THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

MOLLIE PARNIS

Date of Interview

Wednesday, June 2, 1982

Interviewed by

Mildred Finger
Mollie Parnis, Inc. is a high priced dress firm which has added two divisions in the past few years. Mollie Parnis herself has had an interesting career. She started in the blouse business, very young, as a saleswoman and stylist. She married Leon Livingston, a textile salesman, and together they started Parnis-Livingston, Inc. in the early 1930's. Upon his death in 1960, she restructured the business. It continues to operate successfully as a private company.

Ms. Parnis has combined her business and personal life in an interesting and unusual way. Her customer profile reflects that of women involved in journalism and other walks of life. She has made many friends in the world of government and has been involved with the wardrobes of many presidents' wives. She also has been involved in the concept and financing of projects relating to the recognition of talent and the beautification of environments.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

MOLLIE PARNIS
ORAL HISTORY

1 - 5 Early years leading to her role in the better dress industry
5 - 7 Discussion of career and family, and also start up costs for her business
8 - 9 Description of running a business from the 1930's until 1960 when her husband, Leon Livingston, died
10 - 11 Restructuring the business
12 - 14 Comparison of stores of today with stores of the 1960's
14 - 16 Private life tied to friends including journalists and statesmen
16 - 17 Public projects
18 - 20 Interrelationship of clothes design and travel
20 - 22 General conversation about the industry
23 - 25 Licensing
26 - 32 Industry changes: showings, local marts, trunk shows, reorders, store relationships
Q. Mollie, would you like to tell us about your latest project, which I think is awfully interesting to know about, and which will apparently take place very soon?

A. Yes, it's a project sponsored by my foundation, which is called the Mollie Parnis Livingston Foundation, in memory of my son -- both my son and myself were frustrated journalists -- and so we are awarding a $5,000 prize to three young journalists, all of them under the age of 35, one for local, national and international news. The project is being handled by the University of Michigan. The screenings were all done by the university, and we are very proud... This is our first year. We have had in excess of 600 entries, and we had to bring them down to about 30 before we could even take the judges' time to decide on it. So it was an exciting... difficult but exciting project. And the...

Q. It sounds like a very appropriate kind of...

A. Well, I think it's appropriate because it interests me...

Q. Right...

A. And the final disposition of the 1981 awards will be given on June 17th at the New York Public Library.

Q. Would you start by just giving us a brief biography of yourself? When were you born? Where were you born? What were your brothers and sisters like? That kind of thing.

A. I was born so long ago that I don't even remember. I've been in this business, in this particular loft since 1941, and this is 1982, so it gives you an idea of how long I've been around, because this was a pretty big
loft, in those days. It's still a big loft. We occupy this entire floor. We have three divisions on it. We employ 120 people just on this floor. And we do a volume in excess of $10 million. It all started a long time ago, when I was first married.

Q. Could we go back before that... It's interesting and important too. I know the year that you've been quoted as... That you are quoted in Current Biography as having been born in 1905, so I don't think it's a mystery.

A. 1905.

Q. Right. And your family consisted of... You had a couple of brothers...

A. I had one brother and three sisters.

Q. Three sisters. One of whom was Jerry?

A. One of whom was Jerry. She was in the dress business. Another one was Peggy. She was in the lingerie business. That is, today, Christian Dior lingerie, one of the largest and successful businesses of its kind, run by my nephew, her son, that makes me feel like his poor relation. He's been very successful and he's doing very well. My brother has since died. Of the five of us, there are only two left. I have one sister who's married to a doctor and lives in Ft. Lauderdale, and never was interested in this business, and myself.

Q. When you were growing up, was there something that was particularly attractive to this industry, as far as you were concerned--both you and Jerry--came into it?
A. No, no. Jerry came into it long after I was in it. She was younger, and she came in because I was in it. I was going to Hunter High School when I got a job for the summer, and I liked it so much I never went back, and that's the story. Today I always advise young people not to do what I did. To stay in school and learn their craft and get as much education as they can, because it will stand them in good stead. In my case, I think it was more good luck than good management. Because to this day, I have never learned to make a dress. Most young people who come in here, if they're graduates of Parsons or F.I.T., really can start from the beginning and make a dress, and so I envy them their backgrounds.

Q. And you went, instead, into the blouse business as a sales person?

A. I took a job for the summer in a showroom, and I liked it so much that I didn't want to go back to school. And we were making hand made blouses in those days, hand made blouses, which were made in Puerto Rico. When I came to work for the firm, there was a high neck and a V-neck; and I'm the one who got myself interested in the design because there really wasn't a designer then. Those hand made blouses were all done on paper. And I'd say "Why don't we make a round neck, and why don't we put a Peter Pan collar on it? And why don't we do one with a jabot? And why don't we make them instead of all in voile, some in batiste?" And before you know it, I was designing blouses.

Q. So at that time, where was the blouse firm located?

A. Like most blouse firms, over on Madison Avenue. They were in one of those big buildings on Madison Avenue.
Q. So it was really near the lingerie market?

A. Well, in those days, I don't think there was that kind of lingerie market. I think it was very near the ready-to-wear market.

Q. Well, how long did you stay there? At the blouse firm?

A. Oh, I don't think very long, because I barely remember it. Probably a year or two. I remember the first year I did a collection, and the boss was very pleased, and instead of giving me a raise (this gives you an idea of how young I was) he said "How would you like to have your name on the bulletin board?" And so it said... down in the hall, it said "Mollie Parnis, Fourth Floor," and I used to bring my friends around to see my name on the bulletin board. "Mollie Parnis, Fourth Floor." And that took the place of, oh, I think a couple of years' raise.

Q. That sounds like the magazine world.

A. Well, it sounds like any world where you want billing. I guess that was it. You know.

Q. Yes. And when did you take your next step into the ready-to-wear business?

A. I took my next step... It seems to me... Again, it's all very vague. I was not married. I met a very attractive man who was in the dress business, who knew how well I was doing in the blouse business. He said, "Listen, why don't you try dresses?" And I think he offered to double my salary, which wasn't very much in those days, although I do remember getting a contract for $5,000 a year, which was $100 a week...

Q. That was a lot of money then.
A. And I would be out with a date, and instead of talking about what was happening in the world, I would show him my contract, $5,000 a year. That was a lot. And that was the first dress job I had. But I really wasn't serious about my work until I met my husband, who was in the textile business and used to come and show me his fabrics when I was designing dresses, and we decided to get married; and we did get married in 1930, and actually that was when I started. We both got married; he ran the business end of it, I did the designing and we've been here ever since.

Q. What building did you open in?

A. The first building I think was across the street... Five... directly across...

Q. Five twenty-five...?

A. Yeah, I think that's it. Five twenty-five Seventh Avenue... And we were there only about three years. We came over here in 530 three years later... We started in business in 1935... We were married four or five years because we had a child by then.

Q. Oh, did you?

A. Uh huh.

Q. Did you stay home when you had your child?

A. No, I think I stayed home a week before and two weeks after. And then... On the other hand, I think I was as good a mother as most mothers who stay home. I took Wednesdays off, when the nurse was off, for years and years and years. And took Sundays off. In those days, the nurse used to take off Wednesday afternoon and Sunday, and I spent Wednesday afternoon and
Sunday with my son until he began to go to school. So... And I am a great believer that it's the quality of the time that's much more important than the amount of time that you spend with your child. On the other hand, if I were giving advice to young mothers, I think I would tell them to stay home for the first couple of years with the children.

Q. Well, of course, that's a very complicated question. Because so many young women are doing precisely that.

A. Staying home with their children. I find every young...

Q. But also so many of them are very conflicted.

A. What?

Q. Conflicted about staying home, or not staying home when their children are born.

A. I find most young women who were brought up by governesses will not turn their children over to governesses. Now, what the hell those governesses did to those children I don't know. But most young women that I know -- between 25 and 30 -- who were brought up by governesses, do not turn their children over to them.

Q. Did your parents have any effect on how you felt about work and having a child?

A. No. By the time I went to work... My father died when I was 12 years old. And my mother was a working woman who had a shop...

Q. So you had a guide, or a mentor... example set for you a long time before most people did?
A. Yes, on the other hand, I was going to Wadleigh High School and had already been in my Junior year at Hunter, and so I felt like I already knew all there was to know, you know. When we started in business, my husband and I, I think we had between us about $10,000...

Q. Yes, I was going to ask you how much it cost to start a business...

A. I think between us we had $10,000. Today, two young people who wanted to go into business would need a minimum of a million.

Q. Really?

A. Uh huh. So, you see, it costs $250,000 a month just to open this place for a month. That gives you an idea what's happened to our dollar...

Q. I have heard a variety of figures for opening a business. Depending, I guess, on what kind of merchandise is being...

A. I think it depends on where you go and what you want to do. If you want to open a business and show a collection and be competitive, and you want to be in one of these two buildings, you would need a million dollars. I suppose, on the other hand, if you wanted to make a few dresses in your apartment, and put them in a suitcase and take them under your arm and go and sell them to the store, and if you're lucky somebody will buy them, you'd still... I don't know how you'd get them done... I must tell you, I really don't understand that end of the business. Because it never was the kind of thing I did. We were fortunate in that from the day we went in business, we really never had an unprofitable month until long after the war was over.
Q. All right. You went into business, and you came... You were in the building 525 most likely, and you started with $10,000. So, what was your structure like? How many people did you have working for you? What kind of a design room did you have...?

A. We had a designing room with three girls. Today we have eighteen. That gives you an idea... I had... Out of those three girls one of them was an assistant. Today an assistant...

Q. You did your own designing?

A. I did my own designing. Today an assistant gets about $750 a week. We'd make 36 samples and show them whenever we got them ready. There was no such thing as they had to be ready on a certain date to have a collection...

Q. You didn't have market times...

A. We showed them when we were ready and we were fortunate in that I was... From the day I went in business I did well with the New York stores, and always had a favorite customer, so that when I was finished I would call my favorite customer and say, "Listen, my collection's finished, do you want to see it?" And if the customer said "Yes," and so if the favorite customer came in and placed an order, we knew we were in business. For years and years it was Best & Company.

Q. So that based on the favorite customer, who was the one who was knowledgeable, I assume, you had a pretty fair idea...?
A. Well, not only was she knowledgeable, but in those days, she would stay and leave her order. There was no such thing as she had to take her order back and put it through a computer and have six different merchandise men sign it for her. Today, when you show a collection, if you have all your orders in two months after you show it, you're lucky, so everything has changed.

Q. All right. Now, when you moved across the street here, in this building, I assume that simultaneously your overhead went up, your rent went up, and the cost of doing business, just generally, very likely went up.

A. Uh huh.

Q. At what point did your husband die?

A. Oh, my husband died... We moved into this building in '41. We moved in this place in '41, and he died in '60, so he was here a long time.

Q. Oh, oh, oh. I'm sorry. I had an idea that after he... I had an idea-- an erroneous idea, because... It's incredible how much research is bad, simply because they report things so badly -- When he died, you didn't go out of business at all.

A. Yes I did. I went out for three months. And I hated every minute of it. And I went out of business because, when my husband died I not only lost my husband but I lost my partner, my financial advisor...

Q. You say this was 1960?
A. 1960... And I tried... He died in April, and by August I was sure I couldn't run it, so I decided to go out of business. But it takes three or four months if not more to liquidate a business like this, and I still had the loft. And one day Diana Vreeland came to me and said, "Oh, Mollie, you really have to go back to work." And I said, "Diane, I'd love to go back to work, but I don't think I can do it. I don't have an idea, I haven't done it, I haven't been thinking about anything." And she said, "Well, let's see." She came over, had lunch with me, I made a few sketches. I started putting them in work. The next thing you know both of them were in Harper's Bazaar, and I was in business. And I've never regretted it since. In those days, of course, we only had half of this floor. Now we have this entire floor and we have three divisions.

Q. And the three divisions are?

A. Mollie Parnis Studio and Mollie Parnis At Home.

Q. I didn't know you had a home collection. So, you have Mollie Parnis, Inc...?

A. Which is the couture...

Q. The couture. Right.

A. And Mollie Parnis Studio, which is less expensive. And Mollie Parnis At Home, which is sort of... a little dressy in things you wear at home.

Q. What's your price range?
A. At Mollie Parnis they start at about, retail, $275... all the way up. Mollie Parnis Studio they start at $125 to about $400...

Q. Are they carried in the leisure departments in stores or...?

A. No, the "Studio" is carried in regular, inexpensive dress departments. And the "at home" are carried in the leisure departments.

Q. Right.

A. And those retail for about $100-$200.

Q. Well, when you did re-launch your business, so to speak, after being out for three months -- which is not a very long time -- what did your structure become? You then had a production man, I assume?

A. The production man stayed with me that had been with me. We had him, but I got a business manager, because, you wouldn't believe, in all the years I've been in business, I've never been to a cutting department, nor did I know where it is. And to this day, I never learned to read a trial balance sheet. I have an intuitive sense when things are good or bad, but I've never really learned to read a trial balance sheet. I find that this is really a very specialized business. That everybody has to do his or her thing well. If you do a little of everything, I'm afraid you really never get anywhere.

Q. And yet, because it is such a personal business, you know so many of your customers...

A. It really is no longer.

Q. It isn't?
A. Not today, it used to be a very personal business. I really don't know, today, most of the customers.

Q. Could you describe what it was, and what you think it is today? Or what...

A. For instance, take a store like Saks Fifth Avenue. There was a day, if I was unhappy, I could pick up the phone and call Adam Gimbel. And if I didn't get Adam Gimbel I'd talk to Alan Johnson. If I didn't get Alan Johnson I'd talk to Gordon Franklin. I think the President of Saks Fifth Avenue today is Mr. Tansky. And I'm sure I have met him. He's been here to see me. And he's very nice. But I can't say he's my best friend, and I can call him up when I feel like it, and complain. And it's true of almost all the stores. There are some stores where I know people better than others. But, the stores have been so automated that it's like talking to a computer. And it doesn't matter what you say...

Q. Even in this price range?

A. In every price range.

Q. Because I know about the other price ranges...

A. In my opinion, it seems that if they're overstocked in men's overcoats, they can't take in any more children's clothes. They have to bring in their inventory at X amount of dollars, and until that inventory gets down to that X amount of dollars, it doesn't matter who's losing sales or what you're doing, that's the way they do it. And I'm not willing to argue with them, because as I explained to you before, I know very little about figures. Every time you pick up the newspapers, or the Wall Street Journal, they're doing better than a year ago and making more money. So probably that's the way to do it. On the other hand,
there was a time when we used to have about 375 customers, because we had nothing but the big stores in most cities. Now we have over 1,200 customers, and the reason for that is when Bob Kaufman -- who came with me about 10 or 11 years ago as President of the company -- preferred to work with smaller stores to get wider distribution. They have now become the backbone of this business. We really don't have to depend on the big stores, because you really can't depend on them. It's all too impersonal.

Q. So that you're now doing a lot more specialty stores?
A. Oh, all over the country.

Q. But it seems to me you always did this, with the specialty stores...?
A. Well, we did business with specialty stores, the kind like Martha.
Q. Yeah.
A. But we do ... in every city today you'll probably have ... every big city ... two or three customers. We didn't have that. Lots of cities, we didn't even have customers. We sold the really large stores. We sold all the Federated stores. We sold the Associated stores. We sold all the Saks-Gimbel's stores. We did not have... And I don't have to do any more than tell you that we went from about 375 customers to 1,200.

Q. So there are a lot more specialty stores ...? Do you think in part ... Well, you said, Bob really wanted to bring...
A. Yes, I think he was right. He wanted to broaden the base, and I think he's absolutely right. I would have been wrong...

Q. I was wondering if, perhaps, also, if more specialty stores have developed because people who want better merchandise have not been quite so pleased with the service in the big stores.
A. Well, I think it's also true, if you want to buy a blouse today, and you go to Saks Fifth Avenue -- I mention Saks because I know them -- or Bloomingdale's, let's say, if you want to buy a blouse, if you get off... Somebody tells you to go to the third floor; unless you know whose blouse you want, you will go to six departments -- you may go to Calvin Klein, you may go to Anne Klein, you may go to Ralph Lauren, you may go to...

Q. Perry Ellis...

A. Ellis. You may go to six or eight other departments for the blouse. I think the customer appreciates going to a blouse department, and the saleswoman can bring you out... The saleswoman who waits on you in Calvin Klein doesn't go near the Anne Klein, and the Anne Klein one doesn't go near the Perry Ellis, and they don't know what's in the other departments. And so I think it's much more difficult for the average woman to shop, unless she knows exactly what she wants before she gets there.

Q. Why don't we talk about how you got interested in all roles that are affiliated with fashion in a sense, affiliated that is, of the same sort but in different areas. Because that is...

A. You're not saying what you mean. Do you mean what am I doing in my personal life?

Q. I guess I do mean that, simply because...

A. Because it has nothing to do with fashion. My personal life... My friends are mostly journalists.
Q. Yes, But your apartment... The fact that you became so interested in design. The fact that you became so interested in painting...

A. Well, I was interested in design long before I had the apartment. It was the design that helped pay for the apartment. I inherited nothing.

Q. Well, that I know...

A. So that all the money I made, I made in this business. And when I have some leisure, and when I was able to separate my business from my private life, I discovered I was a frustrated journalist. So, if I could do anything in the world, I'd probably like to have Kay Graham's job. And... next to having Kay Graham's job, it was fun to become friends with the kind of people who were doing the kinds of things I respected. And my private life now consists of mostly people who are journalists, in print or electronics or in politics... I went through a phase earlier where I was interested in the theatre, and movies, and... I was interested in people who were doing things besides myself, besides the things I was doing. I now... And because I was lucky enough when Mrs. Eisenhower became the First Lady, and she sent for me... Through some mutual friends... To make her clothes, I went to the White House on an average of once a month... And really became a very good friend of the President and Mrs. Eisenhower... I did some things for Mrs. Kennedy; not a great many. But then, when Mrs. Johnson came into the White House, we really became very good friends, the President and Mrs. Johnson and I. So the result was that my private life was, for me, exciting. I'd be invited to go to the White House. Mrs. Johnson was, and still is, one of my close friends. It was exciting to have a
President of the United States call me Mollie, and pick up the phone and talk to me when he felt like talking to me. I got to know the Nixons, I got to know the Fords. I did not know the Carters. And I've known the Reagans a long time. I knew the President and Mrs. Reagan 25 years ago. Even before they were married. I used to go to Hollywood a lot. And we had mutual friends. So that, my private life, I have been fortunate in that it has nothing to do with my business. And once I leave here... It is interesting... As I accumulated a little money, I did what I wanted with my money, and my first project was something called "Mollie Parnis Dress Up Your Neighborhood," and that was giving grants to block associations all over the five boroughs. I work in conjunction with the Citizens' Committee of New York, and we give away a minimum of 50 prizes a year ranging from $800 to $250 to the people that do the most... The groups that do the most to keep their area clean and improve their surroundings. The result is that we have lots of little pocket parks all over New York that came to be because of my help. I went to Queens not too long ago to look at a project. When I got out of my car I felt like I was dead. It was like a mortuary. Over the park was a sign that said, "Mollie Parnis Park." All it needed was a memorial. But it was very satisfactory, and I've been doing that...

Q. I think it's very nice to have your name on something while you are alive.
A. Well, it is. And all through the City of New York you see those plaques very often that say "Mollie Parnis Dress Up Your Neighborhood" award winner. You know? And last year we included schools and this year we're giving prizes to about 100 schools, both elementary and junior high schools, to the children in the school, the group ... One teacher and a group of children who do something around the school, in the school yard. That's a new project. But my newest project is the Livingston awards, in memory of my son, which will be finally given out on June 17th of this year, at the New York Public Library.

Q. But you've also participated in a lot of other funds. At least I see your name so often, with regard to other things... And that's not...

A. Well, I do try very hard not to spread myself too thin. I don't have too much time to give to other things. I'm active at the Lincoln Center, but I think most citizens who live in New York and who can are as generous as they can be to Lincoln Center. I am interested in Channel 13, and I can't imagine anybody else, again, who wouldn't be. I have had a scholarship for the last five or seven years, both at Parsons School... two scholarships... And F.I.T. F.I.T. is in memory of Morty Sussman, and at Parsons it's a Mollie Parnis scholarship. But those things that I just mentioned really don't take a great deal of time. They take some money but they don't take much time. One thing I haven't got is time to give to other things. Not if I want to stay here and do my job...
Q. And you love your job, so certainly...
A. Yes. I can't imagine anything I'd rather do.
Q. What about traveling? Do you still travel as much as you used to?
A. I travel, but not as much as I used to. I find that it doesn't give me the pleasure. I think, again, I'm probably spoiled. I traveled in the days when it was much more comfortable. I go to Israel a minimum of once a year. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I have a project in Jerusalem, that's called "Mollie Parnis Dress Up Your Neighborhood."
Q. Really?
A. In Jerusalem...
Q. When did you start that?
A. A long time ago. I had something important from Jerusalem that I ought to show you... Oh, here it is. Right here in front of me. A medal from the City of ... Jerusalem.
Q. Oh, it's lovely.
A. I go a minimum of once a year to Jerusalem. I am interested in Israel. I am interested in their museum. I'm interested in my project, "Clean Up Your Neighborhood," but I really don't have the time. I used to go twice a year to Israel. But I don't. I go once a year now.
Q. Well, I remember the days when you got a lot of feeling about what your customers... What your... The ultimate customer wanted to wear, because you did travel, and you did meet them and they met you... What do you do now?
A. Oh, but now, I find that I do that by going to dinners in New York and spending evenings with my people, with my friends. I'm terribly lucky that Henry and Nancy Kissinger are very good friends of mine. They entertain a great deal. Most of my friends entertain and are entertained and do things. I spend a lot of time in Washington. I go at least every other month and spend three or four days, because I have lots of friends in Washington. Oh, I get around. You cannot design clothes in a vacuum.

Q. Yes.

A. But, I no longer think that it's necessary to go to Europe to see clothes. First of all, we have more clothes -- European clothes -- in New York City than they have on the Faubourg St. Honore. And so I see what's going on and I know what people want and need. And that's probably my greatest contribution to my business -- knowing what people want to wear.

Q. I would think that the contact with the ultimate... Ultimately, the private consumer, has to be a source of great feeling about what they're going to want. And you feel that New York and Washington... give you...

A. Gives me what I need. First of all, if you walk on Madison Avenue today, with your eyes open, you really see clothes not only from New York and Paris, but from all over the world. You know, New York today... We who live in New York have the greatest advantage in the world. Music and
culture and fashion and art... Go to the place where the most money is. And there's no question about it. The most money is here. More people from all over the world who can get their money out are coming here. And the Louvre is a marvelous museum, but it doesn't begin to compare to have the amount of pictures that the Metropolitan Museum has today. There's more space; it's spread out more. But we have more in the Metropolitan basement today than a lot of museums have. There are very few museums of the calibre of the Metropolitan Museum, anywhere in the world. But we are inclined to take them for granted. There is everything you could possibly think of, right here in New York. And certainly between the National and the Tate and the Smithsonian in Washington, and the Hirschorn for sculpture, we've got everything you could think of.

Q. Go back a little bit again... What do you think... Was your husband originally in fabrics?

A. He had been in the textile business... He too was young. When we went in business, I was 28 and he was 31. So, you see, we were very young, and we were just lucky. We walked where angels fear to tread, you know. We knew very little, and we were lucky.

Q. Did he stumble into the business too?

A. No, he came in because I wanted to go in.

Q. I meant the whole fashion...

A. The textile business? Oh, sure. He graduated from Columbia, and one of his father's friends said "Why don't you send Leon down for the summer, I have a job for him." And he went down and liked it, and
that's where he stayed. He also was creative. He knew about fabric. And together we made a good team.

Q. When did you change the name of the firm from Parnis-Livingston to Mollie Parnis...?
A. When Bob Kaufman came in. That was in 1970.
Q. Really?
A. Uh huh.
Q. And, if you had it to do over again, would you be in this price range of business, would that still be what you'd want?
A. Yes, if I had it to do over again, I'd stay right where I am. And I'd be on this floor, in this business... Yes. You mustn't forget that the price range grew with the economics of the world. We weren't making this price range, but then nobody else was until the economics of the country were such that you couldn't make a dress to retail for...
Q. Do you remember what the price range was in the beginning?
A. Yes, Twenty-nine dollars wholesale, $50 retail; $60 retail. That was about what it was. $60-$100 retail, you know. And now I couldn't even make a sleeve for that.
Q. Do you remember the early days of The Fashion Originators Guild? The one that Maurice Rentner started?
A. Not really, no. I came a little bit later than that. And also we were so young that most people didn't take us very seriously. You know, Maurice Rentner was a much older man. I remember being in great awe
of Maurice Rentner. And we came along much later than that. It seems like it all was at one time, but it really wasn't.

Q. Yeah, that's what is so interesting... To try to get a perspective on this. Because there's been so little research done in this industry on its history that it's very difficult to get a perspective.

A. Did you ever read a book by Marilyn Bender...?

Q. I've read everything that's been written. I read her book a long time ago.

A. She has a marvelous chapter, both on the union and on people in this industry.

Q. But there are a very great many people who had a major role to play in their own ways, who have not been written up at all. So...

Well... People like Ben Shaw... There was one article about Ben Shaw...

A. But there were so many people before Ben Shaw. I remember there was a designer... There was a firm called Edward L. Mayer, now has anybody ever mentioned that to you?

Q. I'm talking about people who are alive, whom I can interview. Or do some research...

A. Ben Shaw... Ben can still be interviewed?

Q. Yes. He can still be interviewed. Very interestingly too. There are a number of people... But imagine a Ben Shaw... About whom one article has been written, only. And that was by June Weir in 1956...
A. Also, I think one of the most interesting things about what's happened in this business is what's happening to the young designer. The least important thing of what they do is the collections. Because what's happened, and what's so terribly important, is that designers are really more important today and better known than movie stars. And it's the licensing that's become the most important thing today in their businesses.

Q. Well, it's become a moneymaker.

A. That's the thing that makes the money for them.

Q. Sure.

A. When I was working, we had to make money every single month in the dress business, or you couldn't stay, or survive. But a great many of the well known designers today could go years without making any money in the dress business, and it is my opinion that most of them do.

Q. I think you're right.

A. But they do very, very well with their licensing.

Q. Uh huh. Licensing.... Was that never something that you became involved in?

A. I remember having two or three people come to me, and one was a hosiery man... And wanted to do Mollie Parnis hosiery. But that's all he wanted. I wasn't to pick the colors or to do anything... I was horrified at the idea.

Q. He just wanted your name.

A. Yes. I wouldn't think of it. And then somebody came to me...
Jewelry... At least ten people have come and I've turned them down. And I've discovered that that's the way it's done. They buy your name and forget about it. I was literally insulted when somebody wanted to use my name on an umbrella. But... I don't think if I were 35 today and they wanted to do it I would.

Q. But there are some people who are able to insist that they are...

A. Oh, I think today, most of the people that I know who are successful do supervise; have a studio, and have things made all the time and do...
Q. We were talking about licensing, and you said if you were...

A. I said if I were starting over again, today, that's one of things I really would be interested in. I think today you can supervise what you put your name on. It's very lucrative. And, also, I think, very satisfactory. Look at Oscar de la Renta. He has the number one perfume in the world. It's a very exciting idea.

Q. I didn't know his perfume ranked that high...

A. Well, maybe not the world. Certainly in the United States, it's number one in the United States.

Q. Then that is very exciting, because that's one of his newest licenses.

A. It's about three years old.

Q. Right. It used to be that they could only hope to make money after three years.

A. Well, it's the number one perfume in the United States. Which also shows you that... What's happened to designers. I went to a dinner recently for some charity, with Bill Blass, and there were many people from the theatre there. And I was fascinated at the young people coming up to Bill Blass for his autograph. Designers today are as well known, if not better... I think the only people who are better known are pop singers. Designers are really very well known.

Q. And that is exciting.
A. It is exciting, and it's encouraging for the designer, and it gives you an extra impetus to want to be number one all the time. This whole business has changed. I wish I knew exactly how to explain the change, but it has changed. First of all, the stores have changed. The way of buying has changed. And... Imagine having a collection and showing it once, and that's all. You make a collection and spend months making it, and hundreds of thousands of dollars to get it ready, try it on on models two or three times, with accessories and all sorts of things to be sure it will be right, worry about whether the music and the tape that you have is right, and show it once.

Q. Is that all?

A. That's all most people show it. Some people may show it once to press and once to customers. Nobody shows it more than that. It would be too expensive. You couldn't possibly. A model, if she's alive and well and breathing, gets $100 an hour.

Q. Do you use any of the apparel marts in any of the cities that have them, like Chicago or...?

A. Yes, we do...

Q. You do? Oh, that's a very new thing then.

A. We show our collection both in Chicago... No we don't show it in Chicago. I'm sorry. We show it in Dallas and California.

Q. Well, that is new, because in the better market...

A. Well, we don't show the couture, just Studio and the at-home.
Q. But even that is a departure for you, because you didn't use
to do it.

A. Well, if you want to be competitive, you do have to go around.
And they do very well... Another thing that's happened is, all those
little mama-papa stores that have become very, very important in one's
business, a lot of them don't come to New York. One, it's very expensive,
the hotels are too expensive; (2) They hear these terribly weird stories
about what happens in New York and they're scared. They used to come to
New York because they would have a good time. They no longer can do that.
They can't afford the hotel. They can't stay one minute longer than they
have to. And if they get here during market week it's very crowded. And
if they go to the local mart, they can take their time. They can shop
everybody. And I can understand why they do it.

Q. Somebody had said some years ago that the appeal of the New York
market, despite all of the problems with New York is never going to
diminish to the point where the markets weren't well attended.

A. Oh, I couldn't agree with you more. It's like going to Paris.
Whereas... There's something about New York that is unlike any other city
in the world. So, everybody will come here as long as they can. But the
customers who go to the local market are, again, the small shops, where
the expenses are a big consideration. You come to New York and no matter
what hotel you stay in, it's $100 a night for two people. If they want to
stay here for two or three days -- and otherwise it wouldn't make any sense --
and have to pay their fare and lodging, they'd have to sell an awful lot of dresses to make that up. They can do much better by going to the local marts.

Q. What about trunk shows?

A. We do those, with our very good customers, we do trunk shows for Saks Fifth Avenue. We do trunk shows (and that's all a relatively new thing in the last 12 or 15 years) for Neiman Marcus. We do trunk shows for some of our best customers. But... And we do very well with them. There are lots of ladies who really don't like to buy until they've seen a whole collection.

Q. Do the stores buy an assortment before the trunk show comes out?

A. Oh, sure. They place their orders before, their regular stock. But no store could buy one of everything we've got for every store. Saks Fifth Avenue consists of 38 stores. We don't do trunk shows for all the stores, but certainly we do them for 8 or 10.

Q. Well, that's almost enough, really, for somebody to do for four months of the year, as a steady occupation.

A. Well, we have three people who are out starting the first of July. We have to do duplicate collections, which we never did.

Q. And that's very expensive to do too, isn't it?

A. Well, we don't do them in the sample room. We make duplicates. But three collections have to be gotten ready. And starting around right after the 4th of July, most of the collections are out. They come back in
and out for a week at a time, or something, until... The fall collection will certainly be out until the first of October.

Q. And by then you're ready to show another collection.
A. In September. In late August, we will show our resort collection.
Q. And then the spring collection would be...
A. In February. No, probably...
Q. October.
A. No. In September we show resort, and probably November for spring.
Q. Yeah. What I was thinking was that one collection has been out and being shown for trunk shows. And the trunk show comes back and then you're ready to show the next season.
A. Yes. And then they take the next collection... There's about a month in between before you take them, because we don't have them ready before then. But the whole industry has changed. There's no question about it. There used to be a time if you missed the opening, then you could come back the next day and see the collection when you can. You can see the clothes, but you can't see them on a model, and you certainly can't see all the accessories. You can't... It isn't like...
Q. See how all the things are put together...
A. No, no. It isn't like the opening day. There's something exciting about the opening day that never used to exist. And that's all in the last 15 years. Do you remember when we first started to have an opening and then we'd have lunch afterwards?
Q. Oh, absolutely. I still have Ethel Williams occasionally.

A. All I can tell you is there is no way that anybody would have time, when we get through with our show today, to stop and have lunch, because the next show is at 1:00. Ours is at 12:00. Nobody would have time.

Q. Oh, I remember those lunches. So... Well... That is not the single most important thing that has changed...

A. Well, the whole thing is... It's a way of life. Even the way of life, that you saw a collection, had time to relax, and wait an hour and then go on to the next collection. You don't do that today. The average buyer sees a collection every hour on the hour from 8:00 in the morning to certainly 5:00 at night, and there are lots of them who open in the evening.

Q. And lots of out of town and European manufacturers who come into the New York market.

A. I'm not aware of them yet. I'm now aware...

Q. So that the buyers' time... It has got to be that the buyers do nothing but spend their time looking at clothes...

A. Oh, I think there are some times when the buyers are not in the stores for two weeks at a time, two and a half weeks...

Q. What do you think... How do you think this business is being affected by the impersonalization of buying?
A. Very much. I think it's helping the little shops. For instance, when you were a buyer, and I was more active with customers, the average buyers' office was on the floor of her department. So the buyer could go out and meet the customer and see what was selling, and have an idea of what's going on on her floor. In big stores today... Take Saks Fifth Avenue... No buyer has her office on the floor. It's in another building on another block.

Q. What about Sara?

A. Sara Middleman is the only one who has her office there... But then there are extenuating circumstances to that. She is the only one. But outside of that, no buyer has her office on their floor or comes in contact with their customers, and knows at the end of the day what's sold, except that they can remember and they look at the sheet and it isn't the same. And I think the customer... The store suffers, the customer suffers... I think the buyer is frustrated.

Q. Why are buyers so quickly moved to merchandise managements, if they evidence any talent at all?

A. I don't think that's true. I don't know very many buyers who have been moved to...

Q. In stores like Macy's. If they're not merchandise managers by the time they're 25 or 26...

A. Well, you've picked a store I know very little about. Those stores that I do know, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bonwit Teller, Neiman Marcus, I Magnin, Lord & Taylor, that isn't a fact. I know very little about Macy's.
Q. But when people talk about the effect that computers have had, the question arises how much does the individual taste level of the buyer matter? or count?

A. Well, it matters or counts when he or she is doing the actual buying. But my feeling is they don't see the dresses when they come in; they don't see them on the customer; they can only go by the sheet whether they sold or not. And for me, that would be a very, very frustrating kind of a job to have, because half the pleasure for me is going out at night and seeing one of my dresses on a lady -- and to this day I invariably make up my mind I'm not going to say anything, and before the evening is over I say "That's my dress," and the lady says "No, it's not, it's mine." And then I have to tell her who I am and that I designed it.

Q. What's happened to reorders? Do those exist?

A. Again, with the smaller stores. Not very much with the big stores. Again, as I explained to you... On the computer, if you bought Tom Jones' dresses and they sold out in two days, but Sam Smith's didn't, you are not open to buy until you've unloaded Sam Smith's. So what happens is that the customer doesn't get a fair shake. The customer goes in there and Tom Jones's good dresses are gone, and you either take Sam Smith, or you don't buy there.

Q: What... If you had a young person come to you for advice (and I'm sure you have that happen all the time), what do you tell them?
A. To be honest with you I write them a letter if I can keep them away, because so much has happened, and so much has happened that I know nothing about, that I don't feel adequate to tell them right now, what to do. My advice to the average... If one of my friends' children asked me, I think I'd say stay in school as long as you could. If you really want to be a designer, take two years at one of the specialized schools, and then, G-d help you. I really and truly... It is not the way it was when I was looking for a job, or the way it was up to 10 or 12 years ago when I was hiring young people. It has changed and what one needs... I think it's interesting that those who are talented do get to the top. When you see... hear of a young man like Perry Ellis... The fact remains that he got the Norman Norell award and he graduated from Parsons. When you hear Michael Vollbracht... He got the Norman Norell award when he graduated... So obviously they are being taught something they can bring to their jobs. It is not what I thought was most important.

Q. What did you think was most important?

A. What I thought was most important was to be talented and have a knack to meet people. To... I thought caring was very important. You have to have a relationship with the store; you had to care for the store and the store had to care for you. None of that exists today.

Q. Yeah, I used to hear over and over again, and to feel, that no manufacturer would ever be allowed to experience a bad season, or more than a bad season, because help would be there, available, if it were needed.
A. Well, not only that... If... I have been a very good resource of Saks Fifth Avenue or Bergdorf Goodman or Lord & Taylor, for years, and if I had one bad collection, they might not buy as much, but they certainly wouldn't turn me down. They'd buy what they could. None of that exists today. There is no room -- and maybe they're right; there shouldn't be -- any room for any getting emotionally involved. In any of that. It sells or it doesn't sell. And that's the way you are. All you have to do is go through a store and see who one day has all the space, and then the next season who has no space at all. I mean, it's very obvious. Because the space in stores is very expensive, and if it doesn't sell they can't give it to you. And so one year you see three or four collections with lots of space, and then the next year they're not even there. They're in among the rest of the dresses. And it doesn't mean that they're going out of business, and it doesn't mean that they're not doing well. It means just that they had one season for that store that wasn't very profitable, and they don't have time or patience to fool around. It's all so impersonal.

Q. I have to ask you that. If you had it all to do over again, you say you would go back into this business?

A. Yes.

Q. Because for you it was exciting...?

A. Well, I'm now at the tail end of my career. And we're still doing very well. And fortunately for me at the stores that I've always done well with, we're still doing well.
Q. And you also still get the inner gratification?

A. I was just going to say... I have a sense of well being, both with my customers and myself. And I have a staff... If I were selfish and wanted to go out of business, I could liquidate this business tomorrow and invest my money in CD's and make more money on the interest I could get than make out of here today. There's no question about it. But the fact is that there are 75 people working here (most of them 10-12 years or more) and they'd be out of jobs. So that I don't intend to do that. I intend to stay as long as I can operate; as long as we're doing well. And as long as I feel all right.

Q. In this kind of a business, if you... If your presence were not everyday or all the time, do you think it could go on?

A. It does now. I'm not here every day and I'm not here all the time. I really don't get in until 10:30... I usually leave by 5:00 surely. I've been taking Fridays off for a long time. Yes. We have a very good staff. We have a President in his late forties. The average buyer that comes in here now is a new person that I don't even know.

Q. So you're like Lord & Taylor, which went on without Dorothy Shaver for quite a long time?

A. Yes... It's not the same store it was when Dorothy Shaver was there, but it's there, and it's making more money. And Joe Brooks is a marvelous President, and he's doing a wonderful job. But it's not the
Lord & Taylor that you or I know. But it's a Lord & Taylor that obviously is filling a need in the City of New York. Imagine having a store in New York that doesn't carry one European dress.

Q. They don't?
A. Not one. They have discovered that for their customers, they don't need them. And I think it takes a great deal of courage and common sense to find out who their customers are and cater to them. And they really aren't interested about what people are doing uptown. Look at Macy's. You pick it up and it's ahead 22%, 24%... It's doing the most knockout job. And they couldn't care less what they're doing at Bloomingdale's.

Q. Yeah, that's true.
A. I think the best thing about the business today is that it's a business of specialization. It's a business such that people with talent can make it here.

Q. Okay. Very good.
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE
FASHION INDUSTRIES

Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.

2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of ________, (dates), pages ________, in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology." No fees will be charged for published use. User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.

3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.