MEMOIRS OF
NORMAN NORELL
FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH
EDNA SULLIVAN
Co-worker

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INTERVIEWED BY
Mildred Finger
Q: Mrs. Sullivan, would you tell us when you first met Mr. Norell, and what your association was with him, and what happened in subsequent years?

A: Well, I met Mr. Norell when I was a model at Hattie Carnegie, and he...

Q: That was about what year?

A: This was around...It must have been around '32, '33. And he...In those days, Miss Carnegie would import at least 50 dresses from various French designers, some would be Italian...And that was one thing that was a great advantage to Mr. Norell, because he would go over to the showroom, and she would have showings of these imports, and he had the advantage of seeing them and seeing how they were made, and I am sure that with his natural talent, this was really almost like an education to him also.

Q: Did he work on her premises, or was he somewhere else?

A: Well, he...This was when he was employed by her to do the designing in her wholesale establishment. And...

Q: This was apart from her store.

A: Apart from her store. The wholesale establishment was at 711 Fifth Avenue, And I, as a model, started in the retail store....

Q: Which was where?

A: At 42 E. 49th Street. She had just moved down shortly before that from West 86th Street, where she had been. And I guess...In fact, I know I was there before Mr. Norell came, because it was Mr. Joyce who was
the designer when I first worked there. And thinking back on it, I was probably there before '32. Maybe '30...And Mr. Joyce did the designing in the wholesale establishment, and I was over there, and one reason I was hired was there was one model who was small, and I was able to wear her clothes. He made the clothes on her and I helped out in the showing in the wholesale department, and then I would go to the retail store...

Q: How many models were there in the wholesale department?
A: Well, I think there were probably, at that time, probably four...Then, of course, we would...When the season was over we all went to retail and modeled over there. And then, as I say, when the imports would come over from Europe, Mr. Norell would come over to the retail showroom and look at all of them, you know, and I think that was a help to him. Well, as we all know, he was always crazy about the theatre, and Gertrude Lawrence came in and she wanted Miss Carnegie to make some clothes for her for "Lady in the Dark," and she had to have this one dress, this very glamorous dress, and so on. And, of course, this was just what Mr. Norell loved. He just went all out, and designed a perfectly beautiful and gorgeous dress that was more expensive than any dress he had designed before, and I guess any dress that Miss Carnegie ever had at the time. And she was absolutely furious. The money spent, the time and everything on this dress. And they got into an argument about it and he walked out. So then, after that, Mr. Traina, who, as you very well know, was a shrewd businessman and he probably heard about this young designer at Carnegie's, got in touch with him. And Mr. Traina had a very well established business, but it was always women's clothes, and the
pattern maker they had made maybe 14 to 20 or something like that.

Q: Sizes 14 to 20...

A: Marvelous pattern maker. And Mr. Norell, I guess, told Mr. Traina that he wasn't that kind of a designer. He was a designer for small people, and maybe younger, you might say, and it was quite a switch in Mr. Traina's business, but Mr. Traina said yes, anything he wanted to do was all right with him. And, as I tell you, the pattern maker he had was a perfectionist and... He wasn't a very young man at the time, as I remember, and Mr. Norell used to tell me that he just... He'd be in tears sometimes, trying to adjust patterns to these small sizes, after he'd been making all the women's sizes.

Q: About what year was this by the way?

A: Mr. Norell went with him in... ah... I think it was around '40, I would think around that time. And at that time, I had left Carnegie around '37, and, of course, while I was modeling there I did do a little selling, and I thought I'd like to get into sales, and I went into a small house that wasn't very well known, and then my husband's business took him out to Chicago... or out to Michigan... and we lived out in Bay City, Michigan for, I guess, about a year, year and a half. So I didn't see Mr. Norell, then, for a few years, and it was during that time that he left Carnegie and went to Mr. Traina. And so when I came back after that, I had luncheon with him one day and he was telling me all about what had gone on and why he had left and so on, you know. And that's the way it went. And then I decided that I wanted to get back and I took a position... That was it... Ben King
made all our belts. He had been a shipping clerk at Carnegie's some years before that and had gone into the belt business with another man who was a wonderful craftsman, a German man. And they turned out the most beautiful belts. And Ben King said he used to say a prayer every day of his life in Thanksgiving for Mr. Norell, because Mr. Norell was then at Carnegie's making clothes and immediately started using Ben King's belts.

Well, anyway... Time went on, and I came back, and I was looking around wondering what to do, and Mr. Norell said, "Well, Ben King would like to have you on his showroom, and sell his belts." And so that seemed very nice. And this is what I mean when I say he was most kind, and he made a couple of lovely Traina-Norell dresses for me... And a coat... navy chinchilla, with a persian collar, and these frogs you know. Satin frogs. And it was a really beautiful...

Q: Frog closings...

A: Uh huh. And I was there for a while. And then I think we had to leave town again. But anyway, I came back, and I was looking for something and I got in touch with someone in Magnin's, and she said, "Well, I had... I was with Tony down in Palm Beach, and he was looking for a showroom girl," and she said I should call him...

Q: Tony Traina?

A: Uh huh. And then, "You call and see him." And I said, "Well, I have a Traina-Norell coat, but it's getting kind of old now." And she said, "It doesn't matter. You wear the coat, and wear the dress, because he's very proud of his merchandise," So I did, and I started working
there. He was a very good boss. Of course, he wasn't the kind of a man...
If he came out in the showroom, I wouldn't dare say anything unless I had
something pretty worthwhile to say to him. He wasn't the kind of man where
you could say, "Well, it's a nice day out." But, anyway, he... to me, he was
a very good boss...

Q: At that time, you had very little contact with Mr. Norell

A: Well, he was designing...

Q: Yes, and he didn't come out into the showroom very much.

A: Oh, no. No. He never came out. But I'd be around there
when he'd be fitting and all... Not that I helped him... I didn't have to
help him, but I saw what he was doing, which was very good for me when I
was ready to sell.

Q: By then you weren't modeling any more?

A: Oh, heavens no. No... I only modeled for a short while
in Carnegie's, and then I went into sales... But... Anyway, as time went on,
Mr. Norell... or Mr. Traina called me in one day... I was working very hard,
and he said he was going to invite us down, my daughter and me, down to
New Jersey, his home down there, down there for a weekend. So he got to
know Carrie a little bit, and when she was going to college and after she
graduated he said, "Why don't you have her stay here and help you?" And,
of course, I only needed her for about six weeks of the season, but that
didn't matter to him, whether she was doing work or not. Just so... It would
be nice to have her. It's too bad he never had any children of his own. And
so...Then as time went on, Mr. Norell, I think, was kind of anxious to go into his own business, and Mr. Traina wasn't well, and all, and wasn't going to get any better. I guess that was the time Mr. Norell decided he would take the step into his own business...

Q: About what year was that?
A: Well, that I know was around '50, I think.
Q: According to my...
A: No, it was after '50.
Q: ...1960 that he...Mr. Traina retired.
A: Yeah, I went to Norell in '50 or '51, and Mr. Norell had a very nice man, Mr. Klein...I've forgotten his first name...

Q: Adolph,
A: Adolph, Yes, that's it. As a manager,...And Mr. Klein advised him wherever it was possible to start his business with people who had been associated with Traina-Norell, for several years. So I just continued on in charge of sales, when Mr. Norell went into business.

Q: Did you ever have a chance to see how he really worked? I mean, did he start with the buying of fabrics, or sketching or...
A: Well, I would say he started with the buying of fabrics, and it was just amazing to see how they would present him with a card with... There would be, oh, maybe about 75 colors on this card you know, and then he'd go like this...

Q: He would just go through and pick out...with a certainty...
A: Yeah,...Just the very best ones and the very best colors...
You know...You have to be pretty smart I guess to be that clever...It never took him any time at all. He never had to ponder over what he wanted, and any fabrics that they showed him, he knew what he wanted or knew what was best among them...And as talented as he was, I think he always had a hard time starting...I guess maybe most of them do, when they're starting a season. To know what way he was going to go.

Q: In terms of silhouette?
A: And, you know, we would feel for him at that time, and then he would spend a lot of time up in the museum...
Q: The Metropolitan Museum of Art...
A: Uh huh. Working...before he would start a collection. And once he knew what he was going to do, he would go into it, and we'd all feel so good, you know. We knew he was on the way again. And regardless of how marvelous a designer he was, he did go through that every season. And I guess if he weren't such a brilliant designer he wouldn't have to go through all that. He wouldn't have the sense or the initiative to be what he was. And so...But once he got going on what he was going to do, that was it. And it just came out like it was nothing at all, And he started...He would make these...I gave quite a few of them to Bob Riley, his original little sketches...
Q: The Croquis...
A: Yeah, And that's what his tailor...his head tailor, and his dress maker...ladies...would go by. And it was never any elaborate sketches, or color sketches or anything like that...
Q: He would do a simple sketch and perhaps put the fabric with it that he wanted,?
A: Well, yes, he would select the fabric and clip off a swatch of it and then he would show them the whole piece...
Q: Did he fit on the models or just,?
A: Well, his man, his people that worked for him...the man that was the head tailor is still...His name is Cardello...He's still...He works with Blass now.
Q: His name is Cardello?
A: Yeah. And he was the head of the tailoring department, where the coats and suits were made. And then the last few years he was in business, a lady by the name of Hildegarde was his dressmaker, assistant. They, in both instances, were to take these sketches and follow them through as closely as they could to what he wanted, and get them ready for a fitting, and then he, in turn, sometimes, would make changes in the fitting, and so on...
Q: And he fit, a finished garment...He did not fit his muslins or...He fit right in fabric?
A: Most times, Yeah. Sometimes it would be muslins...But not always. Quite frequently it wasn't...into fabric. First of all, the people who worked for him were exceedingly good, and they, for the most part, probably, didn't have to go through that...But I don't say that he never did. He did make muslins at times, but...And then he used the same girls all the time, From four to six models...Four that he would fit on, and
then two other, like regular ones, that he would call in all the time, to show. Sizes like the models the clothes were made on. You know, he didn't ever have a lot of models. But...The day had gone past where manufacturers would have two showings a day for four weeks or anything like that. We would have at the most three shows, and sometimes only two. Usually it was a black tie affair...always it was a black tie party, for the preview...And then...

Q: At night.
A: Yeah. 9:00. And that, of course, was catered. And then the next morning,...sometimes the next morning, we'd have the opening, or the next afternoon. Magnin's used to like to have it...Always had it the next morning so they could work in the afternoon. They were always the first to work, naturally, since our clothes were confined to them.

Q: They were confined to the coast?
A: Confined...When Mr. Norell was alive, it was...They were confined to all of Magnin's stores...And then after Mr. Norell died, Mr. Manning was the lawyer...What year was it now...?

Q: Mr. Norell died in '72...
A: '72...And it was around...It was after Mr. Norell died that he contacted Magnin's and wanted to open the line in California, and they turned him down. And then...I don't know if this should go into your.....what you have in mind or not, but...

Q: It's history; it happened.
A: You see, he couldn't go after that...or opening the line until after Mr. Norell died, because Mr. Norell wanted no part of it.
And then when he did go out to...arrange for us to open up the line to other accounts, Magnin's refused, and he in turn, a year or so later I guess it was, I've kind of lost track of time...sued Federated Stores. They were owned by Federated Stores... And Sidney Auerbach, who was in charge of fabrics, and I, were called down for a deposition. And then it was some time before the trial went on. Then Melanie Manning, who was working for Mr. Manning for several years, married Mr. Manning, and I talked with her ...Oh, I guess it must have been a year or so...Because Sidney...now is retired and lives down in Florida, called and said, "What ever happened about that deposition. Did you ever hear anything?" And I said, "No," but I'll call. And I called her, and her explanation was that expenses were ...Lawyers got most of the settlement...I mean, it was too bad in a way that he ever tried to do that. After this had gone on from way back when Mr. Norell was designer and Carnegie was confined to Magnin's...

Q: Let's go back a little bit, because, I'm interested. to know what your own relationship was with him, and what you knew about him as a boss to work for. He was apparently very close to people who worked for him.

A: Oh, he was. And you know, he was very, very...Particularly as he got older, he...I got very much interested in the theatre because of him. He used to come in and tell us all about these shows he'd gone to see, and I thought, "Oh, that would be great," you know.

Q: In other words, he maintained in adulthood the interest in theatre that he had had...
A: Oh, absolutely, All through his life, until the time he was getting along in years... But... I've forgotten now exactly what year it was. But anyway, he was told that he had a very serious throat sickness or illness... And it seemed as though... Someone must have told him, I don't know who... That the operation he'd have to have, he couldn't talk again.

Q: Yes. I think that was about 1962 that he had a laryngectomy...

A: Yeah. And at that time... I mean, he felt very close to all the models, anybody who worked for him... And we would sit in the showroom and he would say, "I don't want to live if I can't talk. I don't want to live if I can't talk." Well, anyway, as it happened, he had a very, very wonderful surgeon who took flesh from the thigh, I believe it was, and constructed a voice box, so that he was always able to talk, but he couldn't project his voice very much. But before the operation, he would call from his room, where he was designing, into the work rooms, if he wanted Mr. Cardello or any of them. But after the operation, he had to have a bell on his desk, and he would ring the bell, and they would come in... But at least he was able to talk. It's just that his voice wasn't very loud. But he didn't have to whisper, and you didn't have any trouble hearing him.

Q: Now, he had very warm, close relationships with the people with whom he worked, as I understand it. Did he also... Did he have that same kind of rapport with the people from whom he bought, or who bought from him, rather, Or was there no really close...
Q: Everybody liked him. He didn't come out in the showroom during a showing at all. But during the buying he might walk through and ... He knew who was buying, he'd stop and say hello, or something like that. He never, never spent any time saying to them, "Buy that, and don't buy this." Or anything like that. He did nothing in the sales end of it.

Q: He was also a very private person, wasn't he?
A: Very private.

Q: So that he was not one to attend lots of industry functions.
A: Oh, no. And especially as he got older he wasn't so eager to socialize. I think the thing he really enjoyed most in the last years of his life was sitting in the models' room, talking to the models. And all of us. And it was just like a family, almost. At that time.

Q: Did he maintain any relationship with his own family?
A: Oh, yes... Yes... Through the years he... Oh, he was very close to his brother, and his sister-in-law, and he used to make clothes for the sister-in-law, all the time, you know. He was very fond of them. And then he would... Of course, he adored his mother. His mother was quite a lovely lady. It was through her influence and her encouragement, I guess, that he did what he wanted to do, because I'm quite sure his father would have wanted him to go into that same business, that his brother went in.

Q: Which was a haberdashery business...
A: Yeah... And... But, as I say, he didn't want any part of that. But he always went home for Christmas. And there was a time there when
his mother bought property out in Hollywood in Florida, and he would go down and visit with her... And then, of course, as time went on he did a show in Palm Beach every winter. And it was always connected with a big charity. And then the clothes would go into a Martha's shop... for selling and so on. But, in thinking about him... The things that I know about him... I don't know if they'd be of interest to the general public, you might say, but he was a man that had no formal religion, but I don't know of anybody in my life who was more charitable. He certainly was very, very kind to a lot of people, and extremely kind to young students in... As Miss Keagy might have told you, in Parsons School, the designers have one student, as a rule, they work with through the season... And he just went out of his way to help whoever he had... 

Q: Yes, she told me a lot about that. That was very interesting... As a matter of fact, she ended up saying, "If there is such a thing, he was a Jewish saint." She had that kind of feeling about him.

A: I would say that too. And... like for instance... While he had no formal religion or anything, if there was anybody that he revered or was fond of who died, like Miss White... what was her name? It was right before she was married...?

Q: You mean Nancy White's aunt, who was Carmel Snow...

A: Carmel Snow. Yes... Anyway, he and I were at her Mass, at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and he would do things like that... for anybody that he was fond of, or admired, or liked... He was very... Let's see what else I can tell you now. But I think...
Q: He apparently also did lots of things without wanting it known that he had done them for people...
A: Oh, yeah...Yeah...Because he was...I would say, as I said before, he was the most kind, thoughtful, charitable...more than people who go to church regularly...And, of course, my memories of him go back so long because when I was a model he made his clothes on me, and finally I got married...Oh, he always made the bridal dress...
Q: Bridal dress?
A: Bridal dress. We always ended the show with a bridal dress in those days. And so I finally said to him, "Well, you know, I don't think you're going to make that bridal dress on me this year, because I'm going to have a baby." And he said, "Oh, that's all right. It'll be a gunshot wedding."
Q: Oh, that's very, very cute.
A: So I had the bridal dress made on me. Then after my baby was born, he had to make a trip to Europe, and when he came back, he had all these beautiful little French dresses and things that he gave me for Carrie.
Q: He sounds like a very dear, loving person.
A: He was. He really was. Especially for somebody that needed, you know, help or...Like the underdog, you know. He never, never was impressed with anybody who was supposed to be a big shot. Not that he would ever put them down, but he never got nervous or thought, "Hmmm...This is somebody I'd better cultivate," or anything like that. Nothing like that. And then, of course, as far as fabrics were concerned, he...in those days
we used all imported fabrics. There was no such thing as polyester and things like that... But the fabric people made every effort to show him their collection before they would show it to anyone else. And everything we bought had to be confined to us. And, of course, sales did not amount to anything that they would get from us as compared to some of the wholesale houses, where they would manufacture maybe a thousand of one thing and all... But that didn't seem to make any difference.

Q: The prestige of selling to Mr. Norell... outweighed...
A: And I often wonder too... He was always very friendly with and fond of Mr. Galanos too, and he was always... He used to say that he was so glad our prices were so high that there was somebody up there with him, that he wasn't the only one who had those very, very high prices. And another thing that was really great about the two of them was that they, for the most part, the Galanos customer didn't wear too many Norells, and vice versa. The Norell customer didn't wear too many Galanos'. There were some that wore both, but not many. And the nice thing was that he made Galanos exclusive... Beautiful... But they had a different look from Norell's, which was good. And, of course, Mr. Norell used to... and were... Very often on the same plane going over to Europe. They were very, very friendly with each other. Very close to each other. They were comparing notes and so on... I'm just trying to think if there's anything I'm leaving out now.

Q: Mr. Norell had a very good...
A: A very good... For his business, he had one very good characteristic that you might say... ordinarily might say that people who
worked under him, especially in the operation of his clothes, might say he was stubborn. But if he wanted something done, whether it be a collar or whatever, and they'd say, "Mr. Norell, it can't be done." He'd say, "Oh, yes, Now you just figure it out," and it was done all right.

Q: Well, that means that he must have known it could be done. So that he was a technician...

A: Of course. Of course...It probably meant...But the people who were working in...operating...It meant that they had to figure it some way or other for it to be worked out.

Q: Were all the clothes made inside? On the premises?

A: Oh, absolutely. And he...And he supervised every duplicate.

Q: So that nothing was ever given to a contractor?

A: No, And another thing...Very often, you know...Sidney Auerbach, who was in charge of fabrics, also had the job of figuring the clothes...

Q: Was he "O-h-r-b-a-c-h" or A-u-e-r...?

A: A-u-e-r...And then when the clothes...It was time to figure the clothes, we'd all be in the showroom...And I remember so well...Of course it's been a good many years, and it sounds kind of silly now, but Sidney said to me, "Now, you know...Let me tell you something. There isn't going to be a suit in this collection that's under $1,000." And that seemed high at that time. But then...Sidney, particularly, would get so mad at him. Of course, Mr. Norell never knew that he was mad at him. But
he would get so mad at him because then, for the sample, for the stock, Mr. Norell would get other ideas to improve what he had made on the original sample. And unlike a lot of manufacturers who try to take out what's in the original, he would put in more than the original as a rule.

Q: That's very interesting. Driving Mr. Auerbach crazy because...
A: Oh, of course, because he had the job of figuring, and once the price was made that was it. And then Mr. Norell would do something that would be more costly in making this coat or dress or whatever, so that was really something...

Q: That's very interesting.
A: So that's the way he was. And, as I say, he did look at every duplicate.

Q: So that the woman today who wears that which is 35 years old is wearing something that was meant to last 35 years or more.
A: Exactly. And the interesting thing too, I think, is that we would do...Well, every winter we would do a show in Palm Beach, and then we would do a show in connection with a charity...There was a hospital...Mt. Sinai Hospital, I think it was, in Chicago, that we would do a show for every winter. Or fall, I should say. And then the clothes would go into Saks Fifth Avenue for a day or so. And then he would, you know...Well, he'd meet some of the customers. He never sold them, Never took care of them. But he would meet them...Some of the sales ladies would introduce him, and he was always very pleased that somebody was in something of his that she had bought ten years ago. It always, you know, kind of made him feel good to
think that they could wear them that long. Whereas, I guess, some designers might think that, oh, that was old hat and that they should get a new one. But he always kind of liked the idea,

Q: Well, it was really a mark of quality...
A: Yes...
Q: The ability to last a long time, certainly, is a mark of quality.
A: And there's something else that ran into my head just now that's gone...That I wanted to tell you. Something like that...Oh, and then, of course, if he did get involved, like in Martha's shop, when the clothes were there and he did get involved with a customer, and then you know he just went all out, and he made sure that that customer got a perfect coat or a dress or whatever it was, And we came back and started..., everything went into production.

Q: So he did occasionally become involved with customers?
A: Yeah, Like, at a show like that, once in a ...Oh, I know what I wanted to tell you, Anyway...Most of the time, even like...We would have the show in the Grand Ballroom at one of the hotels out in Chicago, and the clothes would go into a store and he would have leisure time. And this one time he went shopping, in Saks, probably, getting some things of his own...So he said he'd like to charge them, and so he said his name was Norman Norell, and the clerk said, "Ah, the perfume man!"

Q: Oh, isn't that wonderful.
A: And he said to me later, "Oh, to think I've been designing
all my life. Now I'm known as the 'perfume man.'"

Q: But the perfume was very lucrative, wasn't it, for the period of time?

A: Oh...And I'll tell you something. It was marvelous. He was a very smart man, and he was always low key and sweet and nice to most people, but he knew what he wanted. And before that perfume came on the market, we were all sniffing and smelling for about a year and a half, until he really arrived at what he wanted.

Q: It worked out extremely well.

A: Even to the shape of the bottle and so on. And then it took off like a house afire, of course, you know...And he'd say 'That can happen, but let's see what's going to happen a couple of years from now.' That's the proof of how good it is; that it has remained popular.

Q: Right. Thank you very much. It's been very insightful and very interesting...

A: I hope I was able to give you something...My view of him is more of a personal view..

Q: Yes, well, that's what I want...