This memoir is the result of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History Project of the Fashion Industries by Phyllis Feldkamp with Eleanor Lambert on December 8, 1977.

Eleanor Lambert has read the transcript, and has made only minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind, therefore, that he is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word.

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(signed) 

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Remarks 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood, Education and First Job 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her Early Days in New York City 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity Career Begins 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Designers, ca. 1930s 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion Editors and Fashion Writing 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New York Dress Institute, The Couture Group and Press Week 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Council of Fashion Designers of America and The National Council of the Arts 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March of Dimes' Fashion Shows 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Fashion Critics' (Coty) Awards 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The &quot;Best Dressed List&quot; 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion Shows in Moscow 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Contributions to Fashion 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franco-American Fashion Show at the Palace of Versailles 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index 55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I: Eleanor Lambert, you have been a steady potent force through the years in gaining recognition for American fashion. In fact you have, I believe, described yourself as a prime crusader for world recognition of American fashion.

N: Well, I guess everything's ok except the "prime". I don't know about that.

I: Would you say "choice"?

N: Well, if we're going to get into the beef area.

I: As publicist and public relations expert, you are in business to make money. Estimates of your annual billings have been as high as $250,000. You have been enormously successful. Serving as ring-mistress, impresario for the U.S. fashion industry, being choosy about your clients, putting quality first, and as John Fairchild of Women's Wear Daily has put it, "Your magic wand lights the way into newspapers, magazines and even society". And yet over the long haul there has been a definable altruism in your business career, you've always said you loved fashion and you have been very
insistent, very assertive in your running campaign to estab-
lish fashion as an art form on the same level with equal
rights as other decorative or so-called minor arts. You
have helped to establish fashion in the public mind as an
art form; fashion is taken more seriously today than it
was. We have hordes of people, thousands of them gaping
at exhibitions in the costume wings of the museums, and not
only at New York's Metropolitan Museum - this is a coun-
try-wide phenomenon that's fairly recent. We have collectors
of antique clothes, of fashion illustration, photography
of the past being sought out as aesthetic records that should
be preserved and valued. Old dresses by name designers are
bringing big prices at auctions in London, Adrian's and
Claire McCordell's being hunted down, that kind of thing.
Ten or fifteen years ago we didn't have this intense interest,
at least not in American fashion. Now here we are in the
year 1977 and American fashion seems to be coming of age.
It's really beginning to make it on an international plane.
Today American designers, wouldn't you say, have emerged
as creators on the same level in the aesthetic sense, and
they are as respected as their European counterparts and
you have been the leading, moving spirit in bringing this
about. Can we go back to your girlhood in Crawfordsville,
Indiana, when, and I think I'm right in saying this, American
style was the step-child of Paris, if any attention was
paid to it at all.
N: I should say so if you're going back to my girlhood.

I: It really was then. You have an art background, you wanted to be a sculptor at first, but doesn't your love of fashion spring from some abiding interest that you always had, is there any...

N: Yes, I think it does spring from an abiding interest although I don't say what so many designers say to me, that they were making clothes for their dolls, or they were making clothes for themselves or their mothers, or somebody, at the age of nine or ten. I have no sense of that, but I was always a keen observer and fan of fashion, and my first job when I was still in art school was as a fashion reporter on the Indianapolis Star. I was going to school in Indianapolis and I got a job doing a column called "Talking Shops," a coy title. I bought the space in the paper and I sold the space for each write-up. It was a commercial kind of thing, a signed column with "ADV" down at the bottom of course. I did little sketches illustrating the clothes or the objects that were being talked about, and it went so well that I soon did the same thing in the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette and I commuted by pullman car - we didn't have planes between Fort Wayne and Indianapolis. I guess I neglected my art school to such a point that I had to admit I'd never be a very good sculptor. Nothing is worse than a lot of heavy, mediocre sculpture sitting around, so I'm glad I don't have that today.
I: Now, "ADV" was?
N: Advertisement, meaning paid space.
I: You had to put that at the end?
N: No matter how editorial it was.
I: But it was signed Eleanor Lambert?
N: Yes.
I: Was there anyone else in your family who was a big fashion bug?
N: No. I think my mother cared about clothes and she was always very well dressed, although we never had any money. I always remember the local department store in Crawfordsville was Bischoff's, and Mr. Bischoff was the old-style shop-keeper who stood at the door and greeted everybody coming in. It was quite a big store, about five floors, and my mother and I loved to go shopping together. I remember thinking, "I know we owe Mr. Bischoff," what seemed to me a lot of money — it was probably something like $50 or $75 — and I wonder if he'll welcome us? But he always did, and he always shook hands when the customers came in the door and conducted each customer to the department where she wanted to shop. I remember my first party dress, which must have been perfectly ghastly, but it came from Bischoff. I was sort of a baby-chicken yellow with white eyelet embroidery sleeves and little black velvet bows at the neckline and on the puffed sleeves, and a kind of draped skirt.
I: Were these made to order or were they ready made?

N: They were ready made of course. But nobody had a label in those days, except the stores. We never were conscious of designers, but I think even then I probably knew of big French names like Lanvin and Chanel and maybe Schiaparelli. That was the Twenties and early Thirties - late Twenties actually - so I might have also known of a few Hollywood designers. Probably Adrian was known then and Travis Banton. But there was no such thing as a designer dress that the average person could afford. Nettie Rosenstein was working then, and Hattie Carnegie. Those are the first two labels...

I: ...that you recall?

N: I didn't know them then because they were way over my head as far as money went. But I do know from my own research that the first American label to be put in a ready-made garment, and sold throughout this country, was Hattie Carnegie, and then Nettie Rosenstein. Hattie Carnegie in 1924, and Nettie Rosenstein about 1928.

I: Those stories are funny that people always have about what sparked their careers - the rose on an aunt's hat, or something like that. I love milliner Lilly Dache's remark, "When I was six years old I made my mother a hat out of her new blouse. That's really fun.

It's interesting that there are so many people from Indiana in fashion. You're sort of the Hoosier group. Norell, Bill Blass, and aren't there some others?
N: Halston.
I: Halston, right.
N: He came from Fort Wayne.
I: Kind of like the Hoosier Writers somehow. Well then you, let's see you went to the Art Institute in Chicago, is that right?
N: Later, yes. I went to the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis first, and then to the Art Institute in Chicago, and then I came to New York.
I: This was all in the line of becoming a sculptor?
N: Up till then, yes. But a gypsy fortune teller in the stockyards of Chicago once told me that I thought I was going to be an artist and would never be one, but would always work with artists.
I: Your business here is in a building that is filled with art galleries isn't it, so you're surrounded...
N: Yes, the Pace Gallery is downstairs.
I: Then what made you take off for New York, and I understand you left with $100. You had all these stories. You had one black coat and it sounds like...you find an apartment on Riverside Drive. It sounds sort of like Horatio Alger or something.
N: I found a furnished room on Riverside Drive, not an apartment, or anything so grand. I actually had $200 to begin with, but I spent a hundred of it as a down-payment on a fur coat.
from a credit furrier in Indianapolis. Fortunately it was a national company, for by the time I had been here two months the coat had fallen in little pieces. It was made of caracul that must have been scraps picked up off the floor and sewn together. Whenever I see these fashionable modern coats in little strips, I always think of my disaster. I was paying so much a week for this coat, and when it began to fall apart I looked up the New York headquarters of the company and showed them the coat. They said, "Oh well, leave it with us and we'll try to fix it." So I left the coat and shivered. I never heard from the coat again but I heard over and over about the payments which I of course wouldn't continue until I got the coat back, or some satisfaction. I was earning $16 a week from the "Breath of the Avenue," a fashion newsletter to retailers.

I: By Amos Parrish?

N: Amos Parrish, that's right. I was one of the cub reporters with a half-time job. I had this $16 and another $16 for designing book jackets in the afternoon for another company.

I: This was in New York?

N: In New York, yes. Suddenly my $16 salary was garnisheed at Amos Parrish, by the credit fur company.

I: For that terrible coat?

N: I was so terrified and ashamed, but I had heard somewhere of the Legal Aid Society, where famous lawyers volunteered to help people with their problems. I went over there, and
as it happened Morris Ernst was on duty that day. I told him the story and he looked at me, picked up the phone and called this company. What he said to that man was absolutely terrible! He said, "My client, Miss Lambert, has had this insult cast on her, and furthermore the coat is a mess and you have the coat and you keep the coat, we never want to hear from you again." So that was it. I didn't have the coat and I was out about $300, but I've always loved the Legal Aid Society for winding the whole thing up for me.

I: And you must have loved Morris Ernst too. Didn't you begin by representing various artists? Was this the American Artists Association?

N: Yes.

I: Were you also connected with the Whitney Museum?

N: Yes, I did the publicity from the time the Whitney was opened, I guess about 1931. I was very lucky in one way, with the two first jobs I had. The Amos Parrish job gave me a sense of New York and New York stores that was a liberal education in fashion and retailing. I had to go into the stores, stand around and watch what people were buying. I would be given a sheaf of clippings each morning and told to give a report on how well they pulled and what people seemed to prefer. I had to write a report at the end of the morning and turn it in. That taught me to describe clothes and people's reactions to them.
I: Who received the results of these reports?
N: My boss was Sarah Pennoyer. Do you remember her?
I: Well it's a name I certainly know.
N: She later became vice-president of Bonwit-Teller, and we stayed friends for years. She's now retired I believe.
I: What was she exactly?
N: She was one of the editors of this "Breath of the Avenue" report. It was like the TOBE report.
I: Or like the Fashion Newsletter?
N: Yes, like one of those things, but they did a much more detailed report to stores of what other stores were selling. It wasn't a sneak kind of thing, it was just a factual report. Maybe today you'd compare it to the RAM Reports. That was one chance I had to learn about fashion. The way I drifted into art publicity was my other job of designing book jackets. This was for a man named Franklin Spear who had a small advertising agency, very small, everybody was in one room. He was there and everybody who worked for him, four or five people. He did advertising for book publishers, that was his specialty. On the side he occasionally did publicity for a book. I was such a celebrity hound that I used to sit open-mouthed while he called celebrities to get quotes for books. Finally he looked across the room and said, "You think this is fun? Why don't you do it?"
So he put me on the phone, and I remember the book was something about heredity vs. environment. I was supposed
to ask Douglas Fairbanks and all kinds of people like that what they thought about heredity versus environment. So I did that as a publicity story. Then I wrote it up and he mailed it to newspapers. One day, after I had been there about six months I guess getting my $16 a week, he said, "I think you have a knack for this thing, why don't you do publicity on your own?" I said, "Well, I don't know, I have no money, I can't get started." He said, "You can stay here, you can have that desk, you can put in and pay for your own telephone. Otherwise, as long as you want to stay you're welcome." I was thrilled, but I said, "I don't know how to start, or who I'd work for." He said, "What do you think you know about most?", and I answered that I thought I knew a good deal about American art. "I've studied it, I know the names of people." He said, "Well, why don't you try that?" He really goaded me into it. I went to a couple of art galleries along 57th Street and made the proposal that I'd do publicity for an exhibition and I'd charge $100 for the job. I did that and it worked very well.

I: Who were the artists, do you recall?

N: People like Jacob Epstein, Morris Ernst, Abe Rattner, George Bellows, Leon Hartl, John Curry. I arranged for John Curry to travel for a season with Ringling Brothers Circus. The whole series he did on the circus came from that.
I gradually got quite a few clients. Then the American Art Dealer's Association was formed and they gave me the job of representing the whole association. Then I got a salary, I mean a fee by the year and I ran up and down 57th Street and Madison Avenue doing these exhibitions. It was a lot of fun and I really loved that part of it. When the Depression was at its worst in 1932 everyone was flat broke and art galleries were terrible. A fashion designer named Annette Simpson, not Adele, Annette Simpson, telephoned me and said that she had read a story I had arranged, an interview with an artist. She had telephoned the newspaper to find out how that story came about, and they told her it was through me. So she thought she'd like to have me do publicity for her. She was my first designer client. I never got paid however. She was very crazy.

I: For a period there you were concurrently working in the art area and the fashion retailing area?

N: Yes, and then the Whitney Museum was part of that whole thing. For a year before it opened, I did the publicity and then afterwards. That's the way I met my future husband.

I: Hadn't you been married briefly before?

N: Yes, I was married...well it wasn't so brief. I was married for about 11 years altogether. We separated after seven years and then it was four years before we got a divorce because neither one of us was interested in anybody
I: Was that someone who was an artist?

N: No, he was an architect, an architectural draftsman. We eloped from school.

I: What were the stores that were the important stores at that time?

N: Lord and Taylor was important...

I: What stores did you cover, and what were the people actually buying?

N: Lord and Taylor, Altmans and Saks Fifth Avenue - Macy's and Bergdorf-Goodman of course. Clothes were much more dress-makery than today, and I don't remember that we ever had things called "separates".

I: You mentioned Annette Simpson finding you and asking you to represent her. There certainly were American designers at the time. I suppose Jesse Franklin Turner was one, she made tea gowns didn't she?

N: Yes, but I think she was gone by then. I'm not conscious of her as much as of the big dress firms, such as International Dress Company and a firm called Jack Davis Company that was immense. Around 1941 when the New York Dress Institute was formed, those people were the biggest contributors because payment was on a basis of one-half of one-percent of each dress firm's volume. They were enormous firms, but they didn't have any labels, they just sold to stores and the stores put their own label in the dress. I don't know
if David Crystal had a label then. International Dress
didn't but they added a label later on.
I: There were individual designers weren't there?
N: Nettie Rosenstein was already a big success, and Hattie
Carnegie, Jo Copeland...
I: Herman Tappe, was he...
N: Tappe was just about fading out and may have already died.
Then of course there were people like Harry Collins who
was a big name, but that was custom-order.
I: Muriel King?
N: Muriel King. Yes, I think so but I wouldn't swear to it.
But houses like Maurice Rentner, Elizabeth Hawes, Claire...
I: McCardell.
N: ...existed or came soon after, and Anne Klein came along
pretty soon too, to introduce young sportswear and junior
sophisticates.
I: That would be in the late Thirties, wouldn't it?
N: Yes.
I: Now, Hawes is, I'd say she is still read, at least Fashion
is Spinach is still read. There she gives an account of
going to Paris and it was during Prohibition so it had to
be the end of the Twenties. Taking all of her clothes over
there, not to see, but to show the French the kind of
clothes that were really, what she thought really were for
Americans. It seems to me she hired some American girls
to be models, and they were all... One of the French reporters, the Figaro man noticed that the models' hands were shaking when they held their numbers they were so nervous. That seemed to be charming but it led nowhere. Then she was involved in some way with Best and Company who through a manufacturer was making a leather jacket for her, got hold of these leather jackets which were only supposed to be sold in her shop, and Mary Lewis who was vice-president of Best at that time, came up to see her because she thought maybe she should sue. That was when Mary Lewis said to her, "Miss Hawes you really should go into making more things, not just individual things for individual customers. Henry Ford makes his money on Fords, not Lincolns," which stayed with her. She tried to connect with Seventh Avenue which didn't work. According to her account, all the manufacturers were interested in was doing copies of things. She ended up saying to herself, "Is God French?" That was her—it was a discouraging experience. Now probably there were...

N: She also wrote in her book that she interviewed -- she didn't use my name -- but she said she called on somebody and talked about publicity.

I: Was it you?

N: It was me. She wrote that we chatted awhile, then she said she "got bored with the whole idea and forgot about it."

I: She was a very strange lady.
N: Yes she was. I was married in one of her dresses though. It was so worn out that it had the elbows out, but it had a sentimental interest for us, so I wore it.

I: You wouldn't still have that would you?

N: No, I don't, but it was a pretty dress. I can still remember it.

I: Well, for quite a while there certainly were, through the Thirties, even Forties, even Fifties, there certainly were American designers who did custom design, who were their own...Who didn't rely on Paris, who weren't influenced by Europe.

N: Oh yes, the American, Charles James was one of the great designers of that period. He was quite influenced by Worth but otherwise he was his own man. Adrian certainly was not influenced at all, and he invented the shoulder pad. In fact, shoulder pads were called "les Americains" when they appeared in French clothes.

I: How about Valentina?

N: Oh yes, she's fantastic!

I: And you've certainly known her for a long time haven't you?

N: Oh, yes. I did publicity for her for many years, she was one of my early clients.

I: Now, back in that period when you were beginning as a publicist, for both artists and fashion people, who were the big powers in fashion? Who really in America?
N: I think Dorothy Shaver was one of the great, great leaders. When people say she was the prime crusader of the era, that's really true. I think Maurice Rentner was a great mover-doer in high fashion as opposed to volume fashion. People like Rentner could have made millions in volume production, but preferred and cared about fine quality and creativity, whether they made French copies or had their own designers. Maurice Rentner's sister Anna Miller gave Bill Blass his first job. He later went from Anna Miller to Rentner, and then to his own firm.

I: At that time the manufacturer's name was on the label. Was the designer always anonymous then?

N: Well, Anna Miller didn't give Bill Blass credit, but Maurice Rentner did when Blass worked for him. Of course Hattie Carnegie was a great school for designers; she had Norman Norell, Claire McCardell, Jean Louis, and Pauline Trigere as designers on her staff. Each one did a different type of thing and when they went out on their own she was always very nice to them. She never objected. I think she was sort of mad when Norman Norell left, but otherwise...

I: I did read there was some ill feeling over the dress... that Norell made for Gertrude Lawrence in 'Lady in the Dark,' and I think he became known as the designer of the dress and that didn't go...

N: She didn't like that.

I: ...Down too well with Hattie Carnegie. Those were certainly
different times. How about Mrs. Chase and Mrs. Snow? Didn't they have a great deal to do with molding taste...

N: Yes, you're probably right.

I: ...and really affecting buying habits and so on?

N: I think Mrs. Chase...

I: This would be Edna Chase?

N: Edna Woolman Chase was a terrific influence in making fashion part of the glamorous scene and also to give it validity as an art form that people should respect and study. Mrs. Snow, on the other hand, really helped to create trends because she had a way of looking at collections and pick out new ideas that had a future. She would go to the designer and say, "This is really wonderful, we're going to use it in the magazine and you should do more of it." Her whole attitude was one of inspired editing. I think that is gravely lacking today. I think the publications tend to just report or to exaggerate the thing too much and frighten the reader off, not as a guide to newness or to fashion education. There's too much fragmentation and too much variety today. I think it is really confusing for women. You hear people say that the clothes all look alike, but it just isn't true. There's just too much choice for people, and I don't think they feel comfortable with that sense that they have to make all these decisions.

I: In the time of Mrs. Chase and Mrs. Snow, wasn't there this image of the unattainable for which the women who read those
magazines, many of them would strive in the sense that this was a standard that was being set. You weren't really meant to look exactly like that.

N: Yes, it was the ideal, that was presented in print, and for that reason it could be pure and distilled. I think today they're all over the lot, trying to replace everybody. I don't think the public wants to be guided and instructed. People want to learn how to dress and the background for every change. They're only getting informed about what's new and crazy.

I: They're very often not even learning, you feel, what the main directions are each season?

N: No, I think there is too much spot news reporting, and not enough truly informed judgment on the part of fashion writers. I think fashion writers like to think they're critics, but they don't take the responsibility of a critic to fill in the background, to give an educated judgment, and to really inspire people's interest. That's what the drama and music critics do. Why not the fashion critic? I think the fashion writer falls between the two stools of being the front page reporter, or merely the one who writes captions under a lot of pictures that add up to no real message.

I: Well, of course there really was, despite Dorothy Shaver who had two campaigns at Lord and Taylor, promotion series to promote American design. One early in the Thirties and
then the other during World War II when we were cut off from Europe. Lord and Taylor almost represented this great new school of American designers, Tom Brigance and a whole school of people.

N: Clare Potter and Vera Maxwell.

I: Vera Maxwell. That was also the beginning of American sportswear, with California at the same time. But if you go back and go through not just Vogue and Harpers, if you go through the women's magazines, McCall's, Ladies' Home Journal, and Women's Home Companion, all those. It took us ages to break the French connection. There was, there really aren't any mentions of any designers in any of the ads, much less the picture credits, the editorial ones, and it was just Paris, Paris, Paris. Well, in a way it made things clearer I suppose because in Harper's Bazaar you would get the...I remember the first wireless reports and they thought they were wonderful, they were getting the news, the fashion news into the magazine right away, and it was "Paris says" and that was it wasn't it?

N: Surely, yes it was.

I: It made it hard for American design didn't it?

N: When I started working, I don't remember ever seeing Mrs. Chase at an American fashion opening; I think Carmel Snow did come, and of course Tobe came faithfully and went to the Paris collections too. The story is told that she used
to fall asleep but she would just open one eye when the best thing in the collection came out. Mrs. Snow did the same thing. I think those people were really fabulous when you think that Dorothy Shaver, Tobe and one or two other women were responsible for the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum. I was involved, but it wouldn't have happened without their strength and power. The same little band also founded the Fashion Group which is now a world organization. They were great friends and I think when people of influence are friends and see the same need at the same time, that is a very important thing. Those people really got things done because they cared enough to give every extra minute to furthering fashion.

I: What role did you play in the founding of the Fashion Group, and when was that?

N: I don't remember the year, but I remember that I was part of it. There were about five of us who got together and decided that there should be some kind of organization for the women who were concerned with fashion. Today I quarrel with the Fashion Group on that score, because I think we've long since passed the time when women have to go into their own huddles. I think it's just embarrassing that top men designers have to call one of us up to get a ticket to go to a Fashion Group presentation. The Group could be so much more important if it had both sexes, and I don't see the point anymore of a woman's organization.
I: I think there is under discussion now, it seems to me...

N: To make it...

I: Didn't you get a ballot? I did. Whether we wanted men to be admitted or not, and why.

N: Maybe I didn't look at it. I'll ask for one because I'll fill it with exclamation points.

W: Yes, yes you would. The Costume Institute was...

N: That was sort of a long story but...

I: Well, tell it!

N: It was...there was a woman named Irene Lewison who had a dress collection. She was a rich woman.

I: She had a wonderful collection of clothes?

N: A great collection of antique costumes and national costumes. Conde Nast was alive then and he was greatly interested too, and helped her put it together. It was kept in her private house until her death. Some of us who knew about the collection went to Adam Gimbel at Saks, and he gave us a room in an empty building that they owned on 50th Street, to house it there. We just stored it in trunks, until we could find some permanent home for it, so Tobe and Dorothy and I, and I have a sense that there was one other person...

I: Polaire Weissman?

N: Polaire was interested in it, but she didn't know the museum people then. It could have been Wilhela Cushman of Ladies' Home Journal. Anyway, I asked for an appointment
with the director, and he invited us all to lunch. We told him this collection existed and that we felt it was of major interest to this city where the first industry was fashion, and that the Metropolitan Museum should have a wing of costume for the use of designers for research and inspiration.

I: Excuse me, now was this do you think the first concept of a fashion wing, rather than a costume wing, because certainly museums all over the country had had long time costume wings.

N: Very few of them had...The Smithsonian had their costume collection which is very fine, and I think Boston had some too.

I: That's all American isn't it, exclusively?

N: I don't know.

I: How about Brooklyn?

N: Brooklyn had a costume collection, but almost never on public display. It was always just an archive.

I: It really wasn't costume in the fashion sense?

N: Michele Murphy was in charge in Brooklyn. Anyway, we went to the Met and had this lunch, and said our speech. The director said he understood and that the idea was very interesting, and that the Metropolitan would do it. But he said, "We feel that on the basis of your statement that the fashion industry needs and would use such a wing we should have some kind of token fund raised by the fashion industry
to prove their interest." We said, "What do you mean by a
token fund?" and he said, "Well, let's say $125,000." We
said, "That's too little, we can't go to the overall
fashion industry and raise that small amount, but we will
try to raise $250,000 as a permanent endowment. Will that
be all that is necessary now and forever?" and he said,
"Yes, absolutely." So we went out and asked for a minimum
of $1000 and a maximum of $10,000 from big firms, corporations,
and individuals. We raised about $350,000, but we also
told every contributor, "Now we will never ask you again,
because this is it."

I: Dangerous- dangerous!
N: So everything was done. There was an exchange of letters.
I: Excuse me, do you recall who the large contributors were?
N: Yes, I remember Singer Sewing Machine was one that gave
us $10,000.
I: Various manufacturers?
N: Yes, mostly the big textile companies. But after the first
year they came back and said, "We need $30,000 a year."
I: $30,000 a year?
N: Yes. We said, "Why?" and they said, "Well, that's what it
takes to man the section." We said, "But you told us you'd
never need any more money from the fashion world." The
trick was that the money had gone into the main fund of
the museum, so we had an awful fight about that, and we got
people together and we said, "We can't go back and ask for contributions, we've got to do something." So that was the beginning of the "Party of the Year" that went on for many years.

I: When was the first held?

N: Sometime in the early Forties. Those raised about $100,000 each year. They only needed $30,000 for maintenance you see, so the difference was used to set up a building fund and that money (after we'd raised something like $2 million), is what the Costume Institute wing was built with. The "Party of the Year" was no longer necessary, but the opening night of each new Costume Institute exhibition is sponsored by the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

I: And that must have been the first special wing that was set aside in a museum for costume, in the fashion sense, not in the old dusty, dusty...

N: And also it's a model of preservation because they have sterile store rooms that are kept at an even temperature so that the clothes will last forever.

I: And they have that marvelous Elizabeth Lawrence too.

N: Yes, isn't she wonderful!

I: The restorer. Well that was...so that was a first, a first.

N: Yes, it was.

(INTERRUPTION)

I: Now, that was Francis Henry Taylor?
N: Yes, that's right.
I: Who was Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Now, what was Tobe's name. It was...
N: Tobe Davis was her name.
I: Tobe Collard?
N: Tobe Coller Davis was her name.
I: Tobe Collard
N: Coller. C-O-L-L-E-R.
I: Oh, Coller Davis. She had a service was it?
N: Yes, it was called Tobe Reports. It's still going. I think it's still a big success.
I: And the Tobe Coburn School was something else?
N: She helped found it with Julia Coburn who was the editor or fashion editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*.
I: Oh she was. This was before Wilhela Cushman?
N: Yes, before. I believe Julia left to take over the school. Wilhela, or Willa as we called her - Cushman - is still living you know. She's just as active as ever. She comes back quite often.
I: She was sort of a prototype of a certain type of fashion editor.
N: Yes, "lady in the dark" She and Diane Vreeland are two of the ultra fantasy types. Bettina Ballard was another.
I: There are all sorts of accounts of photography sessions of what it was like with those ladies. I remember a French photographer with whom I worked in Paris telling me about
right after the war, Willa Cushman arriving and insisting on a bank of hydrangeas of a certain color. They had to be absolutely this color because of the dress. So with great, great trouble they found these hydrangeas, and he said, "You know we were coming out of this period when we didn't have a thing. We didn't have a paper clip, we didn't have a piece of string, and here was this lady asking for a wall of hydrangeas."

N: Mauve, do doubt!

I: Yes, and so they got them all set up, they got the lights set up and the model was there, and the dress and so on. Willa Cushman came and she said, "Oh! I've never seen anything worse in my life. It's dreadful, take it away. I can't stand it." They had to start all over again with something else.

N: She was remarkable because she was also one of the first "pony express" fashion editors to get her pictures overseas immediately. One time she had made a batch of photographs in Paris and she wanted them promptly delivered in New York, so she went out to Orly Airport and saw a likely looking man. Though she didn't know him from Adam, she went up to him and thrust this large sealed package into his arms and said, "Don't say a word, take this to New York. Someone will meet you and take it from you." He was befuddled, but he did it. He didn't know what he was carrying, or for whom.
I: Well I trust somebody did meet him in New York.

N: Yes, I think so.

I: Now, 1941 and 1942 were really signal years for you weren't they, because two things had their beginnings then, if I'm not mistaken. One was Press Week, or what became Press Week.

N: 1943 that was.

I: Yes, that was 1943?

N: 1941 was the beginning of the Dress Institute then.

I: Then, what was the other...maybe it was the Coty Awards.

N: Coty Awards.

I: Yes, right. The idea of Press Week, let's see, the progression of the promotion of Seventh Avenue fashion began in 1943 you say...

N: Well, Press Week began in 1943.

I: 1942 was the New York Dress Institute?

N: That was 1941 I think.

I: 1941. Can you talk about its beginnings and objectives. There was this "Don't be a One-Dress Beulah"

N: Yes, but that was before my day. Actually I think I should correct myself. I think it was 1940, because we were not yet in the war. It was obvious that there was a war in the offing. The labor unions and the dress manufacturers got together in fear that if war came, the dress business would go to pieces, people wouldn't buy clothes. So they made
this agreement which I think is historic in labor union history because it was the first joint agreement for a national promotion program. They set up this contract which said that one-half of one percent of the volume of every union dress manufacturer (it was only the dress industry, not coats and suits) would go into a fund that would be used for advertising dresses. It had nothing to do with public relations, and it was turned over to the J. Walter Thompson ad agency.

I: Was Julius Hochman the...

N: Julius Hochman was the head of the dress union then. David Dubinsky, the chairman of the board, was involved, of course too. The other partner in the plan was the Association of Dress Manufacturers and its members. So they turned the money over to an advertising agency to do big billboards. The agency, J. Walter Thompson, was famous for certain things. They did Listerine, it was "Aren't you ashamed?" halitosis stuff...

I: They laughed when I sat down at the piano?

N: I don't know if they did that one, but they did the Ponds Cold Cream thing, and I don't know what else. Their three themes were applied to those ads that you speak of. Because one was "Aren't you ashamed you only have one dress - One-Dress Beulah". There was another that I thought was hilarious of a very dressed up Martha Washington visiting the troops at Valley Forge, and all these dying and maimed men were
looking longingly and lovingly at this lovely lady. A lot has happened since then. Anyway, its effectiveness didn't have to be tested because dresses were among the few things that you could buy after the war began. You could buy soft goods, although you couldn't buy refrigerators or automobiles or anything made of metal, so the business boomed and therefore the fund grew and grew, and they couldn't possibly spend it all. They also were being scolded by the stores, which were telling them that the whole thing was ridiculous, the angles they were taking. So they went to see the heads of stores - Mr. Holmes, the head of Bonwit-Teller; Dorothy Shaver of Lord and Taylor; Andrew Goodman and Adam Gimbel. These people all told them they needed publicity to make people believe in American fashions designed and made in America. They recommended that the Dress Institute work with me. When I started in 1941, I tried to do a general campaign on fashion but it was almost impossible without identifiable clothes. The J.D. Dress Company, for instance, were contributing about $75,000 a year into this fund, but they could get nothing out of it because their clothes were unlabeled. I finally got some of the executives together and said, "Just forget the whole thing unless we can use designer names, and you yourselves must pick your leaders, the people who are the most creative." That was the beginning of the Couture Group of the New York Dress Institute.
I: Do you recall who they picked?
N: Yes, Nettie Rosenstein, Jo Copeland, Maurice Rentner, Ben Reig.
I: Adele Simpson?
N: Adele Simpson was one of the earliest ones.
I: Claire McCardell?
N: Claire McCardell.
I: She worked for Townley...
N: Townley Frocks it was. But I'm not sure Claire was in that because in the beginning there were only about 11 designers. I said, "It isn't enough just to have dress people, you have to have people who make coats, suits and sportswear." So they, I think very magnanimously, said, "Okay, let's just take the name designers that would be like the name designers in Paris or anywhere, and let's do a campaign based on them."
I: It wasn't exclusively dresses any longer?
N: No.
I: Then you invited editors from various parts of the country?
N: The Press Weeks began at a meeting of the Couture Group. When Ben Reig who was a very rough and ready person said, "Well now, you're always giving us advice, tell me what to do when those women from out of town, those newspaper writers come horning in with the buyers and they want to know if they can see a showing. Should we let them in or not?"
I said, "I not only think you should let them in, I think you should invite them in." So that's how it all came about. Everybody thought that was great, and let's do it. So we set up the Press Week.

I: It was held where?

N: It was held in the showrooms, making treks up and down the elevators, because there weren't so many. There were only twenty members of the couture group. I remember we invited 150 editors, and the first time 53 came. We offered to pay their way, but we had sense enough to make it optional. They could accept if they wanted too. I never knew who accepted and who didn't, because the bookkeeping was handled by somebody else. I remember those first fashion editors. Some of them were pros, they were okay, and others had never really seen a collection. They had seen selections of clothes in the stores but never the whole collection.

I: Because they'd never been to New York.

N: Well, I'm not sure, I don't know about that. In any case they had never seen a whole collection. One time I was in the elevator at 498 Seventh Avenue, and of course I didn't know them well, and they didn't know me. One of them said to another editor, "Are you going to So-and-so's collection?" and she said, "No, his clothes don't fit me!"

I: (Laughter) Marvelous!
N: I think fashion reporting has come a long way since then.

I: Yes, they were rather subjective. The dimensions of the whole idea of Press Week are really pretty broad. The idea of having an organized scheduling of showings of the most noteworthy clothes, and accessories and hair-dos and what-not. This was your concept then, and this performed a great service for designers and manufacturers, and it meant more to American women than they perhaps realized.

I found a quote from an Associated Press story written in 1968, but it certainly would apply to the Forties and Fifties as well. This writer said, "The housewife browsing through the ready-to-wear rack of Middletown U.S.A. may not have heard of her, yet Miss Lambert has influenced her wardrobe choices, the housewife's choices that is..."

N: Oh, yes.

I: ...by promoting fashion clients so that they become important labels in high fashion, worth noting and copying at lower price levels. Anyone who has heard of the World's Best Dressed Women list, or the Fashion Critics, i.e. Coty Awards, whether she agrees with the often controversial choices or not, has been touched by the world of Miss Lambert."

N: Oh! That's very nice. Who wrote that?

I: Well, it was not signed. It was in the A.P. dispatch so it went out to a lot of papers. Now speaking of controversy there was a lot of fracas later on, wasn't there, when you resigned from the New York Couture Group and then The Council
of Fashion Designers of America, C.F.D.A., wasn't it, organized.

N: Yes, but it wasn't organized for the Press Weeks, the Council.

I: What did happen?

N: The big ta-do was, like many organizations composed of both manufacturers and designers, there was a great conflict in the organization when they tried to set the opening market dates. That's still going on many years later, as you know. Designers have a tendency not to show up at meetings, but the manufacturers did. There were people, Herbert Sonheim was one, and Nat Bader another, who were very fine people but they thought like manufacturers, not like designers. They were making a drive to set market week dates, and they passed rules saying that people who did not conform to these dates would be thrown out of the Couture Group. I put up a terrible fight because knowing people like Pauline Trigere, Bill Blass, and I can't remember who else, but you know in a firm where the designer is in control he wants to do the best collection he can. If he's going to be a little late, if it has to be a week later than the dates that have been set, he's going to do it.

I: Excuse me, Market Week at that point was set up for buyers and press?

N: No, Press Week was completely separate, but the fact that the Couture Group was becoming a business-oriented organization instead of a publicity-oriented organization
meant that it would lose fashion importance. They ended by throwing out Pauline Trigere and Mollie Parnis, and Adele Simpson for not conforming to the market date. I said, "We cannot do without those people because they are influential designers, creative newsmakers."

I: This was something of a confrontation then between the business interest, manufacturers who were business oriented, and the creative designer...

N: Yes, that's absolutely true. So they said, "If that's true then we'll just do away with the Press Weeks ..." So I said, "Okay, then you do away with me because I'm not interested in the business side of this. We'll just forget it, and I will conduct the Press Weeks on my own."

I: Excuse me, the Couture Group evolved from the New York Dress Institute, then for a time there was simply the Couture Group. The point where you're now speaking, there is a division between the Couture Group...

N: Within the Couture Group...

I: ...over policy.

N: So I left and they decided to turn the organization into The Couture Business Council. I said to my clients, and to people who were not my clients but of interest to the press, "Let's continue the Press Weeks because it means first-hand information for the fashion editor." They said, "Fine, let's do it." So it has become the American Designers Press Week. It's a pro-rata collaboration by the participants.
They put money in the kitty, and spend it. You don't belong to anything, you just participate if you want to. Meanwhile, the Couture Business Council decided not to discontinue their press showings either, and conducted them for several seasons.

I: But at the time this first happened, the fashion editors were making a great fuss over how they had to run from one place to another. I don't know what they would do if they were in Paris and had to cover the ready-to-wear there where they're running all over town and being pushed and kicked and so on.

N: But you mentioned the Council of Fashion Designers, you're going to talk about that later?

I: Well...

N: Because that really isn't anything to do with Press Weeks, but it is an interesting thing.

I: Let's talk about that now. We certainly want to talk about that, and we want to talk about the Coty Awards and the Best Dressed list, and we want to talk about your book, and well...

N: The Council of Fashion Designers of America came about as a side-bar of my being a "hair shirt" to Senator Jacob Javits, because since he was the New York Senator and since fashion is such a major part of New York life, both the state and the city, I had always complained to him that he didn't pay enough attention to the interests of fashion, and didn't
try to help us promote American fashion. In fact, one
time I remember when Mrs. Truman announced scornfully that
she had no intention of buying an Easter costume, I wrote a
stinging letter to Senator Javits that didn't she remember
how there was such a thing as the fashion industry. It
was during some sort of recession, but she quickly went out
and bought one. So he was helping. One day he telephoned
me and said, "You know, you're always criticizing me and
making complaints. What would happen if fashion were
named as one of the arts? I have a bill before Congress
with Senator Pell to establish the National Council of
the Arts, and the National Endowment of the Humanities.
Suppose I put fashion into that list? What will happen?
The government cannot deal with individual firms. Who
would they deal with?" So I said, "You get the bill
passed, and we'll have an organization the government can
deal with." So I grabbed the phone and called some top
designers, and they came up here to my office and we set
up an organization called The Council of Fashion Designers
of America. It's an honorary society, with a charter based
on the American Institute of Architects because an architect
friend of mine sent us over their by-laws. C.F.D.A. has
turned out to be one of the most potent factors in the
growth of American fashion. Whatever they do, and they don't
do very much and they don't make a lot of waves, but every­
ting they do is distinguished and productive.
I: Do you recall the wording of the bill and the number of the bill?

N: No. I think I have it, but it's now The National Endowment for the Humanities. It was begun under Kennedy's administration, but President Johnson inaugurated it and signed the bill, and I was appointed to the National Council on the Arts for the first ten-year term.

I: So that made it official, as official as it possibly could be, that fashion is an art?

N: It was always spelled out that if you were on the Council you were not supposed to be representing any phase of the arts. You were supposed to know something about all of them. The first meeting I went to, I remember Agnes DeMille came up to me and said, "I know you're a nice woman, I've heard that from my sister, Margaret, but," she said, "I don't think you belong here. I don't think fashion belongs in this thing. I think it is not an art, and that's all there is to it." So for about a year and a half, I never asked for anything, but then about six months before my term was over I made a speech asking for $25,000 for the Metropolitan Museum to put on the exhibition called, "The Art of Fashion" that was what we called it. It was in the big halls of the museum, and I got it. It was a matching funds grant and we gave a party for Norman Norell, you remember, and got the other $25,000, and that's the $50,000 that put that show on. After that I got everything
that I asked for. It had to be voted on by the whole Council, so I don't think they were so antagonistic as they claimed.

I: No, not after all.

N: We did the first seminar ever held for costume museum curators. That was on a grant from the National Council.

I: This has no connection with the American Designer Showings except for the fact that some members of the Council are...

N: No. The Council of Fashion Designers of America is purely an honorary society that works to relate American fashion to the other arts. It sponsored the Costume Institute shows, the opening nights. The invitation reads, "The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum and The Council of Fashion Designers of America invites you to..." and that money we raise from the evening goes to the Costume Institute.

I: I didn't want to forget to mention the March of Dimes shows which you put on in the late Thirties?

N: Forties and Fifties, until the Salk vaccine solved polio.

I: Was this an innovation in fashion shows; had that kind of thing been done before?

N: I don't think anything that large, and anything with that sort of theme that related theater and the entertaining arts to fashion...

I: Did it precede the Coty Awards?

N: Yes, as I remember.
I: How many were there? Was there just one?

N: No, I did them for about 18 years running.

I: Where were they held?

N: At the Waldorf mostly. They charged $100 a seat for them in those days and they were always sold out the day after we announced one, because even if people didn't care all that much about clothes, they cared about seeing Judy Garland and all the stars modeling and performing as part of the show. I have a lot of photographs from an old file. They include one of Robert Redford with Elizabeth Ashley, Judy Garland, Helen Hayes, Cyril Ritchard, Beatrice Lillie and Mia Farrow and many more. We went on until the March of Dimes licked polio and they decided to make their effort for birth defects, and we decided to do something else. But, I think they continue to do wonderful work.

I: At the time when you began with the New York Dress Institute, i.e. which became the New York Couture Group and were doing Press Weeks, the Coty Awards started. Did they not?

N: 1942.

I: Yes, I have it here. [Looking through her notes]

N: I seem to have been awfully busy.

I: Yes, yes you had all these interests. 1943 was the first date with...

N: Well that was the first presentation. So it was 1942.
I: Are all the Coty winning designers, as you look over the list, are they all represented? Do you feel there are any oversights perhaps?

N: Perhaps there were oversights, but there were also discoveries. I remember when the jury told me that they had chosen Giorgio Sant'Angelo, I'd never heard of him. There were several instances where the designer was truly known only to the fashion editors and that's why...

I: Giorgio was really Pat Peterson's discovery wasn't he?

N: I think he might have been, but they mentioned that he had been featured in Harper's Bazaar. Plastic jewelry he was doing then. It seems to me that through the years the record of the Coty Awards has been spectacular. The insight and foresight of the fashion editor in sensing what a fashion designer does, or will mean to the public, is rather wonderful.

I: Now, these selections are made by a board of, a committee rather, of New York based editors, in two committees, one for women's fashions, the other for menswear.

N: Yes.

I: And the nominations for the Winnie, the top awards are made by this group and then the ballots are sent out to how many?

N: 450 editors, including the regional committee.

I: 450 editors in the whole country for the final choices. You did have some battles in the course of all this, or maybe they were just spats. Norman Norell sent his award
back once.

N: Norman was already in the Hall of Fame. He got angry when the jury gave the Coty award to Rudi Gernreich. Rudi that year had shown a coat with only one lapel, and Norman was such a classicist and purist that he bundled up his Coty trophy and sent it to me with a handwritten letter which I still have somewhere, saying "I have always treasured this and believed that it was a true tribute to talent, but I can not feel that that is true if they're going to give it to a man who makes a coat with one lapel." Then I answered, "You can send it to the jury, or you can throw it in the river, but don't send it to me because I'm just the co-ordinator."

I: So that's what that was all about.

N: But the main thing was that that's another one of Women's Wear's little contributions because for the first time in the history of the awards a journalist at the meeting went out and reported the discussion. They printed the story of Norman's anger and that's why it was blown up. Otherwise I don't think anyone would have known anything about it. It was a personal letter to me. She didn't know about the letter to me, but he did tell her he had sent it back.

I: Some of your critics have faulted you for what they say is your elitist, that's one of those vogue words today, view of fashion. This kind of comment seems to come up about the
time that the International Best Dressed poll is decided on.

N: You mean elitist in the sense of only rich people being on the poll, or who votes or what?

I: Yes, or perhaps you're only interested in designers who make very expensive clothes. That kind of thing.

N: I think designers are basically interested in making expensive clothes. Most of them are. There are notable exceptions that I tremendously respect like Rudi Gernreich who never did expensive clothes, and Anne Klein who never cared about expensive clothes. When Anne started she said the most expensive thing a woman should ever buy, the most she should ever spend, would be about $200 on a dress. As a rule, I think the creative designer sees fashion in terms of quality. If that's being elitist, I am.

I: What purpose did the International Best Dressed poll serve in the beginning, and what purpose do you think it serves today?

N: I think it's exactly the same as it ever was, and I did not start it, for the record. It began about 1924 in Paris. It was issued namelessly. It just said, "The French Couture today announced the list of the Ten Best Dressed Women." In some years the A.P. and U.P. had different lists, both with the same attribution. But I think it's only purpose is a record of taste, and the taste-makers of the period. Whether those taste-makers are rich or poor

42
really doesn't come into it. They have to be prominent or they couldn't set the pace. I don't think...maybe in the early days it represented great expenditure in clothes but today I think it doesn't. It's just people who know how to get it all together. I think we need that. Today if we think of Irene Castle, we think of a whole epoch. We tend to see personalities as symbols of their time. That's what the Best Dressed list aims to do.

I: It was quite newsworthy, let me see where is that (looking through her notes), when - I can't seem to find that clipping - Jackie was...Ah! "Stylists Scratch Jackie from Best Dressed List".

N: Oh really, when was that?

I: That would have been...'64, I think maybe '65.

N: Well, that was soon after the assasination, maybe that was just out of respect for her mourning.

I: It was the year that Mrs. Newhouse made the list, and this is from a Newhouse paper and of course they have a note saying that she was on the list.

N: I don't remember, but I could look up in the...I keep the press releases.

I: Well, is it really true as the girl in People magazine said, that you and Eugenia Sheppard and Mrs. Vreeland all sit around in the (a restaurant) over lunch and decide who these people are?

N: Mrs. Vreeland never goes to lunch that I know of, and she
has never been to lunch in the (the restaurant) that I know of. Eugenia is still perfectly furious about the story in People, because she says that the girl who came, that at first, I forget who it was but she is supposed to have said, "Oh, no...or she didn't think the person was...". I can't even remember what she said, but she said she never mentioned that person and she didn't have any feeling about her. I don't know where that came from because I don't recall it either. It was Lee Wohlfert of People who came and wrote this story. She and I and Eugenia all went on a television show where Eugenia told her off.

I: It was a piece of creative writing?

N: Yes, she claims that it was said, but I don't remember it and Eugenia said she didn't say it. There were other people there. If you're going to belong to a group to finalize something or decide, I do feel there is a sort of privacy that should be respected. So a person can speak his mind without being quoted, because it can be out of context. Also, if you're going to be honest, you may not want that person to know what you think, so it isn't really fair.

I: I've been reading about you. Did you always wear red shoes or shoes with red heels?

N: I love shoes with red heels because I love 18th Century fashion, and that was...

I: ...When the aristocrats wore them?
N: Yes, that's as near as I got to aristocracy.

I: You still see them at the Comedie Francaise when they play Moliere, they always have those shoes.

N: Yes, absolutely. But then in those days we had people who would put the red heels on for you, but you can't get them anymore. I used to get them from Delman, and Beth Levine...

I: Now, let me see... is it true that you used to be driven to your office in a limousine with leopard skin upholstery, and a liveried chauffeur?

N: No.

I: No.

N: No. When my husband was alive we had a car and driver. No leopard skin, and no livery. I rent Bermuda cars when necessary. Today if I have to go out at night... I figure that as a widow it's better to rent a car than hope for a gentleman to pick me up and take me home.

I: Was it the State Department that asked you to organize the two shows that you did in Moscow?

N: Yes, the State and Commerce Departments combined.

I: What kind of clothing did you take? Was it a representative group of fashion, or just the upper reaches of American fashion?

N: No, we had Sears in there, and Levis. But I had some sort of go round with a Congressman from Brooklyn. He got up, it was in the Congressional Record, and said, "That woman up in New York, she doesn't know anything except about all
those rich clothes and we want to show the Russians that we're just like everybody else." So I was interviewed and I said, "I don't want to show the Russians that we're just like everybody else. We are a capitalist country. We have wealth, and we have success and beautiful possessions we earn, and that's what I want to show. We want to show all the types of fashion. They don't have weddings in Russia, but our finale is going to be fifteen wedding parties." That was in 1959, and then in 1967 the Russians set up a thing called The International Clothing Exhibit, and they asked the American government, and there were 29 countries represented, and so the American government had me do a show there, and that was a staggering experience. It went for three weeks and they had five shows a day, we didn't do five shows but they had the rotating series of the 29 countries. The director of the Bolshoi was our director, and the models were treated like ballerinas. We were told exactly when we were to rehearse and so on. It was really very exciting to see all the clothes from all those countries too.

I: How were American fashions received there?

N: They went crazy! They threw flowers on the stage, and yelled and screamed. We were the hit of the show. We used some Russian models. We took I think 12 American girls and we had 12 Russian girls. I remember finding that one of the Russians could not make a fast change. After the
dress rehearsal I went back and arranged for another model to fill in for her. She burst into tears and rushed out. It was the biggest drama you've ever seen. She thought I didn't like her, her looks. I finally, through the interpreters, convinced her that wasn't the case, but only the timing. She said she could make it, and she did. We put her rack on stage so she could make the change.

I: What would you say have been the important contributions to international fashion that America has made? From our folklore and counterculture and mass production and creative design - what stands out?

N: The most obvious of course are jeans, which are American fashion, but I think we must count the shirtwaist and skirt that were the beginning of ready-to-wear, and were totally an American idea starting with the Gibson Girl.

I: Would that have been the precursor of separates?

N: Yes, though we didn't realize it at the time. I think the unconstructed dress, the unconstructed garment which Claire McCardell used long before anybody else was a milestone, too. Of course Vionnet and Chanel had made unconstructed things, but theirs were very technically complicated, very couture. Claire went back to the pioneer woman, the American country dress of the covered wagon time. I'm sure there are many others if I could think of them. Adrian with the shoulder pads created a whole epoch. I think Norell brought in elegant American simplicity.
I: In other words, the films certainly had a great influence on American clothes, the movies.

N: Adrian more than anybody else.

I: The frontier...

N: The frontier.

I: The cowboy...

N: The cowboy is an influence as much as the Chanel suit. The Eisenhower jacket is a very typical recurring influence, very American. I don't think you really could say that the "little" suit, or the "little" black dress were anything but American.

I: What about leisure wear, casual things to wear around the house? Isn't that something that the Americans having more leisure time because of the standard of living...no one else really had that kind of clothing.

N: Well of course, the mother of the tea gown, Lady Duff Gordon, was Canadian and worked in America.

I: Was she Lucille?...And even before ol' Jesse Franklin Turner. You do handle a great variety of occupations. You have a syndicated column as well as your public relations firm. Do you ever find that you bump into yourself when you're doing that?

N: I do, but I think it's a question between me and my journalistic integrity that's kind of ingrained. Also just the practical fact that I only have 60 papers, and if I want to send a press release I can hope that it gets
printed in about 200 papers. Anyway, I don't think that today the strictly "fashion" column has a meaning. I think people are interested in everything: personalities, travel, clothes, food, houses.

I: Do you think high fashion is dead, or that fashion is dead? We went through that tumultuous period when everybody was burying high fashion.

N: Yes, just like they said God is dead. No. You cannot separate people, their yearnings, their dreams and their inborn vanity from an interest in clothes. They say the first thing an animal does is to pick up something, a flower perhaps and adorn himself, stick it on himself somewhere. I think it's as basic an instinct as you can find, to ornament the body. So that we have to make the changing persona of humanity fit our ideas, I don't mean you and I, but the fashion world must try to keep abreast of these changes and fit into them and make them interesting. I think we've had some rough times when we didn't know what to do, and therefore people didn't know what to do about dress.

I: But there always has to be fashion. You can't kill fashion because as long as people do anything, wear anything or put anything on....It seems to me you have a very deep feeling for your country. I recall when we were in Italy at the time of the first Moon landing. I don't know if it was Venice or Rome, but we were all in this room watching
television and there was this "giant step for mankind."

I didn't see this, but one of the other editors turned to me and said, "Eleanor is crying!"

N: Oh, really!
I: And you were.
N: Maybe I was crying because...
I: It was a very emotional moment.
N: ...we had been invited to see this on television there, and the television turned out to be about five inches square and it was all in Italian. We could hear these American voices, saying things in American but there was the commentator saying, "Blblblblblblblblblblblblblbf (imitating Italian) in Italian. I was going crazy. I think it was frustration, but it was also patriotism. But everybody was crying as I remember. It was a great moment.

I: I don't know that they were, but you were. And we haven't talked about what I think was a great turning point for American fashion, and that was the Franco-American gala at the Palace of Versailles. Now that started with a lunch that you had in New York with Marc Bohan of Dior?

N: No, it started with Florence and Gerald Van Der Kamp. He's the curator of Versailles. We were all together visiting friends down in the south of France, and they were telling me that they needed money so desperately and they wished that they could do something. I had been there...
I: For furnishing the palace?

N: Yes. I had been in Paris and had been at their house, and had seen the little Marie Antoinette Theatre, and I said, "Why don't we try to do a fashion show in that theatre and make it a French-American show?" They thought that was fine, so I tracked Marie Helene Rothschild down to see if she would be the chair¬man because she's a great mover - doer in...

I: And Princess Grace was what? She was honored guest or something?

N: I don't know, but she wasn't on the committee. I don't know, maybe she had something to do with it through Baroness Rothschild. I came home and I got the American designers like Oscar de la Renta and Bill Blass.

I: Halston?

N: Halston wasn't involved in it at the beginning. They said, "How will we settle on five? We can't pick ourselves". So I went back to Paris, and Marie Helene Rothschild got Marc Bohan, Givenchy, St. Laurent, Ungaro and Cardin together. We asked them to pick the five designers that they felt were their counterparts here in America. So they picked the five. Then there was a lot of ta-do because one designer couldn't do it. I don't remember who, it was one that they picked. I called them from Oscar's office and asked them, "Who else would you want?" Because I really don't remember who it was that couldn't go, and they said,
"Galanos". and then he felt hurt that he hadn't been invited in the first place, so...

I: Well, in any case it was a great triumph for the Americans. They all carried on about our showmanship, and then privately they said that the clothes were terrific. They stomped and hurrahed and threw their programs in the air.

N: Yes, everyone threw their programs in the air, it was wonderful.

I: Cheers, and stomping and so on. It was...

N: Actually people like to say that the American show was so much better, but I felt we were wonderful there's no doubt, but the French show had a point of view that was correct. If it had been explained I think you probably would have liked it, because they had tried to re-create an 18th century palace entertainment on the stage. It would have been perfect if the audience had understood, but they just thought it was kind of old-fashioned. Of course it was old-fashioned, it was supposed to be, but no one ever announced that.

I: No, I don't think people did realize that, but there were some memorable moments certainly.

N: Did you go?

I: Sure I went. You don't remember?

N: I don't remember, I was too busy.

I: Yes I certainly did go.

N: All I remember was that we had no water in the theater.

52
There was no water and we had to...

I: Oh, and the models, the poor models. They had to send out for Evian for them. It was a...

N: I don't know what they'd do if it caught fire because there's no water.

I: No water in the palace at all?

N: I don't know about the palace, but not in the theater.

I: Perhaps not. Could be, but that's all very strictly controlled, as to what you can do in those places.

N: Yes.

I: Well, is there anything that you... what are you proudest of that you've done, and is there anything that you feel you've left undone, that you'd like to have done?

N: This sounds sappy, but I think the thing I'm proudest of is having brought the fashion press into contact with the designers themselves instead of just with their clothes. One person can't be a great machine, or a great power in this day and age, that's nonsense.

I: No. You've pretty much accomplished what you set out to do then?

N: I hope so.

I: Thank you.

N: Shall I die quietly?

I: No! Heavens no!

N: It sounds like an obituary.

(LAUGHTER)
I: It was not meant to sound...

N: I know.

(END OF TAPE)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>2, 15, 47, 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Art Dealers' Association</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Artists' Association</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Designer Showings</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Designers' Press Week</td>
<td>34, 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Fashion Critics' (Coty) Awards</td>
<td>27, 32-35, 38, 39-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American fashion designers</td>
<td>12-15, 16, 47-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Institute of Architects</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley, Elizabeth</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association of Dress Manufacturers</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Altman's and Company</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bader, Nat</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballard, Bettina</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banton, Travis</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellows, George</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergdorf-Goodman</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best and Company</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Best Dressed List&quot;</td>
<td>32, 35, 42-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bischoff's Department Store</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blass, Bill</td>
<td>5, 16, 33, 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohan, Marc</td>
<td>50, 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolshoi Ballet</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonwit Teller</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Breath of the Avenue&quot; newsletter</td>
<td>7, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigance, Tom</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Museum</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardin, Pierre</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie, Hattie</td>
<td>5, 13, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle, Irene</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanel, Gabrielle (Coco)</td>
<td>5, 47, 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase, Edna Woolman</td>
<td>17, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coburn, Julia</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Harry</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedie Francaise</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressional Record</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copeland, Jo</td>
<td>13, 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art</td>
<td>20, 21-24, 37, 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coty Awards (see- American Fashion Critics' Awards)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council of Fashion Designers of America</td>
<td>24, 33, 35, 36, 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couture Business Council</td>
<td>34-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couture Group of the New York Dress Institute</td>
<td>29-35, 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crawfordsville, Indiana</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Crystal, David
Curry, John
Cushman, Wilhela

Dache, Lilly
Davis, Tobe Coller
de la Renta, Oscar
Delman's
DeMille, Agnes
DeMille, Margaret
Dubinsky, David

Epstein, Jacob
Ernst, Morris

Fairbanks, Douglas
Fairchild, John
Farrow, Mia
fashion "designer" labels
fashion editors
The Fashion Group
Fashion is Spinach
The Fashion Newsletter
fashion writing
Figaro
Fort Wayne Journal Gazette

Galanos, James
Garland, Judy
Gernreich, Rudi
Gibson Girl
Gimbel, Adam
Givenchy, Hubert de
Goodman, Andrew
Gordon, Lady Duff

Halston
Harper's Bazaar
Hartl, Leon
Hawes, Elizabeth
Hayes, Helen
Hochman, Julius

Indianapolis Star
International Clothing Exhibit
International Dress Company

J.D. Dress Company
J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency
Jack Davis Company
James, Charles
Javits, Senator Jacob
Johnson, Lyndon Baines

56
Kennedy, John F. 37
King, Muriel 13
Klein, Anne 13, 42

**Ladies Home Journal**  19, 21, 25
**Lady in the Dark**  16

**Lambert, Eleanor**
American Fashion Critics' (Coty)  39-41
Awards  41-44
"Best Dressed List"  2-6
Childhood  20-25
Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
Council of Fashion Designers of America
Early days in New York City  7-10
Education  2-6
The Fashion Group  20
Fashion shows in Moscow  45-47
First job  3-4
Franco-American fashion show at the Palace of Versailles
March of Dimes' Fashion Shows  38-39
Marriage  11
Moves to New York City  6
New York Dress Institute  25-30, 33-34
on American contributions to fashion  47-48
on the necessity of fashion  49
Publicity career begins  10

**Lanvin, Jeanne**  5
**Lawrence, Elizabeth**  24
**Lawrence, Gertrude**  16
**Legal Aid Society**  7-8
**Levi Strauss and Company**  45
**Levine, Beth**  45
**Lewis, Mary**  14
**Lewison, Irene**  21
**Lillie, Beatrice**  39
**Lord and Taylor**  12, 18, 19
**Louis, Jean**  16

**McCalls**  19
**McCardell, Claire**  2, 13, 16, 30, 47
**Macy's**  12
**March of Dimes**  38, 39
**Marie Antoinette Theatre, Palace of Versaille**  51-53
**Market Week**  33
**Maxwell, Vera**  19
**Metropolitan Museum of Art**  2, 22-24, 25, 37
**Miller, Anna**  16
**Moliere**  45
**Moscow, U.S.S.R.**  45
National Council of the Arts 36, 37, 38
National Endowment for the Humanities 36, 37
New York Dress Institute 12, 27-34, 39
Newhouse, Mrs. 43
Norell, Norman 5, 16, 37, 40-41, 47

Onassis, Jacqueline Kennedy 43

Pace Gallery 6
Paris, France 2, 19
Parnis, Mollie 34
Parrish, Amos 7
"Party of the Year" 24
Pennoyer, Sarah 9
People Magazine 43-44
Peterson, Pat 40
Potter, Clare 19
Press Week 27, 30-34, 39

RAM Reports 9
Rattner, Abe 10
Redford, Robert 39
Reig, Ben 30
Rentner, Maurice 13, 16, 30
Ringling Brothers' Circus 10
Ritchard, Cyril 39
Rosenstein, Nettie 5, 13, 30
Rothschild, Marie Helene 51

St. Laurent, Yves 51
Saks Fifth Avenue 12, 21
Sant'Angelo, Giorgio 40
Schiaparelli, Elsa 5
Sears, Roebuck and Company 45
Shaver, Dorothy 16, 18, 20, 21, 29
Sheppard, Eugenia 43-44
Simpson, Adele 30, 34
Simpson, Annette 11, 12
Singer, Inc. 23
Smithsonian Institution 22
Snow, Mrs. Carmel 17, 19, 20
Sondheim, Herbert 33
Spear, Franklin 9

"Talking Shops" column 3
Tappe, Herman 13
Taylor, Francis Henry 24
Tobe Coburn School 25
Tobe Report 9, 25
Trigere, Pauline 16, 33, 34
Truman, Mrs. Harry S. 36
Turner, Jesse Franklin 12, 48
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ungaro, Emanuel</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.S.R.</td>
<td>45-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Government, Department of</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Government, Department of</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentina</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Der Kamp, Florence and Gerald</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Versailles, Palace of</td>
<td>50-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vionnet, Madeleine</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogue</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vreeland, Diane</td>
<td>25,43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weissman, Polaire</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney Museum</td>
<td>8,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wohlfert, Lee</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Home Companion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Wear Daily</td>
<td>1,41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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