave me a job working in their plant was another big plus.

[0:19:57] Again, these are people that I knew and respected and had known since I was a little boy.

Interviewer: You don't have any conceptions of whether they were among the biggest companies in town at that time?

Respondent: I don't know.

Interviewer: Biggest garment companies?

Respondent: I don't know that. There's this whole group of companies down there that were all working and selling stuff. I don't know how they ranked. In other words, I kind of had them all on an equal par.

[0:20:28] But if you asked me what their annual sales were versus Youthcraft or something like that, I have no clue. I couldn't rank them.

Interviewer: You mentioned Youth Craft. You obviously do have a fair amount of knowledge about the garment industry.

Respondent: They're names, like KC Boys Wear, which was right across the street. I knew the Plotskys, who were KC Boys Wear.

[0:20:57] But I didn't know their business, I didn't know their products. Just growing up in the community, I knew people.

Interviewer: But you never developed any really specialized knowledge of the industry?

Respondent: No, I didn't.

Interviewer: Were you aware that it was a major industry in town?

Respondent: Oh, absolutely. I knew it was a major industry. And I knew it was a very big important industry.

[0:21:30] In other words, I can't compare it to somebody like Marion Labs, for example. I don't know that it ever got to be that big. Marion Labs was a multibillion-dollar operation, and I'm not sure that any garment manufacturer... Do you have a number?

Interviewer: Loose numbers. No, certainly – but a dollar was worth a little more.

[0:21:58]

Respondent: Yeah, in the context of how I know big companies to be – the local bigger companies – names like Russell Stover's, Unitog, which continued to be around for a long time, Yellow Freight, Butler Manufacturing – I perceive those all to be much bigger companies than the average garment company.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. There was a figure, and I think this was back in the fifties, that one out of seven American women had at least one garment made in the Kansas City area.

[0:22:36]

Respondent: That's a big deal.

Interviewer: That's kind of a big deal. Did it give you a little bit of enjoyment thinking that you were doing something that all these women were wearing?

Respondent: Doing my part? You know, again, you're talking about a simplistic 16 year old who was just glad to have a job, glad to be able to go down to the office and take a break in the air conditioned room my friend was working in.

[0:23:04] It was a summer job.

Interviewer: Did you ever consider spending more time in the industry?

Respondent: You know, not really. As I was getting older, going to school and stuff like that, it was a time of decline in the industry. By the time I got out of college, which was 1968, a lot of those companies were beginning to close down operations.

[0:23:36] I'm thinking that's the right timeframe. So it was never considered. I'm kind of a stock market junky.

Interviewer: Sometimes summer jobs do develop into lifelong careers, though.

Respondent: I know.

Interviewer: Did you keep in touch with the Brands?

Respondent: Oh yeah.

[0:23:57] I still see Betty Brand on a fairly regular basis and still see Bruce and Arthur's daughters, Toba, Marcia, Pam.

Interviewer: You'll have to identify Betty.

Respondent: Betty is Arthur's wife.

Interviewer: And is Arthur no longer living?

Respondent: Arthur passed away maybe ten years ago.

Interviewer: Did you have some knowledge through your friendships with the Brands as to how the company gradually faded away?

[0:24:34]

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: What did you pick up from that?

Respondent: Just essentially that they couldn't compete with foreign manufacturers.

Interviewer: Did they give you any feeling for how successful the company had been in the past?

Respondent: No.

[0:24:59]

Interviewer: Some of the companies in Kansas City had been very successful for quite a period of time.

Respondent: I'm sure there are many garment business millionaires and millionaire families in this town. I'm not sure where the Brands – how well or how unwell they did, but we never talked about their financial – how much they made or what they made, nor did I talk about that with Bruce.

[0:25:30]

Interviewer: Do you even know when the company finally closed down?

Respondent: No, I don't. I'm thinking it had to be around 1970, but I'm not sure. Do you know?

Interviewer: Approximately then, but I don't have a specific date.

Respondent: Early 1970s? Or maybe before then?

Interviewer: No, probably right around then. There's a Mr. Puritz who's still...

Respondent: Yeah, I know Carl.

[0:25:57]

Interviewer: Oh, do you know him?

Respondent: Sure.

Interviewer: He gave an interview for this project, and I watched it. I don't think the interviewer dug in quite enough to get into explaining what happened at the end, because I was left wanting to know more about what happened, and it didn't seem to come across. But he was very articulate and, I thought, gave a very nice interview.

[0:26:31] Are you satisfied in your own mind that the foreign competition was the big thing?

Respondent: That's the thing that keeps coming out in my mind. I'm not sure if that was true, but I think the ability to make this stuff profitably in Kansas City went away for some reason, and the only thing I can think of is that they took the production offshore.

[0:26:57]

Interviewer: Sometimes time just passes industries by, and that could be a factor too.

Respondent: Yeah, in other words, they may have been obsolete in their manufacturing process, but I think if you take a look around all the labels in the clothes that you wear, much of it is made outside the United States. And I'm not sure if that was what the cause was 40 years ago, but it's hard to survive making this stuff.

[0:27:32]

Interviewer: Now, after you got through with this summer job, where did your life lead you? You went to college, I presume?

Respondent: Yeah, went to college. Graduated in 1968. Spent a brief time in the army during the Vietnam conflict in the Reserves. I was fortunate to get into a unit, so I was not abroad in that conflict.

[0:27:59] And then came back after the army, went to work for Smith Corona Marchant. That's a name you ought to remember. Smith Corona, the typewriter company?

Interviewer: Well, I know that name, but what was that third word?

Respondent: Marchant was an adding machine company that they bought.

Interviewer: Oh, I never heard that name.

Respondent: Yeah, SCM Corporation was the name they took on.

Interviewer: I was an Underwood guy, so forgive me.

Respondent: Yeah, as well.

[0:28:28] You know, I didn't know the preferences, and of course IBM put both those companies out of business. But there, I spent about a year doing a job I didn't really like selling office copiers and a job opportunity opened up for me at H.O. Peet in the investment business.

Interviewer: And you've been in that ever since?

Respondent: That's right. That's the business I wanted to be in.

[0:28:57] And it turned out to be pretty good.

Interviewer: Do you ever think about the garment business once and a while or in passing?

Respondent: You know, it's a long time ago. You kindle memories of the time with regards to the neighborhood, the street, the aroma, the heat, the lint. There was a grill down on the corner, the Tallman Grill, where all the garment moguls used to hang out for lunch and stuff like that.

[0:29:32] And I would eat lunch there sometime, because on my meager salary, I could still afford a burger at that place. And it was, you know, just a different time. Kansas City was a lively place down there.

Interviewer: I've been told that there was a community within the garment industry, and I've heard of this restaurant.

[0:29:56] And even though you were just a teenager, I gather you felt that at the time?

Respondent: Oh yeah. I mean, everybody knew everybody. And if you walked in there, and if you were in there with Arthur especially, but I could have been in there with Bruce, because the families knew the families. Everybody knew everybody.

Interviewer: And you still think about that if you happen to be going down Broadway?

Respondent: When I go down Broadway, and I go by it, it's like I shake my head, you know?

[0:30:30] It was a much more interesting place back then, and I think the Talman Grill is now the Phoenix, which is a bar.

Interviewer: Oh, is that the location?

Respondent: Yeah, I think that's where it still is. I'm not sure, but that's what went in there.

Interviewer: How do you feel when you look at those old buildings down there? Most of those were garment manufacturers.

Respondent: Well, I tell you what, I work at 130th and Metcalf right now, in an office park across from the Deer Creek Golf Course.

[0:31:03] And if I had my druthers, I'd work down on 10th and Baltimore, even though it is still not the lively place it used to be. There's so much. It's just, you're downtown. You're in a place where people did business.

Interviewer: Do you think we should be doing more to preserve the remnants of the garment industry?

[0:31:31]

Respondent: Well, yeah. I mean, I think it's a good project to point out that this was a big part of the economic history of the town that happened in that four or five square block area. So sure. But again, it does bring back fond memories. I love the old buildings. I hope they stay forever. It's a totally different environment from the sterile environment we have out here in the 'burbs.

[0:32:01] And if I weren't so close to the golf course — you know, I've told my wife this a bunch of times. It really is tempting to think about living downtown, because downtown is going to be and is getting to be a very exciting place.

Interviewer: When you talk to younger people, people in their thirties and forties, do you think they have any conception of the fact that there was once this important industry here?

Respondent: No.

[0:32:34] My kids all know Betty Brand. She's a sweetheart. And we get together with here every once and a while and get my kids and our grandkids together and all that. But they have no clue as to what Betty, Arthur, and the rest of the crew that were down there did in the community and for the community.

[0:33:02] There was a really fine group of people.

Interviewer: Well, it's sad, but times change and things move along, and off you go.

Respondent: Sure.

Interviewer: Well, you've come to the end of my questions. Somehow, you don't look like a bundle boy, but that's okay.

Respondent: Yeah, I changed. I don't look anything like I did when I was 16, I guarantee you that.

Interviewer: We're done with the video part.