ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, F.I.T.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

HELEN LEE

Designer, Specialist in Children's Wear

Dates of Interview

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Wednesday, July 6, 1983

Interviewed by

Mildred Finger
Helen Lee is a designer who specialized in children's wear. During her career, she worked for many of the best known children's wear houses, including Joseph Love, Rosenau, Youngland, Kate Greenaway among others. She also over a period of sixteen years designed and coordinated the Winnie-the-Pooh collections for Sears. An enormously prolific designer, she dealt with many clients at a time from her own business, running a design studio.

After closing her business in 1981, she returned to Tennessee where she remains very active doing just things she enjoys, including a pattern collection of children's wear and of women's dresses for the McCall Pattern Co.
Early history of Helen Lee; childhood involvement with clothes; study of art

Helen Lee goes to N.Y. and goes to Traphagen School and to the McDowell Patternmaking School

Early jobs after leaving school. First good job with Joseph Love where she stayed for two years, leaving there in 1930

Worked for Kate Greenaway for sixteen years, leaving when they would not make her a stockholder

Joins Rosenau, the giant among children's wear companies at that time. Remained only short time, as they resisted the fashion publicity Helen Lee was getting under her name

In 1949, she joined Sam Landorf of Youngland, Inc., with the right to use her name

Review of publicity she received during jobs with Kate Greenaway, Rosenau and Sam Landorf

Helen Lee works for Alyssa, high price children's dresses manufacturer; also makes collections for Saks Fifth Avenue and others for Sears

Sets up own business to make prototype collections for her many customers. Undertakes designing of Winnie-the-Pooh collections for Sears. Explanation of way of developing collections, including knits in Greece

Anecdote about Taiwan production of knitwear collection for Sears

Helen Lee describes how she was able to combine her career and personal life as a mother

Importance of travel for inspiration through seeing beauty in all forms of art
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Q: ....Fashion Institute of Technology. This will be an interview with Helen Lee, famous designer of children's wear. The date is July 5, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Helen, before we really start and get into the chronology of your history and the various experiences you've had throughout your life, I would like to know, what made you decide to be a children's designer, and do you know, have you any idea when you made that decision?

A: Yes. I know exactly when I made the decision. I went to Traphagen, and I was very interested in drawing children and designing clothes...I didn't know I had this feeling, but when I got there I was interested. And then they had a manufacturer who came up to the school and said, "Does anybody here design children's wear?" And they brought me up, with my sketches, and he accepted all of my sketches, for $1 a piece. And I thought that was the greatest thing I'd ever heard of. And so I thought, "Well, I'll just keep on doing things with him," which I did, while I was in school. And he took the designs. So I thought, "Well, that's a good deal," because he had told me there was nobody designing children's wear in the industry. They just had cutters, who put lace on a collar or something like that, you know. And so I went into children's wear then.

Q: Now that we've got that established, let's go back to the very beginning. Where were you born? When were you born? I can tell by that lovely accent that it was somewhere not in New York. But where were you born, and when and what was life like as you grew up?

A: I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1904. I'm sorry. I
said that wrong. 1908. I'm going to be 75 this August. And I came from a real Southern family. My mother came from Virginia, my father from North Carolina, and I spent my summers either in Virginia or North Carolina. With my grandparents.

It was a typical Southern family. My father was an attorney and, of course, my mother was a housewife. And my mother was very interested in the arts, and I think she first got me interested in beauty. Really, she was more interested in beauty than the arts. And my grandmother--her mother--was very interested in sewing, crocheting and knitting, and she taught me things as a little girl, and I started making children's clothes, really doll's clothes...

Q: I was just going to say, did you love dolls' clothes?

A: And paper dolls and all of it. Then I started sewing for my little sister when I was very young, and by the time I was 12, I was sewing for my mother as well as myself. And I spent hours at it; that was my interest.

Q: Where did your ideas come from, as a designer at 12 years of age?

A: I haven't the faintest idea.

Q: You don't know if it was magazines...

A: No...Oh, yes, the Delineator. That was the one that...

Q: The Delineator?

A: An old magazine. Do you remember? It was a wonderful magazine; they had wonderful drawings, particularly of children, and they were line drawings, and I kept all those paper dolls. And I got all these from
Q: Do you still have a collection?
A: No. No, I wish I had my paper dolls. Well, I started, really, taking big dolls and making clothes for them, and I remember one time my mother took one of my dolls and showed the clothes to some friends, and I was absolutely furious that my ideas had been shown. I wasn't proud at all, and I tore up the clothes. I guess it was so meaningful to me that I didn't want anybody to criticize or look at them.

Q: So that you really had a sense of this being something that was special to you...
A: Yes. It was internalized. Very internalized. And I remember one time I was having a nap--I was five years old--and my mother came into the room and she said that the Sunday School teacher had come to see me and was downstairs and I was to dress myself and come down. And I put on five dresses and went down. And they all laughed. I thought five would be better than one, obviously.

So, I was always involved with clothes.

Q: That's very interesting. Because I don't know that I had heard of anybody being (in your field that is, certainly) involved at that early a stage. I do know, for example, that Norman Norell was heavily involved as a very young child. But, of course, that was in a field that I think had its sources available from many, many places.
A: Well, I was really very young when I started.

Q: When did you...How long did you stay in your home town?
A: Well, I stayed there until I was 14, when I went away to
school in North Carolina, to Salem Academy, which is a girls' school down there. An old school. And I stayed there for three years and I came back and went to....

Q: Did you study art there?

A: Yes, what I wanted to take. They didn't have any particularly good courses or anything. I came back to Knoxville and went to a small private school that had a good art teacher. And I stayed there, and I loved that. I spent most of my time with art. And then I went to the University of Tennessee for two years, and then I said, "I must go to New York." I don't want anymore education, in that direction.

Q: Well, now, in those days, did you have any notion of making commercial use of your time?

A: Yes, I did. I wanted to be a designer.

Q: That was unusual, wasn't it?

A: Yes, it was. I was very anxious to be a designer, because I'd been sewing since I was very young you know, making my clothes. And I wanted....But I didn't know what field. I didn't know what it was all about or anything. And my father was determined that I get a degree from the University of Tennessee, and I said, "No, I'm going ot go to New York."

Q: Despite the fact that you were female.

A: Oh, yes. He...Well, he was hipped on education. He had had his own education at Michigan, and my aunt had been an early graduate of Barnard. So the family was hipped on that. But when I wanted to go to New York, he didn't want me to go, and I had a few dollars in the bank, and I went down and got myself a ticket, and took the money out of the bank and
came home and started to pack, and my mother came in and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm leaving for New York tonight." And she said, "You're what?" And she ran to the phone and my father came home from the office in the middle of the day, so I knew it was a trauma for everybody. He wouldn't have come home otherwise. And he said, "What do you think you're going to in New York? How are you going to make a living?"

Q: Now, approximately what year was this?
A: Well, I was about eighteen...
Q: So it was about 1926.
A: That's right. And I said, "I'm going," and he said, "How are you going to make a living?" And I said, "Well, I can go to school somewhere, and I can be a waitress at night." And he said, "Will you please sit down?" And he said, "Are you determined to do this?" I said, "Yes. If you don't send me, I'm going. I'm eighteen and I'm going." And he laughed, and he said, "Well, if you're going, you're going to go right." So he capitulated and that was fine. And he said, "We'll find the best school for you to go, and a place for you to live, you're still just eighteen years old." So we did, and I went to New York and I stayed at the Arts & Crafts Club.

Q: Where was that?
A: It was on West 56th Street. Right close to where the Hearst Building is. And it was run by a very interesting woman who had a daughter who was an actress, and they had some young artists and actresses and people who boarded there. We didn't board, we just roomed....

Q: You were not given your meals. How did you pick the school
you went to?

A: Well, there was somebody....There was an artist in Knoxville. I cannot remember her name. But my mother got in touch with her. She had been in New York, and she said that she thought the best place for me to go was Traphagen. It was a new school at that time, and she thought that that would be the best, if I trained there. And then after I went there, to Traphagen...

Q: How long was the course?

A: Two years. I was not satis...My second year, I was not satisfied. I was not getting what I wanted. So I went to a school called McDowell Patternmaking School...

Q: M-c-D-o-w-e-l-l?

A: Yes. And I went there for pattern making, because at Traphagen what you really got was the history of clothing and you got lots of art courses, which was good, but I wanted to actually move fabric. And then at night I went to the Art Student's League. I was pretty busy in those years.

And then, of course, the family thought I would come home after all this. Well, all I was doing was getting myself ready for a job...And... It's a funny story. I didn't know how to go look for a job anywhere. After Traphagen and this man--'Borgenicht' was his name...And he didn't offer me a job; I didn't know where to go and how to....

Q: This man had come to the school and taken an interest in your....The fact that you were studying...

A: Yes, but he didn't offer me a job. He had taken my sketches.
Q: Borgenicht represents a well known name in the trade.
A: Yes, it is. So I didn't know if I should put an ad in Women's Wear, I didn't know...I really didn't know much of anything. But I went into a place and had cards printed, that said, "Helen Lee, Designer of Children's Wear." And I went up and down Eighth Avenue (that's where the children's wear industry used to be then).

Q: Eighth Avenue and what?
A: Thirty-fourth street. Thirty-seventh street.

Q: Because one of the things I've been interested in is tracing the movement of the various industries, so that I am interested in....
A: Yes. Children's used to be over on Eighth. And I went...Some of them were on Broadway, but most of them...And I went from floor to floor, if they had children's wear, and I left my card with everybody, and I began getting some calls. And I got some free lance work.

Q: And you continued in the meantime to live at that art...
A: No, I met a woman. I don't know if you know who she is. She died years ago. She was the only woman cartoonist. For many years she did Mopsy, and she was in all of the newspapers. And I met her and she and I took up art together. And she was interested in clothes too, but she was more interested in cartooning, which was a very unusual career for a woman in that time. And we had an apartment. We were just kids, having a good time. That's really what it amounted to. I did this free lance work, and then finally I went...

Q: Excuse me. Back in those days, is this just sketching?
A: Just sketches.

Q: You did not make the patterns or...?
A: I wanted to be in the factory. That's what I was interested in. The clothes, and handling the clothes. But I went to ...They were way over on Madison Avenue as I recall. It was Kate Greenaway. And I didn't get a job there. I wanted it. I talked to them. Then I got a job over on Eighth Avenue with "Chicky" Children's Wear. And I really got in the factory there. And I could cut and sew and do things, but I didn't keep that job very long.

Q: But did you actually do the cutting and the sewing, did you feel it brought you closer to the ability to execute that which you had in your head?

A: Oh, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to use the fabric and work with it. My first really good job I would say was with Joseph Love, and he was at 1333 Broadway. And I really was in the factory, and then I really learned. Then I really learned about selecting fabrics and what they would do, and they had a wonderful pattern maker at the time. The things I had learned at the McDowell School were too formal for the children's industry. The children's industry is always in block patterns, as you know.

Q: No, I don't. Please explain.

A: And that was what I was interested in. And all he gave me was just the front, the back and the sleeve. And then you had to develop everything off that. From those blocks. And that's what I wanted.

Q: I'm not really sure I understand block patterns, and I think I would appreciate it if you would explain it.

A: Well, a block is a front....
Q: A two dimensional piece of paper.
A: Just this is a neck. And then a back, and then there's a sleeve that fits into that arm hole. That's all you're given. And children's wear still does that. That's a block. So you take your sketch and you develop a pattern from your sketch.

Q: You don't work in fabric.
A: First you develop the pattern, and then you cut it out in the fabric, and then you have someone who sews it up. The designers usually don't do their own sewing. And then you do the trim and do whatever you want to do. Finish it. And then you have it pressed, and then you paper it, and then you look at it, and there you are.

Q: How long did you stay with them?
A: I stayed two years with Joseph Love, and he gave me $50 a week, and I asked for more money, and his brother...he was a salesman and was sent down to Knoxville and went up to my father's and he came back and he told Joe Love that my family had money and he didn't have to give me a raise. After two years, at $50 a week!

Q: And this was about 1929-30, something like that?
A: Yes.

Q: Approximately just before the Depression.
A: That's right. And then I went to Kate Greenaway, and I saw Mr. Leo Goldberger...And I told him I'd been for two years with Joseph Love, and I wanted $75 a week. And he gave it to me. Well, that was so much money I didn't know what to do with it. It was incredible. $75 a week! And I stayed with that company for 16 years.
Q: Now they were really considered top of the line weren't they?
A: No.
Q: They were not?
A: They were not. They were volume, and they sold a lot of basement stores too. They were not top of the line.
Q: Top line then was Florence Eiseman.
A: No, she wasn't...I don't think it was.
Q: Sorry. I just don't know enough about that...
A: I'll get back into this in a little while. But, I went up in the company and I was paid well and I liked the company, And then Life Magazine came and wanted to do a story about Kate Greenaway, and they wanted me to do the clothes. They really had picked up the name, and they wanted to use that. And so I did the clothes, and there was a five page spread in Life Magazine...one garment to a page.
Q: My word. That has to have been worth a fortune. In advertising.
A: Of course. I handled the whole thing; did all the special design and everything. And when that was over, I made a hit. And I went in to the company and I said, "I want..."
Q: You had to have what?
A: I had to be a stockholder. I was not willing to stay unless I was. And they said, "We'll give you an answer tomorrow." Well, I waited and waited and I went in there, and I said, "What about your answer?," and he said, "we've decided no," and I said, "Well, I'm going," and he said,
"Well, I hope you won't." And he cried. Because we were good friends. And I cried. But I had to move on at that point, you know. If I couldn't get any recognition...And Irving took me aside. Irving and I had worked closely, and he said, he said, "You know, you shouldn't go, Helen." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "The last person who left our company committed suicide."

Q: Oh, dear.
A: And I said, "Irving, I don't believe I will." And I left. And I went to Rosenau and they set me up an office in New York and it was lovely and they gave me a good salary and everything was fine.

Q: Now, they were a giant company.
A: Oh, they were giants. And then my name started to appear and I got a lot of publicity, and they had a meeting, and they said, "You know we're like the Ford company, nobody gets publicity..." And I said, "I'll have to go. I'm going to build my name. You built yours; I'm going to build mine." So I left them. And in the meantime, I had been married and had children.

Q: Yes. I was going to say, at some point I really would like to (whenever you think it's appropriate) stop and talk about your life as a woman, a mother, a wife.
A: Yes, that's the other side. But I'm into this, so....

Q: Whenever you feel it's appropriate.
A: So, I left there and I had no job at all and I didn't know what to do. But Sam Landorf...I'd known him at Love's, and he had just started his company, Youngland, Inc. and I heard that he was in trouble. That he wasn't
doing very well. He'd been in business about six months. So I called him and said I'd like to have lunch with him, and we had lunch, and I said, "Sam, I will come with you for very little money if you will permit me to use my name." And he said, "Yes." And I went there for $5,000 a year.

Q: Now, what year was this, approximately?
A: This was in the late '40s. See, I was 16 years at Kate Greenaway.

Q: Yes. That's a long time.
A: A long time. And he said, "Yes," and he'd pay me $5,000 a year. And I'd been making a very good salary, at Rosenau and Kate Greenaway. So I said, "Let's make it on a sliding scale. As your volume goes up, so do I." And he said, "That's fair." . . . And within three years we were up to $8 million in two and a half years. So we grew like lightning. And my name was then spread everywhere, and I got the Coty award and...

Q: What year was that?
A: Isn't it in....?
Q: Well, I think it was 1953.

A: Yes. I'm not positive. Silly, I can't remember...I think I should get back to some of my personal history here.

Q: Well, I think that would be a very good idea too.
A: Well, I married Bob Lewis when I was at Kate Greenaway, and I was 24, and I had one daughter.
Q: So you were married in 1932.
A: Yes.

Q: The Coty award was in 1953.
A: And the Neiman award was later.

Q: The Neiman award was in '58.
A: Yes. Well.

Q: So...There you were. Married at 24.
A: Yes. And I had one daughter. And that marriage...I left him when she was five. And then I married Grant Caldwell when she was six and a half. And I had one daughter from that marriage.

Q: You lived in New York.
A: All the time. Both my husbands were New Yorkers. So that brought us up to...The Coty award was '53. I should remember this, because over my kitchen sink in Knoxville I have all my awards.

Q: There are probably too many to remember.
A: It's funny to have them over the kitchen sink. I see them everyday. I didn't know where to put them. But anyway....What was I talking about?

Q: Your second...
A: Up to...Yes.

Q: Your second marriage, your second child.
A: Now I'll get back. I was still at Kate Greenaway, and I had a call from a Miss Brogan. I don't know if you know her...She had two shops, one on Fifth Avenue and one up on Madison Avenue, and she had the most beautiful children's clothes in the world. The most expensive, the most
They were all made in convents.

Q: Made where?
A: In New Orleans. In convents.
Q: Oh, right. Yes.
A: And they were just...The best fabrics, the best....
Q: So you're talking about christening robes and...
A: Everything. And children's clothes. Up to 12 years. But the most exquisite clothes in this country. Outside of the French things that came in.

Well, she called me. She had heard my name and she called me and she asked me to come and design for her. On the side. She didn't want me to give up my job at Kate Greenaway. So I was doing the Kate Greenaway line and the Brogan line at the same time. Well, after this Kate Greenaway story came out.

Q: In Life.
A: In Life. It was the first story that Sally Kirkland did.
Q: Really!
A: The editor before, had done the whole story, but when Sally came in, they put it under her name. She didn't want to have it, but she got very little from it, and...

Q: Sally is, I think, fantastic.
A: Oh, she and I became very, very good friends. After this. You know. But she wanted to change it. And she was so cute. She wanted to do other things, and she said, "I'm going to do another story on you," and I said, "That's fine." So anyway....Brogan...After this story came out,
she went to Brogan's to do the opposite side of what I had been doing.
and she called me and said, "Come over because Life Magazine's coming,"
and there I was, sitting at Brogan's, doing the Brogan line. She says,
"This is the craziest thing." So she said, "I'm going to do the story,
but I won't say you designed these."
So she did the whole story on
clothes, my clothes and Brogan's. And then about six months later she
said, "I want to do a story the way I think it should be done." And that
was called...There was a "pinny"...A pinafore. Which was a beautiful story.
Big color pages. Sally was a good friend of mine over the years. She and
I got a lot of publicity on that too.

It was the second story, where I had to leave Kate Greenaway,
when I wanted stock. Then I went to Rosenau, and they wanted me to not use
my name. And then I went to Landorf, and made the deal with Landorf. And
we had good years together, until I got the Coty award. And he wanted to
share the Coty award with me. And I called Eleanor and she said, "It is
not sharable. It is yours, and you cannot share it." So then my relation­
ship with him deteriorated.

Q: It's interesting. Because designers really had none of that
kind of status in those years.

A: No, no. They wanted to kill you. They wanted to take all of
the good parts, and leave the rest. But I had to leave him, and then I
didn't know what I was going to do, because by then I was up in the big
figures, in income. And I didn't know where I was going, and I didn't know
who could pick up these figures for me, either. I was becoming a heavy
package. And Alfred Flug called, and he started "Alyssa." He had just
started "Alyssa."

Q: I'm sorry. "E-l-i...?  
A: A-1-y-s-s-a. He had just started it a few months before.  
So he wanted me to come with him, and he gave me a very good contract,  
and I went with him, so I really...  
Q: What kind of price range is Alyssa?  
A: The best.  
Q: We will talk about pricing a little bit later, but at  
what point did you work for Sears, because I know you did...  
A: Well, I'm coming to that... Because when I was starting  
with Alyssa, we went very fast there. We went to $10 million in a few  
years, very quickly, and all better things. Because after my experiences  
at Brogan and commercial things, I was able to put things together and make  
a better package of my designs. Shaver called me, and wanted to use my  
name and promote my things. And that started Youngland. Youngland and  
Dorothy Shaver, and they used my name to promote...  
Q: Now, was that at the time of or just before the Second  
World War?  
A: That was after.  
Q: After the Second World War.  
A: After. I think it was in the mid-forties. And that  
was when Sears came to me, and wanted me to work for Sears. And Sally  
wanted to do a story about the things I had done for Sears.  
Q: The Sears things were then designed for Sears...a contractor?  
A: No, we manufactured them for Alyssa.
Q: In your price range.

A: Yes. We did the best things that Sears did. And we manufactured them. But Lord & Taylor, when they heard I was going to do things for Sears, (Dorothy had died), and I forget who it was... I think he was Merchandise Manager, he said they could no longer do business with me. Then I called Adam Gimbel, and he said he'd like to see me and I went up to his office and I sat in his office and he had the Sears catalogue on his desk, and he had been looking... He had it there for me... And I had the back cover of the catalogue, and he said, "I want to talk to you. First of all, I want to congratulate you on the work you're doing for Sears." A good merchant.

Q: Yes, indeed. He certainly was.

A: He said he was very anxious to make arrangements with me. He said, "Of course, if we do make a good arrangement for both of us, I don't want your name to be with Sears. I don't care how much work you do for them." So we got together and made arrangements and I took over doing anything in the children's field that they wanted me to design. Coats, dresses, sleepwear, anything. Boys', girls'-- Anything they wanted me to do, I designed for Saks under my label. And that was a very happy... Those were happy years. I was designing for Sears, I was doing the Alyssa line, and I was doing sportswear and I was doing all the work for Saks. Those were very good years. Then I received the Neiman's award....

Q: In 1957.

A: '57. And....Because Neiman and Saks were always close together. So they... Neiman picked up everything.
Now my clothes, that we made and manufactured for Saks, a lot of the things I designed went to other manufacturers, for Saks. But Saks paid me. So those were very happy years, and very fulfilling. So many branches....

Then Sears was very anxious to pluck me away from the industry. And I was very split about that. I didn't know whether to go or not to go, and I really didn't know what to do.

Q: Was Mary Lewis involved at that time?
A: Yes. Mary had been a friend of mine for a long time. She was very anxious to for me to go to Sears. And they made me a magnificent offer, and they didn't care if I did other things. And they didn't want to use my name. What they wanted was my work. And finally I made a decision to go...And they set me up in my own business, and I had other accounts, so I wasn't only doing for Sears, and I had started Winnie-the-Pooh for them....Pete Smith, from Disney, was a friend of mine, and he called me and he said, "We've got all the Winnie-the-Pooh books and the rights from A.A. Milne, to use these, and we want to take the Winnie-the-Pooh label to Sears, but we only want it if you will do the designing. Take you in with the package." Well, I had already been doing things for Sears, so they knew what I did. So he went after them, and they took the whole package. Then the problem...Winnie-the-Pooh got so big, and we were manufacturing the clothes too, but they wanted me to go in all directions. So they wanted me to do that, it meant that I couldn't do all the other things I tried to hold on to. Saks was anxious for me to go on, using my name since Sears wasn't using it.
Q: Incidentally...When you worked on this basis...Because you certainly are the most diversified, independent contractor or free lancer, or what will you...Were you working...Did you usually work on a percentage basis of their sales, or...Was the salary a percentage...?

A: Yes. Some places I did the...

Q: Because you learned how to be a negotiator.

A: Oh, I did learn to negotiate. Yes, I did. But I had good advisors, and I had good counseling; lawyers. My brother is a lawyer, he would come up and help me, and it was handled well. It depends. Sometimes a percentage is good, and sometimes a salary is good. Each company, it depends on how well they are located themselves.

Q: Well, I'm just interested, because obviously you were one of the very early people who became involved in this.

A: Yes, I think I was one of the first who did so many different things. But Sears, they gave me a high percentage. There's no way to fight that, you know. And, of course, they're not going to cheat you in any way; you know you're in good hands.

But in lots of ways it was very meaningful for me to go to Sears, and very fulfilling, because my whole concept of design had changed. I became a conceptual designer.

Q: You know, that's a whole subject unto itself, that I'm most anxious to get into. But I think...Could we just finish the chronology. Because I know you did Garanimals.

A: Yes. But I got so involved in the intellectual designing for Winnie-the-Pooh, it became...It was most basic type of design. I selected
all my colors. Everything was dyed special for me. Every season had a special group of colors. Those were dyed especially and controlled... We had to control the people in Chicago who did all of that, and I had to design all my fabrics, prints, everything. So it was really from ground up. And it was extremely, intellectually fulfilling. And, of course, it caused enormous problems. I went from big boys to infants and I loved that, because it was movement. I designed shoes...anything they wanted me to do. And they had the people to do it, the people to oversee it, so it was controlled. And I think that was the only time that kind of programming was ever done. And only a big company like Sears could do it, you know. And this was all top of the line merchandise. And I was very proud of it.

Then I started doing the Garanimals for Garan. They wanted me to help them put out the line similar to that and I worked for them seven years. I had my own business, which I still have. My own business... I lost my thread, of what I was thinking.

Q: You were starting to work for Garan, and you said that you were really working out of your own facility....

A: Oh, yes. I had my own business, and I had many accounts. Sears was my number one account, but I worked for various people in the industry, which I had all the rights to do....

Q: I was about to say...Did any of them have agreements with you so that a conflict of interest would not...

A: No, no. And Sears was always very nice. I didn't go to them for outside contracts, but they would let me do it.
One of the things I haven't gotten into here, which goes back to Alyssa...When I was at Alyssa, I started designing in England. Knitwear. And I used to go over there seven times a year, to those big mills up there, and design lines which were sold in Europe, and we also sold them in the States.

Q: Now, how did that kind of contact come about?
A: Well, there was a man...He used to be with DuPont. He went over to be head of a big mill in England, and he called us and wanted to know if I could do some designing. So I went over with Alfred and we set up a deal.

Q: Alfred...?
A: Flug.
Q: Yes, yes.
A: And then I started working in Greece. Doing knitwear in Greece.

Q: I must say, it sounds as though you were 18 people all the time.
A: I am very productive. Very productive. No, I just sit down and do it. And I loved doing it in Greece. They had beautiful machines there. Cottage industries, where things are all done...They're like handmade. Those were all better things, and they were all sold all over Europe, too. And Saks had all those. And then when I went with Sears, I went to the Orient, to Taiwan. And I worked in Taiwan and Singapore and Hong Kong--all over.

Q: So by then you were extremely knowledgeable, technically.
A: Yes. I had gotten my technical knowledge in England, on
machines. And in Greece. So that I could pretty well know what the machine would do. I have one lovely story to tell.

Q: Please.

A: I sent a whole collection of clothes, knitwear, to be done, to Taiwan. And they would send me all the color cards and I would swatch and I would make the patterns and everything very exact, I would send them about six weeks before I was coming. And Sears had selected this particular manufacturer. So then I was to meet the Sears man in Taiwan, and we met there and we had dinner, and he said, "Early tomorrow morning we'll go out to the plant and see the samples." So we got out there, and they put you down with some Coca Cola, and talk, and finally Ernie said, "Well, we'd like to see the samples, and he said, "Well, come in the back." And he said, "Well, just bring them in here." There were about 30 garments. "No," he said. "Come back. I want you to see them." And they had bins the size of this room full of each garment. They had knitted thousands and thousands of each of these things, and we'd never even seen the samples.

Q: Good heavens. They had made stock already?

A: Yes. So we said, "We only need to see one of each. What have you done here?" But they were wonderful things. The manufacturer said, "J.C. Penney was in, and they bought all of them."

Q: Oh, that's marvelous.

A: This was J.C. Penney's order that we were looking at. I had to stay there for a month and do another group.

Q: Were they as good as they said?
A: They were beautiful.
Q: They were.
A: They were lovely garments. They had done them from that...all my patterns and sketches. And we nearly died. I don't know what Sears did about this. I wasn't in there when they did that. Because he--Ernie--I went back to the hotel and he stayed, and I don't know what they had to pay him for this. For the boo-boo they did. But I had to stay in town for a month and do a whole other line, for Sears.

Q: Oh, that is really very funny. That's...What's extraordinary is that you did not, at that point, apparently, have your own American production liaison man, which often seems to be the great need. Somebody who will work with these people and show them...

A: Oh, yes. Sears had a whole office there. But they...
Q: Helen, I'm sorry; I missed the point. This was a Sears undertaking, and they had sold...
A: They sold my whole line to J.C. Penney.
Q: Oh, I didn't realize....
A: Yes! No! The manufacturer took the whole line...I had sent ...He was supposed to make a sample of each thing. They showed all the sketches to J.C. Penney...
Q: And this was being done under the aegis of Sears. Instead of which, they sold to....
A: Yes. The Sears man came from Chicago and met me. We didn't bring in the Sears men, who lived in Taiwan, until we were ready to give an order. They just took the whole...
Q: And so you stayed that extra period of time and made a...
A: Another whole line with another manufacturer. You can be sure...I don't know what they had to pay Sears for that, buy I'm sure it was....

Q: Oh, that's funny. Well. I think the way I would like to proceed now is that I would like to spend the next half hour or so talking about...If you feel now that you've given the whole chronology, essentially, of the business thing, let's go back and let's...I'd like to hear from you about your family....How you were one of the original career women, really, who devoted herself to career, and at the same time a mother...How you conducted your whole personal life, and then the next time we meet, I would like to go into all of those things which are.....

End of Side 1
...very much part of your life, as a children's wear designer cum manufacturer. But that will be a whole second kind of interview.

Helen, let's hear from you now about how you managed to keep your life in true function; that is to say, you managed to work as a designer and a very successful business woman. You were a mother; you were a wife. I'm sure you had a social life so you were a friend. Would you just tell us how all this was able to be done. And what lessons perhaps can be learned for young people today, who are having this as a major problem?

A: It's very difficult. I'll say that first. I had one child by my first husband, and we were married during the Depression. And we lived with his father, who was a doctor in New York. And he had a big house up on 64th Street, and there was plenty of room for us to live there, and I had a good nurse. The first step is you have to have somebody very responsible for the children. And I had a nurse--she was with me for 13 years. A German woman. Wonderful. And she really made my career possible.

When I left my husband, I got a small apartment in New York and I had my one daughter, who was five years old, and I put her in Brearley, the best school I could find for her. They would take her in the mornings; she got on a bus, and come home on a bus, and the nurse could function well.

Q: By the way....Then it was still very unusual, was it not, to be the child of a divorced parent?

A: That was difficult. And a working mother was difficult. The whole thing was different. But Brearley was wonderful. Still is an excellent school, and they were very helpful in every way--about my child and doing
everything that had to be done, for her interests. And I would say that the thing I couldn't cope with was my marriage. Something had to give, and I found that marriage did. I had two divorces. And I think that's the difficult thing. And I really think...I don't know that I could have done better. And I took the choices for my career, and I think that I couldn't have taken any other choice. You know--I was dedicated to my work. I think just as dedicated as if I'd been a non-commercial artist. My whole interest was in art. Still is. And I think if I had been a non-commercial artist, I think I would have been just as dedicated. I really don't think it makes any difference. If you're that way you're that way, and you finally have to accept yourself, for what you are.

I wanted my children. I was desperately anxious to be a mother. I wanted both my children very, very much. I am very close to my children, and we've had our ups and downs. Naturally. Because they resented my career...

Q: Did they?

A: Yes. When they were little. Then, they would come to my office, and see what I was doing. And the fact that I was doing things for children helped, because they could identify. They could identify with what I was doing. And I think that was helpful. And then they were proud when I would get recognition for my work. And then they got so they could go in a store and pick out everything I had designed in the store, they could see exactly what I had done, and that was fun. They would love to go to Saks or somewhere and say, "You did this one, you did this one," and that was fun. And they did get identification with it.
My older daughter became a model. An early Ford model. She was very successful. So she was involved in the fashion world. And then she went to Life and worked with Sally Kirkland. She was assistant to Sally. And then she married and had three children. But my other daughter....Both of them have identified with my interests, and they still do things themselves. But....

Q: Is either of them interested in the world of design?
A: Well, they are both able. But I think in lots of ways, when you've had a mother who's been successful, it's hard to go the same path. And I think because they both have given a lot of time to their children, which I think means I didn't give enough to them in lots of ways; I think they've made it up over the years.

I think the children of working mothers who are dedicated workers.....But now, when they are mature women, they are very pleased that I had my career. They identify with being successful and that it was meaningful to me. So I don't think today they have any feeling. I have a granddaughter who's 21, who's going to be a senior at Parsons next year, and she's very talented and she's going to go my way. It often does that, you know. Jumps a generation. And she's going to go my way. And she's very dedicated. She's not into fashion. She wants to go into graphics...but she's a good artist and she just really wants to....That's what she wants, and she'll have it. I think both of my daughters could have done it, but there's a certain psychological problem there. But I think...

What I lost in my life was a good marriage. That's the price I paid. But after I left my second marriage I was aware that I wanted to be part of the world. I really didn't want to just be in a little rut. I
wanted to travel. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to incorporate the world. I wanted to beat the world. And....

Q: I wanted to ask you about that. Because you obviously have always traveled a great deal....

A: Well, I have since my children...Since my youngest child was about eight, I've been traveling. She's 40 today. So I've been traveling a lot. Eleanor Lambert (the publicist) and I have traveled all over the world, many, many times, to strange and wonderful places. I always felt that my traveling...I only learn through my eye. You could sit here and tell me something all day and I wouldn't learn a thing. But if I see it, I know it. Like the other day I went over to the Metropolitan, and I spent the whole day and I came out and it was like I had had a big meal. I was just full of so much. It was wonderful. And I feel that when I travel. I spend a lot of time in the museums.

Because I think...Designers...They don't know where they get their ideas. If you're taking other people's ideas, you're not a designer. You have to...It has to come internally. And the way you achieve that is through beauty. I never make sketches when I travel; I never make notes. If I don't get it inside, then I don't have it. And I come home from a long trip and I will be just full, and I put it down on paper and I design. Go, go, go.

Q: Do you work with fabrics. Are they an inspiration, or....

A: Oh, yes. No, fabrics primarily. I usually start with fabric. Sometimes I'll start with a form. I think that's why we have to go all over the world. All the colors and the fabrics and the textures...It goes through
your hands...

Q: Did you feel a special affinity for the things you saw that children were wearing...

A: Oh, no. I didn't pay any attention.

Q: It didn't. To what children were wearing.

A: I didn't pay any attention to the way children dressed or anything. I never paid any attention. I'm doing women's clothes today. And I'm doing some children's dresses. But I'm really interested in art, and I happened to find the channel through the children's world. But...I guess I love children, and art. Those are my two interests. But I think that every designer has to move. You have to know all the ethnic cultures to know anything today, coming from all over the world.

Q: What do you think, over the years that you've been designing have been the influences on children's clothes? Is it a question of how people live, or what?

A: Yes, I think today what's happening--and I don't think it's bad--I think that we used to dress children as sort of a dimension of our own ego. And I think that's gone, and I think that's healthy. I think it's healthy for the children. And I think that jeans and T-shirts are the uniform and I think that's healthy. I think from all this has emerged something very wonderful. And I think we're in a very changing...

Q: Do you?

A: Oh, very changing. I think...I've been mad for Japanese design for years. Because of the flat. I always loved that. And I feel that that's where it's going to move into. Not to clothes constructed, but things
that are simple to wear and put on and go. Look at the Greeks, you know. And I think we've done a lot of things about clothes commercially, in the United States, and I think today that most of the designers are designing and making collections because they support their franchises. I think designing per se is in a bit of a flux, the same as artists. And I think it's going to take some time for it to develop itself.

Q: Well, of course, for a lot of people, art is now based or headquartered in this country, where it didn't used to be. Do you feel that that's true in children's wear as well?

A: No.

Q: You don't.

A: No, I don't think children's wear is based anywhere today. I think that the emerging child is changing. I think we are understanding children more than we used to. I think we give them more freedom than we ever did before, and I think that it's going to be another generation.... They're going to be different.

Q: What happened...There was a time when children's wear... Particularly if you talk about little girls...Children's wear was dresses; then it became sportswear, including the kind of thing that Danskin makes, which we haven't talked about, but which you did...

A: Yes, I worked for them too.

Q: Yes. Right. How do you feel about the way of life as affecting the category of merchandise?

A: Well, I think it affects it very much. But I think from this is going to emerge a different type of clothing for the world. I think
it's going to be...I think you're going to....I don't think it's realistic to make a collection and...at one time have it pull up one side and at the back another time...You know, I think we have to clothe the body and have to be comfortable, and I think that is what the Japanese influence is going to come into. And I believe that ten years from now that the Japanese will have control of the clothing industry, just as they have the electronic. Because I think their minds work differently. And I think because they are a pure ethnic culture, they will all work together. And I just think these big collections...You find so many of them that are just for a few people, and if they're intricately done they can't be copied well. You know? There has to be a simple way to clothe people. And, of course, I think the movement that's happening today that's very meaningful is people are doing handwork again. Because the stores all have the same things. Sweaters are in, so everybody's knitting. People are doing gloves, and with their hands, something that's individual. We're going to come to that. We cannot have all these different kinds of dresses and sleeves and bottoms and skirts.

Q: Have you got any feelings about what's happened to the changing population with the instance now of first birth, a point in a woman's life where she is perhaps in her mid-thirties...Do you think that that whole change over of pattern is affecting...

A: I think it will, because I think the woman is more mature. Emotionally mature, when she has her first child. And she's more involved with the development of that child. And she's not going to use that child just as a family ego. That's what it used to be. Well, you know...My
daughter got married at 20 and she had a baby at 21, and you know, it's all become part of... But I think a woman today, if she's 35 years old when she has her first child, she's very involved with that human being. Not that it's part of the family structure. I think that even though she would, she's not going to have as many children at that age, you know. And each one is going to be very meaningful to her. And I think the fortunate children are going to be the ones who have a mother who has more concern for them. You used to just kind of pass over the children.

Q: Helen, if you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently? Or would you do anything differently with your life, professionally and personally.

A: If I had it to do all over, I think--in the same time span I lived in--I think I would have done the same thing. But if I was doing it today, I would do it very differently.

Q: How would you do it?

A: Well, I would go into finance. First. And then I would like to develop some point of commercialism that would incorporate finance. And I would not have a child and I would not marry early. Then I would select a man very carefully for what his interests were, not for romance in any way. His interests; his intellectual capacity, and his... If he had as much going for him personally in his life as I would have in mine, and we would live together and have a child because we wanted to. But those things were not in the score cards when I was growing up, you know. There was a different selection of husbands. But I think today... Of course, we still always have to remember that the child bearing years are just so long, so you have
to get it in there somewhere. But I would start with finance, I think that I got in on an early commercialism, which was fascinating, you know. But I see today that the commercial side is destructive of one's growth.

Q: Do you feel that it's possible to know too much about the technical aspects, or do you think it's important to know as much as you can about the technical aspects of design?

A: I think the more you know the better off you are. I always say it takes 20 years to make a designer.

Q: You go to school for two years, and then you get...

A: Then you work and work and it takes you 20 years to be able to heft a piece of fabric in the air and know exactly what it's going to do. It's going to take you... It takes a long time. You have to have a lot of mistakes before you... to be really able to move quickly and know what you're going to do. And I think that... I think so many designers want to "be desingers." They like the terminology more than the true aspects of it, you know. But, it's going to change. I think our commercialism in this country... What injures me a little bit is to go to Japan, and you see everybody giving up their beautiful kimonos... except for special occasions. And that was there... There was that beauty; they were like flowers, they were so beautiful. But if you go to India, and you see those saris, and they're so beautiful, and they're just fabric wrapped around...

Q: Is India a country you've been to now?

A: Oh, I've been to many, many countries. I've spent a lot of time in... I'm crazy about India. And I think... we have spread our commercialism around the world. I was down in Yemen a few years ago, and I saw the women
all wrapped in their wonderful peasant clothes, you know. And all their little children were wearing little American clothes. It's as though we've invaded other countries with our commercialism. Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad.

Q: But at least, at the same time, they have retained something of their own.

A: Well, yes, but I think it's going to be less and less.

Q: You think there's going to be more and more homogenization.

A: Yes, I think so. But I think we're growing up. I think we're growing up emotionally and intellectually about clothes, and I don't ... I think that the Japanese influence is going to do something about clothes in the world.

Q: When I started in business as a buyer, at the end of the '40s, and then all through the '50s and '60s, it seemed to me that clothes (and this is now clothes for grownups), it seemed that clothes represented a very, very important part of a woman's life. I have a feeling that that is changing. How do you feel?

A: Yes. Oh, very much. Very much so. I think that most women today, who are knowledgeable about clothes, they want their look, and they want to be comfortable and they want to function. It used to be that we wanted clothes because they put us in a room. But today, if you can't go in a room, the clothes shouldn't go. You have to go first. And I think jeans and shirts did a lot of that.

Q: But I think you're also saying that clothes are important, but that the woman makes the clothes.
A: Yes. The woman's growing up, you see. She's maturing. And she...The entrance is not the only thing. She has to go into the room and talk. And it used to be that the entrance was the main thing. If you looked well and if you could...

Q: I'm still interested that...I perhaps have got the wrong concept of the woman of the South, but somehow you sound as though you are a person who was doing some pretty avant garde thinking, a long time ago.

A: Yes.

Q: When Southern women weren't doing that. When Southern women...Or perhaps I shouldn't feel it was Southern women...at least Southern women, as I thought of them, weren't doing that.

A: Well, I've never been a Southern woman, but then my father wasn't a Southern man.

Q: You mean literally, or figuratively?

A: We were a different breed, don't you think so?

Q: Well, what made you different?

A: Well, we all had our own ideas. Everybody in the whole family. We were a very volatile family, and sharp. You know what I mean? And well read and interested in everything. I wouldn't say that we were really the usual Southern family at all.

Q: But you really don't know how to account for it?

A: It was because of my father. He was a forward thinking man. Very forward thinking. And my aunt, his sister. She came up here, to Barnard, to school, when she was young. She never left, and she was very forward thinking.
Q: And you were also very entrepreneurial, at a time when women were not. You had the guts to go into your own business and to risk that you would make enough money to survive.

A: Yes, yes. I've always done that.

Q: I mean, you had no doubts?

A: Well, I always quit every job. No job quit me.

Q: And you had no self-doubts about your ability to support yourself once you were started?

A: No, I didn't. I was very young when I trusted my intuition, and I trusted my design ability. I was very young. I realize that. I didn't...I never cared whether the manufacturer like what I did, or didn't. I only liked...If I could get it into the store, I felt it would sell.

Q: Well, one of the things we're going to be talking about is what your relationships with the stores is, or has been... So, I thank you very much for today, and we will resume.....

End of Tape 1
Q: ...Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology. This will be the second tape to be done with Helen Lee, as Memoirist. The tape is being recorded on July 6, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Helen, could we start today's discussion with a little bit of your point of view about your store relationships over the years. With whom did you deal and on what levels? How do you feel about specialty stores vs. department stores? How do you feel about buyers and buyer turnover? And merchandise managers and working on promotions? Just that kind of interplay, between human beings.

A: Well, I think the first time that I really worked with a store, completely, so to speak, was Lord & Taylor, with Dorothy Shaver. She came and wanted me to... When she was doing so many of the young designers, you know, she wanted me...

Q: About what year was that?
A: Let me see. That must have been about '52, along in there. '51, '52 I would think. And she came and she wanted to promote my name and my designs. And since she wanted it to be done, of course the buyers came along and were happy and willing and very cooperative. And I had good relationships with the store and with the buyers. And also with Henry Callahan, who used to be the display man, and I used to work with him every time they put my clothes in the windows, and they had wonderful displays.

Q: Did you work with the advertising people as well?
A: Yes. Yes, I did. And then Dorothy would want me to do certain kinds of things. Like she wanted me to go into sleepwear and under-
wear for other manufacturers who would handle my clothes, and the designs. And so whatever she wanted me to do, I did. So I became...I started to be ...I started to function as a designer for Lord & Taylor's, the children's ....What we could manufacture we did. If not, we'd go out and get other....

Q: When you say "we," what company were you at the time?
A: I was with Youngland at the time. And whatever we could manufacture we did. Otherwise, I would go...other people would do it and I would be paid by them. I'd make my own arrangements with them of what they would pay me.

Q: But in those days, all your production was right in this country.
A: Yes. In those days, everything was in this country. I was with Lord & Taylor for so many years. I can't remember the span. But anyway, then Sears came to me (I think I told you that the other day) and they wanted me to design some things for them. And this was after Shaver died, and they didn't want to use my name anymore and I got very angry and I told them....

Q: They wanted to use theirs.
A: Uh huh. Adam Gimbel of Saks then took the name up, and I started doing for Saks what I had always done for Lord & Taylor...

Q: At a place like Saks, did you work directly with buyers or always...
A: Always...Both. Merchandise men...were always present. And Mr. Gimbel said that the buyers...He told me that the buyers would have to buy the line, and if there was ever a problem he would discuss with them
that they had to buy it. That was one of the reasons why the merchandise man would come into the picture always, and he would see that they spent the proper amount for each collection so that they had windows, and they had it for all the stores, and they had displays and everything. Advertising. And I worked with the advertising people and the display people. By then, Henry Callahan had gone to Saks, so I worked very closely with him; we were great friends. And I worked with...throughout the store. Everybody. And our relationship was always very splendid. Just recently, about two months ago, one of the buyers, who was a buyer at that time for Saks (he's been retired but he lives in Spain)...he came down to Tennessee and visited with me. We're old friends. Most of my relationships with the buyers...We were good friends.

Q: Has that situation changed since? Nowadays, the buyer turnover is faster..

A: Very much. You see, when stores were bought, so to speak. Like when Saks was a family store, it was very well controlled by Adam Gimbel, and the buyers were all involved with Adam Gimbel too. The relationship was very tight in those days. Now, after these big stores were sold, the buyer turnover was much more and they didn't have the same control. The heads of the stores did not have the control that they used to. As they changed them all the time, it was not the same situation.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the size of the collections that you would do, and how many times a year?

A: I did four collections a year for Lord & Taylor's and Saks.

Q: And also, I assume, those same collections were sold in
other parts of the country....

A: They were sold anywhere that...They did not sell anywhere close to Saks.....Fifty miles was the way I could sell...Anybody that wasn't within the 50 mile radius.

Q: That would have to be more and more difficult nowadays...

A: Oh, yes. I don't think this could be done anymore. It's very difficult.

Q: Yes, because all the stores have proliferated.

A: Oh...These were very personal relationships. Dorothy Shaver and Adam Gimbel. This was a different era. I don't think anything will ever be the same again. But, we would sit down with the buyers and we would...I would have ideas, and they would say, "Oh, we like that idea." I would get an idea for a collection. . .

Q: This was before you showed the collections...

A: Oh, yes. Before I'd even start on them.

Q: Actually, before the collection started--in those days of the '50s, say--You would get your heads together and...

A: Yes. Oh, yes. So everybody was together. And there was no squabbling at all. None. . . And I would make a collection of dresses, say, for Saks. I would show them about 50-60 models. Then I would show them coats. And in those years, I would go and buy my fabrics in Europe for the coats, and they were very beautiful fabrics and beautiful coats that we would do. Of course, the company that I was with did not manufacture the coats, but I had another dealer that manufactured the coats. That's how I got into licensing, really.
After the collection...When I would show the collection, I would show all the different components of it. Whatever I had done. Sleepwear, underwear, whatever...All shown together. Usually I showed the collections in my own home.

Q: Yes, I was going to ask you that. In other words, these were really licenses you're going to talk about next. But these licensed products were shown in one place, and it was not a showroom.
A: No.
Q: It was your home.
A: Yes. Now, we did have a special showroom at Alyssa, where we showed my things and we had a special girl who sold them and explained them. But the buyers selected from the 50-60 dresses, and then they would get coats to go with them. Because the colors had all been planned together.
Q: So that you really worked with various houses to get a color theme.
A: With the people they got shoes from, too. We did the whole thing. Hats. Everything.
Q: Now, in those days, certainly, that was a relatively unique operation.
A: Oh, yes. I don't think, certainly in children's wear, anybody else was doing it. I think I was the first...This was when I first started doing a collection that all tied together, and this was really conceptual design, you know.
Q: Did you think of it as licensing...?
A: No, I only thought of it as coordination, and pulling to-
gether the industry so that everything worked together.

Q: How did you work technically? For example, you did a collection for Alyssa and you did a collection for a coat house, and you did a collection for an accessories firm. Did you then have assistants to work with you?

A: Oh, yes. I had a work room, and I had over 30 people who worked with me. Because, you see, all the time I was doing this, I was doing things for Sears; I was doing the Alyssa line; a sportswear line. So I was doing...I had a big, big work load.

Q: Under your own name, or was this...

A: Oh, yes. It was part of Alyssa, but I had part of Alyssa too. I owned part of Alyssa. And I had pretty good control over Alyssa for what I did, because I handled all these accounts myself. I did go into the showrooms and worked with other stores. But, of course, we didn't do special things for other stores. But I would work...The stores that would come in, and want to buy the Saks line where they were eligible to have it, and I would work with them too.

Q: What about the resident buying offices. Did you work with them?

A: Yes. Yes, I did. They would come in and I would show the collections. I wouldn't personally show the collections, but I would come in and show them for important buyers. And I worked very closely with buyers. I always had good buyer relationships. They were always friends, you know. We went out together socially and we had good relationships.

Q: Now, could you talk a little bit about how your sales pro-
motional efforts were conducted in those days? Was advertising tied in right from the very beginning? Did you do trunk shows? What kinds of promotions did the stores do within the stores, and did they collaborate with each other, or was it all separate?

A: Well, I went all over the country, many, many times to the stores. And sometimes I would go out and do 21 cities on a trip, maybe one day for each city. It was pretty rough going, you know.

Q: I'm sure.

A: At each place they would have a fashion show....

Q: And this was done by the members of the staff of the store.

A: Yes.

Q: They would coordinate it and arrange....

A: That's right.

Q: Your appearances on radio and...

A: That's right. And I'd go on television, and I'd go into radio, and I would be at the stores and have fashion shows. I'd work that out. Usually...Bonwit Teller in Philadelphia...Mildred Custin....She and I were good friends. I would always go down there and do good shows with her. And we would put on fashion shows, and we'd all have to speak. There was some sort of theme that we'd work on....We always had to have some little gimmick. Such as, we would say, "Wear your Helen Lee dress, and be in a fashion show." And the children would come in with their dresses...And at the end of the show, we'd have every girl in the audience come up and model her Helen Lee dresses. And, of course, before the show they'd buy the clothes to be on the runway...We'd do little things like that, with the children.

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Q: That really sounds like fun... When you worked out your collections... And you started to say you did four collections a year....

A: Yes...

Q: What were the seasons for those collections?

A: Well, it was Fall. Our biggest collection. We showed that in April, as I recall. That's when the big collection was shown.

Q: For delivery in July and August.

A: Yes. It was usually started in June. The children's things... Before they go to school or camp. Sometimes they would buy the clothes...

Q: To have them ready...

A: Yes. And then I would do a holiday collection, and spring and summer sportswear.

Q: And about how many pieces would be expected to be produced in your dresswear firm, let's say.

A: Let's say that Saks would perhaps, out of 50-60 models, would select perhaps 30 models, for each season.

Q: But that didn't leave much for the other stores.

A: No. Then they were withdrawn. We only manufactured what they selected.

Q: Then how did you sell the other stores?

A: Well, we had the Alyssa line.

Q: I see. So you're just talking about...

A: See, I did both lines, but I had to make sure that the Saks line was more expensive fabrics and more expensive clothes. But the Alyssa line was still my design and had my look.
Q: Yes. Right. You know, in all this time (and it's my fault), we have not once discussed price range. And price ranges have changed dramatically over the years.

A: Oh, yes. They certainly have.

Q: Now. For example...When you first went into business in New York City, you came up and you were designing by the late '30s and early '40s...

A: Yes.

Q: Do you have any recollection of what your price range was?

A: Yes. I do. I remember when I was at Youngland, I did a dress and Bloomingdale's bought it. It retailed for $7.95, and it was the best $7.95 dress they had ever had on their records. Now, their best dresses had been around $5.95, and this brought them up.

Q: Do you have any idea how many they sold?

A: Oh, I couldn't tell you.

Q: A hundred? A thousand?

A: I really couldn't remember that. Because we sold so many people, you know.

Q: Well, what would a really good cutting ticket be?

A: Well...A cutting ticket, for, let's say, a Saks dress, would be around 45-50 dozen.

Q: And you still were selling by the dozen.

A: Yes. That's right. We didn't go into units until they rose up to be where they were retailing for about $20.

Q: Yes. At which point it seems silly to be doing it by the dozen.
A: Yes.

Q: What...You had said you were running a design room and there were about 30 people who were involved in all of the areas of the clothes that you were making. That included, I assume...Did you work with sketches and with people who went shopping for fabric?

A: No, I did all of that. I did all the sketches, and I did all the selection of the fabrics, and trim. I saw fabrics and trim every day.

Q: And what did those other 30 people do for you?

A: They did...They cut, they made patterns, sewed. I would make their sketches and they would...These girls...I had assistants who had to work with all of the sewers; made sure that they brought the dress through to specification.

Q: So that actually, in your design room, you produced your first sample.

A: Yes.

Q: And did you also produce a duplicate, or did that come from the factory?

A: No, no. It came from the factory.

Q: And then did you correct the duplicates?

A: Yes. I would see the duplicates; they would come down to me, from the factory.

Q: Did you use models for the duplicates, or was this done...?

A: Well, that was all done...I worked with all the patterns, too. I did all the pattern work, with the pattern. And that was all specified
and by the time the dress had gone through my work room, and was fitted to
the models... I don't mean live models, but the models... And then we would
have models in constantly because we were always taking pictures, photographs,
and you were always fitting and everything. If I had any concern we would
bring in a model.

Q: Let's talk about Europe, both in terms of its influence
on you, and Europe in terms of its influence... and reverse influence, if
there was any of that. Because I have sometimes felt in the past that
while they had interesting ideas, in terms of design, the practical things
of snapping and unsnapping things in the right places, they had a little
bit to learn that they might have learned from us.

A: I never took anything directly out of Europe. I always went
to Europe with the feeling that I had to fill myself with ideas, wherever I
found them; museums; anywhere. I really had to fulfill myself on a trip,
and I didn't care where I got it. Where I got color combinations...

Q: You never sat down at night and sketched out...

A: No. Never, never. No, I tried to fill myself. And I
would go and see the clothes in the stores. But the clothes were very dif­
ferent from American clothes. And, as you say, the way they were made... They
were not commercially made in most cases, for the production of America.

Q: I've always been very curious about how children's clothes
were made in Europe for children of families... For example, were the children
of wealthy families dressed as their mothers were, by dressmakers? Were the
children of poor families dressed by somebody at home sewing on machine?

A: I think most of them were. I think they were either made by
the mother or by somebody in the neighborhood, or a dressmaker or something. They did have some children's clothes, but certainly the bulk of the clothes were done in the home.

Q: But you felt that your travel...How often did you go to Europe? Every year, or...?

A: Oh, no. I would go frequently. Sometimes seven or eight times a year.

Q: Really. What countries did you go to?

A: I went all over. Then I started going to the Orient, and I began branching out.

Q: Really. What year was that?

A: Let me see...The first time I went to the Orient was in the early '60s. But before that I had been designing in Greece, and I had been designing in England.

Q: For production there.

A: For production there, yes. And those clothes were sold in Europe, and I also brought them here and sold them here.

Q: Well, now, were you working on a licensing arrangement when you did that?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: So that they paid you a royalty, a percentage of whatever it was...for designing clothes. That must have meant they knew your name and knew your work.

A: Yes, they did.

Q: Europeans are never the quickest in the world to recognize
American design.

A: Well, I started going to England....The man whom I worked with had been working in the United States and he knew my reputation here, and he wanted me to come over and do knitted wear in England.

Q: How important were knits?

A: They were very important. Knitted children's clothes were very important. They were...It was very interesting, because I was given just certain colors to work with in the knitting machines. And I had to take those colors and make them so they would do for the American market, and be different from what was being sold in Europe. And it was very interesting.
The first collection I did, I worked one day, I came through with about ten garments that day and the man I was working with, he said, "These don't look anything like anything we've done here. This is just what I wanted." He said, "You've taken the same colors, but you've mixed them up differently."

And that was the interesting thing; that you could work with the same materials and come out with a different look.

Q: Yes. A different interpretation.

A: Yes.

Q: When did you really begin to think of the way in which you were working as licensing.

A: I never thought about it.

Q: You never thought about it.

A: No. In those days, it wasn't called that. The whole idea was to put collections together, that would coordinate. And Eleanor Lambert used to handle my publicity, and everything was that I coordinated clothes.
And that was the... But, of course, the licensing today isn't the coordination. It's just names that are licensed. I licensed work, so to speak. I had a... I constantly had the idea of putting it together in a package. And I wanted to use colors that were different... I would find a lovely color that I wanted in a tweed coat for example, and I would want to build around that, so that I would have a wardrobe. So the dresses would be coordinated with the coats.

Q: We talked a little bit the other day about the role of women in this fashion business world. Did you ever find that there were men who did not really regard your business skills simply as skills of a human being who happened to have them?

A: I don't know. I had a good relationship with most of the men in my business life. Until I got too much publicity. I got too much... Then there was trouble. I don't think that I had any trouble about being a woman. I think they liked what I did and they wanted it, and then suddenly they realized it was overpowering for them....

Q: And that their own businesses became secondary...

A: That's right.

Q: Have you ever worked for a company which did work specifically for a discount group? I'm not talking now about the mass marketing people or the chain distributors like Sears and Penney's, but the discounters. Were you aware ever....

A: No. We didn't have that trouble in those days. A lot of things would go offshore, when we had overproduction.

Q: Ah. Now, you're using "offshore" in an interesting way. That's not the way...
A: Yes, I know.

Q: What you're saying is that a lot of your extra production was sent out of the country...

A: That's right. That's right. That's how we unloaded it. And we didn't sell...Because we had too much trouble...Where were we going to sell it? That's one of the problems today. What is a manufacturer supposed to do with his overproduction?

Q: Well, there are some manufacturers who have set up specific divisions which do nothing but sell to the major discounters.

A: Well, I know that's one of the major problems we're having today. In industry. Isn't that right?

Q: Ummm...If they do it specifically, and sell specifically just to discounters (and I assume there are a great many in the country)...

A: Yes.

Q: They are then keeping that same merchandise out of the hands of the department stores who would object to it. So I think the situation has changed somewhat from the days when I, for example, bought for Ohrbach's, which was an underselling store. But you have had, yourself, no direct contact...

A: No. I would not say that we had that as a prime....

Q: What about such things as acquisitions and mergers? Were any of the companies that you were with involved with, acquiring businesses that could produce other things?

A: No. They did not.

Q: They pretty much had their own production.
A: Most of them had their own factories, and the children's industry, you didn't have contractors the way you did in other industries. We had our own factories and things. Sometimes we had to have contractors when we had busy seasons or something. But you usually had your own factories.

Q: So you never really became involved in the thing which differentiated the jobbers, who were manufacturers, and the jobbers who were agents?

A: No.

Q: That was never part of your particular world?

A: No.

Q: It's really very interesting, because, of course, so many of the businesses became...Well, not specifically in the children's market, which I haven't got, really, all that information about just yet...In other kinds of businesses, especially ready-to-wear, huge differences between jobbers who were manufacturers and jobbers who were agents, and stores came out...A store in Philadelphia might acquire its Saturday stock, from a jobber, but that did not happen. . ?

A: No. It did not.

Q: Was that because children's wear was placed for delivery so far in advance?

A: Yes.

Q: Far in advance. Was there ever any...Did you work for a stock house ever?

A: Never.

Q: Never.
A: Never.

Q: So they never cut stock but they would just have hanging...

A: But sometimes we did. Because we had to. But we would work...

Every Thursday night we would work on the new models that would come out of the work rooms, and we would decide which ones to cut and how much to cut, so we kept production going. But we... That was all a gamble that we did.

Q: But now you're talking about what I think of as a merchandising function.

A: That's right.

Q: That was a function that you participated in.

A: That's right. And then the next week's work--I would plan it in relation to what we'd already cut.

Q: Let's talk about Garanimals, since you mentioned it just briefly the other time.

A: Yes.

Q: How did that all come about?

A: Well, Garan is a big company. And they started with men's shirts, and they had various divisions, doing other things. And Seymour Lichtenstein, who was the head of it, he called me and asked me to have lunch with him one day, and he said he wanted to start a line called Garanimals, and the idea had come up from his advertising company. And he wanted me to see the idea, and see if I could work with it and did I think it was a valid idea? Well, I looked at it and I said I thought it was terrific. And he said, "Well, you go and see if Sears is willing for you to work with us. And then you decide what you want to get paid, and we'll make an agreement." So I called
Sears and they said it was all right for me to have that as an account...

Q: So that became an additional account.
A: Yes.

Q: How many did you have by then?
A: Oh, dear. I don't even know.

Q: Because that really sounds like a lot of work. I mean, that just isn't done with your hands tied behind your back.
A: No. No, it wasn't. I didn't do the designing, though, you see. I worked with their designer, and I showed them how to work.

Q: That sounds like one of the secrets to your success.
A: Yes. I think it is. I think so. You see, I always started with my colors. I would start and select my... That's one of the things I did when I went to Europe all the time. I would really look for colors, and I would get the colors I wanted in wool yarns. I'd bring back balls of yarn. And then I would put this....

Q: This is for Garanimals.
A: Well, this is for everything. Yes. And I did it for Sears too. Because I already... When I took the... I was well into Sears when I took Garanimals on, and I showed them how to work. How to get their colors first; to dye those, and how to coordinate everything—the tops and the bottoms and... Because they did all of their own fabrics, you see. They didn't weave them or anything, but everything was dyed to match for them.

Q: Well, now, in an operation as big as that, for example. Are they involved in what I call offshore production?
A: No, everything... They have 21 plants through Mississippi and
Georgia and Tennessee, and they have plants (I've been to all of their plants), and they have a couple of airplanes. They'd pick me up and take me around to the various plants.

Q: Well, you mentioned earlier that you had started going to the Orient in about '60. Was this still just for the impact of ideas, or had you begun to perceive there was going to be what has happened, certainly, in other industries--This enormous effect of their production.

A: No. I wasn't that aware. The first offshore things I had done had been in Puerto Rico. Hand smocking. I had done that for many years. When I went to the Orient, I did a fashion show of my clothes over there, in Tokyo...

Q: Do you remember what year, approximately, that might have been?

A: I would say it was about '66, maybe. Along in there. And Eleanor Lambert arranged a fashion show with the American embassy over there, and we had... In our fashion show, we had 2,500 people come to the fashion show, and we sold tickets and we gave the money to a crippled children's hospital in Tokyo. And we had fabulous publicity from this.

Q: Did you use local models?

A: Oh, yes. And we had... The sisters of the emperor... backed the show, and also the American embassy, and we had children from the royal family, in the fashion show. And it was a lovely, lovely show. Eugenia Sheppard came with us and did all the publicity back from there; she came in every day. And one of the buyers from Saks came to the show; Alfred Flug was the manufacturer. And that was a beautiful show and it had lovely... And it spread the name to the Orient, you see. So then...
Q: Were you the first children's wear designer over there?
A: Oh, yes. Norman Norell went after me and had a show in Tokyo, on the same concept as what I had done.

Q: But apparently, as I recall the story, he had a terrible time. He was not provided with the backup that they had promised. And I believe it was Hanae Mori who came to his rescue.
A: Hanae Mori came to mine too.
Q: Did she?
A: Yes.
Q: She's extraordinary.
A: She's lovely. You see, I had all the pictures of all these children and all of their measurements, and I made all the clothes for them. And I think I showed 60 models, and each dress was made for a specific child. And we didn't change their clothes; it was too difficult. So that each child had one dress, you see. But Hanae Mori helped me. And all the clothes went without hems finished. And she helped me with all the things that had to be altered. She was wonderful.

Q: Yes. She is an extraordinary person, and...
A: A lovely lady.

Q: A lovely lady indeed. But you...As you say, you were the first children's wear person who went over there. Now, what did happen in subsequent years with production? Some things, for example, are being made in China.
A: Oh, yes. Well, we started making things while I was there. I made a collection while I was...We went on from Japan to Hong Kong, and Alfred
had made contact with...

Q: I'm sorry. Just clarify it for me once again. Alfred Flug was President of what firm?
A: Of Alyssa.
Q: Now, Alyssa has been the primary source with whom you've worked over the years...
A: Well, it was Youngland and it was Kate Greenaway; Youngland and Alyssa. And from Alyssa I went into my own business. But Alfred had set up a contact for me in Hong Kong back in '66. After the Tokyo show we went there. And I did a collection while I was there. And we brought all those clothes... They were manufactured and we brought them back to the United States and sold them here. That was our first contact in the Orient.
Q: Are you now...How do you feel about the production of clothes in the children's market over in the Orient? For example, in the American ready-to-wear market, other than the top level of clothes, a very high percentage of our clothes is being made offshore. In Misses apparel. Is the same thing in...?
A: Yes, a lot of the children too. A lot. Although I don't think as much as it used to be. I believe that a lot of things are done in this country. A lot of the T-shirts and jeans are done in the Orient. But I don't think the dresses are bought very much, as they used to be. Children don't have the dresses. If the child today has three dresses a year, that's about all she has.
Q: Was the children's wear industry a unionized industry?
A: Oh, yes. Completely. The ILGWU, yes.
Q: So that the contractors would work out...or the factory
...I'm sorry. Would you clarify that. Did you say that most of the
children's firms owned their own contractors...

A: Most of them had their own factories. The big ones, had
their own factories. They do some contracting work, but only in their
busy season. Otherwise, they had their own factories to keep busy.

Q: How did you feel through that whole period of the flame
retardant question?

A: Well! I went to Washington on that one.

Q: Did you.

A: I thought it was ridiculous. I think that...You don't have
the sheets flame retardant. You don't. There are many things you don't have
retardant, that the child uses all the time. And I think it was a very
emotional thing to happen. I don't think it was realistic. And certainly...
Then they discovered that they could get cancer from all that...I always
thought it was emotional and not realistic. And, I think asking the industry
to babysit and I think if we had lots of open fires, that's one thing. But the
child doesn't get that close to the fire. I went to Washington and spoke very
strongly as to how I felt about it. But, of course, it was a very difficult
thing to fight, because it was like saying, "I want to burn babies." So, it
was emotional. And I don't....I would say that most children today sleep in
their underwear.

Q: Well, most of the children's manufacturers went out of that
business. They couldn't stay in it.

A: Oh, yes. Absolutely. They couldn't. And I always thought
it was emotional. You know, one Senator started that bill. He had a secretary who had a child who had been burned, and he got the bill through Congress. But I never thought it was more than just emotional. I think most children wear their underwear to bed. But the body of the pajamas...The buttons pop right off, you can't hold the button. And it doesn't function, you know.

Q: Tell me...I'm going off on a little different tack for a bit. If you were talking to a person who wanted to go into designing children's wear, what would your advice be?

A: I would ask them not to do it.

Q: Really.

A: I don't think there's any future there.

Q: You think it's a mature industry?

A: I think it is. I just feel that there's nothing there for the future, in children's clothing. I felt that the only direction to go into if you went into it was to do staples...

Q: Blue jeans and...

A: That's right. Because that's what I think it's all about and is going to be all about. And I think there will be a few people who do children's party dresses, but I don't think there's a future there. I think we had a wonderful industry for some years, but you don't see any childrens' advertising in the New York Times anymore. You see Healthex occasionally. The N.Y. Times used to be full of beautiful ads for children's things. It's over. I think life is changing and I don't think it will ever be back. And if you see a child who's dressed up today, they look almost funny.

A: Well, then, if you don't want to talk about people going into
children's design, let's talk about designers in general. For, after all, you are a designer, whether you are designing children's wear or, as you are now, designing patterns. But patterns for clothes. What kind of design training do you think people should be getting?

A: Well, I have a granddaughter who is...

Q: Yes, you mentioned her.

A: She's at Parsons. And I advised her not to get into fashion at all. She's a good artist, and I said, "If you go into any branch of fashion, I would go into textiles. Because textiles are going to be here."

Q: Even though there is such a high unemployment rate right now.

A: Yes. I think the designing of textiles is going to be with us. We're certainly going to have to clothe ourselves, and I think that beautiful textile is going to happen. But I said, I don't think you should ...She's going into graphics. And I just think fashion is in a rough time today. I think it's rough. And I think manufacturers are very scared about what they're doing and about what the future's going to be, and they are copying each other. In the children's industry, there's nobody that's doing anything unique, unusual....

Q: You mentioned the other day that you thought the Japanese..

A: Well, I'm talking, really, about women's things, and I got into that. ... I'm more interested in women's things than in children's, but I don't think there's a big future of any kind. I do think clothing is in a state of flux, and I think it's going to change, rapidly, into some other direction. I think the blue jean....People want to go somewhere else and they don't really know where. Everybody goes to shop, but they really don't
know what they want, you know. They don't know what to do, and you see such high markdowns in the stores of women's clothes. It's frightening. And I think most of the good names, and the people who do good clothes, they make their money off of licensing. I don't think they make it on their production. And the same thing is true in France.

Q: And, of course, that does offer some job opportunities for designers to work with designers who are heavily into licensing.

A: That's right. That's right.

Q: Well, I guess what I'm really trying to get from you, if I can...I know that you are...I hear that you are not feeling very optimistic about the future for designers. But, do you believe that designers should learn their trade as a trade, as a craft, as an art first. Or do you think they should have practical experience, should they attempt to do an emulation of the old apprentice system? How do you think designers get made? Or do they?

A: Well, today I think it's very difficult. I don't know what the percentage is that come from the schools today, and do they get jobs easily? I don't know. You could probably tell me more than I would know. But I think that there is so much fear in the industry today, it seems to me, that it's difficult to get the experience you used to be able to get in an apprenticeship. But if you're lucky enough to get it, in a good work room, that's the best thing you can do. That's the best thing. I think that schools can give you the tools, and I think that's very valuable and very necessary. But if you want to get into it, then I think you have to go to work and you have to handle fabrics. You really have to do it with your hands and find out what it's all about. But, I don't think it's very easy....I think the young designers
today, even though they do very good things, they have a difficult time 
getting recognition from the press. Very difficult. It used to be the press 
were thrilled to find new people. But you look in the papers, and it's 
Perry Ellis, and it's the same names every time. You never see a 
young designer being promoted.

Q: And, of course, the press is busy covering so many people 
in so many different places....

A: Yes. Right. That's the whole thing. And it's different, 
you know, from when the press used to go to Europe. We had a wonderful 
time and they sent back wonderful pictures, and there was movement. Movement. 
But it seems to me that the movement is erratic today. It doesn't seem to 
have a movement. I used to think that fashion was like a wheel, and that a 
new idea would come on the top of the wheel, and in the first quarter of the 
wheel, that was where all the new fashion was. And it went on down to the 
bottom, and then when it got to the bottom, everybody was on it, and then... 
the top one jumped off....

End of Side 1
A: Today I think it's difficult to know when you're on the wheel, and where it's going, because in the first quarter, suddenly it may jump form one direction to the other, and you don't know whether to stay on your wheel, or get onto somebody else's. And I think that's one of the problems with fashion today. And I think that the public is not getting the same vibes as they used to get, from the papers or the magazines, because the magazines are jumping around too, with ideas.

Q: Helen, when did you decide that you were not going to continue working with children's clothes, but nonetheless are continuing to work in another field. So that you haven't given up designing; you've changed directions.

A: Well, I'm doing children's things too, but my interest is in a different type of design today. And although most of it is being done more for my pleasure than anything else--I'm doing things I really want to do today--and I'm interested in my own thinking about what's happened, and where I think it's going to go, and to think about what people want and what they want to do with their hands. I think people want to...

Q: Are you working with crafts?

A: No, no. I am doing...Actually, I'm doing collage. Prints. And the way I like a plain black dress, which has a feeling of a Japanese form, and then I make a design on top of that, maybe using 16-17 different prints, making a collage on top of that. So I'm making my fabrics on top of that.

Q: Well, now, are women going to be able to do this?

A: Well, McCall's is going to do a show.
Q: They are.
A: Yes. But I am also doing it, really, for my own pleasure, because I just feel that this is kind of a new direction. For clothes. And people want...They want something that's individual. I think it would be very difficult (I'll show you some things) for these to be made in this country commercially. I think they could be done in Hong Kong, where you have good hands to work. And I'm doing a children's collection for them, and the women's things. And the things that I've done for them have all been in this very simple design. Very simple. And any age woman could wear them, but they're particularly good for the older woman.

Q: Now that's interesting. Why are you now interested in clothes for the older woman?
A: Well, maybe because I've always made my own clothes, and I have a certain feeling, and I've been sewing a lot of things for my friends, just for pleasure. And I never saw the things commercially but I've been making Eleanor Lambert's clothes for many years.

Q: Really.
A: Yes. Nobody knows. I make her clothes all the time. And I make a lot of things for my sister, who's here, and for my daughters, and my granddaughter. And I do it as pleasure. I like to...For the older woman,
I like to be able to make a pattern that makes her look better than what you can get in the stores. I like to drape and cut them in a way that she looks...it conceals her figure problems.

Q: How often do you come up to New York to work?

A: About four times a year. No, I do all my work in Tennessee, but I bring the collection. Sometimes they come down to me. I don't bring big collections. Just what I think is the type of thing that they need for that season. Then I bring things up and they make a selection. It's very interesting, the things that are coming out in September. That's the beginning of my women's things. Jean Padgett is modeling all of the things. Because we wanted an older woman in the clothes, and somebody who was lovely, and Jean's an old friend.

Q: She most assuredly is lovely.

A: Isn't she lovely? She says it's her swan song. But she's an old friend of mine, and she was happy to do it.

Q: So that represents a totally different direction for you.

A: Absolutely. And it's a personal direction I'm going into. And I'm planning to have a show down in Knoxville for these things, and not model them on people. I want them on the walls, more as works of art. And the direction of doing handwork, that can be incorporated in clothes.

Q: Incidentally, when you mention doing things as part of a show, we haven't talked at all about the awards that you've gotten over the years, and...

A: I've gotten all of them, yes.

Q: Could you just enumerate them and tell me some of them that
you were especially pleased with?

A: Well, there were two that were really most meaningful to me. Of course, the Coty award, because I was the only woman who designed children's wear. And the Neiman-Marcus award. Those two were very meaningful to me. And I felt that actually my career had peaked with the Coty award. In those days they all meant a lot; they meant a great deal, and particularly when it hadn't been in the children's field before. And it gave me more status as a designer. Both of those awards did. And I had many others, but those were the ones that were the most meaningful. And I don't know whether the Neiman-Marcus award is even given anymore... Stanley did that. Now isn't it a pity. He did wonderful things. But, of course, you know he brought fashion to Dallas, and he was Mr. Dallas. And I think today it's all different.

Q: Yes, it certainly has changed, yes.
A: People didn't move too much....

Q: What is going to be the succession to some of the firms in this industry? For example, when you talk about (I don't think it matters if we mention names), but when we talk about places like Joseph Love and Youngland and Alyssa--What's going to happen to them? These are not companies that have been acquired... 

A: That's right. Well, when I was with Alyssa, we had many people who wanted to buy the company. But I wasn't...I owned part of Alyssa, and I wasn't interested and at that time my thoughts were going to Sears and the Winnie the Pooh collection, and getting into big production. But I don't think they're going to bother. I don't think there's a future there.
Q: So you think that unless they are taken over by the next generation. . .

A: That's right.

Q: When it's a small, private, entrepreneurial...

A: That's right. But you see, they're not developing design staffs. They are really just trying to get by. But if the stores don't... If children's wear remains Jeans and T-shirt. . . .

Q: And, of course, a lot of the stores are doing their own importing.

A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. But a lot of those....They go to the Orient. I used to see all the buyers over there, and I used to work with them. It's another world. And I was lucky to have the good years that I had.

Q: You had wonderful years.

A: Yes, I did.

Q: You made your tremendous contribution to their being wonderful years, but they were wonderful years.

A: Well, it's different. And I don't know where children's future lies. I really don't know, the children's industry. I think that Healthtex and Carter's and other big mills, another big plant, and I think Garanimals--they will survive because they've got basics.

Q: Do you have the feeling that it's either terribly inexpensive and volume, or else very expensive and specialized?

A: Well, I don't think any of it is very inexpensive today. I think even the big companies, like Healthtex and Garanimals, their prices have
gone way up too, as everything has. Then, if you're going to sell dresses at around $75 a piece, how many are you going to cut of them? This doesn't keep factories busy, you see. There is no way for this to work anymore. And the children's coat business is absolutely gone. They wear down coats with everything. They don't care. If you see a child all dressed up, it looks like it comes from another century, or something. I really wouldn't know. I really wouldn't know.

Q: Do you think there's anything that looks right in accessories for children?

A: No. Sneakers.

Q: Yes. Running shoes of all sorts.

A: And that's what the children want. And they're very adamant which ones are there. But look what they've done to sneakers. Look at the design effort that's gone into sneakers. It's incredible isn't it?

Q: Absolutely.

A: And those designers--you don't know who they are. They work for big companies and all those colors and all those stripes and everything going--It's a different world. It just is not...I really don't know where it can go in the children's industry. I certainly don't want to be in it anymore. I think the buyers are very nervous today. They don't know what to buy. And they are shifted around so much, you know; they don't have much stability.

Q: Well, if they're any good, they're instantly made merchandise managers.

A: Yes. Absolutely. Because they need them there. So...It's another world. And, of course, there is no exclusivity anymore. You can go
anywhere and buy anything. I remember in the old days, exclusivity was very meaningful. A store would run ads and they would promote you, if you would give them exclusivity.

Q: Speaking of ads and exclusivity, what happened during the war years? Certainly L-85 affected the women's industry. Did it affect children's?

A: Yes. It did.

Q: You had restrictions on fabric.

A: Yes. It did. We couldn't get the fabrics because there was so much cotton that went into the army use. So we had a very difficult time getting fabric. We could sell everything we could get, but we couldn't get...

Q: That was a very active time...

A: Very active.

Q: The baby boom...

A: Yes. That's right.

Q: And what's happened, I think, in terms of what you're saying, now, about the demise, if you will, of this industry, is in large measure based on or contributed to by the non-baby boom.

A: That's right. That's part of it. There's another thing. Textile houses do not make fabrics for children anymore. There is not enough volume for them. So you can get little prints and things that go into the quilting industry, and those prints, what you get for children, they really go into another industry, because you know the home sewer is doing so much of that.

Q: Is she?

A: Oh, yes. Fabulous things.
Q: And for children as well as for adults.
A: Making quilts. You know. And they sit and do all of that. That's all over the country.

Q: That's what you were referring to earlier, when you talked about craft.
A: Yes, yes. Women want to do something with their hands. They used to do all needlepoint. That doesn't seem to be the big thing anymore. There still seems to be something about if they can put it in a bag and take it around with them... quilts. And I noticed down in the South, for instance... Of course, they've always had the quilting industry there, up in the mountains. But in the big stores down there, they have the people to show you how to do it and the designs and everything... and woman do those things. It's very interesting isn't it? I think women still want something that they have made, that's handmade. Where can you go and find anything that's handmade today? You can go to a flea market and maybe get something that's handmade. But there's nothing in the stores. In the commercial world.

Q: Well, there are some things that are handmade. I just brought something home that was incredibly expensive, from Santa Fe, and it is handmade. But when it's handmade it is very expensive.
A: Oh, yes. But it's local artists doing it.
Q: That's right.
A: And that's what they're doing in the quilting industry.
Q: And wonderful silk colors. But that is, of course... It represents a tiny, tiny percentage of the...
A: Absolutely. And, of course, I heard just recently... I was
out there buying fabrics, and I heard that the silk industry is so into
prints and a lot of things we've been getting from Europe, are in rayons.

Q: Even Abraham has been making rayons...

A: Yes. That's one of the ones I'm talking about.

Q: Yes, I know. Which certainly would not have happened a
generation ago.

A: But, you've got silks, up to $95 a yard, 36" wide, and
you're in trouble.

Q: Yes. It is a very serious problem. Of course, that kind
of price range is a problem even in the market for grownups.

A: Oh, yes. Sure... You can't do anything for children.

Q: Unless you're doing it, for instance, for Princess Diana's
baby.

A: That's right.

Q: She probably buys much less expensive things then that. Well,
I'll tell you...This has really been very interesting. I am so pleased that
we were able to get together, and I will take you up on your offer to fill in.
So I thank you very much. It was a pleasure...

Helen, you just said something very interesting. Would you mind
repeating that, and that will be our final word for the day.

A: I wanted to say that the greatest job I ever had was doing
the Winnie the Pooh collection for Sears, and which I did for sixteen years.
And it was the biggest coordination of children's wear that was ever done,
anywhere in the world. And the volume there was around $50 million a year,
and I designed...
Q: A year.
A: A year. And I designed every garment, every color, every fabric; everything that went into the collection.

Q: Have they ever repeated anything like that, with anybody else.
A: No. Oh, no.

Q: That's finished too.
A: Oh, yes. It was a tremendous job, and I did four collections a year. But I did infants, children's, girls, boys, big boys, and I did everything a child wore. And I coordinated every collection. And I...

Q: How many manufacturers were involved in this?
A: Oh, dear. I guess there must have been 50 odd, and 52 buyers, mind you.

Q: Sears buyers were very powerful.
A: Yes. But this was all...My contract was from the President, and they had to buy what I designed.

Q: Were these for the catalogue, or for sale in the stores.
A: Both. And it was their most expensive line. And it started with...I think I said it on the tape before...with Disney. And they got the rights for Winnie the Pooh, and all the books, and came to me and asked me if I would design the clothes. They wanted to sell the package to Sears; if I would do the designing. And I said, yes, I was already designing for Sears. So they took the whole package. And I started on that. That's when I went into my own business. And Sears was my largest account.

Q: And what did you call yourself...?
A: Designs by Helen Lee.

Q: Right.

A: And I had other accounts at the same time. But this collection was an enormous... And I did...

Q: What years did that cover. Do you remember?

A: Yes. From... When I went into my own business was '71. But I had been doing Winnie the Pooh for some time.

The Winnie the Pooh collection lasted for 16 years. But I, when I went into my own business in '71, I then went into boys and everything. Sears put me into everything. Before that, we were just in 3-6 clothes.

Q: And when did you stop that business?

A: In the end of '81.

Q: And, of course, it's interesting. You, in your case, also did not have an heir or heiress.

A: No.

Q: To leave that business to.

A: No. No. I think it's very difficult for a designer to do that. I really do.

Q: Well, for example, you have a grandchild who's going to Parsons. But you have said her interest is graphic design. It's not really in this area of yours.

A: And it's very difficult to hand this over to somebody. How can you hand your sense of color to somebody? How can you train anybody in a big, big thing like this. I think it's very difficult to... I think if
you've got a franchise of some kind, where the name is what you're doing, that type of thing. But when you do the work, I think it's very difficult. If a team does the work... I did it all. I did all of it. And I did eight collections a year. And for all these areas. And each... every collection had their own colors and everything was dyed to match. So that you could go into the store and everything worked. If I did four pairs of pants, there would be eight shirts, that went exactly with those pants. And it was an enormous amount of work and it was an enormous coordination... And I don't think anybody else could do it today. Sears... Because they bought all of their fabrics in advance.

Q: Yes, of course. If you worked a lot with the Orient, you have to work far in advance.

A: Oh, yes. A lot of them are made in the Orient. I spent a lot of time doing this in the Orient. But this was the biggest job I ever had. It was an enormous job. I did everything. Sportswear, dresses...

Q: How big was Garanimals? It sounds enormous to me.

A: It is. Well, I don't know what their figures are today, I really don't. I would say... Because this was only for one group of stores...

Q: Which stores.

A: Sears.

Q: Oh, yes...

A: But Garanimals, I don't know what their volume is today. I would think it's up around to... It might be up to $60 million. In their children's wear coordination...

Q: Well, that's a fair amount of business.
A: Oh, yes. That whole business is much bigger... I would say that I think their whole volume may be up to $70 million...

Q: Well, you see, then, the business hasn't really disappeared entirely. You have Garan and Healthtex and Izod... Izod is enormous.

A: But these are all conceptual companies. I think it's the little companies that are in trouble. These big ones have plenty of money to start all of this. That's one thing. But if you just go in and start a little business for yourself, it's very difficult.

Q: I was going to say... Do you think you can start a little business? How much money would this take?

A: I think it would take $100,000 to start a little business. And you might lose that in the first year.

Q: Yes. But if you were under-capitalized you certainly would lose it the first year.

A: That's right. I think it would be very difficult today to start a small business. And I think that a lot of these big companies are struggling. Struggling all the time.

Q: When you started your own studio, did that take much capital to do?

A: No, it didn't...

Q: Because you had contracts already...

A: I had contracts. And Sears paid me monthly, and there... Even though they paid me against the royalty, I had enough to run my work room from the monthly checks. And then at the end of the year I would get the...

Q: Balance.
A: The percentages. Yes. And I had to put up some money, certainly, but it wasn't bad, because I had big contracts.

Q: Well, so many young people today seem to feel that they can simply start a licensing or franchising business without first putting in the years to create the validity of their names, as you did. I mean, your name was a very important name before you began to become involved in franchising or licensing.

A: Oh, yes. It takes a long time to be a designer. To get your name there, and to get your own point of view, you know. One line doesn't make a designer. It takes a long time.

Q: Right. Right. Well, I hope that something interesting and dramatic will happen in the children's industry...I would hate to see it just disappear and not...

A: I hope so.

Q: And I do think that one of the things that happens when companies are only large companies...They can no longer turn on a dime, so that if you have a new idea, you need a small company.

A: That's right. You do. I think the difficult thing today is to have a new idea and be able to commercialize it so that you...so you can make money on it. It's very difficult. If it's a good idea, and you can only cut a few of everything, well what are you going to do with that? Let's say you have a sweet, nice little line, and you went to Bloomingdale's or somebody, and they said they'd like to buy. Well, how much are they going to buy? Ten dozen? You can't live on that, you know. And if it's a new idea, they don't want to get into it too heavily.
Q: Until it's been proven.
A: That's right. And that takes money, to hold on while it's being proven. I don't know. I don't know where it's all going to go.
Q: But wherever it goes, you don't think it's going to go into the children's business.
A: No, I don't.
Q: Thank you so much, Helen.