I hereby give the tapes and transcriptions made of interviews recorded on May 26, 1989 to the Oral History Library of the Fashion Institute of Technology, for such uses and purposes as the Director of the Oral History Library shall determine.

MEMOIRIST

Signed
John Cosentino

Date
7/26/90

INTERVIEWER

Signed
Lynn Felsher

Date
7/31/90
Dear Ms. Felsner:

This letter will confirm my understanding and agreement with the Fashion Institute of Technology with respect to my participation in a series of interviews conducted by the College's Oral History Research Program.

1. The interviews will be taped and a transcript made of the tapes. The tapes and transcript (collectively called the "Work") will be maintained by the College and made available by the College in accordance with College rules and general policies for research and other scholarly purposes.

2. I hereby grant, assign and transfer to the College all right, title and interest in the Work, including the literary rights and the copyright, except that I shall retain the right to copy, use and publish the Work in part or in full until the earlier of my death or Dec. 31, 1996.

3. This letter contains our entire and complete understanding.

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

Date 7/26/96

ACCEPTED AND AGREED:
THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

[Signature]
JOHN COSENTINO

b. November 25, 1922
Paterson, NJ

Company president

C. Cosentino Co., Inc.
Interview with John A. Cosentino regarding C. Cosentino Company for the Fashion Institute of Technology, conducted by Arlene C. Cooper at Boris Kroll Fabrics, 979 3rd Avenue, New York, on May 26, 1989

COOPER: Mr. Cosentino, please tell me when and where you were born.

COSENTINO: I was born on November 25, 1922, in Paterson, New Jersey.

AC: What is your position with C. Cosentino Company?

JC: My position with C. Cosentino was President. We've sold the company during the last year to Boris Kroll Fabrics. I am now Sales Manager of the Cosentino Division of Boris Kroll Fabrics.

AC: Thank you. That clarifies a confusing point. Please tell me about your parents' background. When and where were they born?

JC: My mother was born in Paterson in 1891, and my father was born in Italy in 1886. He came to America in 1901 just to visit an aunt who lived here. The rest of the family never came. Since Paterson at that time was a textile/silk manufacturing center, the first job he got was in the silk mills, and then he went on. He started as a weaver and became a loom fixer. They had a silk school in Paterson at that time, where he learned construction of fabrics, designing, and so forth. Then, he became a mill superintendent until 1928, when he started our company.

AC: When and how did your parents meet?
JC: My father, I think, was working in the mill and my mother was working in the office at the mill. I don't know the name of that company. They're long defunct, I'm sure. But I don't remember.

AC: When did they marry?

JC: 1916, I think.

AC: Do you have siblings?

JC: No. I was the only child.

AC: About the establishment of the company by your father in 1928, were any of the members of your family involved in the textile industry?

JC: My mother had uncles and cousins who were in the textile industry and ran a weaving mill, but I don't think that had anything to do with my father starting his business.

AC: So he left a position as a mill superintendent.

JC: He left a position. At that time, he was in Paterson at that time, but he had been a superintendent in Long Island City, too, at one point.

AC: Was there a significant silk weaving industry in Long Island City?

JC: Not anything like the size of the Paterson silk establishment. But yes, there were several mills there and there are still a few left.

AC: Please tell me about the founding of the company.

JC: Well, I was six years old at the time, so I don't
remember a lot. [chuckles] But I know my father bought some looms which were used but fairly new, because the silk industry had gone through kind of a depression or panic in the early 1920s, so there was lots of machinery available then. I think he bought the looms either in Pennsylvania or New York State somewhere.

Our mill property had two buildings -- one large, one small -- each with two floors and a basement. He started on the first floor of the smaller building, which he rented. The other larger building was used by a ribbon manufacturer. Then, from there, he moved to the second floor of the large building and, finally, we bought the whole building and used it all.

AC: When did that happen?

JC: I would say right after the war, because I'd just come into the business.

AC: What type of looms were they?

JC: They were Crompton and Knowles box looms, which means you have four shuttles on each side of the lay. So you have a combination or your can run seven shuttles. You have to have an empty box. Then, later, we have Crompton and Knowles pick-and-pick automatic looms.

AC: How many looms were there at the beginning?

JC: When he started? I think about twelve..
AC: How did that compare to other Paterson silk mills at the time?

JC: At that time, there might have been some with hundreds of looms - especially the narrow plain looms. Jacquard mills weren't as big.

AC: The Crompton looms were jacquard looms?

JC: Crompton and Knowles, yes. Crompton and Knowles was the loom-maker in the United States that made fancy looms, looms that would weave multiple shuttle fabrics. The Draper Corporation made the plain looms for the cottons, sheetings, and things like that; both of whom are no longer making looms.

AC: Is the original equipment extant?

JC: No, no. We were using some of it up until a year ago. When Kroll bought the business, it was scrapped. We're still using some of the silk looms, though. They were moved over to Kroll's plant and we're using those.

AC: What types of fabrics were produced?

JC: In the beginning, pretty much all silk for dresses and neckwear. Not so much neckwear, but scarves and things like that. Then, in probably the early 1930s, he went into the home furnishing - upholstery, drapery, mainly upholstery fabric.

AC: Why did he make that switch?

JC: I think it was a more stable kind of market. It
had seasons, but not the kind of seasons that apparel had, when you have to have a fall line and a spring line, and you have to have samples ready and produce goods in six weeks, and maybe close the place up for a couple of months in between seasons. Upholstery never had that problem.

AC: Were they low-, moderate-, or high-end fabrics?

JC: Everything I think we ever made was high-end, probably as high-end as you could make, which I think was the reason that we survived all the years when a lot of other mills did not.

AC: The demand for high-end --

JC: High-end, I think, held up better. People often prophesized that I would be pricing myself out of business. But I think more people priced themselves out of business with low prices than they did with high prices.

AC: Where did the designs come from?

JC: Well, from documents, from designers, artists. Those were the main sources.

AC: Were they on staff with you?

JC: No. We used free-lance designers.

AC: Was there a certain group of them that you called on regularly?

JC: Oh, in those days, there were -- I don't want to say "hundreds," but there were probably a dozen people we knew, who made designs. There still are
artists. But then, I think you had more who had not only an artistic ability but a technical ability, who would know what kind of fabric would be produced from their artwork. I mean, it's easy to buy artwork, but it isn't so easy to buy artwork that's easily adaptable into a jacquard fabric.

AC: Would they put things into repeat for you?

JC: Yes. They would put things in repeat.

AC: Would they submit the designs, or would you commission the designs from them?

JC: We, I think, would tell them pretty much the kinds of things we wanted. Some of the point paper designers -- A point paper designer is a person who makes the design on a grid from which the jacquard cards are cut. The ones we used mostly had their own sketchers working for them and with them so, quite often, they did the whole package for us. Card cutters were different, though. They were different companies. The point paper designs went from the designer. What we call "designers" are point paper designers. We used to call the others "sketchers." The artists were called "sketchers."

AC: How did the jacquard card part of it work - the card cutting? That was was a separate company?

JC: That was a separate company, yes. Oh, I can think
of a half dozen or more in Paterson at that time.

AC: So they were nearby.

JC: Nearby, yes. Oh, sure. They had their own trucks. They would pick the designs up from the designer and they'd take them to their plant and cut the cards, and then send the cards to us. If you need more than one set of cards -- if you want to run the same pattern on more than one loom, you need more cards -- they would repeat the cards.

Cutting was sort of on like a piano, where they sat there and just cut each either hole or not a hole, depending on what the design called for. Repeating was done differently, much quicker.

AC: How long did it take to have the first set made usually?

JC: It would depend on the number of cards in the set. That would be determined by the number of picks per inch times the number of inches of design.

AC: The range of time might be --

JC: Oh, the range of time might be a few hours to a few days. Some sets of cards might have thousands of cards. Of course, that would take a lot longer.

AC: The company was founded in 1928, right before the Depression.

JC: Yes.

AC: What was the effect of the Depression on the
business?

JC: I can't think there was a lot of effect. I mean, the business prospered all through it. It was better in 1938 and 1940 than it was in 1928. Of course, there was nowhere to go but up [chuckles] when he started in 1928.

AC: Were other mills equally as lucky, equally as fortunate?

JC: The people in the upholstery area, yes, did quite well - especially in the late 1930s through the wartime and into the early 1950s. And there were a lot of us then. I'd say from the mid-1950s on, the attrition started. As an example, when I came in in 1947, we had a manufacturers association with twenty-four members. There were twenty-six members, maybe, and there were still another ten mills who did not belong to the association but were involved in the same industry. So, say there were thirty-six jacquard manufacturers. Today, the association, if it exists, it exists very informally and has four members.

AC: Is that the Master Weavers?

JC: That's the Master Weavers Association, which I'm not sure is still extant. It may be defunct. I think the last negotiation we had together was three years ago. This year, the negotiation was handled individually. And then, there are a
couple of other mills in the Paterson area who are not members. So I don't think there are more than six or seven mills left.

AC: So the Association functioned as a negotiative body.

JC: That was the reason for the Association, yes. That started, I'm sure, during World War II, when there were problems of mainly finding ways to give people increased wages in compliance with the laws because we had wage and price controls in those days.

AC: How did World War II affect business?

JC: I think adversely for two or three years. I mean, there was a certain amount of government business available, but for a mill like ours, it just didn't work very well. There were severe shortages of yarns. But right after the war, everything became available. Probably the most prosperous years that industry ever had were 1946 or 1947 to 1950.

AC: And that would have been true for the upholstery.

JC: Certainly for the upholstery. I'm not so sure about the apparel, but I would guess.

AC: In the first few decades, who were the Cosentino customers?

JC: I'm not so sure in the beginning. I think some of them were -- I know when we started in the
upholstery industry, there were upholstery fabric
jobbers. Some of them are still our customers
after all these years.

AC: They're in New York City?

JC: They're in New York City. Yes, almost all have
their headquarters in New York City. We had
customers in Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia.
That was about it. And then, in the 1960s, we
started to sell to furniture manufacturers. But
the jobbing business is the main part of it - I'd
say eighty-five to ninety percent still.

AC: How long did your father remain in the business?

JC: Until he died in 1955.

AC: How old was he then?

JC: Sixty-nine.

AC: Your own early background and training -- Can you
talk about that?

JC: I was born in Paterson, but we moved to Clifton
when I was a year or two old. I went to public
school in Clifton and went to Clifton High School
for a couple of years. Then, I went to Montclair
Academy in Montclair. Then, I went to Harvard
until 1943 - from 1940 to 1943, when I went into
the Army. I had infantry basic training and then
was transferred to the Chemical Corps as an
anthropologist. [chuckles] The Army was trying
to decide how big faces and heads were for gas
masks. So I worked at MIT in the Chemical Warfare Service Development Laboratory and at Edgewood Arsenal until 1946. Then, I went back to college, night school, with one term to finish. I graduated in February of 1947 and went into the business.

AC: What kind of degree did you get?
JC: A.B. in physical anthropology.

AC: Not exactly preparation.

JC: No, not really. Then, I was called back into the Korean War and spent fifteen months at the Army Chemical Center in Maryland. We had had our first son at that time, so that was not bad duty. That was kind of fun, really.

AC: Did you know when you were at Harvard that you would be going into the business?

JC: No. I thought I probably wanted to go to medical school at that time. So I really didn't have any intention of going into the business.

AC: What changed your mind?

JC: Well, the fact that I was sure I would never be a doctor. It was probably the path of least resistance at that time.

AC: Your father was very eager to have you?

JC: No, I don't think he was. No. I think he would rather I'd gone on to professional school or something else.
AC: How did you start out when you came to work for the company?

JC: Oh, I started out doing just about everything. I never became a skilled mechanic or weaver, but I knew generally how to weave. I don't think I ever learned how to fix a loom, but I knew what a loom could do. I learned how to make a design. There was an old gentleman, whose name I can't remember now, who ran sort of a private tutoring school for designing. He did some designing himself. I went to him two or three times a week for three or four months and learned something about fabric construction. It was on-the-job training other than that.

AC: You became an executive with the company?

JC: Sure. My father was the President, so I became a Vice President. [chuckles]

AC: How long did that take?

JC: A month maybe. I don't know. [chuckles] I don't remember.

AC: What was it like, working for your father?

JC: It was good. I mean, he gave me the opportunity to do whatever I wanted. He never interfered. He said, "Do what you want." I'd ask for his advice and he'd tell me what he thought he would do. He said, "But do whatever you want," which was good because he didn't live that long after. I was
there from 1947 to 1950, then I went into the service. I would say maybe six years with him. I wish he'd lived longer because we would have been a good team. He was more interested in the mill than I was, and I was more interested in selling and the administrative part of the business.

AC: So you became owner of the mill yourself upon his death.

JC: Yes.

AC: Your responsibilities then changed insofar as you also had to take on the --

JC: Yes. Then, I did everything. I was the President, Treasurer, Purchasing Agent, Sales Manager. In a small business, you do everything.

AC: How large a business was it at that point?

JC: Oh, we had forty-five to fifty employees.

AC: About how much yardage did you produce in a year?

JC: Not much - a hundred and fifty thousand yards or something like that.

AC: How do you feel that the silk industry has changed since your early days?

JC: I don't think that I was ever in the silk industry as such - not as the silk industry was back in the 1920s and before that, when it was mainly kind of a plain goods industry and the dress fabrics, tie fabrics industry. I was in the upholstery business, which was more cotton than silk. We
still used silk, but it was a different kind of business. It was really almost part of the furniture business because everything we did eventually wound up almost everything. Some was drapery but, for the most part, it wound up on furniture. So we were more involved as an adjunct to the furniture industry than we were in the silk.

But I remember there were silk dyers and rayon dyers and cotton dyers and other people whose businesses were, each one, involved only -- A few of them had multi-fiber operations. But most dyers were pretty much specialists in specific fibers.

AC: So you would have to determine at the beginning of a season which fibers you were going to use?

JC: Yes. I don't think we thought about seasons as much because you hoped that you would make things that would sell for years. We are now making things that we brought over to Kroll that we made first, I think before I came into the business. So we have some things that have been going forty-five or fifty years.

AC: How would the determination have been made as to what fibers would be used?

JC: I think you always would start thinking about silk. If it could be produced in silk at a price
which would produce enough volume, you would do it in silk. I don't think there was that much market for silk, so then we'd use cotton. I think we used more maybe ninety percent, maybe eighty-five percent, cotton, and then some rayon. Rayon got to a point where it was almost a natural fiber, it had been around so long. [chuckles] We always did produce silk. But at one time, I don't think more than five percent of our production was silk.

AC: And today?

JC: I would say it's about the same today.

AC: Five percent, roughly?

JC: Yes. But I think with more emphasis on it, we could sell more silk today.

AC: So the advent of rayon --

JC: The advent of rayon really put the traditional Paterson silk industry out of business, when people were buying rayon dresses and acetate dresses instead of silk dresses.

AC: And it also, then, made a tremendous change in your business.

JC: I don't think it made that much change in our business because the upholstery business was -- No, I really think that we went on doing about the same kinds of things because we started using a lot of cotton back in the 1930s. Even at the time when rayon was replacing silk in other industries,
I think that ours was fairly stable and that we never had to make drastic changes.

One of my competitors used Bemberg, which was an acetate rayon. When Bemberg became difficult to get or the Bemberg Company went out of business, he was distraught. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he switched from Bemberg to nylon and never missed a beat, really. Bemberg is available again, but for a while -- It was a German company that went through some problems during the war. It was taken over by an American, and then they finally went out of business. So it was a real problem for people using Bemberg. Bemberg was a beautiful fiber and still is.

AC: Did you, at any point, use the fibers like nylon, the newer, man-made fibers?

JC: I don't think we used a thousand pounds of nylon altogether. Nylon always had sort of a bad name in our trade. When you're talking about the top of the line, people want silk, cotton, linen, wool. And anything that has a synthetic connotation, it sort of loses a little bit of its luster.

AC: Was that so even at the beginning, when they were novelties?

JC: I think nylon came in in hosiery. Nylon stockings were what made nylon go, really.
AC: The company is known for high-end upholstery fabric?

JC: Yes.

AC: Is there a particular image within that? Is there a Cosentino look, as it were?

JC: Oh, I think there is. I haven't always been aware of it, but people tell me, "We always know your goods when we see it." So I guess there is. We always tried to do it the best we could. We didn't cut any corners. I always produced the fabric without thinking of what the price was going to be. I mean, I knew if something was going to be way out of line that maybe I wouldn't do it, or maybe I would if I thought it had a market. But for the most part, I think we tried to do it well, and then price it after it was finished - not try to make the fabric for a price. I think the company I'm with now has the same approach.

AC: Is there a way that you could characterize the Cosentino look? I'm sure that's amorphous.

JC: I would think high-quality cotton, matelasses, damasks, and then fabrics that don't readily fall into any one category - things that are what you might call "novelty" fabrics.

AC: And the color range? Has that changed?

JC: Good design doesn't ever change and good quality.
In fact, the same kinds of fabrics that were made a hundred years ago are still being made. But colors change. We've often changed the color range of the fabric that's run for ten years and some of the colors are not so good anymore, not so popular anymore, and put a whole new color range in.

AC: How do you determine a new color range?

JC: Mainly, our customers would do it for us. They're on the firing line. I mean, they're closer to the consumer than we are because they have decorators in the showrooms and the decorators know what they want. It filters down to the mill.

AC: So you respond to that request.

JC: We respond, and from experience you know which colors. Some colors will always be good. I remember when I first came in, you could run the mill on dark green, sort of a forest green, and a lipstick red. Those were the two big colors. And then, there was gray and turquoise. But other than that -- Now, I think every loom is running on a different color. There's much more variety available.

AC: Which colors do you think are always good?

JC: The beiges and naturals.

AC: As far as the design process goes, we talked a little bit about that earlier - about the artist
who you called the "sketcher."

JC: We call them "sketchers," yes. "Artist," I think, would be more appropriate.

AC: The process has remained more or less stable since the beginning of the mill? You're still working the same way with the sketchers and the point paper?

JC: Yes, except now, designs can be made from the sketch by computer without the point paper. So you eliminate the point paper designer. Not in all cases. We use both now. Some designs are cut by computer and others are cut from point paper.

AC: How is the decision made?

JC: I think anything that is very complicated probably is done better with point paper. If the sketch can be delineated by weaves or easy to delineate, I think probably computer. I'm sure that it will all be computer in the not too distant future because there just aren't that many people going into the designing business.

AC: Is there anyone encouraging them to go into it?

JC: Probably not. I think they learn in the textile schools, but it's a pretty tedious job to sit there all day and put little dots on graph paper [chuckles] and have to know where the dots go.

AC: What about the variability of the number of colors in a design? Is that an issue?
JC: Yes. The number of colors in weaving is limited by the number of colors the loom can handling in the filling. I think looms now run eight colors. Our looms now run eight colors in any sequence in the filling. Of course, the warp, you can put as many colors as you want.

AC: Does it in any way affect the cost of the textile, the number of colors that you use?

JC: Yes. Because, well, the quantity and the number of colors. If you're going to do, say, a plaid with five colors in the warp and five in the filling, there's going to be a lot of dying expense and preparatory expense before you start weaving. It may take longer -- usually does take longer -- to make a short warp than it does a long one, especially when you're using a lot of colors. We've made warps that have taken a week to make, or even sixty hours of warping time, because the colors were put in in such a way that the warper had to be changing what we call the "bank," the spools or the cones, several times to finish the warp because the sequence of colors was such that you just couldn't put them up once and keep running the machine. You had to take them down, start over again.

AC: So that would increase the cost considerably.

JC: Oh, yes.
AC: Did you utilize dobby or shaft looms, as well?
JC: Yes.
AC: How many of those?
JC: Did we have? I think we had only about eight shaft looms when we finished our business, and we had about seventy jacquard.
AC: Where there shaft looms at the beginning, too?
JC: Yes, there were shaft looms. Actually, I think the first dozen looms were shaft looms.
AC: Do you know when the jacquards came in?
JC: Oh, probably in the early 1930s.
AC: Were the problems presented by the dobby or shaft looms different?
JC: No, the loom is the same - dobby or jacquard. It's just that the jacquard has the jacquard machine and the harness and you don't need the dobby.
AC: In terms of breakdown?
JC: Well, yes. I think you probably had a little more breakdown in jacquards because you had the jacquard machine as well as the loom to contend with. So, yes.
AC: Were there any special problems inherent with the shaft looms?
JC: No, not that I can remember.
AC: We talked about the computerization now of some of the point paper work. What other technical
innovations have affected your business?

JC: Well, I think the biggest innovation in weaving has been the advent of the shuttleless loom, so the shuttles are obsolete now for the most part. The looms are run without shuttles. They're rapiers and waterjets and airjets and different things that will get the filling from one side of the fabric to the other.

AC: And the looms that Kroll took over from you were --

JC: They were shuttle looms, but there are only a few of those. Kroll's looms are shuttleless looms. So all the looms they're running, except for the few of ours that we're still running some very fine silks on, are shuttleless looms.

AC: Any other technical innovations?

JC: Warping is done much quicker and better. They're able to use much larger warp beams, meaning you can put a lot longer warps in a loom. Winding is improved dramatically, winding from skeins to cones or from perforated tubes to cones. Every aspect of the business is improved. Maybe in the larger, mass producing area, textiles more than any. I think the textile industry has always had a bad reputation for not being progressive, but I don't think many industries have done as well. If you look at the amounts of money spent on research and development by textiles, they rank right up
there among the best. I mean, compared to oil companies - not even close.

AC: Did your budget include a research and development component?

JC: I don't think as such. If there was something we wanted, we'd buy it. I don't think I ever -- Well, I'd think, "Can I afford to do this?" But I don't think each year I'd sit down and say, "Well, I can spend so many thousands of dollars on machinery." No, I didn't do that.

AC: Most of this new machinery has been made domestically or overseas?

JC: No, no. I don't think any of it is now. It's all, for the most part, European.

AC: German?

JC: German, Italian, French.

AC: Can you give me a breakdown of the jobs performed in the mill?

JC: Well, starting with the yarn, you'd have winding. You'd have to wind the yarn either from skeins to cones or from tubes to cones. When shuttles were being used, you would wind the yarn from the cone to the shuttle, to the bobbin that goes in the shuttle. That job has been pretty much eliminated. Warping. Knotting or twisting. Twisting came first, and then knotting. Twisting was when they twisted the new warp to the old warp
by hand. And then, knotting machines became available which tie the warps in with the machine. Then, there are weavers, loom fixers, inspectors, pickers or menders who go over a fabric: Are there any loose ends or dirt? They get the fabric presentable for shipment. Mending is something that we never did, but we do at Kroll. It's more a woolen industry type of operation, where heavier fibers can be mended so that they're in perfect condition. Finer fabrics, you just can't mend very well.

AC: How many people were there working in each of these components at the time of the silk business? Can you recall?

JC: I can't -- Winding, I think about seven or eight. I'm not sure.

AC: Warping?

JC: Warping. Well, I'd say we had the equivalent of four people warping. But we made a lot of warps and did a lot of winding for the size of our business because we did a lot of short warp, short orders that we had to do a lot of preparation before we -- There were mills that were making ten times as many yards as we were without making nearly as many warps.

AC: And the twisting and knotting?

JC: Knotting. Well, again, knotting, we had two
people doing it at two machines.

AC: Weaving?
JC: Sixteen or eighteen.
AC: Fixers?
JC: Three.
AC: Inspectors?
JC: Two.
AC: Pickers?
JC: Well, inspectors and pickers did pretty much the same thing.
AC: Did that proportion pretty much stay the same from the early years of the business?
JC: Maybe the proportion and the numbers -- I'm not so sure because I remember my father telling me that the weaving expense should be twice what all the others were. That was sort of a rule of thumb. It got to the point where, unless the wages changed so that the people who were doing other jobs got more and the weavers maybe stayed -- I don't quite know why, but I know that it got to be about fifty-fifty rather than two-to-one.
AC: What about the sexual breakdown of the workers?
JC: I would guess almost sixty men to forty women. Women were always winders; sometimes warpers, but not too often; never loom fixers; but were pickers and inspectors. Weavers, about half and half. I always thought women were better weavers than men.
AC: Why was it that -- I think you said -- they were never warpers?

JC: I didn't say "never." We did have one in the years that I was there. [chuckles] So, in forty years, we had one woman who was a warper. I think it was just that they probably didn't get the chance because warping was a little better job than winding.

AC: So it was the pay scale?

JC: Pay scale. The pay scale, as far as I was concerned, it was the job; it wasn't the sex. A woman would make as much as a man if she was doing the same job.

AC: I think you mentioned that in the use of menders now, that's a function of using a lot of wool. Are you now making fabrics with wool?

JC: Not on the Cosentino line, but the Kroll line has always used a lot of wool and make beautiful woolen fabrics.

AC: But then, the Cosentino line remains primarily cotton and silk?

JC: Primarily cotton, spun rayon, linen, silk.

AC: Silk is used in both warps and wefts when it's used?

JC: Yes. Well, it may be used in both; it may be used in one or the other.

AC: Where do you buy the silk from?
JC: We buy it through a dealer, a throwster, a person who buys the raw silk and twists it. Throwing is twisting the silk. I think it could come from China or Korea, but a lot of it now comes from Brazil. The price of silk is very high at the moment and there's a big shortage. I don't think much is produced in Japan, if any. They're too high-tech, I think, for the silkworms. We used to buy silk from Italy, too, years ago. I don't think they're exporting any. I'm not sure, but I haven't seen any for years.

AC: How long has Brazil been in the silk industry.

JC: I only heard about it about ten years ago, [chuckles] so I just don't know.

AC: So it comes to you undyed.

JC: Undyed. And then, the dyers dye it --

AC: Is that within your own --

[end of side one]

JC: We made warps as short as sixty yards. We don't like to, but it would be very expensive. There were times when you'd get a special order for a color that someone's willing to pay for. I always thought anything that we could get paid to do, we'd do. We didn't set minimums. For our standard warps, of course, then we'd have to have minimums. But if someone wanted something special and they had a client who was willing to pay, we'd
do it.

AC: In today's market, how much would somebody pay for the luxury of having a sixty-yard warp?

JC: Somebody might pay, beyond the normal cost of the fabric, someone might pay seven or eight or nine thousand dollars.

AC: And the normal range?

JC: The normal price might be at retail seventy or eighty, and they would be willing to pay that much more. That doesn't happen too often.

AC: Can you comment for me on labor unions and the relationship between labor and the Cosentino Company over the years?

JC: I wasn't there when we first got the union. I think it was in 1933 when we were organized the first time. I was involved in negotiations from the time I started in 1947 until three years ago. I think we always had a fairly good relationship with the union. My feeling was that we needed a union. I think it helped more than hurt. I think some people say, "Oh, the union's going to put you out of business." I never felt that way. I think the union leadership -- I got to know them fairly well over the years and I think they're always reasonable people. There were certain things they had to have and certain priorities that they had to get for their people, but I think they were
certainly reasonable expectations. I think the textile industry went from a fairly low-wage industry to today, when I think the pay is pretty good. I think around Paterson, weavers are doing better than -- I don't want to say "ninety percent," but I would think maybe better than ninety percent of the labor force in Paterson is doing.

AC: Approximately, what are they making now?
JC: I would think weavers are making ten to eleven dollars an hour with all the benefits: vacations, holidays, insurance, pension - not that the pension is very good, but the insurance program is good (health insurance, some life insurance - not that much). I think the labor has prospered in Paterson.

AC: You mentioned that you felt the labor leaders were generally reasonable in the things that they mentioned.
JC: Oh, sure, yes.
AC: Could you be a little more specific? Could you go into a little more detail? Certainly, you mentioned pensions.
JC: Yes. They would always let us know, often in very uncertain terms or very certain terms [chuckles], that there were certain things they had to have. In negotiation, they always start with a big,
long, laundry list of things they have to have. And when you cut through it, you get down to the point where it's mainly how many cents an hour is the increase going to be, are there going to be any more holidays or vacations. The working conditions I don't think were ever a problem. There was only one time when they were a problem, when our weavers used to run two looms and we wanted to extend that to three or four. We worked out a program where we could try it. The union was never an obstacle there. I think the rank and file were more against work changes, working conditions, workload changes, than the union leadership was. I know they were.

AC: But there was no problem in permitting you to try extending --

JC: No, not with the union. We worked out something. I think there were two or three months, whatever the time limit was - a working agreement that they would try it, and then a joint committee, the manufacturer and the union, would say, "Is it working?" I don't think the manufacturer would want to go on with it if it didn't. I mean, it was to everyone's advantage.

AC: Did it?

JC: It did, sure. From then on, there was no work assignment. You did whatever you thought was in
the best interest of the business and the best interest of the worker, and get the best production. Because I think the unit cost is what we're trying to get to. To have somebody running a lot of looms that aren't running all the time because he can't keep up with them doesn't make any sense. The union has been very good, in my opinion, and I think most of the manufacturers that I've known have thought so. We never tried to get rid of the union.

AC: There was a stormy early history.

JC: Oh, at the beginning, sure. There was a tremendous strike in 1913, as I remember, and I guess in the 1930s, when the big organization -- I guess the C.I.O. -- was organizing the industry. The longest strike we had was in 1950 in May or June. I know it was in the spring of 1950. I think it was a two-week strike. We were part of the group. I think probably we would not have gone on strike if we were negotiating alone, but we were part of a group and did. It was two weeks. I don't know who [won]. I don't think anybody wins a strike. But the funny part of that was -- It was June, I think, in 1950. In September, the Korean War started. At that point, war was starting so business was going to be great, and [chuckles] the weavers whose wages we
were trying to hold down were now begging to come
to work for us instead of the other guys and
paying them more.

    In other years, I think maybe two or three
other times over the thirty-five years or so, we
might have had a day strike or two. I think most
of those were more because we were a group and
thought we had to be stronger than we would have
if we'd been negotiating individually.

AC: When you say, "we were a group," you mean the
Master Weavers?

JC: The Master Weavers, yes.

AC: Do you recall your father talking about the
problems in the 1930s?

JC: No. I don't think he ever -- I mean, he just
assumed that people were going to be in the union,
and that was it. I think he always thought they
should be. You paid as well as you were able to
pay. There's still constraints of competition,
but I think you're always better off with a well-
paid work force.

AC: What is your current involvement with the Paterson
silk industry? You say now that you really feel
rather separate, being in the upholstery
[business].

JC: Upholstery, yes. I honestly don't think there is
a Paterson silk industry anymore. I really don't
know of any mill that's a silk mill in the old sense. I think everybody left now is pretty much in upholstery. There's one substantial mill that isn't, but they're in upholstery, too. But they were in tie goods and still are. I think it's pretty much upholstery.

AC: What about after World War II? Was there increased competition from the Southern textile industry? Did that affect you at all?

JC: Yes. I think you compete not so much item for item, but maybe for the consumer's dollar. I don't think it's that we're making something that some other mill is making and ours is a little cheaper or theirs is. I think it's more that we're making our kind of thing and the jobbers only have so much money they can invest in product that they would have to like ours better or the other guy's better. I think that's the way the competition is. A couple of mills have moved from Paterson to the South that I know about. One prospered there tremendously, and the other one, I think, was doing better when they were in Paterson. And then, of course, there were the Southern mills that were started in the South and are very good mills. The industry is a good industry. The quality of fabrics is, I think, better than it's ever been.
AC: What proportion of the industry do the high-end mills represent?

JC: I just honestly do not know. I'd say probably very small. I don't know what you call "high-end." I'd say the kinds of things we're doing.

AC: Yes.

JC: I don't think there is any mill... There are maybe two [mills] that I can think of that are doing things, for the most part, in the same price area, same average or median price, that we are. I'd say [we're] a minuscule part of the whole upholstery fabric industry, when you think of the quantities of goods that are made. Mill prices are three dollars to five dollars a yard, and our mill prices are upwards of eighteen dollars. We're a very small part of it.

AC: Can we talk about figures? Can you discuss at all your sales figures?

JC: Our business has been doing around two million dollars from the mill for the last several years. I didn't try to increase that very much because I thought there were certain problems in getting enough people. But with my association with Kroll, I think we'll probably do quite a lot better than that in my part of the business. Of course, Kroll's part is substantially larger than that. Maybe I got a little bit old and tired and
didn't try to push things too hard. We did the things we did well and we had a nice group of customers and a nice group of suppliers. It was a good business, a nice business to be in.

AC: Your customers and suppliers had remained until you sold the business?

JC: Yes. And they still remain.

AC: Quite stable for a long period of time?

JC: For a long period of time, yes.

AC: What about your cost structure? What components make up your cost structure?

JC: Labor, materials, overhead, designing - all the things that have always been part of it. Certain things are more expensive now than they used to be. I think freight, for instance, has become an item they have to think about, which you never did. You maybe should have, but didn't. Just shipping is an item. And, of course, taxes and environmental concerns are tremendous - especially if you're getting out of business. The Environmental Protection Agency gets very much involved. You have to clean a building up before you can sell it. Before you can sell a business, you have to get approval. You don't have to, but I don't think anyone would buy a business or a building without the clearance from the Environment Agency.
AC: What do they look for?

JC: They look for any kind of pollution, any kind of oil that might be around, or any kind of chemicals. When I sold my building last year, we had no problems because we didn't use any chemicals. But they even ask you about cleaning fluid. "How much cleaning fluid do you use?"

[chuckles] It's not an easy thing. You have to hire consultants and engineers and cleaners.

AC: What about cotton dust over the years?

JC: The cotton dust we clean up so there wouldn't be any cotton dust. But that was something to consider, too. I remember when we used a lot of chenille yarn, a lot of our winders didn't like to. They wore masks. It finally got to the point where I thought it was more trouble than it was worth, so they just didn't make any more chenille fabrics; although, we're making them now and no one seems to complain. Maybe the winding equipment is better. I think that's probably it. And I began to think about bysinosis or brown lung disease. I didn't want to get involved with that. I don't know any cases of that in Paterson, but I know that's a problem in some of the Southern mills.

AC: Did many of your workers wear masks as a general rule?
JC: No. And they never wore ear protection either, although we supplied it to them in the form of ear muffs and ear plugs, or anything they'd want. They'd wear them for about half a day, and that was the end of it. Oh, maybe one or two would continue to wear the hearing protection. We had, at one point, everyone had to be tested for any hearing impairment. I think there was one man that had, however you determine it, five percent or eight percent, and he'd been a weaver for fifty years. Of course, the decibel level was beyond the allowable limit, but there wasn't much you could do because a loom did make a lot of noise. The newer looms don't make as much noise. But the old looms, you couldn't hear when you went in there.

AC: You mentioned the cost of freight had sharply increased.

JC: Yes. That's one item that I think is up so much more than anything else. I mean, the cost of material sort of goes along with inflation and labor goes along with inflation, but there are certain items, and freight was the one that came to mind.

AC: Can you think of any others that have been particularly --

JC: No, I don't think in the manufacturing. I think
in the overhead area you have more accounting work to do and things like that than you did - at least it seems that you do. More government reports to complete. I'd say, generally, things have stayed the same.

Of course, in the labor area, when we first started, there were no vacations and no holidays. I remember the day of Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, we only worked half-days, but the other half-days were not paid. So it was really a layoff.

AC: When did that change?

JC: I think it changed during the war. As a matter of fact, I won't swear to it, but I'm sure the holidays were not paid until during the war when, in place of a wage increase, which wasn't allowed or might not be under the wage price stabilization, we gave holidays. That's, I think, when they started for the most part. They might have been paid Christmas or Thanksgiving. I don't remember, but I don't think so.

AC: You mentioned that there seems to be an increase in government reports. What kinds of reports?

JC: Oh, census and registration of oil tanks. The fire department in Paterson comes in for an inspection, and then you have to pay them a fee for whatever reason. I can't remember all that,
but it seems that every day we were doing something. Of course, the environmental people always want to know. Your neighbors have a right to know what you're doing, what you're using - chemicals or anything that might pollute the atmosphere or the ground or the water.

AC: Did you actually get requests like that?
JC: Oh, we'd get them all the time from the State and the Federal government. Did we ever get any from any neighbors?
AC: Yes.
JC: Not that I know of. No, I don't think so. I'm sure they didn't even know the reports were being made. [chuckles]
AC: In terms of today's silk industry, you think it really doesn't exist anymore.
JC: I don't think it exists the way it used to, no. I don't now how much silk is being used now as compared with fifty years ago, but I think a very small percentage.
AC: I think that I've covered my specific questions. I wonder if there is any area that you think deserves some more mention or that you would like to tell me more about, that we haven't discussed.
JC: No. I can't think of anything specifically. The only thing is that maybe the home furnishings industry doesn't get as much credit as it should
for style and design and color and the things we
do. I think you see a lot about fashion and what
the designers are doing and the fabrics they're
using, but I think there's probably as much or
more innovation in home furnishings than there is
in a lot of other areas.

AC: You feel in terms of color?

JC: I don't think we changed colors, no. We don't
have revolution; we have evolutions in fabrics.
People buy a sofa and keep it for ten years and
maybe change the fabric then and maybe not then.
It isn't like buying a dress that you change every
year or two.

I remember making some dress goods at one
time. I made them only for a man who was a jobber
and sold to the best houses, really top of the
line stuff. I remember making a fabric for him
once and I said to him, "This is really not very
good. We should make it a lot better."

He said, "It's all right. It looks good."

I said, "But it's not going to wear that
well."

He said, "It's going to be so expensive that
it's not going to be worn that much."

[chuckles] So the more expensive a dress, I
guess you don't wear it. The people that buy
them don't wear them that much.
It was good enough, but I thought we could have done better with it.

AC: Was that an isolated incident, your making the dress fabric?

JC: He came to me and we worked well together. Yes, for four, five, six, maybe eight years, we made things for him. Then, I think he retired so I didn't pursue it anymore. It was a difficult business. You had to make samples, then you'd get some orders, they'd all have to be done within two or three months, and then that was it. You might get a reorder. But in the upholstery business, we can run things, as I say, for fifty years and our deliveries sometimes take four or five months to complete.

AC: So it never became a significant portion during that period of your business.

JC: Oh, no. It was a little adjunct. It was kind of fun to do at the time.

AC: What period was this during?

JC: I think probably in the late 1950s, early 1960s - maybe a little later than that, but I don't think so.

AC: Had your father also succumbed occasionally?

JC: I think when he started he would be doing more things like that, yes. I think he made a lot of fabrics that were difficult to make. I know I've
seen some of the things now that when we moved out, a lot of things showed up again that he had made in those days. I don't think we'd want to attempt them now.

AC: Those are things that Kroll has kept?

JC: Yes. We have the documents. I think the documents are there. I know I saw some of them. A couple of the fabrics I thought, well, we ought to try -- We're going to try one. We have one that we found and we're going to try. I think it will work, but there are others that I don't think would work anymore. I don't think people have the patience they used to have.

AC: When you say "people," you mean the weavers?

JC: I mean the weavers, yes. In the old days, the people had been brought up with silk and could handle silk. It takes a special feel. It's something you have to -- I don't want to say you're born with it, but you were trained in it. They started to work in the mills in their early teens. Now, I can think of two or three people that I know that have been retired, but maybe not too long. We had one man that worked for us until we closed last year, and he was eighty-two or something. He'd been a silk weaver for seventy years. And there aren't any people left like that. Not that the weavers we have aren't good,
but they just haven't had the experience in handling silk.

AC: How were they trained?

JC: How were they trained then? They were trained in the mill.

AC: The ones who were working there now?

JC: They're trained on cotton and wool and mainly heavier fibers, heavier yarns, and heavier fabric.

AC: And the silk is more delicate?

JC: Silk is a lot more delicate, yes.

AC: Is there anything else?

JC: No. I can't think of anything else. I think we've covered it.

AC: Thank you so much.

[off/on tape]

I wanted to ask you about the age and kind of looms that you had when you --

JC: We had a lot of box looms that went back to the 1920s and 1930s and still produce good fabrics. And then, we had newer looms that we'd gotten within the last twenty years. But we still use the old looms. And, as I say, we're still using some now in Kroll's plant.

AC: And the remaining ones that Kroll didn't take out were scrapped?

JC: They were scrapped, yes.

AC: Thank you. End of Interview
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