ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

STEVE ARANOFF
PRESIDENT
LADY LYNNE, INC.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

DATE OF INTERVIEW
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INTERVIEWED BY
Mildred Finger
Lady Lynne, Inc. is an intimate apparel firm which operates as a family owned entrepreneurial firm. Its present president, Steven Aranoff, is the son of the founder, Morris Aranoff. In recent years the firm has grown by adding fashion products to the basics for which it was best known.
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STEVEN ARANOFF

ORAL HISTORY

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Q: ...for the Oral History Collection for the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with Steve Aranoff, son of the founder of Lady Lynne Lingerie Co. The interview date is February 25, 1983. The interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Steven Aranoff, you are the President of Lady Lynne, is that right? And...

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And would you then start...Tell us, please, where you were born, when you were born, and how you got interested in this business and when you came into it.

A: I was born in New York City in 1936, and I've always lived in New York City, or in the area of New York. Right now I live in Westchester. My early life was on the West Side in the Seventies. I went to Public School, P.S. 87, from the years...through the Eighth Grade. And I was accepted at Horace Mann High School, which was a boys' school at the time, and I had my doubts as to whether I'd want to go to a private school, and certainly I had doubts about going to an all boys' school. This was in 1949--I was 13 at the time.

Q: You mean 1959--No, '49. I'm sorry.

A: So, when I began at Horace Mann, I really felt a little bit out of my environment. All these fellows I used to play ball with in the streets on the West Side, and here I was, going to a private high school and had to wear a jacket and tie every day. It was a bit of an adjustment for me, but of course my parents were very anxious for me to go because it was important that you went to a good school. And with a private school like Horace Mann,
you had a very good chance to get into a good college, and after a lot of
difficult thinking, I decided that I would go.

At Horace Mann, once I got there, I had a lot of chance to
play athletics, which I was interested in. Of course, I did my work, and each year
I got better so that when I graduated, in my Senior year, I was improving my
grades right along and did better each time I took the college SATs or college
boards, and I got into Brown University in 1953, and I went to Brown. That was
in the Fall.

At Brown, my main interests were English literature and I had
an interest in law, but the more I began to take the very detailed history
courses, and I started to read documents of the Federalist papers and then
went to the Constitution in depth, I realized that I didn't....I liked the
concept of law, I was interested in that, but I didn't like the type of work
that had to be done to become a lawyer. So I dropped that idea somewhere in
my freshman year and I concentrated on English literature, which I was most
interested in.

Q: Did you have any idea of coming into this business?
A: Well, my father never really talked about business a lot at
home. Now, I don't know whether that was the way that most fathers were in
the forties and fifties. Maybe they felt that they didn't want to discuss what-
ever problems that were going on in the business at home, and they just wanted
to separate their lives. I know now I have a little bit of carry over of that.
I don't talk a lot about business at home, but I do, particularly with my
wife, discuss all my problems, all the things that go on that bother me. And
I think it put a lot of pressure on my father not to discuss...He might have
discussed it with my mother, unbeknownst to me. I have a feeling that my father separated his business life from his home life in the way that once he was away from work he was relaxed, and I think he wanted to get away from it. Because my father was mostly what in our business is called "the inside partner." His partner, Morty Cohen, was the sales head. He also, at that time, when I came into the business, had a general salesman by the name of Bert Glover, who is still with us. This is his 36th year.

So, Bert and Morty Cohen did most of the selling. My father did a little bit, but mainly he was the inside factory man. And after 25 years in the business—which is what I have at this point, in experience—I find the problems in the factory far greater than I had ever anticipated. The details are incredible; the problems that pop up that you have to solve. And I can understand why my father would want to separate the business from the home.

Q: I will ask you to talk about that aspect of it a little bit later, but could you just go back... I didn't mean to interrupt you... But to finish your schooling, and to talk about how you came into the business....

A: Okay. At Brown I... My personal life changed dramatically right before I went to Brown. I met Anita... She was known as Anita Reese then—she's my wife.

Q: R-e-e-s-e?

A: Right. And she has... We've been married since 1957. And we met in '52, right before I went to Brown. So my personal life changed. We went what they called "steady," at the time. And then we got engaged in '55, and married in '57. But at Brown, it was a fraternity life situation. I had
a lot of fun at Brown, and I was concentrating on my major, which was English literature, and that required a lot of reading and writing of essays, but not the detailed work that you constantly have to pore over with economics or history. And that's why I really had more fun at Brown than hard laborious work.

The beginnings of my interest in the business started around that summer of '53, when I started Brown. I began to work...And even before then, I might have worked a couple of times during the summer, for my father, in the factory. And July was a good time to work, because I was out of school and the factory was either half closed or people were on vacation, and I could fill in very easily in July and find myself useful. Which is an important element. I think that if my experience here was not a positive one during the summers, then I probably would not have wanted to go into the business on a full time basis. But it was positive. I had a chance to work occasionally with buyers, just if somebody...I was the only one here a lot of the time in the summer. My father and his partner occasionally took days off, so I did have a little bit of a chance to do a little bit of selling in the showroom. Work with the buyers, answer questions about deliveries that they might want to know. And also, I did work in the back, and I began to learn the business.

By the time I graduated I was planning my marriage, which was in June of 1957, I decided...I had decided even before, maybe three or four months, maybe six months before then, that I would definitely go into the business. And after my honeymoon, sometime the first week in July, I came to work on a steady basis, and I've worked here since July of 1957.

Q: Was your father's partner still alive at that point?
A: Yes, he was alive at that point. And he began to show me his technique of selling and getting orders and working with buyers. Now, as it turned out, he was a very difficult man. He was a very high strung individual, and I found it very difficult to work in any way like he did. But, just seeing him in action, so to speak, and watching the buyers' reaction to the way he worked was very educational.

At that point, when I first began working in July of '57, I started in the factory again, but I was doing a little bit more than I had been doing in the summer. I was given some responsibility by my father. I checked cutting tickets; I added up the orders in the book to find out what the best sellers were and reported that information to him; and, I began to learn all of the details in the business, which you have to know in order to be able to sell, and explain your product. I learned a lot about laces; I learned a lot about embroideries; I learned about straps and elastics and how to put a garment together; although I didn't sew, I was able to observe. And I began to learn the business in all of its complexities.

At the same time, I was doing more and more selling in the showroom, and I eventually worked during market week with buyers, first the small stores and then the big stores, and I began to get more confidence in presenting the line and more satisfaction when I was able to get orders and see my work actually bring in business. And from that point I began to....I think I made a total of three trips, swings throughout... mostly throughout the East and Middle West of this country, where part of our business was. And with Morty Cohen, our salesman... He made, I think it was three big trips a year, and I made two in, I think, '58 and '59, and I got to see stores
face to face. To me they had only been names, whether it was a Hudson in Detroit or a Kaufman's in Pittsburgh. They were just names on boxes to me, working in the shipping department, or seeing orders come through. I didn't know what the stores looked like, I didn't know what the potential was. I did know the buyers, but I got to see them on their home turf, and that was very good for me. Very educational. Very important. Of course, there were some very difficult moments, because, as I say, Morty Cohen was a difficult person, and it was extremely tough for me to be in his presence for long periods of time, but I just had to do it and I did it.

In those days, in the late fifties, the business swings were four weeks, and that meant...

Q: I'm sorry...Business trips?

A: Business trips were four weeks in length, and that meant being away from my wife for that amount of time. And that I didn't like at all. I used to call home a lot, but...

Q: Was that the pattern of the industry, that...?

A: I think so. Because Morty Cohen, in those days, was in his late 60's; that might have been a carry over from when they didn't fly very much and it used to take that long just to get around by train or car. But we flew mostly. Occasionally we took a train. But we went to Pittsburgh, we went to Chicago, Detroit, down to St. Louis and Kansas City, and it took a long time to get to every major buyer in all of those big cities. Also, Morty used to entertain. He used to take buyers out to dinner when he was on the road. I think he used to like to have company, and also felt that was a way of cementing a relationship. So I used to go, of course, with him to dinner,
and those were times I particularly didn't enjoy it, because...As difficult as he was to be with, he was even more difficult in a social situation. He would explode at a waiter...It was rough.

So...I got through that period of time, and in late '50, which I think was my second trip, my first child was born, and I was away...The trip was November, she was born October 27th, so I was away four out of the first seven weeks of her life, and I really didn't like that part of it at all. But...

An interesting sidelight is that this is the person, my oldest child, Susan, who is now at Lady Lynne, working with us as a new employee of the firm.

So, I had the combination of factory work. I worked in the showroom. Now I'm on the road working with buyers, with Morty, and that was really how I learned the business. By the '60's I had a second child born--Eddie was born in 1960, April of '60--and my responsibilities grew and I became more and more aware of my potential at Lady Lynne and my future, and I started to...I was always serious about my work, but I really, I think, by the time Eddie was born, I was sure this was the place where I was going to stay. And I began to apply myself in more creative ways wherever possible. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed trying to find ways of saving cuttings; if I could make one cutting instead of two, preparing a style. Or if I could possibly think of a new way to do things...My father was very receptive to any suggestion I would have. He wouldn't always take it, but he would listen.

Q: Could we just take a few minutes now...As long as you've
gotten to the point in your life...You know you're going to go on with it. How did you see the business overall? Did you have designers? What was your product mix?

A: Right. Lady Lynne began producing woven...I believe it was some form of crepe...In the '30s and the first part of the '40s. But when nylon became available on the market in the late '40s, after the war, most of the competitors to Lady Lynne who were in business at that time made nylon, because it was cheap. Much cheaper than any woven crepe, or certainly cheaper than silk or anything like that. And those businesses began to grow. By the time I got into business in '57, we were really a very, very small firm in comparison to names such as Vanity Fair and Van Raalte and...

Q: Do you remember what your volume might have been at that time?

A: Yes. Our volume...and it's an unusual setup...Our volume stayed between around a million and a half or two million dollars for a long time. It...There were times that we made more expensive items than those that we had sold, and less volume. And whether they were more profitable than the less expensive items is questionable. We probably had a profitable...The same amount of profit, the same amount of business...We had to hold our costs down. There wasn't these tremendous fluctuations in inflation as there are now. So we did that business for a long time. Maybe fifteen years.

Q: So, essentially, you were in what's called daywear.

A: We were essentially in daywear, and we stuck to woven. We didn't really go into the tricot to fight the brands head on. We felt our niche was in beautiful laces, beautiful workmanship, and shipping on time, and
the brands were big but they had a lot of problems. They had problems delivering and so on. And we kept our niche, and as long as we were making money we kept doing that.

Q: Did you consider yourself a moderate priced firm or...?
A: At that point, we were pretty much moderate priced. We were competing with Barbizon. Barbizon is a company that's a large....similar to the Vanity Fair and Van Raalte of its day. But they were really very, very basic in their styling.

Now, as far as designing is concerned, we had a designer at the time. A lot of his styles were classic designs. We maybe changed the lace or changed the embroidery, but the designing was really how the lace would be put on the garment. Because we dealt in woven, and we wanted to keep our prices fairly much the same as they always had been, we pretty much.....not anything more than Barbizon in dramatic styling, but we had little subtle touches that made us prettier and, as I say, our workmanship was excellent. So we had our customers that wanted to carry a little bit higher price than Barbizon. So, we were woven, and we felt ourselves a very basic firm that made beautiful products and could compete with Barbizon, but we never really went after the other big brands that made nylon. So the designing part was more or less very, very small amount of changes year after year. Just little bits, in the lace and maybe in new fabric, but basically we did crepe and satin.

Q: Was the designer basically a technician or...?
A: She was creative, but she wasn't really what...Nowadays she would be considered more a technician than creative. She really didn't
have that much creative talent. But the firm went along for many years that way, successfully. We had some difficult times in the late '60s. I think the worst times we had were in the early '70s, when business was difficult and there was a recession. And our business had grown to maybe $2 1/2 million at that time, and all of a sudden it went down a little bit. We had been able to keep our costs in line for a long time, and as long as we maintained our volume or did a little bit better, we could make out OK and earn a profit. But as soon as we started to lose business, we had a real problem. And at that time, the designer retired. She really wasn't that creative anyway, and we had interviewed many designers, and had different ones for maybe five years and managed to squeeze by. But the times were tough, though, and in the lingerie industry, the hardest blow of all was when women started to wear pants, which was in the '70s. And our business had always been petticoats and full slips, and sure, you had the customer who would wear that, but it wasn't as large a number of women as it used to be, in the '50s. So we had a problem. We tried things such as body suits, print body suits. And in those print body suits we had all kinds of production problems. We weren't used to making collars and tabs and snaps and buttons and buttonholes, and we just had to do something, because we couldn't keep going out showing slips and petticoats and getting turned down. So we struggled. It was very, very difficult. In the early '70s. As happens in fashion, we were very lucky that it did turn around, and knit dresses became very big in the '70s, and firms such as Goldworm and Kimberly helped tremendously, because they started to come out with their dresses and their suits. And when that happened, not only did women need petticoats and slips to wear under the knits--because they wanted some under garment--
but they also found that those garments, those knits, clung to their body and
what was very fortunate for us was that the crepe that we had been using all
these years, the woven crepe, turned out (and taffeta too, although crepe
more than taffeta), turned out to be the best fabric to wear under knits.
It had a certain combination of fibers--nylon, dacron and rayon--which worked
extremely well under knits. And we began to put hang tags on all our garments
(because we had it tested in several laboratories to make sure we were abso­
lutely accurate), we began to put "non-cling" lingerie on every single garment in
crepe. And our business started to improve dramatically.

At the very same time, in the mid-seventies (we had been in and
out with several designers), we interviewed one who is now with us--has been
with us since 1975--and her name is Lynn Green. Lynn was able to give us not
only the laces and trims and the look that we wanted in our basic line--which
was the bread and butter and the heart of our business--but she was able to
give us some new creative designs, and we began to be known, little by little,
year after year, as a very innovative lingerie firm. We were one of the first
to see the trend toward "teddies" in '78, and put in a line of "teddies," and
we became very active in that field. And Lynn was very good in constructing
the garment as well as choosing the lace and the fabric, and we began to have
success not only in our basic business, with the knits (and as the knits fell
by, then other fabrics came on) and women still wore petticoats and slips under
them, but we began to sell tap pants and camisoles and even now, beginning with
the chemise. So, we had a new dimension to the business...fashion...And this
not only was extra dollars in business for us, but it gave the buyers that
bought only the basics, let's say the stores that maybe couldn't afford or
didn't really believe that fashion was that important, and I'm going now to '76-'77, now, when you say fashion isn't important you won't get a buyer who'll agree with that. But in the late '70s, there were a lot of buyers that were conservative and taking the slow road on fashion, and a lot of markdowns from other people in fashion all along. So they were careful with what we made, and everybody. But anyway...We had the buyers that would buy the basics, knowing we had the fashion, even if they didn't buy the fashion, still thought of us in a much more positive way; that we were growing, and they bought our basics with a little more confidence.

At the same time the fashion business began to grow, we were able to maintain the basic business, so that our volume had grown to about $3 million.

Q: Of which the basic still represented...

A: It represented over $2 million. Then we began to see...One of the strongest points I think Lady Lynne has is to be able to see a trend, and, since we are what is considered in the business a small firm, a small to moderate sized firm, we're able to capitalize on it the next day, literally. Whereas our competitors, big giant firms, have board meetings and discussions with all kinds of limitations as to how quickly they can move. We can decide Monday that slips and petticoats are important, and by Tuesday you can begin production on it. And that is exactly what happened. I use the slips and petticoats as an example, but that literally is what happened. Slip-petticoats, a lot of the skirts began....

Q: The distinction you make is that a petticoat to you is a half slip....
A: Yes, a petticoat and a half slip...It's hard, because some of the younger buyers call....What we call petticoats and half slips, they call them slips, so that word is a very...You have to be precise when you're dealing with generally a younger, newer buyer, she'll say, "I want to look at your slips," we take that to mean full slips with a shoulder strap, and she often-times takes it to mean petticoats. So, there is a difficult distinction there, but we are aware of it and usually settle it in a few minutes.

Q: You never made the Anne Fogarty kind of petticoat, which was a full petticoat.

A: Not in my time. I think it was just ending in the late '50s. I remember seeing boxes of bouffants floating in the back somewhere, because they were so difficult to pack and box. But they weren't important from '57 on.

Q: Right. So you're talking essentially about the half slip as a petticoat, and....

A: Yes. It could be a little bit flared, and it could sometimes have a flounce on it, depending upon the silhouette of the time. But it basically is, as you say, not the full flounce....

So, the slip-petticoat became a tremendous business. We had an ad in the Times for Saks Fifth Avenue. We had an ad for Lord & Taylor in their booklet, which showed a woman striding and you saw the slip and how she was able to very comfortably move with the slit sides. And that became the rage, and our business started to grow even more.

Q: Slit sides?

A: Slit sides on the petticoat. Right. So, that one style,
that one change of silhouette in the late '70s was tremendous for us, because we did see it first...

Q: Where did you pick it up?

A: Well, as I was starting to say about what I think our strong points are... We deal with buyers on a very close basis, where our business is very, very strong in New York City. For example, our top three accounts nationwide--our top four accounts--would be Saks, Bloomingdale's, Neiman-Marcus, and Lord & Taylor. That shows you the strength that we have in New York. As a result, any time we would hear any kind of a discussion of fashion--whether it's color, whether it's style--we would think nothing of calling up our three or four favorite buyers and just discussing it with them.

Q: Do you find that there are still buyers who have been buyers long enough to have a history in the business and....

A: Not too many that have a sense of history of the business. But there are... The advantage of having a buyer who doesn't have a sense of history is that when she does see a trend, she's more open to it. The buyers that have a sense of history might be more cautious, because a lot of these trends die very quickly. So you have on the one side, let's say, a new buyer who doesn't really know what's been happening in the last 20 years, but if she sees a trend toward slip-petticoats, she's more apt to go after it than, let's say, an older buyer who's seen trends fall flat, and will be a little more cautious. But this particular trend--the slit-side petticoat--was a big one. And the ones that went after it, promoting it to its best advantage in ads, were the Lord & Taylors, the Saks, and they were buyers that hadn't been buying very many years. So we found this particular style, which we had discussed
with all of our people. As I say, that really is...Our strongest point is our close contact with our buyers. We won't listen to one buyer and say, 'Okay, she's the one that we want to go by.' But we will listen to maybe ten. And if a large number out of the ten agree on something, and we agree to begin with...What we're really asking for is confirmation of our own thoughts. We wouldn't call anybody up and say, 'What's new?' Or, 'What's doing?' and pump them for information. What we do do, is from our own sources, from our own reading materials, from Lynn, our designer; from traveling to Europe and seeing what the women are wearing; whatever...We will develop thought processes on the next season. And if we're unsure of it, we'll then check with, say, our top ten buyers. And if a large number agree, then we'll go ahead and make some styles in that look. And that's what happened with the slit petticoat. We checked and everybody seemed to be doing well with it, and we rushed production, and we had a tremendous success, and you began to see Lady Lynne in every single catalogue throughout the country. And we became more famous.

With the success of our reputation having been enhanced by being in the catalogues and being seen, by being known not only as a good solid supplier of basic merchandise...Because, after all, even though Bloomingdale's has the reputation of being first in fashion (and they're our number one or two account for the last several years), we still do 85% of our business with Bloomingdale on basic crepe half slips. And camisoles. And that, I think, is unusual. I think it's a fact that most people wouldn't necessarily know. But by knowing that, that the basic business is so strong, we were happy to keep that business intact. And then the fashion business became a plus business. But by being in the catalogues, and by being better known to the buyers,
by being thought of as innovative, we began to develop a certain reputation which a new part of the industry came to us for. Now, the part of the industry that I'm referring to is the catalogue industry.

In 1976, Bloomingdale's came out with a lingerie catalogue called "Sighs and Whispers," and at the time it was thought of as avant garde. Mainly...Not that the merchandise was that unusual, but the photography was. It was photographed in Paris by a very famous French photographer, Guy Bardin, and he used very sombre lighting and put heavy, what we would consider to be punk rock makeup on the models, and the garments were almost secondary. As a matter of fact, the catalogue did well. In fact, we had a gown in it that did extremely well. A very sexy gown. But by and large, the reputation of the catalogue was even stronger than the actual sales. But when lingerie began to become more interesting to department stores, because of "Sighs and Whispers," other people tried to imitate it because everybody was talking about it, and little by little, you began to see the more progressive stores put in a sexy, daring item in the catalogue. Whereas, up until that time, they were very conservative. Almost every department or specialty store was afraid that they would offend a woman if they would show a nipple or pubic hair, and this now became...They still were not avant garde at all, but little by little they began to show a little bit sexier, daring garment. The people that took the Sighs and Whispers idea and brought it to its natural fulfillment were catalogue people that didn't care so much about every customer that walked in, because their business was mail order, and the firm that comes to mind that was tremendously successful with lingerie is "Victoria's Secret." They began
about four years ago, and have taken off on the Sighs and Whispers theme, and they show not the punk rock type of photography, but they show very sensual photography; very beautiful backgrounds. Victorian settings. And they have had a tremendous growth in the last four years. So much so that they, from just being mail order, they now have six stores in the San Francisco area, and they were bought recently by The Limited, which is a tremendous chain of stores, primarily in the Middle West, and The Limited hopes and thinks they can build the chain to as many as 250 stores. Now, whether it's possible to translate a very expensive, sexy type of store with personal service—the sales people in these stores are very highly trained and are, generally speaking, very lovely looking women.

Q: You're talking about Victoria's Secret still...
A: Yes. Whether they can translate that to 200 communities, or 250 communities, is questionable. But they certainly have the desire to do it. They've been successful with the six stores, and have been tremendously successful with the catalogue itself.

But from Victoria's Secret, Spiegel's, which had been purchased by, I believe, a German company seven or eight years ago, began to see the importance and the excitement of advertising lingerie. And they put out a catalogue called "Private Lives" about two years ago, which is strictly a lingerie catalogue. Also very beautiful, beautiful photographs, and quite high priced, even though they were a little more moderate than Victoria's Secret. They've been successful. So that people such as "Frederick's of Hollywood," which was always known for their racy kind of merchandise, put out a high
class lingerie booklet called "Private Moments," and they've been successful. So, little by little, we're beginning to see the effect of fashion, of excitement in lingerie, of drama and the appeal to the new woman, the feminist, the woman who is a feminist and feels she should be able to show her femininity; the woman who is a non-feminist who just wants to...Let's say the traditional sexy role, wants to be able to buy this type of merchandise.

And the mail orders do allow the women to buy secretly, so to speak. Maybe their friends wouldn't see them buying this, or something of that nature. Or, it gives a chance for men to buy sexy lingerie for their wives or girlfriends. And it's become a very big part of the business. And an interesting adjunct to that is that the first department store to come back at these large catalogue houses is Bloomingdale's. They're bringing out their first book since...They had one success in the Sighs and Whispers--I don't remember the name of it--and that was about 1978. They haven't had a lingerie book since. And this April of '83, they are bringing out a lingerie book called "Desire." And that will...I haven't seen any photos, but I'm sure that will do very, very well. And, you can look forward to the department stores really competing with the catalogue people.

Q: You're represented in that?
A: Yes. We're in that. Competing with the catalogue people for the very customer that they started in the Sighs and Whispers book. So, our business has been successful in both ends, both the fashion and the basic business. Just this past October of '82, two designer names came to us and wanted us to represent their designer label. One of them was Cardin--the largest licensee of his name throughout the world (I think he has several hundred licenses)--
we considered that and we rejected it because we felt it was just too commonplace a name, and our design is to build on (maybe slowly), but to build on a more exclusive name. So we did choose the second person who came to us, which was Guy Laroche, and in November...Actually they came to us in August and September. We began designing, Lynn began designing under the Guy Laroche name, with some help from France, although Guy Laroche, in an interview with us, told us he hadn't had experience in lingerie, and was looking for things to design. He did some sketches and sent over some ideas of his own, having to do with color. But Lynn is responsible for the line, and by November, which is spring market, we had a full line of 18-20 pieces. We utilized the satins and crepes we use, but we did beautiful antique embroideries and laces, and for the first time bought our silk, and our own French laces to go with it. That enabled us to retail a chemise, make a garment that would retail at $100, which is the most expensive piece that we've ever made, exclusive of some Chinese silk, which we had in the past.

So, the Guy Laroche name was launched in November and we had a cocktail party at the Doral on Park Avenue. It was very, very successful, from that point of view. We had a lot of press; we had the buyers in the next week of market, and the orders started to pile in. We estimated doing approximately $300-400,000 on Guy Laroche in 1983, which is the first year. And as of this date, we have already booked almost $500,000 in the spring alone. So, we're tremendously happy with it.

Q: Do you think it's because it's the Guy Laroche name, or because of the design?

A: Well, it may be a little bit of the Guy Laroche interest.
I don't think the name is that well known to most of our buyers.

Q: No.
A: But they do know it's a French designer, and he has his own boutiques throughout the world, and he does have one on 57th Street in New York. So some people are aware of the name. It helped a little, but mainly it's the style, in my opinion, that will sell. It would never be the designer name alone. Through the years I've seen Yves St. Laurent, Givenchy--many, many larger than Guy Laroche--fallen flat, particularly in day wear. Most of the firms that have used those names have been branded firms, large firms, and they're....Almost exclusively they're making nylon, and there isn't too much they can do to dress up nylon as a fabric. And their laces are not.... They don't have the experience of dealing with imported French laces; not as much as we do. And as a result, Givenchy, Yves St. Laurent--all of those names--have fallen by the wayside. The only name that has been successful in the last 15 years has been Christian Dior, and that was made by Chevette Lingerie, which is a firm similar to ours, a little larger in its approach to fashion.

Q: When you talked about fashion earlier, and the development of importance of fashion as an aspect of the business, when, for example, did you first start going to Europe, which you obviously are doing at this point? When did you start to go, what do you think you get out of it?
A: Okay. I actually went to Europe when I was 19 years old, not in any way interested in fashion at that point, but it did give me the chance of having been there, and I felt comfortable when I was planning a vacation in the early sixties, which was the first time I went back after that. I felt more comfortable having been there. But when I went over in the '60s and '70s,
I mainly went over to see what the small lingerie shops in Paris and London and Milan and Rome were showing. And what I found was that they were showing very specialized, very fine, almost exclusively 100% cotton; 100% silk, which really didn't relate to our business at the time. We were into poly-crepe—a mixture of nylon, rayon and poly. We were into satin and taffeta, and those fabrics did not sell in Europe. So there wasn't anything that I really gained from the trips from the point of view of design. I did get to see the importance of fashion by observing what was in the stores and what the women were wearing. Whereas when I'm in New York, I'm either at work or I'm on my way home, or I'm going to a movie—I'm not really aware of looking for fashion at that particular moment.

So that when I was in Europe I was more keenly aware of style...

Q: What countries do you think were interesting to you, are interesting to you, in particular?

A: Mostly, I happen to enjoy going to Paris more than any city, so France is certainly...and now with the Guy Laroche tie in, I was able to get to see his collection in November of '82, his full pret-a-porter and couture collection, so I would say Paris, France is the most interesting for me. In the Women's Wear everyday I do certainly think the Paris influence is tremendous in ready-to-wear. But, the main interest in fashion at this point, from the practical point of view, is to be very much on top of what happens in the next season's designs. Now, Lynn, of course—my designer—is very, very aware of all these trends, and we'll sit and talk about it and discuss it, and I'll tell her what my buyers are telling me and she'll tell me what she's hearing from her influences, and eventually we'll develop, between
the two of us, what the goals are in design for the next season, and she'll go ahead and do it.

Q: Do you use such sources of fashion information as 'Here and There' or in any of those?

A: Well, we have Fashion Newsletter, which we get (Bowman puts that out). And we get the French Vogue and... Mostly magazines, sometimes from my trips...Lynn has sources from the fabric people and the lace people, for color, and we get information from them.

Q: When we talked about, again, Europe--Are you doing any exporting of your own product?

A: At this point we're doing a little bit, just from...by being in business and having a reputation that we do, we have accounts in Germany and in France and England. But our business is very, very small on the export level. There was a trip that I made just recently, a month ago, to Paris, to the Porte de Versailles showing, the showing of lingerie, which was the first time that the Commerce Department put together a U.S. pavillion at that show. There had been independent, mostly large American firms at the show, but they were interspersed throughout the whole arena. This is a U.S. pavillion, and I think there were 14 firms, including Lady Lynne, as part of that show.

My reaction to the show was that I was very interested in meeting the different people from the different countries to find out what their preferences were, and as far as what we possibly could export....And I found very much what I had found in the '60s and '70s. That they were still mostly interested in silk and cotton, and they were not interested in crepes and satins that we made, and that we were so successful in selling.
The show itself, aside from the fabric point of view, was interesting, because I did make contact with a firm in England that produces higher priced silks than we do, and even though I don't have a license for Guy Laroche, I am making now for the first time "Lady Lynne silk."

Q: You don't have a license for Guy Laroche for...

A: ....for Europe.

Q: For Europe. Yes, yes.
A: I only have it for the United States. So, therefore, I only show the Lady Lynne things in Europe, and I had very strong reactions from the buyers that I work with on our own silks. We also began a program.....

Q: Are these imported from China?
A: Well, we began a program three years ago importing silks from China.

Q: The finished product or...?
A: The finished product. It was a very unusual situation. Bloomingdale's was running a big China promotion. They run a country a year, and that year it was China, and it was very, very successful promotion by Bloomingdale's. What they needed, though, was merchandise made in China. And they had buyers and merchants and different people, like fashion coordinators, who went over to China, mostly to Shanghai and Beijing and Canton, and tried to make contact with some Chinese manufacturers. What's difficult there is that the government owns all of the production, and it was difficult for Bloomingdale's to have their own styles. They might be able to go in and pick up an old fash-ioned camisole, a slip that they might have been making for the last 20-30
years in China, but it was difficult for them to create new styles. Lee Fabrini, who's the fashion coordinator at Bloomingdale's, is excellent. She persisted and was able to get some of her own designs and her own patterns made for the show, but not a lot of styles. She needed help, and she called upon us to try to contact the contacts she had in China, and try to make some nightgowns, which she was not successful in having done on her own. I was put in contact with Bryce and Arlene Bowman of Bowman Trading, who had been going to China for six years, and they made some Chinese T-shirts and some little knit and woven cotton shirts and pants, and they....The contact they had in silk shirts turned out to be the contact that I needed for silk nightgowns. We started to do business with China that season for Bloomingdale's, who placed an order for 600 silk nightgowns, which retailed at Bloomingdale's for $150 each, which was far greater a jump in price than we'd ever...Our most expensive gown to that point might have been $50-60 retail.

Q: Incidentally, you mentioned once before the word "gown." When did you diversify into nightgowns?

A: Oh, I haven't been talking much about nightgowns. Well, on and off. We've been making them for the last 30 years. On and off mainly because when we were very busy, gowns are much more difficult to produce and they always took a back seat to whatever daywear we were producing. As a result of the difficulty in producing nightgowns, whenever we had a production problem, it would be the gowns that would suffer. So our reputation in delivering everything we showed and sold was a little bit shaky in sleepwear. We had a lot of loyal friends and some very big stores that liked our designs, and they...
would come in and buy whatever we could supply. But the silk nightgowns were something that we had a production problem on. We had to make sure they were made right, and we had to make sure we had them on time, but basically all of the entire garment is made in China and shipped complete to us. The first season it worked very well. We got our production in time for the Chinese show, the Bloomingdale show. We sold every price of the balance that Bloomingdale's did not buy to other customers, and we began a relationship dealing in silk in China. From the gowns, we went to our natural strength, which was daywear, and we made silk camisoles and tap pants and bikinis. We began the next season to sell them, and we've continued since that time. It's now 2 1/2 years, and we've invariably sold everything we've brought in from China. My wife and I made a trip to China. My wife is an opera singer and she performed solo concerts in Shanghai and Beijing, which is a phenomenal story in itself. She was picked up at the airport by the Culture people. I was picked up at the airport by the Textile people, and we just hoped we'd wind up together.

But the contact was made through Bowman, we made the trip to China, my wife and I and Bryce Bowman, and solidified our position.

Q: I'm sorry. Is that B-o-w-m-a-n?

A: Yes. And now we are known throughout the market as, really, I think, the only importer of Chinese made garments, particularly in daywear. There are garments that come out of Hong Kong, some of which are made in China, some of which are made in Hong Kong, but they're not designed and executed entirely by the manufacturer. They might be something that the manufacturer might see and buy from a Hong Kong dealer. We actually design through
Lynn Green our own styles and have the production made for us.

Q: What's the lead time for China?
A: The lead time is six months.

Q: Six months. What's your ordinary lead time?
A: Ordinary lead time. It varies. I would say on a camisole and petticoat it would probably be six weeks. So...but the prep...We don't have a tremendous amount of styles coming out of China. We limit it to maybe four or five pieces a season, so we can control it, and that has worked very well. So, we do have this silk interest, going through the Chinese promotion to the Guy Laroche, and now we're doing some for Lady Lynne, of our own. Not with the Chinese look or Chinese embroidery, but our own lacy looks, which we would normally make in crepe or satin.

Q: And when you speak of crepe or satin, you mean rayon crepe or rayon satin.
A: Well, they're all a mixture of nylon, rayon and polyester. Fabric made in this country, mainly by Jaunty Mills.

Q: Do you do any offshore production--forgetting China for the moment, Taiwan or...?
A: All of our production, I would say, up until the last four years, all of our production was done either at 105 Madison, where we've worked for 20 years, or East 33rd Street, where we are now. In the last few years, as our business has grown to over $4 million, we've had to produce some work outside of our factories, in New Jersey or...

Q: Contractors?
A: Contractors.
Q: Yes. Whom you don't own.
A: No. We hire them to do a certain amount of work for us. We pay them their price, we agree on the price we pay them, and that's....
Q: When you talk about the contractors, or even the people who work on your premises, are you ILGWU? Is this....?
A: Yes. It's Local #62. And anybody that does work for us in the contracting or...Of course, all of our workers are ILGWU workers.
Q: Do you know how you settle prices? Is it anything like the garment industry?
A: Well, yes. We settle prices...Well, the normal procedure would be...And we give them mostly basic garments, garments we've made for 4-5 years, maybe a different lace but basically the same silhouette, in large quantities. And we know what it costs us. And we ask them their price. We give them some samples, and we ask them their price.
Q: When you say "them," you mean the contractors.
A: Yes. And if the price is out of line, we try to find out why their price is so high, and if the price is in line with what we expect to pay them, and what we can pay....And naturally it's going to be more than what we pay our girls because they have their own profit program. But if we can accept their price and have it fit into our price structure, as it exists, then we do that. And that's mainly how we do it.
Q: Just a couple more areas. When you talk about markets--You say there are five markets a year at this point?
A: Right. There are five markets a year, but the main market
is the November market, for spring, and that is more or less duplicated in January. And the big market for Fall is in May. Now, there is a pre-market, a pre-May market, which is in March for warm wear and for... In this case, we're going to be showing silk this March, because we're going to have difficulty getting enough fabric and lace, we want to have an advance of orders on it. So then the pre-May market... And then there's a post-May market, which is in August.... Now, all of these markets come. They come 2-3 months apart, and a lot of time there is a repetition, to remind the buyer of a style that she may have not had the money to buy the first time we showed it to her. Maybe, for example, you show a style in November, she doesn't have all of her spring money and is waiting to see how she does at holiday time and selling what she's left with. And, therefore, the January market, she may place an order at that time, on the very same styles you showed her in November. The same thing will happen in May and August.

Q: Are you... Do you... How much of your business is done in the New York showroom, and how much is done on the road, and how do you handle the road?

A: Well, it's difficult to say how much is done in the showroom. We don't have a lot of orders written in the showroom from the big stores, primarily because their money, the way they work their dollars is intricate. They have to figure how much each of 10-15 stores is going to get of a certain style. So, generally speaking, the showing is in the showroom. We more or less have an idea of what they're going to buy, both from past history and knowing the buyer, and also from follow up phone calls 2-3 weeks after market. We'll go
over the notes again with them, on the phone. So it's difficult to say how much is actually written in the showroom. But the merchandise is shown to every single major account in the showroom.

Q: In the showroom. Do you have a road force?

A: We have a salesman in California--Dick Simon--who's had an office for 10 years, where he sells Lady Lynne as his daywear line. He also has a robe line. So we're well covered on the West Coast, and our business is growing there. We also have hired a salesman who's been with us for a year now--in Minneapolis--and he covers the North Central part of the country, and he was just given Kansas City and St. Louis, so that he can make the whole swing in the middle of the country.

But most of the selling is done by our Sales Manager, Bert Glover, who's been with us for 36 years, and myself. Bert has key accounts in...He has some key accounts in New York, and I have the rest. He has Neiman-Marcus, and travels to Dallas, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Boston, Cincinnati... So he has quite a few cities that he goes to, on occasion, when the timing is right. But there are so many markets that he doesn't travel as much as he used to, and I don't travel as much as I used to, because by the time we get to see a buyer in November, you know she's busy in December with her holiday business; she's coming back in January. And she's coming again a few months later. So we do make spot trips. I just made a trip on Tuesday of this week down in Washington, to Woodward & Lothrop, which is a very good account. The buyer just had a baby and she didn't have a chance to come in in January and that...

Q: So that was a special reason.

A: Yes. It was a special reason.
Q: When they want management decisions on catalogues and things like that...

A: That's all discussed in the showroom. Generally, what will happen is, for example, they'll discuss the spring catalogue, and catalogues are important. Even if they're not, all lingerie catalogues—Bloomingdale's "Desire," lingerie certainly has a place in almost every catalogue that a store puts out. And they will come to us in the November market and say, "We have a spring book going out in February or March," and will discuss what's available for that delivery. They'll discuss what they need from us, what they want, what they like. And we have a difficult time sometimes, not only in delivering a new line by February—because generally the spring market production begins in January—but also we have a difficult time in certain cities where 2-3 stores in the same city want the same item. We want to be fair to everybody, and we try to do the best we can and give it on a first-come, first-served basis.

Q: What has happened to specialty store business over the last 10-15 years, with the proliferation of department stores and their branches? Do you see a change in pattern?

A: A lot of the... There's a group of stores called Specialty Stores which are fine stores—Berger's in Buffalo and Godchaux in New Orleans, Frost Brothers in San Antonio—very fine stores. That group has picked up a number of stores, from other buying offices that have not been successful; they've lost some of their own, older stores. So I think there's been a shift in importance. The real strong specialty stores are stronger than ever, but there are a lot of smaller stores that haven't been successful.

Q: Do you know a way... Can you give me a rough ratio of
department stores to specialty stores? In terms of the total business that they do?

A: I would say, since we...if you're going to consider....the moderate sized specialty store...plus the smaller stores, the boutiques and that...We have 800 accounts, and of the 800 there may be 150 that are large stores. So we have a lot of small boutiques that buy from us. The dollar amount might turn out to be...I wouldn't include Saks Fifth Avenue as a specialty store, even though some people consider it a specialty...I would say any large store, no matter how fine, like Saks or a Neiman, I would put that in the department store category...I would put only a smaller store in the specialty store category, and I would say that the business may be 70% department store, 30% specialty store.

Q: And a last question...In terms of the future of the business...In terms of the succession of the business, do you see it as a business that might someday be acquired by somebody, or do you see it as a business that will continue to be run by family?

A: That's a very good question. We didn't touch on that.

Over the years, as our business has gotten more and more successful, particularly in the last eight years, we have had feelers by people who would be interested in taking the business over. And in every case we have not gone beyond just the talking point with any of those people. My personal philosophy is going back to what I mentioned about my father's old partner, Morty Cohen; his business was almost his whole life, and he entertained constantly and that was very important to him. I have a more personal view. I don't spend a lot of time entertaining buyers. And I think that represents the fact that I don't
consider the business to be that important that I want it to impinge on my own life, private life. And, as a result, as long as business is good and the company's profitable and I enjoy doing what I'm doing—all of which is true—then I'll continue to do it the way that I have. And my father, also, has never really wanted to grow so big or be taken over by somebody else where we would lose control. The fact that we're small; the fact that we have most of our production done right here, on the floor; have 10,000 sq. ft.; we have a factory behind the wall where we're speaking now—We're on top of it; we enjoy it; we control it. I don't see any take over. I don't see any buy out. And that would not be my decision down the road. Right now that's the way I feel. But, we do have another Aranoff, or an Aranoff/Van Dolsen in the family. My oldest daughter, Susie, is now in the business, since November of '82....

Q: Would you spell "Van Dolsen"?

A: V-a-n D-o-l-s-e-n. Which is her married name. She is now in the business, and the decision beyond the few years that I'll be in.... Going back to what I was saying that the ultimate decision of what will happen to the business, whether it will stay in its present form or change, could be partly the next generation. Now, Susie's in the business; I have a son, Eddie, who's in the insurance business now. At some point he might come into the business. And I have my youngest daughter, Sharon, who's 17, and she's very interested in fashion. She just recently won first place in a retail contest in Westchester County. She's certainly interested in fashion and in business. She might come into the business. And those decisions would be decided by all
of us, including my father, as long as all of us are active. And as the years go on, the position of the decision making will change. I think we will all be involved in the decision, and beyond what I feel now, I don't really see any change, but it could change.

Q: I had said that was the last question. Really the last question is, what would you tell a young person about the possibilities in this industry, assuming that that person did not have a family connection? How do you feel about it?

A: You mean somebody who would want to come into it? A small business...?

Q: Well, an F.I.T. graduate, for example. How do you feel about the lingerie business for...?

A: The lingerie business, I think, is a good business to go into. In fact, a lot of buyers who have become Merchandise Managers and Vice Presidents, a large percentage have come out of lingerie. Somehow there is a combination, which is the same as the combination of our business, of fashion and everyday business, basic business, which you find in very few departments. You get that mix in lingerie. In foundations, it's more heavily weighted to basics. But in lingerie--daywear, sleepwear--it's a good combination. And in ready-to-wear, it's more heavily weighted toward fashion. So, I think the reason that lingerie is a good business to go into is because you do get that mix. And I feel that the interest has to be there. If the person is graduating or is just interested in coming into the apparel business, they have to have somewhat of a feel for lingerie. I don't think that it involves anything more than
wanting to do the work, and if you do have that desire, to work in the field, I think there is enough interest to keep a young person active. Whether it's the design, creative, factory part of it, or in the selling part of it.

Q: Thank you very much.
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