ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, F.I.T.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

SARAH TOMERLIN LEE

President, Tom Lee, Inc.
International Interior Design

Dates of Interview

December 15, 1983
December 20, 1983

Interviewed by

Mildred Finger
SARAH TOMERLIN LEE is an extraordinarily creative person who has made major contributions to a varied group of areas in the fashion and design world.

Mrs. Lee has been a creative person in advertising, both in stores and with advertising agencies, in the cosmetics industry, in the magazine field both fashion (cosmetics editor for Harper's Bazaar) and interior design (Editor-in-Chief of House Beautiful). Since the death of her husband Tom Lee, she has been the very successful head of Tom Lee, Ltd., specializing in hotel interior design.
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Q: For the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with Sarah Tomerlin Lee, President of Tom Lee, Ltd. an international interior design firm. The date is December 15, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Sarah, you've had such a diversified career life, I wonder if you had any idea when you were a child, growing up, what your life paths were going to be?

A: Yes. From the time I was nine years old, I thought I would be a copywriter with a department store, writing advertising. And the reason for that was that my father was a fine merchant and one of the people that I met through my father, as a little girl, was Helen Cornelius, who was my ideal. My father wanted me to be a schoolteacher and my mother would always say, "Sarah..."

Q: I'm sorry. What was your father's name?

A: Charles Granville Tomerlin. And he was a wonderful merchant. He had an enormous imagination and charisma.

Q: Did he have his own...?

A: He worked... We lived in nine cities. He was a hero. He would come to a failing store, put it on its feet, and ride off on his white horse with us. We were a very close family. But his successes were so important to me as a little girl. I was in on his plans from the time I could stand and talk. He did marvelous work in Detroit and Indianapolis. It was just a thrilling thing to go to these store openings and see the community turn around and adopt a store that they had given up. It happened over and over and it was his big challenge.
Q: That's interesting. I'd like to know more about how he got started. Because that makes him the first retail consultant I've ever heard of.

A: Well, he did the first fashion show, although Carmel Snow... He did it in 1914 or 1916 in Indianapolis, Indiana; a fashion show "purple" named for a race track. He had over 100 models dressed in violet with huge violet umbrellas and white pleated skirts and either violet coats or violet pull-on blouses, who walked around the entire racetrack to introduce this color scheme. This was at the beginning of World War I, but it was entirely based on color. He did tremendous promotions I remember with Victor records, buying trainloads of victrolas. He put in those first quiet rooms where you could hear records. And he invented the "service flag" of the United States, working with...this was in Cleveland, Ohio... He went out to see the people who repaired clothes, the fitting department, and the girls weren't busy, and he said, "If you're not busy, why don't you take a rectangular piece of cloth," and he drew it. And he said, "Do you know how to cut out a star?" And he showed them how to cut stars out. And he said, "Put a big border around the red star." Then he said, "On second thought, I'd like to have some yellow stars." He was the one who thought of gold star mothers. They sold out so many flags in less than two weeks that he was ashamed. He wrote the United States Senate and said, "I'm not going to make money on patriotism. Here's my idea. This seems to be a great reward to people whose sons are overseas, or husbands, I give it to the nation." It was a darling letter, and he had a wonderful letter back from them and they gave it to manufacturers who must have made a fortune on the idea. But father was very innovative and very creative and I was his constant consultant, all my young life.

Q: Well then, let's start with where you were born.
A: Well, I was born in Union City, Tennessee, by default. I was almost a child of the railway because mother did not want to have, she said, "Another Yankee child." They were living in St. Louis at the time. My sister was born in St. Louis. He was working for "Scruggs, Vanderwoort and Barney." And she took with her a doctor and got on a train and I came the next day. The truth was that Mother wanted to be home for her sister's wedding, but was not particularly welcome because of her condition. And it was a very Victorian household. But my mother stood up on the balcony of my grandmother's house and signaled the doctor when she felt me coming and I was no trouble at all. The doctor said, "Praise the Lord, Miss Dorothy, from whom all blessings flow. You have a beautiful baby girl." During the ceremony. Isn't that a southern story?

Well, I had to go back to St. Louis with Daddy. He came for us when I was a month old. And then we went to Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Detroit, Utica, all with father. It was a very happy childhood. I was sick most of the time; had a fever every day and got to stay home. I had a piano and I became an artist, and my mother taught me right through Lucretius and right through higher mathematics. She was a brilliant teacher and we didn't have an unhappy moment.

Q: So you didn't have formal schooling?

A: Not really. I mean, I'd go occasionally.

Q: Until what age?

A: Until about the seventh grade. But it was a very productive time for me. Very unusual, I think. I just played my heart out on the piano and I drew and wrote. I would have loved to have never grown up, I'm one of those people. It's a wonder that I turned out as normal as I have.

Q: How many siblings have you?
A: I have an older sister, only entirely different from me. She herself has had a remarkable career in retailing, but her dream was to be in foreign service. And she had passed all her tests, but we were in a terrible automobile accident and she wasn't able to take the final test. And it was the time that Franklin Roosevelt needed three women in the foreign service and they all flunked out or got married or got homesick, and he said, "No more women." Then, so, Dorothy went to Miami as fashion director, which was a terrible disappointment to her. She really was geared to be a diplomat. She was beautiful and entirely... She became a merchandise manager at Glamor, Merchandise Editor, before she died. She died in '47. She'd been with them a very long time.

Q: Now, getting back to you. You started in an ordinary school as opposed to being tutored at home?

A: In Detroit, I went to the Eighth Grade in a public school and then went to Northwestern High School for three years, which was really a very spartan experience for anybody as sheltered as I had been. It was a huge school of 5,000 students. It was very hard, emotionally, for me. The savior for me there.... I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown because I wasn't used to the impact of these kinds of people. The principal asked me to write a series of articles on how to study, and he... We did 12 and I was in his office doing it, and enjoyed every minute of it. He enjoyed my articles; he gave me a little niche of my own. Dorothy was president of the student body in that school for three years. That was power! I was a little nervous wreck, too frightened to ask anybody where to put my coat. It was just an awful transition and my parents probably shouldn't have done that to me, but I came through it and maybe that was...

Q: Now, writing the articles, was this a precipitating factor in getting you to want to be a writer, or you said you....
A: No, what made me be a writer was that one of those days in the Detroit grammar school, there was a contest. We had to hear Henrick Van Loon speak and then write it up for the Detroit Free Press and I won the city award. Why I won it was just because I went back... I think I looked at the blackboard where he'd drawn all those "platypusses" and things and drew them throughout my piece...illustrated piece. I was called down to the principal's office and he gave me five dollars, and that did it.

Q: Just to tie it up... You went to grammar school starting at what age?

A: Well, it was about the seventh grade.

Q: In the seventh grade you might have been very close to 13. Right, okay. So, you knew quite young that you wanted to be a writer?

A: I always wanted to be a writer. But I had this Helena Cornelius, she was the advertising department of J. L. Hudson in Detroit, and she would sneak in and out.... We lived in a downtown hotel in Detroit because of the illness of my mother and she stayed there with her mother. And she was a stunning girl. Wore jersey dresses and shiny black collars and long black silk ties, and I thought she was wonderful. I mean, father always admired women enormously in business; he thought they were extremely creative. He respected them and he respected all his advertising managers whom I met, I met all of his people. And most of his buyers I knew quite well. Daddy would have me come down to the store and have lunch with him and he'd introduce me to...

Q: Whatever store he was working at that time?

A: I often went with him on interviews, which must have been maddening to his people, "What was that little child sitting here for?" And then he'd say, "Sarah, would you hire him?" And then I would say... I remember once with a dress buyer, he was quite fancy... I said, "I think he
has marvelous taste but I wouldn't expect him to change a tire." And shortly thereafter they drove to New York from Detroit and they had three blowouts and he never left his seat to help and he called me and said, "Well, you were right, Sarah." Well, Daddy wanted me to... He taught me all.... He really had observed, about looking at people and deciding about them. He told me lots of facts about how to select a detective, for instance. He was a really marvelous character. A great influence on my life.

I'll jump about twenty years and tell you that in Utica, in the heart of the Depression, he transformed a failing store into...

Q: Early thirties I would say....
A: Yes. '30-'32. And on Saturday night I would hear him... The indoor sport of Utica was shoplifting. Because there was nothing else to do. And it was shocking. He was caught; he had pretty good detectives, and he made them go upstairs to the top floor, across from the advertising partition where I was, and I would hear him, with a very low Southern voice, talking to them. Now, the penalty for shoplifting (Daddy never turned them over to the police) was to promise never to come back again, and to sign a statement that they had been guilty of shoplifting. And Saturday nights it was just horrendous; these interviews went on and on and on. We had some terrible things; important people... I won't tell you who, because it was shocking. But anyway.... Then I used to smell this peculiar smell before we'd go home, and one.....driving home one night I said, "Daddy, what is that acrid smell?"
And he said, "Well, you see, honey, don't you tell anybody, but I burn the confessions. Because I might have an accident and that would be blackmail material for these people. I don't want anyone to know that I burn them, but I do."

Q: That's very interesting.
A: That's straight from father.

Q: Incidentally, when were you born?

A: August 13, 1910.

Q: 1910. So that when you were with him, you were already in your twenties?

A: Yes, I had graduated from college.

Q: Right. Now, let's go back. You finished high school and...

A: I went to prep school in Danville, Virginia, where I wrote a stirring poem on the modern woman for Thanksgiving luncheon. I won a scholarship to "Randolph Macon" which...

Q: In Georgia?

A: Lynchburg, Virginia. Like a prep school, in the 18th century. Our Latin examination was 7½ hours from English to Latin. We were supposed to have learned 5,000 lines of poetry by the end of the year. At any point they would break into a poem and you would finish the line. There were only 49 students, but it was the most rigorous and marvelous education...

Q: In the senior class?

A: In the whole school. Lots of charming and wonderful things happened. A remarkable teacher. Miss Mabel Kennedy was a marvelous woman with a great crown of hair. She had studied at the University of Heidelberg and at Oxford and she would... She was an inspiration. Her eyes were alight, and she knew everything she ever had to teach to the point you couldn't hardly believe it.

Q: And was she your English teacher?

A: She was my English teacher, but she was the Dean of the College... I won't go into all the stories; I'd like to tell you sometime but not here, I'm sure. But that was really very good for me, to have that background, as
hoping to be a writer. Only we wrote in the manner of Beowulf...or whatever they wished.

Q: You knew various styles of writing?

A: Yes. And I went to Randolph Macon following my sister, who was a power by that time on the campus, so that I had an ideal Freshman room looking out over the Blue Ridge Mountains. I knew immediately the Dean and the important teachers on the campus. It was a campus of 800 students. And I majored in Latin and minored in Greek, and enjoyed every minute. I wrote seven plays that were produced on campus, and three big pageants... It had always been the May Queen, which I thought was terribly outmoded and disgusting. And so I used the dance department and the costume department and the music department and we did great festivals. We still had the May Queen, but she was just watching. It was a good step ahead and it was a fine thing for them. I was president of my class and it was an absolutely wonderful, creative place to be.

Q: That sounds like a place that you stayed for a longer period of time than you had done?

A: That's right. I spent four years there and had made very dear friends, who are still there, amazingly. Many of them. I've been on the Board of Randolph Macon - I'm Emeritus now, as of last year - every since 1940. I go down three or four times a year so my relationship has been very warm. And over the years they have turned to me as one of their graduate students who ventured into business, or whatever. So I've always known the successive presidents and that's been a wonderful, extra dividend for me, to know these people.

Q: Now, what did you do once you were graduated from college?

A: Well, the minute my diploma was in my hand, we drove back to Utica which was probably...
Q: Wait a minute. I'm sorry. What was put into your hand?
A: My diploma.

Q: Oh, your diploma. I'm sorry.
A: In 1932. I went immediately to Utica and there I guess the Depression was probably the worst.

Q: Your family was at that point....
A: Yes. And father was trying again to save a store that was failing, and I must say, we did it. My sister was Merchandise Manager in fashion and I was writing my head off. Dad was very severe. He would say, "If you do something wonderful, I expect it. If it's a mistake, I'll tell you." Well, of course, I knew underneath he was as proud as he could be of what we were doing and what he was doing." The day came... Well, the bank owned the building and had sold it without father's knowledge and the day came when I had to come to New York to earn my living.

Q: Why did you decide on New York from Utica?
A: Well, because it was the center of the fashion industry. And Amos Parrish, whom you may have heard of, was one of father's proteges and a wonderful advertising man and advisor to department store people. And I was invited by Amos to come down one summer and write his speeches for him. He made father sign a pact in blood that if I didn't like him, I could return; or if for any reason I was unhappy. And the same would be true of him. If he couldn't tolerate me.... Because he said in a letter, the worst thing that can happen between friends is to employ their children. And I did nearly collapse, because he was such a stern taskmaster. Father made me stay at the Waldorf Astoria, and I think I was paid $40 a week by Amos and we worked Saturdays and Sundays and right through till midnight getting through the "clinic" it was a "crash"....both advice to merchants and prognosis of fashion.
Q: That was really the first....

A: He was the first and he was very successful and he made millions and he was a brilliant man. He had been a newspaper reporter when father had found him and taught him what he knew.

In the meantime, father had asked him to write some letters for me to Bonwit Teller and Best & Co. and I suppose this would be interesting to you. My first interview, because of the letters, was to Mary Lewis of Best & Company, who at that time was leading (so regarded) promotional and advertising woman who did create an aura... Later done differently at Bonwit Teller and later still at Lord & Taylor. But it was a certain kind, type of person. I mean, she introduced the Best twins, when they were in all their ads. They were slender, bright, shiny haired, wholesome, slim girls--always in jerseys; always the pleated skirt and a white turnover collar. They sometimes wore a cardigan. It was such an innocent, happy... It was reflected in the musical comedies of the period as well. It certainly was true of the professionals on 5th Avenue and I thought she was that kind of woman but I found out she was far from it.

Q: Mary Lewis?

A: Mary Lewis. Whom I later got to know better. But my first interview was a great example to me of what not to do to a young talent who comes to see you. And I don't know if I should say this kind of thing, to you, or whether it's libellous.

Q: Go ahead.

A: I had this really mean letter from her saying that she had no wish to add to the rolls of inexperienced ("country people" was the implication) by an interview because the city was already overcrowded. And I wrote her saying that I had no wish whatever to waste her time and even less wish to waste my own. Therefore, I would not come to New York to see her.
And I sent a copy down to father, quite pleased with myself, and he called me up and he said, "You are a coward. Your letter's fine until the last sentence, and I've rewritten it to say, 'I have no wish to waste my own. Therefore I will be down tomorrow morning.'" I said, "Daddy, you're sending me to the slaughter." And he said, "You must find a job while you have one, dear. You're so shy and you must go while I'm behind you." That tells you about the mail service in those days. I went on the night train that same night to New York City.

Q: I'm sorry. Had you already left Amos Parrish at that point?
A: Oh, I was only with Amos one summer. Two summers. I wrote his...two of his clinics. Then I went to the Waldorf, checked in, called Miss Lewis, and her secretary said, "She's reading your letter, and she says to come on over and get it over with." Now, can you imagine the mail service being that good?

So I went with my book under my arm and went into her room, which was a large Fifth Avenue office, and it was typical of what everybody thought of Best. It was baby blue with white scallops everywhere, cutouts around, over the knicks and windows. And in the windows were bins of hats, also the scallops and polka dots. It was a very sweet, innocent office. Unbelievable. I was fascinated. I didn't see anyone in the room. I looked out the window and I looked down in the bins and then I had a feeling that someone was in the room with me and I turned and across the room in a kind of a niche was Mary Lewis, sitting down at a huge desk. She'd been watching me. She didn't speak when I came in, you see. So I said, "I didn't see you." And since she didn't answer me, I walked over to her and she reached out and got my book of samples. And she turned to a double spread which was written for teenage girls, and it was very...

Q: You mean, when you were at...
A: ...for my father.

Q: For your father? Yes.

A: And she was very sarcastic. She really just reeked sarcasm. And I finally closed the book and put it under my arm and I said, "Miss Lewis, you could make the Old Testament sound pretty silly if you put your heart into it." She said, "I neither know nor care. You are a stenographer with a college education." And I said, "No one who has ever read my copy has ever had this reaction." And she said, "Aren't you fortunate? This interview is over."

I was absolutely destroyed. I went out of the office and sat in a telephone booth and cried and then I sat on the floor of the booth because I was such a mess. I went back to the Waldorf and put ice on my face because I had two other interviews that day! And I was just destroyed. One was with Cannon Mills. A very nice man who had heard about me through friends and had written me to say, "Come to New York to see me." And one was with the august and frightening Bonwit Teller, which was then... I don't think any store now has the prestige it had at that time. A very scary store, for people from out of town.

Well, I went to see the man at Cannon Mills and....

Q: Excuse me. Were they making domestics at that time?

A: That's right. And they had just done the first gift package, which was done by my friend who asked me to go down there; making towels gifts and rolling them and putting them in boxes. So, he had a pipe and he was quite a handsome man; wore tweeds to work and jackets unlike his trousers. I remember he put his feet on the desk, which was odd, and kept sucking on his pipe and it was so different from my experience with Mary Lewis. And he said, "We really want someone who can write easily and gets along with everybody and knows something about retailing. So you see, Miss Tomerlin, you
won't do." I couldn't believe it. I said, "I thought, when you described this person that I was Cannon fodder." He said, "My G-d, I'll have to use that in my next speech. Never thought of that. But you won't do." So I said, "You must tell me why, please." He said, "You are so sensitive I would be afraid to come near you. You go away for five years and come back tough and we'll give you almost any job. I just don't want you around." It was because I'd been crying, I think. I looked so sensitive. I'm sure that's why. I didn't know that; I didn't think of it until I left. I had an immediate appointment with Bonwit Teller. This is a fairy tale. It is absolutely true, though. I got on the subway down at...Cannon Mills was down at William Street or somewhere. I got on the Manhattan... I was very chic that day, I thought. I had a black beret (was trying to be mannish) and I had a grey dyed striped beautiful English tweed suit with a beautiful overcoat with a black velvet collar. You know that look? And I was about a size 10. It was almost too much for me. Too many clothes and it was pouring rain and I was a mess. It had been such a hard day, really, and I thought, "How can I go? How can I go to Bonwit Teller?"

So, I went up to the advertising department and I will tell you that on the way, in the elevator, they only had men who had deep voices, at that time. Basso profundo voices. They would say "The Executive Floor!" And you were supposed to tremble all over. Well, I walked forward to the Executive Offices and there was a little boy named David Abrams, who later became a dear friend. A little boy with very blonde hair and heavy glasses, and he said, "I'll tell you Miss Tomerlin. Mrs. Pennoyer is having her hair done. You'll have to go to the beauty salon for your interview." And I said, "I will not."

I was President of the Junior League at the time and suddenly my other side of me...I have a split personality, obviously.
Q: This is Sarah Pennoyer?

A: Sarah Pennoyer. He said, "You'll have to see her." And I said, "I will not do that. I will not. I'm going home." He grabbed my hand and he said, "She's the most important woman in New York, one of the most wonderful women in the world, and you will do that and you'll come with me."

He was the office boy. He took me down to the beauty salon and we went through all these cubicles and all the smells and finally he got to her cubicle and opened the door, and her feet were right in my face. She was having her hair washed and she had two manicurists, each with her arms spread out, working on her. The great Sidney was on the floor—the hairdresser—and her secretary was in there on the floor. There wasn't room to stand. And all of a sudden she raised her head and it was a flat face. It looked like your Raggedy Ann doll. Really, you know, she did. And she said, "Miss Tomerlin, if you'll pardon this Oriental pomp, I'll be sitting up in a minute." I couldn't believe anybody could be funny with me, it was such a grisly day. So I gave her my book, and I said, "Do you mind if I take my coat off, it's so wet? And I'll come back if I can hang everything up." And then a few minutes later, I said, "Wouldn't you like me to put those flowers in water?" Somebody had brought her flowers. And I came back and she said, "Is this an interview I'm having or is it a monologue?" I was just dying to get away, you see. She said, "I just said something very important but you didn't hear it, so I'll repeat it. I read your opening editorial advertisement and if I'd thought these thoughts, I'd have said them this way."

She said, "Do you realize what that is? That's probably the biggest compliment you'll ever have because I'm a very good writer. But I'm not better than you are." Could you believe it? I was way down here....

So she said, "Now, I would like you to start right away. But we've got all kinds of problems here. Ruth Eagan is Catholic and she's getting married
and she won't be here long, she'll be having babies right away."

Q: Who is Ruth Eagan?
A: She was copy head for Bonwit Teller. And there's Kate Graelish who's about to have a nervous breakdown...

Q: I'm sorry. Kate Graelish? How do you spell that?
A: G-r-a-e-l-i-s-h. She was.... She's still living. She was a very tough but capable advertising manager from Macy's. Very blonde, as wide as she was tall. Very harsh but with a heart of gold. And then she said, "I don't know how I can ever be sure I won't lose you." So she put my name with lipstick on the wall in the beauty salon and my address and telephone number.

Q: In other words, she couldn't hire you right then?
A: She said not, but she said she would want to get in touch with me. And she turned and pointed down on the floor at her secretary and she said, "She can never find anything, so I'll just do this. I'll write it on the wall." And from time to time after I came there....

Q: How long did it take?
A: Oh about a year.

Q: A year!

...And you stayed in Utica during that time?
A: Yes. I went back and worked for Daddy, and then Amos sent for me again because he said he couldn't do without me. And she saw me in the store, working for Amos. I was doing a report for him; I think I'd been there three days when she saw me. And she said, "I couldn't bring you to New York but as long as you're here I don't want anybody else to have you." And there began the best chapter of my life.

Q: I'm sorry. What year was this now?
A: Well, that was '36 or '37. '36 I think. I had been working for father for four years after college. So I went in as a copywriter. Everybody left within a few weeks of my coming, including Pennoyer and I was moved into her office and became... I was almost running the store, because Bill Holmes was in Europe. It was very reckless. I mean, only the Treasurer and myself were there. But she had perfect confidence that I understood retailing exactly, even though I was that young, and I did. I did. Tom Lee was still in Australia and I didn't know he existed, so my life was fun, I had a lot of beaux and I had a very good time here.

But when I came to New York to work for Amos, I made $47.50 a week and Daddy made me stay at the Waldorf and my bill was $46 a week at the Waldorf Astoria. I had a big double room on the corner. But this was the Depression. And they moved me out of the Junior League rooms because they didn't think they were big enough and put me down there on the corner because the Manager was Daddy's friend, Mr. Farrell, and he was a wonderful man. So, I just started out with the most glamorous...without money, but the most glamorous job. You know, when you went to the theatre, you had lovely flowers. You had lots of clothes, you had lovely clothes, and you know, it was nothing. Money was nothing.

Q: What were you paid when you went to Bonwit Teller?
A: $50.

Q: Were you still living at the Waldorf?
A: No, no. I couldn't stay in the Waldorf. My various beaux were very upset that I was there. They couldn't understand what I was doing there, you know. But also, I was uncomfortable there. So, like everybody else did, I went to the Barbizon Club for Women at $16 a week. See, Daddy was paying the difference between... And I didn't want him to. So, $16 a week, or $18, that little tiny room with a basin in the corner where you did your stockings
every night. But wonderful things happened. I must tell you this, if I'm not being too frivolous, I had made a terrible mistake in an ad. I had only five minutes to write a full page Sunday ad one time because somebody had written it and it was a failure. Bonwit's had these wonderful velvet negligees with fur sleeves, long, very, very "Rowena" kind of look. And they put them all on my wall and said, "You have five minutes to write this ad over," and I did an ad called "The Dream of Fair Ladies," and I quoted Tennyson and I quoted Chaucer and I mixed it all up and brought it out of the typewriter and it went to press, and they had 500 letters from school teachers the next day or Monday morning. Sacks of mail. And I was called into Pennoyer's office and she said, "If you're going to refer to historical and literary allusions, you'd better be accurate." And I said, "You'd better give me more than five minutes." I wasn't usually that impudent but I said I thought it was marvelous that these people read the ads so carefully. "It's a great opportunity to write the letters back and make them even closer to Bonwit's than they are and I'll be glad to take those letters." I think that's the background of customer involvement with the store.

And then the next time I was sent for... She was so brilliant, you know. I had written my parents about her after about two weeks and saying, "I'm not working for Sarah Pennoyer, I'm working for Samuel Johnson." She was very curiously legged--the calf development was as though she were 17th century English and she "wears long waistcoats and she pulls at a forelock all the time, like she'd just taken her wig off and put it somewhere. And she wears octagonal glasses, it's an attire, and she talks so rapidly and she's so brilliant that I'm sure it's Samuel Johnson."

Well, that's the way she was. And very impulsive woman. And I was called in again. I was afraid I'd made another terrible gaff. She said,
"Close the door," and I knew that indeed I was in trouble. You don't close the door if you're a copywriter. She said, "We think you're terribly lucky. The luckiest girl we know. You see these sheets that have been on my desk—very wide and they're scored for a month at a time. And in the small blocks are what the department is, what the subject is, how much stock there is, and what the concept is in and where we're going to advertise." It was done with tiny little handwriting and I said I'd seen it. She said, "They're all gone. We've lost them for three months. We think they're on the desk at Saks Fifth Avenue and we want you to find them."

Q: Heavens!

A: My dear. I was again under the dryer having my hair done and the word was to come up whether my hair was dry or wet. We ripped it down. And I said, "Well, have you looked out on the 'setbacks' (Because Bonwit's had four setbacks in architecture)?" And she said, "I'm not a fool. Of course I have. You find them."

So I went out in the street with my veil and hat and gloves and I looked up and down Fifth Avenue, which was absolutely immaculate. There was a high wind and it was a time when there were chauffeurs. Every department store had a boy that helped you out of your car, to carry your poodle, give him a drink of water; he carried your hat box. We had a little boy called Buttons, in a red jacket (he was a dwarf). And I looked in the wastebasket on the street. I thought...these were big sheets of paper. The wind.... As she said, did this. They had a "simple" spine, so that if it was a hot day, (we did not have air conditioning, the wind could come right in and it did and took all three sheets off apparently). So.... I look up and down the street, and I thought, "No big sheet of paper is going to be here." But it was an immaculate street compared to our streets now, and so I looked in the first wastebasket, as I turned, I was surrounded by people.
Because there weren't so many nuts on the streets as there are now. Nobody
would look now at a lady in a veil looking through a wastebasket. But then,
everybody was looking at me. I had a whole... So I went back and got
Buttons and I said, "Come with me. You have a uniform on and you can do
anything."

Q: "Buttons" is the boy?

A: Uh huh. So, we went through the wastebaskets. And I kind of
licked my finger, like Joan of Arc and I said, "I think the wind is blowing
north by northwest and I think we should go up and down 57th Street and maybe
all the way to 58th and look in the wastebaskets. And he said, "Miss Tomerlin,
you must go. What I see in this wastebasket, a lady shouldn't look at."

So I went back and within an hour he had brought me the three sheets.
One had a corset wrapped up; one had somebody's lunch. And I put them on
Miss Pennoyer's desk and she said, "I knew you'd find them." I gave "Buttons"
$5 and he gave it back and he said, with tears in his eyes, "I'm just as much
an employee as you are, Miss Tomerlin. It's been an experience for me." And
he walked out and I thanked him.

That was the spirit of the times. I went home that night to my
room at the hotel and couldn't get in the door. There was a maze of roses
in single vases tied with white satin ribbon in a big star, and it said,
"You are our lucky star. Bonwit Teller." Now, I don't do things like that
for people who work for me now. I mean, I.... The overflowing of love and
respect and appreciation was just so stimulating. Isn't that wonderful?

Q: It's marvelous.

A: I adored Miss Pennoyer. And I'll tell you another story about
her, because it's very close to my personal life. She was thoughtless about
lots of people. She adopted four children, which was a wonderful thing to do.
And they were not ideal children. They were either cross eyed or they were a little sub-normal but she took care of them. She had them operated on. She read to them at night. She was a most generous and wonderful mother. But to her employees she would leave you waiting, somebody who'd come to see her, two or three hours, and not even care if they were outside because she was involved and she was.... Well, that was the way she was.

One day I came to work and William Randolph Hearst was sitting outside. He was a young salesman for the Hearst press at the time, but I didn't know who he was. And it was before the days of coffee in an office. I rushed out with a paper; he'd been sitting there about an hour and I said, "Would you like a newspaper because I don't know when she can see you?" I wasn't her secretary, but... And he said, "No, I don't want to see one because I'm fine." So, I only tell you that because later in the day I came back from lunch and there was a very handsome young man sitting outside. Mr. Hearst she saw about 11:30 that day. He'd been there from 8:30. And this man... I couldn't believe it. He was so attractive and.... I went back and sat in my own office. I had a glass wall for those few days, because I was in Eagan's office, she was in Europe or something. And I heard him say, in a very British voice, "Tell Miss Pennoyer I've been here 10 minutes; so if she really wants to see me, she can come to my office." And I thought, "Oh, I can't believe my ears." And then I thought, "Isn't it terrible that this wonderful man is married and has five children?" That was my immediate reaction. Well, a minute later, the phone rang and with the same beautiful voice, he said, "Are you Miss Tomlinson?" And I said, "No, but that will do." He said, "I've been told by everybody in the store that you know everything about everybody and that you're very helpful. Could I come back and see you?" And I said, "I would love it." He apparently looked through the glass and said, "That's the girl I'll marry." He said it was instant. Isn't that amazing?
Q: Yes. Yes.
A: I saw his vein pumping as he talked to me.
Q: On his neck?
A: Yes. He was very funny and very debonair and left soon, and I really... He didn't want any gossip and I didn't have any for him but he really was trying to figure out, I suppose, who was in control and he hadn't gotten to see Miss Pennoyer. He'd just come from Australia where he'd been doing Farmer's Department Store over. He did the interior design of that store. He was a surrealist, a famous surrealist painter of Australia and he had many one man shows out there and did a lot of theatre there.

Well. He, I thought, was an Australian because he was very dark... I didn't know what Australians looked like but he looked like one. He had olive colored skin and big black eyes and lots of black hair and was very British. Well, he was really an American but I didn't know it. But he'd been on a boat for 40 days and that was why he had color and he was reading Wells "Outline of History." And he took the long way and stopped off in various... The Hawaiian islands and brought some treasures back, which he gave me.

Q: Which island?
A: The island where... Lord Howe island, coming from Australia, where they have seeds that they give you instead of money and you have palms....

Q: I'm sorry.... This was some part of Polynesia, I would assume...
A: I think so, yes. But it's a famous island. Anyway... he was Display Director. He had been Display Director. He'd been the interior Display Director of Macy's.

Q: In New York?
A: In New York. But he had such a British accent I didn't know he'd ever been in New York. He was beloved at Macy's, because he was so talented
a painter. But more than that, his disposition was...his understanding of people was so evocative. Everybody said he wore a blue smock and sat on a high stool and listened to everybody's private problems and they just loved him. He'd give them a coke, and he would draw and draw and draw. And I found out later that he was born in South America. His father was a Consul in five different countries, and his mother was... His father was an Englishman but was an American consul. His mother was a schoolmarm from Boston and Rutland, Vermont, and I knew them very, very well. Both of them lived to be 80-90.

But he ran away from home because he wanted to be an artist and his father didn't want him to. So, he was then Consul-General in Lisbon. He had $6 from his mother to pay for his life in New York City and immediately came and got a job with Macy's, but he also taught at Traphagen School. And, in fact, was honored last year, posthumously, as one of the great creative people who had ever been there. It was a wonderful thing. They struck a medal for Tom.

He, as a young man, did costumes for Mae West and nightclub people. He was so handsome that he was seated in a window on Broadway, when he was nineteen years old, drawing furiously for three different nightclubs, working daytime at Macy's and teaching at Traphagen School, teaching costume design. He was one of the important people in the early days of F.I.T. which you may remember.

Well, we knew each other very briefly, except we just saw each other occasionally in the office, but we both apparently knew we were terribly in love with each other. It was a remarkable romance because...

End Tape 1 Side 1
...Tom Lee was immediately, when he came to America, it was at the time that I met him, started to do the big balls in New York City, and he did some wonderful parades, which he continued to do until his death, for New York City. Beautiful, beautiful parades.

Q: You were married in what year?
A: '38. December 28th. And we went to Bermuda on a two-level British plane, and aqua-plane, which is surprising in '38. Two flights back, the heater failed on the wings of a similar plane and it sank and everybody was killed. We were brought back early because of my father's illness; we had a phone call to come back. That was probably the most important phone call... We had this little house in Bermuda. But the first one that came through... It was the second day we were there. It was Mr. Selznick who called Tom and asked him to do the sets and costumes for "Gone With the Wind." And Tom didn't tell me. He said he'd just gotten married and he felt that it wouldn't be fair to our marriage to go to Hollywood. I wish I'd known, you know. But he didn't tell me. They found him in Bermuda, and he... The day I was married, Lord & Taylor had called me and asked me to be the Merchandise Director of the children's floor and promotion advisor. Mrs. Van Wessop asked me to come and I said, "Well, I can't do that." And she said, "You haven't even talked to me about money. Why can't you do it?" And I said, "I'm being married at 5:00." And she said later, years later, when she saw me at a cocktail party, "You know, you've been such an example to me. You really took off with such a flying start at Bonwit Teller. To think that you gave it all up." And I said, "Don't you read Vogue and Harper's Bazaar? I've been copy editor for Vogue for six years or so and signed many articles in Harper's Bazaar. I've been the cosmetics editor and have signed everything." "No, I don't read those magazines, dear." I couldn't believe it.
We had a wonderful, wonderful marriage, as you probably have heard.

Q: Did you stop working entirely?
A: No. I was busy all the time I was on my wedding trip, writing Matchiabelli ads for The New Yorker.

Q: For Bonwit's?
A: No. I was free lance.

Q: Oh. That was free lance. By then, in other words, you had left Bonwit's or they allowed you to free lance?
A: They didn't allow me to free lance. I was just trying to do it because they kept promising me a raise and never gave it to me and I had turned down Saks, who had offered me $150 and I sayed on. Finally, Mr. Gans--Victor Gans, who owns the Picassos--called me and asked me if I would please write a series of ads on the Matchiabelli perfume, which he had just bought, and they were for page on of the New Yorker. They were really the beginning of the de Beers account, where it was very romantic, all type, beautifully laid out, with a little vignette at the top, and I wrote four--probably the best ads I've ever written in my life. And they ran for ten years. I think it had a lot to do with Tom's love for me, the way I wrote. He was so proud of me and the fact that I had a different talent from him. I resigned when Todd, now an architect, was born.

Q: Todd was born in what year?
A: Oh, late '39.

Q: And that's when you retired?
A: I was at home, thinking I'd never work again. And I had kind of a post-baby depression, one particular day. Because Tom was doing sets and costumes for "The Louisiana Purchase." Five hundred sets, 500 costumes,
nine sets, big curtains. He moved to a hotel to do it and worked through the night and we had lunch every day but I didn't see him. And I had an English governess who said, "The mother's always welcome in the nursery," so I didn't see too much of my baby. So the phone rang and it was Jessica Daves of Vogue saying would I like to come and be an editor at Vogue magazine? And I went down to see her and she gave me a trial assignment on the sexual attraction of hair, and women in the public eye, which was an article about how large women should dress. The sexual attraction of hair was the one she assigned me first; I didn't know much about it and I went to the library and looked up the Venetian women who pulled their hair through the "crowns of their hats" and I wrote the best one I could and she wrote me back, "This is slightly Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but maybe that's what we need in the cosmetic division," so she offered me a job as copy editor and it was a great thrill, as you can imagine. I was taking the place of Marcel McGuane who was a wonderful copy editor.

Q: How do you spell....?
A: M-c-G-u-a-n-e! I got to know Edna Woolman Chase very well, and Jessica Davis, of course, and Babs Rawlings and John Rawlings and the entire group of pretty distinguished women editors in those days.

Q: In those days, that type of thing really appealed to a very upper...
A: Very, very. And, you know, we were very important... More than that... I mean, Charles de Gaulle came to our office one day. We didn't believe it. We looked up and there he was. I mean, when you look back over the issues, you can't believe what's happened to our fashion magazines now because they were very serious and very well written. We had Aline Talmy as feature editor and she pulled down a magnificent interview with Douglas McArthur, and we had, as did Harper's Bazaar, marvelous contacts with fiction
writers of the time that were very avant garde, really marvelous. Very top level. I was very proud to be there. It was a hard time during the war. Tom went off with the first group of camofleurs to establish, he had thought, a school for camouflage. But before he knew it he was wisked off to the 8th Air Force Base in England and I was copy editor of Vogue and it was very, very hard.

Q: You started there in what year? You had had...
A: The baby came in '38... I must have gone there in '39.
Q: And you stayed there?
A: Well, I quit and went back. I went back at double the salary, which was fine.
Q: You quit Vogue and then went back to it?
A: That's right. I went back. In the meantime, I wrote more advertising for Matchiabelli and other things. Jessie called me back and said was I happy in my work and was I expensive? And I said, "Yes, to both" because I had been way underpaid at Vogue and I was supporting... I mean, Tom sent us all the money he could, but I had a very sick sister and I had a little boy who was very ill, and parents who were in an automobile accident and I had to make more money. So, I lived in a two room apartment on Madison, and my baby qualified for Hunter College....

Q: Hunter College? You mean Elementary School?
A: That's right. Gifted children. You weren't supposed to tell them they were gifted. And he didn't learn very much. They finally discovered he was behind his age group because we were afraid to let him read. I had a hard time letting him catch up when I finally discovered... I just thought he was so brilliant. He was a wonderful companion.

The stories about Vogue in those days are endless, and I don't think we probably should go into it.
Q: Well, I would like to hear something about it. For instance, Vogue in those days was not, as I understand it, terribly interested in sportswear, for example. They really concentrated on...

A: Those were the days of "Mrs. Miniver." That was on feature. Yes, we were. I mean, in a sense, we did an awful lot of Claire McCardell and that was all sportswear. And it was a little earlier... Well, Bonnie Cashin was just beginning in fashion. And a lot of the pictures that I remember writing captions for were cottons, wonderful cotton clothes and tennis clothes and wonderful swimwear. Swimwear was marvelous in those days. It was more contrived than now. There was more fashion to it and less body, you know. It was very hard to write copy during World War II because.... But the interesting thing... It may interest you and whoever knows about this interview.... We were short of people and paper was rationed, just like fabric was for clothes by regulation L-85. So the government had people who would read what I wrote... Or, I was copy editor and I had 12 people under me..... We had underlined each issue the number of times we told people to make over what they had. Go to the closet first, see if they couldn't revive something. That's not very interesting fashion copy. But there were some things that I wrote that I was very thrilled with. The experience of the war too, and the women's feelings... And if you ever look at those issues, we didn't ignore the war. There was one wonderful sequence of John Rawlings, a wonderful negligee, a John Robb Gibbings beautiful chair, and a woman in a negligee getting out a paper and getting out the shoes and getting ready for the warrior's return. We did that kind of thing.

Q: What about the American fashion designers? Were they...?

A: At this time Coty decided to have an award and I was chosen to write the first fashion Coty award.
Q: Was that 1945?
A: It was just at the end of the war, yes. And I had worked with Kay Sullivan at Town & Country, who was the editor on it and Jessica Daves told me that I had been chosen by all the editors.... That normally they wouldn't let anybody make any money free lancing, but this they'd give me $1,000 to write it. So, for four weeks I worked with Adrian, who won it, and Kay Sullivan in my apartment night after night. We wrote it dialogue because there wasn't any television. It was radio, it was a "blue" network, and to write a fashion show for radio is a great challenge. It was bought by the "White" network and did as well as the "blue" and was a great success. I was given exactly $50 for that effort and was outraged because I had been promised $1,000. And I went to see Jessica and she said that if I couldn't make my own arrangements she couldn't take care of me. I couldn't believe it. And I told her that I couldn't believe her any more. She didn't remember our conversation. So I quit, thinking it would be a disaster. Actually, it was one of those other things that has happened to me all my life. At the darkest hour, Tom Lee came back from the war. The next day. And I had had a long talk with Jessie and she said, "You know, you and I are just alike. We're both Southern. Our parents adored us. It's given us a high challenge. We can't be wrong. We're always right, even sometimes when we don't tell the truth." And I said, "Well, I'm really not like that, Jessie. I'm always the one... I hope I'm the one who knows when I'm wrong." So, I left her, and went to Young & Rubicam immediately, and had a field day. I loved it. I was so stimulated. I had never worked with men who were also writing copy and I wrote a funny script for a television program on sterling silver and it became a booklet and was a program for a long time. It was the only funny thing ever said about silver, I think. And...
Q: Did they have any fashion accounts? Were you involved in that?

A: Well, they interviewed me and they were anxious to have me but they said that I "played with the loot." I had a silver account, a Neet deodorant account. I had five accounts in three months and then I quit and went to Harper's Bazaar as Managing Editor, I thought. And they were very upset with me. They said, "You've been a rocket in the sky and then fizzled out." The copy chief called me in and said, "Your job at Harper's Bazaar as Managing Editor is 'playing piano at the court house.'" And I said, "What? Do you care that much that I'm leaving?" Well, he did apologize later, but that was pretty rough.

The one incident, at Young & Rubicam, which on the whole was a wonderful experience but fast, you know, was I was given a piece of a large notebook...a large notebook which had everybody's picture--life size--in it, and clipped to the top of the notebook was this, "Welcome stranger. Take the first hour of your time with us to familiarize yourself with these people; these people, these executives on whose broad shoulders the fate of this agency rests so that you can speak to them in the elevator in the morning." I wrote a note to the President right that minute and said, "I think it is probably the poorest private-public relations I have ever encountered. I advise you to circulate the pictures of those on whose narrow shoulders the fate of this agency may someday rest so the old boys can speak to them in the elevators." And the President of Young & Rubicam called me for lunch. I mean, that was Daddy coming out in me. [I mean, every once in a while Father comes out, you know.] "I want to tell you I wanted to have lunch with someone who's not afraid of men, at least." And he said, "I think that is the most shocking thing. I did not know that was happening in our agency." I met the man who wrote that, years later, when we lived in Utica...in Greenwich. And he said, "Do you have any idea who I am? You almost cost me my job the first day you were there."
Q: You loved Young & Rubicam?
A: Yes. I loved it.

Q: But you went to Harper's anyway?
A: Yes. Mrs. Snow was so persuasive. It seems like a very rocky life.

I went to be France McFadden's replacement. She was a wonderful Managing Editor. And after I'd been there about two or three days she decided that she wasn't leaving and that I could be the Copy Chief, again, which I'd been for six years on Vogue. You don't leave to go back down. So I resigned again. I stuck it out for a few days. But they were picking out all the credits and just telling me...it just seemed to me to be too close a relationship between the advertising and the editorial departments at that time. It wasn't true at Vogue but it was true at Bazaar, so....

Q: You went home from there, straight into Tom's arms?
A: Yes. And we went for a long walk in the park. And I was just desolate, because I had hoped to do well at Bazaar and hoped to be, you know, the Editor, for heaven's sakes. So, I went finally, exhausted.... We walked in the rain. We went home to bed and early, early the next morning the phone rang and it was Carmel Snow, and I said, "Mrs. Snow, I never expected to hear your voice again." And she said, "I want you to be perfectly quiet and let me talk. There was a message from Garcia that you resigned. I went immediately to St. Patrick's and I prayed that this was not true, and I also prayed that you would never leave my side, because you do tell me the truth," I said, "Miss Snow, don't worry about it with me." (You see, I'm a Methodist.) And she said, "Hush. I'm leaving very soon. The tide is going out and I'm going with it. (You know how important those trips to Paris were to her!) And I cannot waste a moment. And G-d answered me." And I said, "This is ridiculous," and she said, "Hush. I knew exactly what to do.
I called up Fred Drahe in Minneapolis and I said, 'Sarah has a tumor.' I've had three babies on Conde Nast; why can't Sarah have one tumor on Hearst? Let's offer her the operation with all expenses paid, send her to Florida—or wherever she wants to go—for two or three months. She's terribly nervous; that's why she's being so moral. She's nervous, because of her tumor."

And I sat there stunned, because only my doctor and my husband knew I had a tumor. And I didn't think much of it. They said, "Don't worry." The doctor said it was nothing. And of course, it was a mystery. She said, "You will be the cosmetic editor when you come back, and you will determine your own credits and you will write your own... You will have absolutely, bona fide people yourself. I will not do anything about your pages. I trust you totally. I know that you're a friend of Elizabeth Arden's, Helena Rubenstein and Charlie Revson," Charlie had asked me to write a 20 year analysis of his business which I had done. Isn't this fascinating?

Q: Yes.

A: I couldn't believe any of this conversation. She said, "Now, I'm going to go and when I come back... I don't want you to say you will or won't do it. I want you to have your tumor out and send us the bill."

Well, it unfolds that her daughter had the same doctor and was in the room when the doctor called Tom and said, "I just examined Sarah and she has a huge tumor that must be taken out in the next week. It's exploded and it's very critical. I didn't tell her and I haven't told her yet, because of her sister's death and she's so upset...I have to tell her now." And this girl was in the room listening to this conversation and she went right out the door and called her mother.

At the same time, Dorothy Hay Thompson, who was our cosmetic... A beautiful cosmetic editor had gone to Elizabeth Arden to have her hair done
and had included in one of her features at Harper's Bazaar on "milk farms: the
mention of Arden's Main Chance which was a thousand years ahead of the milk farms.
Arden had read it, so when she got off the elevator on the main floor, Miss Arden
was there and she started hitting Dorothy Thompson and almost knocked her down.
She slapped her maybe ten times. Dorothy Hay Thompson went running and screaming
out of the salon, which was full of ladies. And that same day, she ran up to
Mr. Gregg's office, or somebody's office, and said, "I never want to be in a job
where anybody can attack me. And I quit. You'll never see me again." She left.
So, here....Smart Carmel Snow put together the fact that I knew all the queens and
that I needed some help and she had this hole.

And so I went back as cosmetics editor for six more years and had a
marvelous time. I really did. I loved it. I did some... I think... I had one
idea that made Hearst, they said, $5 million. While I was having a second baby,
I thought of it. It was called.... It's silly to say, but it worked...I thought
this out... The problem with testing perfume was the fact that they permeate
almost anything, you can't sample them. The day before I went to the hospital
where I'd had the baby I'd met the man who owned the right to "knips," which was
a long.... 'n-i-p-s' -- He had been put in jail and was just out of jail because
he had brought it in from Mexico or somewhere, a Chanel 5 and Arpege and the big
rose perfumes, and hadn't gotten anybody's permission to... He brought them in in
bulk and put them in these little 'nips' which he then sold to the different
inexpensive stores. But the product was fabulous to me because it didn't permeate
to the next...

Q: At that point Chanel 5 and Arpege were not in this country?
A: Oh, yes they were.
Q: Oh, they were.
A: Yes, but he was selling them, not they. You see. I mean, they were selling them but he was selling them in that form. But he was jailed. And, at the Fashion Group, one day, (I was President later) I met this man and they said, "He's just out of jail, Sarah, but he has a wonderful product that you should know about. So when I went to the hospital, I thought, "How can I use that?" You can't sample but one perfume at a time and I was so tired ...I was writing my heart out about perfume. I loved to write about perfume. And I would have lunch with the president of one of the companies and he would say, "Why don't you write about perfume, Sarah," and I said, "Why don't you read?" So I thought the best thing to make them aware of our power is to sample and get them to give it to us and make them suffer a little bit. So, I thought the way I can do it is to do an editorial called, "What color do you see when you smell a famous perfume?" And I had about 200-300 people tested and...It fell pretty well into a gamut. I mean, if you smell Carven everybody said green. When you smell Joy, everybody said gold. It's strange. And Le Bleu, of course. You recognize it and you say blue. Well, that wasn't too clever of me. But I decided to take the nip and put a colored dip on it, on the very tip and then I did a little chart and then I did a little tiny Harper's Bazaar, little thing, with these little containers. We sampled 53 perfumes the first time. Everybody took an ad and we sampled their perfumes and we got 140,000 50¢ pieces in the mail in less than two weeks. So that I was...

Q: They were supposed to send in 50¢ to get the container...

A: They had a big party at the Sherry Netherlands and showed the perfumers the stacks of bags of money. It was very dramatic. And we did have every advertiser in our book. We were very successful. And I got to know all the queens very well. I knew everybody at Estee Lauder. Everybody.
Right down through.... They really loved me dearly. I was a strong advocate for them. And I decided to leave the magazine because I had a little baby, two or three years old. And I was missing him. And working too hard.

Q: You had a second child by then....?
A: Yes. After the operation for the tumor, I still had the baby, which was a triumph.

Q: And you were still working there?
A: Yes.

Q: When you had your second baby?
A: Yes. Anyway, I decided to write an issue called "Beauty for Skeptics," and go to see every chemist... And I spent six months researching it myself, and it was a very illuminating.....and it was a very good magazine. Everybody was terribly honest with me and it was fascinating. It sold out on the newstands.

Q: It was the whole issue?
A: Oh, it was a whole issue. We did a lot of things at Harper's Bazaar that weren't beauty. And I was the Beauty Editor at the time, and I felt that way. I did an issue called, "Things You Never Saw Before," and we wrapped it and tied it up with string and sold that right out on the newstand. I got everybody to... I mean, Irving Berlin wrote us a song...

Q: I'm sorry. Sarah, you could not have been doing this while you were still cosmetic editor?
A: Yes, I was.

Q: Well, didn't the Fashion Editors and so on complain? That you were taking over the whole issue...?
A: Oh, well, we had beauty issues. See, twice a year they gave me the whole issue to do anyway. That was what it was.
Q: And you did a beauty column each month?
A: Yes, I always did.
Q: But in addition...
A: I wish I could show you these beautiful editorials, one called "Lady's Not for Burning," one called "The Student Body," it won all the awards in the country for the photography on it. I had this idea of girls...
Q: No, no....
A: Well, once at Randolph Macon, I came in late from a holiday and all the girls were in the windows around four stories up, on ivy clad walls, and they were all combing their hair and doing their nails, and one morning Carmel called me early in the morning and said, "Sarah, we have two empty pages; will you please think of something before you get to work?" And on the way to work I thought about Randolph Macon and I thought, "Wouldn't it be great if we could have a dormitory that has two sides to it, like a stage, and fill it with models doing things and call it the "student body." This was a student issue. I mean the college issue. The photographer who took that picture knew exactly where they were set, with all this ivy and we got 24 models, and it was just fabulous. It was a double spread. And it was great fun. Lots of things that were such fun for me to do pictorially.

I would like to go back to the end of the war for a minute because Tom came home from the war... Conde Nast had written in his will that Tom and Sarah Lee were to start a magazine in Great Britain called House & Garden. I forgot all about telling you that. Tom was supposed to be the publisher and art director and I was supposed to be the editor, and Tom refused to do it because he'd been home about a week.... Conde was dead.... and Patcevitch read this aloud to us, and Tom said, "I don't want to tell people how to decorate their house when they just got through being bombed. I want to let them recover; I don't want to do this." And he was very emotional
about it. He had had a very difficult war. He was in the OSS and he was in Paris before Eisenhower and he was with General Patton in Germany and he was a paratrooper. And he had left the camouflage and gone into the OSS because he did speak five languages. And he came home looking very, very worn and thin. It was too soon to ask him. We should have probably done that. It would have been a wonderful experience.

Q: How did you know Conde Nast? You had not mentioned...

A: Oh, Jessica Daves just loved my ads at Bonwit Teller and kept asking who wrote them.

Q: She asked Sarah Pennoyer who wrote them?

A: That's right. So, the day that I told Pennoyer that I was going to get married to Tom Lee she was sitting at her desk, and I said, "I have several things to tell you. One is that I am the author of the Matchiabelli ads...I never told you." She stood up and repeated them from memory. She said, "I've been looking all over New York for whoever wrote those. She said if I could have Sarah and that girl, or man, I would have a real department." And she kissed me, and she said she was so happy, because she too loved Tom. she's been a dear friend always. I've been very lucky with people I've known.

The experience of being cosmetics editor at Bazaar was... You could write a book. I knew all the queens so well, and I knew them very personally. There is no such thing as being an editor and being remote from them. There are moments of high drama when, for instance, I had resigned and was living in Greenwich and trying to just be with Charlie and Todd and Tom and we had a farm house in Greenwich at that time and I was writing free lance for the Air Force. I was at the Pentagon all the time and I was working for various people free lancing for Handmacher; I wrote all those ads for Life Magazine.

Q: I'm sorry. What period was this between?
A: It was about...

Q: Let's review what the time frames are. You were with Bonwit's from 1936 to 1939. You were with Vogue from '39 through '46, into '46; you spent a few brief months in 1946 at Young & Rubicam, and then you went to Harper's from 1946 to 1952. And the period that you're now talking about, when you worked freelance, was in 1953. So let's just resume...

A: One I had was Jacqueline Cochran, and I was supposed to advise her on the development of new products, and I wrote her ads. She had flowing Velvet and I did certain cosmetic things, like a wand of makeup, I got to know her very well. She was a very interesting lady, self-made.... I think it's worth my telling you about her because she was an orphan left at the door of some Catholic priest in Florida and she had a very miserable childhood. She became a manicurist at Saks and in one weekend learned to fly. She saved her money for flying lessons. And the Herald Tribune ran an article about this society lady who had broken all the records and she had really passed her exams. Cochran wrote a letter to the Tribune saying, "I'm not a society lady; I'm poor; I'm a manicurist. And I wish you'd tell the real story; it's a better American story." Mrs. Whitlaw Reid sent for her immediately and said, "You're a marvelous young woman. I certainly admire you." Well, that's kind of the essence of Jackie. An enormous drive and reality but also very ambitious and....This is an interesting story. She had seen Pygmalion and she said to a lady whose nails she was doing, "I understand you're going to Palm Beach next week, and so am I. Saks is sending me down there for the winter to be a manicurist and I do want to meet a man that I know is a friend of yours and I would like to be invited to your house for dinner if you will lend me a dress and if I won't embarrass you by the way I speak or the way I look." And the lady said, "I think that would be
fascinating. Certainly. That would be lovely." And it was arranged that she would sit by Floyd Odlum. She said to Floyd Odlum (and she told me this), "Are you a gambler Mr. Odlum?" and he said, "I am not, I'm an investment banker." And she said, "That's being a gambler. Would you gamble on a human being?" And he said, "I don't understand this conversation." And she said, "I need a jet. I wish you would buy one for me." She had just met him ten minutes before. "I wish you would buy one for me because I will pay you back within the year. I will win every speed record that's open to women fliers. Would you gamble on me?" Well, he not only gambled on her, but married her and threw out his dear wife of thirty years and married this blonde bombshell.

She used a lot of people along the way and I know that famous Russian flier.... He says he and his wife went and actually marked up the barns across the country so that she could take this kind of a flight pattern. But she wrote a book called "Stars at Noon," which she dedicated to me. She talks about her early life and this experience, winning and about Floyd. It was interesting to have worked for Mrs. Odlum the first at Bonwit Teller and then Mrs. Odlum the second. She did break the sonic wall. She did fly bombers; she did organize a women's flying group for World War II and brought bombers across the Atlantic. She did fly damaged planes in England when they landed in air fields where they were to be repaired. She was a daredevil all her life.

She told me once on her birthday, at lunch, that she would pray under a plane...sometimes half a wing was shot off. She would have to have the other half wing taken off and then she would pray (she was a devout Catholic) and finally got the word that she could fly. She said, "You know you can't take a damaged plane down a highway; you must fly it. Maybe two minutes is enough in the air to crash. You've noticed haven't you, Sarah, that in my apartment at the River House that I have these bars on the windows?" And I
said, "Yes. On the third floor; fourth floor." She said, "Yes. I have a fear of falling." And I said, "How can you fly?" Well, she had said to me, "Where are you now, Sarah; where are you sitting?" And I said, "The 83rd floor of the Empire State Building." And she said, "I couldn't stand that. I couldn't stand it." And I said, "How could you fly and how could you have done all this?" And she said, "Well, if you're in the plane and you're in control, you think you have a floor under you. That's why so many pilots crash with their planes. They just don't get the message." But she was a fascinating and great lady.

Q: How did she get into the cosmetic business?
A: Excuse me. We're not finishing the story.
Q: I'm sorry.
A: She took that damaged plane that I described, the one with the half wing sawed off, and then she flew over the field where she used to land. She saw all these fire trucks and ambulances and this man came flying up when she landed safely and said, "Miss Cochran, this is your shining hour," and she said, "That's a wonderful name for a perfume." I don't know how she started, but that's the way she lived. She interpreted herself in her products. She knew as much about chemistry, unlike Rubenstein, who was a graduate chemist. Not even as much as Arden. She really didn't know anything. But she could name products and she looked lovely and she was a great power. I know 25 stories about all these ladies; can't get into it.

Q: So, when she did go into business, you were her advertising...
A: I was supposedly free lancing half a day, two afternoons a week, but it really didn't work because I don't think you could be a consultant successfully unless there's a big staff that carry out what you say. She had practically no staff. So, I found myself doing the packaging and writing the ads and even getting them set, and I would go away, you know...
working full time for two afternoons a week. And it really wasn't satisfactory because I couldn't put things through. It was awfully thwarting and she didn't understand anything about her business, really. She had some good Frenchmen there, but they didn't know much about promotion. And she finally sold her perfumes.

I free lanced for, as I say, Handmacher, and wrote those big full page double spreads. And then...what happened after that...

Q: Now, after the period of free lancing that you had, you went to a full time job again?

A: With Margaret Hockaday, the Creative Director.

Q: That was an advertising agency?

A: A small, brilliant advertising agency that was just on fire. They did a lot of things like polka dotta... Those little shoes, you know, for Papagallo? Margaret was really quite a genius. She was a cross between Abraham Lincoln and Katherine Hepburn. She had great magnetism and she was... She had the young mentality that was a wonderful thing in her advertising. It was sometimes foolish, but she had a little success. Had had a very hard time for a long time, but they had a tightly knit, small organization with Alvin Chereskin who is now the president of AC&R and is one of the best advertising...and most rewarded... It was a group of devoted people, who believed in what they did. And it was hard for me, who came with a lot of prestige and fancy hats. They really didn't believe my humility, when I was with them. They didn't realize that I admired them all so much. It was really a little hard transition and I didn't realize that Margaret herself was rather jealous. I had six or seven happy years, innocently, with her, and we did get some great campaigns. I got the Jantzen bathing suit account which was a $3 million account right off the bat because I wrote the headline,
"Just wear a smile and a Jantzen." And, of course, I had Helena Rubenstein...

Partly... she was devoted to David Ogilvy and should have been. So she gave me development of new products, and a consultation fee; and men's things and Gourielli. We did the introduction to Gourielli for her.

Q: So that while you were working at Hockaday you also freelanced?
A: No, no. This is for Hockaday. No, I just worked for Hockaday. We got the Wool Bureau. Andrew Arkin and the Arkin Girls. I did that campaign on comics in the New Yorker. We did... I got the Crane stationary account, the Reed & Barton silver account for her--about $9 million worth of billing for her... I got them... and wrote the ads and went calling on clients and became Account Executive.

Q: I was just going to say... You were really an Account Executive as well as a copywriter?
A: Oh, yes. Sure. And we had a hilariously wonderful time. And she decided to give stock to people in the company after I'd been there about six or seven years and I asked her if I wasn't going to have some stock and she said, "Never. You weren't with us in our hard days." And I said, "I can't believe it. Because I've come with all these goodies and put them at your feet. I want to work with you the rest of my life."

And that, again, was one of the crucial days where everything happened. Mel Dawley asked me to come down and talk to him.

Q: At Lord & Taylor?
A. At Lord & Taylor. Because Miss Van Wessop wasn't well and Dorothy Shaver was dead and he asked me to bring a list of twelve people that I believed in that I thought could take all these people's places and be Advertising Manager and Creative Director of Lord & Taylor. So I had these ten names all typed up (and I believe, Mildred, you were one of those that I recommended; I'm sure you were), and I had lunch in his office, by himself. And we went through
the list and he said, "This is really a trick, because we want you." And I said, "I never would leave Margaret." But I had had this little intimation that she would be glad if I did, in a way. You know, I couldn't believe it. And I said, "I won't work... No, no. I've had my fill of department stores."

And I went back and Margaret said, "What did Mel Dawley want with you?" And I said, "He offered me a Vice Presidency," and she said, "Take it. I think you should clear your desk this afternoon." So I did. I called Mel up, and I said, "I was wrong. This seems to be the breaking point for Margaret," and he said, "Well, how soon can you come?"

Q: And so you went?
A: I went. That was in 1960.

Q: For the Oral History Collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this is a second interview with Sarah Tomerlin Lee, President of Tom Lee, Ltd. The date is December 20, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Sarah, once you got to Lord & Taylor, what were your responsibilities and what are some of the interesting things you remember?

A: My assignment and responsibilities were advertising promotion; public relations--private/public relations which is very important. And display and interior display. So that's just about the whole thing. Also, I was determined to keep in public consciousness-- "this is the store that I love." Warm and real.... After the death of Dorothy Shaver and the resignation of Alida Van Wessop, advertising/promotion for 30 years. I found a staff of brilliant eccentrics who had all been spoiled by Dorothy Shaver, but worked to a white hot peak of creativity, all of them. They were rather resentful of me for quite a while. All but Gloria Carr, who championed me immediately. It was quite difficult to move into but it was terribly stimulating. And I don't have an abrasive personality and so I finally won,
more or less. I don't think it was a bottleneck in the administration; I really don't think so. We did such thrilling promotions. Because they were all so marvelous.

Q: Who was the top manager at that point? Mel Dawley?
A: Mel Dawley and Harry Murray and Shapiro. We had wonderful, wonderful meetings.

Q: That was Dick Shapiro, right?
A: Yes. Dick. He had endless conferences. Three days a month we'd sit and look at merchandise from every bit of the store. Every buyer had to present what she wanted exposed to me, whether it was in the window or whether it was in the New Yorker ad or whether it was a newspaper. It was a full... Whatever they believed in, they had to present.

Q: And then it was your decision about...?
A: My decision, with the Merchandise Manager. I don't want to take too much credit for that. I was the influential, decisive...but I was sitting there always with Mel Dawley and the Vice President in charge of that particular area.

I loved it. I loved it when I realized... Well, I always had, because my father was a merchant and my grandfathers were both merchants, but I was very much at home there. And the responsibility didn't frighten me at all. It was just wonderful to have people so brilliant with me and with the full confidence of Mel Dawley.

Q: At that time the format was, if I remember correctly, the large sketch and the single theme?
A: That's what Dorothy did. Dorothy Hood was the Advertising Manager.

Q: Dorothy who?
A: Hood. She was a wonderful artist. But we had marvelous men artists as well and we had just wonderful water colors for interior designs. It was a discovery of the use of lots of creative talents, and we just furthered...we didn't change it much. We didn't want to. I had lunch with Miss Fitzgibbons one day. She called me to lunch... I didn't know her; my husband knew her. And when I arrived she said, "I wanted to tell you that you have disappointed me. I expected...because I think you're a very creative force...I expected a big change in Lord & Taylor." And I said, "You would have had change in Lord & Taylor if I thought it was necessary. I think it's perfect they way it is."

Q: This, of course, is Bernice Fitzgibbons?

A: Bernice said, "Oh, I didn't know that you were so big. I said, "That's ego when you change the format of success. That's all that is." Then she was surprised, and I've been... As I looked back over it, I wondered what right she had to call me and ask me this but she was the foremost woman in advertising, and of course she had expected the leaf to turn. But it was so successful, and when I did leave Lord & Taylor in 1965 we were 22% ahead of where we'd ever been in the history of the store. So, I was right not to change the format it seems to me.

The wonderful thing for me was to be able to evolve a national promotion, as we did with "The Pride of Ireland," where right up to the Prime Minister of Ireland, we had their cooperation. And if it's time for an anecdote, I'll tell you that one rainy night, after everybody had left the store, Mr. Dawley called me and said, "I have to make a speech tonight, but there are two Irishmen down here (It sounded like the beginning of a joke to me), and I'll have to send them upstairs to you, Sarah. Do you have to go home now, or can you take care of them? I don't know what they want."
Well, these two rain-drenched Irishmen arrived, kind of gloomy, and they said, "We want you to cooperate with us, with our country, in a promotion. We have $50,000. Would you accept that?" And I said, "If we like what you have, we don't want your $50,000. We're really not interested because, at this moment, you have a lower standard of living and a low rate of exchange. We would look for your genius." Well, from that sentence, right through to the end, it was a love feast with Ireland. And we did $10 million worth of business on that one promotion. I called it "The Pride of Ireland," and it was in every way marvelous. We were concerned for a while about keeping the quality, in some of the stuff we got first. Just to look at it, it seemed kind of shoddy. But we controlled it very well. And they worked with us very closely. I made four or five trips and we had fourteen buyers working....

Q: How long a period of time?
A: Well, that was just two weeks, but they....

Q: No, I mean to set up the promotion from start to finish?
A: Oh, excuse me. Well, I think it was a year and a half. They used everything we did. They used all our displays, our displays in the windows, and our packaging—everything—in nine other "Pride of Ireland" promotions across the country and Canada. So they were very pleased, and I've made lifelong friends in Dublin which isn't hard to do...and it was perfectly beautiful, both for fashion.... It was a fine time in Ireland—Sybil Connolly was doing so well. We worked with 15-16 designers, and we worked with furniture designers. It was just splendid.

Q: So by then Lord & Taylor was no longer exclusively an American designer's...?
A: No. That was a phase, you know. Then we went... We did promotions, as all stores have now, we were cutting some new patterns in Italy and less successfully with England. Well, no. Dorothy Shaver had done a British fortnight herself, and called it that even before Neiman Marcus did, I believe...

The entire formation of the store fascinated me. There were the people (it was like a kingdom)... There were the clowns, the fools, the Prime Minister, the head of state... And when I viewed it this way, like a little country, with a tremendous affection between everybody, a great loyalty, there was almost patriotism for Lord & Taylor. And after I had gone and I would come through the store, Mr. Murray is said to have said to Mr. Dawley, "Well our Lady of Tears has just gone through," because the elevator girls, you change their costume and give them a fresh flower at Easter for their lapel, and they love you forever. I really enjoyed it very, very much and I hated to leave.

Q: Now. Why did you leave and when did you leave?

A: I left because my husband persuaded me to. He said he didn't like me spending my time deciding on what was going to be "Window #9." He thought I was a creative writer...

Q: So, in other words, your display department didn't work autonomously?

A: I told them what to put in the windows. And we'd discuss how it worked and what the thrust was. Of course, in each case, there were five people under me who were heads of their departments and they had wonderful ideas. I don't mean that I pre-empted them...
Q: But also, it reflects, I would think, the fact that there were so few Lord & Taylor stores compared to the number today?

A: There were seven of them.

Q: So that it was possible to maintain a very close surveillance and participation in the activities of the New York store?

A: What did worry me when I was there was that the budget seemed very unequal, between the branch stores and the home office. They had the idea that what you did in New York would reflect and carry the whole promotion through to Philadelphia and up to Boston and down to Washington and I didn't think it did. And I really argued about this. I thought we should bring much better budgets to support our branch stores. And I did finally work out a single pattern for effective fashion shows where we rented two big buses that had been painted with, "Lord & Taylor, Lord & Taylor," and did a script and music and Gloria Carr recorded or went... And then we had the same clothes across the country. That's the first time that we had been able to kind of simplify the thrust of promotion at that level. Because, before, if the YWCA or the women's groups wanted a show at a luncheon or a country club, Gloria would rush around and do it. But it was a disaster as far as trying to support the merchandise. We did this every season for the last two years I was there, and it was very.... It seems simple now, looking back on it, why we didn't always do that. But we did a show for anybody who wanted it. There were certain changes because of climate and degree of rain, as in Washington. You asked me why I left... This is really because Tom was so anxious for me to get back to writing, and because Hearst offered me such a great job at House Beautiful. Mr. Deems said, "You know, you gave us some ideas when you were Cosmetics Editor that made us $9 million. We're still doing it. And we want you to come back." I hesitated, because I didn't know very much about home
furnishings, and to become Editor-in-Chief, of a book like House Beautiful from fashion
was quite a jump. But Tom said, "I'll be behind you and I'll help you. And
if you know how to be an editor and you have a good staff, well no doubt you'll
be able to do just like you did at Lord & Taylor."

Q: What was he doing all those years?

A: Everything. He was doing the parades on Fifth Avenue. He was
doing Bergdorf Goodman's; he was doing maybe 15 accounts for display and he was
doing... I've forgotten just when he started hotels....but I think it was right in
there. He did a hotel in London and he did the Park Lane here and he was
changing from display to interior design of hotels, which I thought would be more
permanent.

Q: Had he already set up Tom Lee, Ltd.?

A: In '47.

Q: Oh. Oh! He did that from the very beginning?

A: He did. When he came back from the war he set that up. But...

I looked through his files and I can't believe the work that he did. The
World's Fair. Three of the big pavilions he designed for the World's Fair.
All of the big city shows he staged. And he was either at Bonwit's or
Bergdorf Goodman's doing the windows, too. Always. And brilliantly, I think.
He was a leader. He did The Louisiana Purchase. He did five musical comedies
one year. He was the busiest man I've ever seen. He did set, costumes, curtains,
everything. He would just naturally draw on things, and enjoyed it. It was
a very nice relationship because I was excited about what he was doing and he
thought that I was doing....

Q: So you stayed at Hearst during your....?

A: As Editor in Chief. Now, I had wonderful people there. It was
difficult to follow Elizabeth Gordon, who was powerful and who had the whole
teaching instinct and did lay down the law and the order in the old manner
of fashion editors. They were almost unapproachable. She said it was
green that year, so it was green, you know? She was a great advocate of
Frank Lloyd Wright, who I thought at the time was very old hat. I was much
more intuitive and emotional about my writing than she ever had been. But
she did a big Japanese promotion, if you remember, called "Shibui," which
apparently was her undoing, but the Hearst organization was unforgettable as
far as the public went. She had Frances Heard as her chief editor and so did
I; a wonderful, wonderful woman who knew and was loved by the whole market.
However, she had a different structure of staff. She had a lot of men who had
hoped to be Editor-in-Chief, which I found rather difficult when I took the
job. I realized that there were six men that she promised that job to, so
I decided to interview each one of them in the first two days and to tell
them frankly that I knew that had been their ambition and that I just wanted
to talk to them. Actually, they all stayed and were very helpful. The man
in charge of flowers and gardens and the structural man... They were
wonderful, professional people. I changed the format entirely and I did
issues like "emotional decorating," which sold out on the newstands, and it
was an extraordinary, beautiful issue. We....

Q: What was emotional decorating?
A: The way you feel about windows and color, space... I'd love
to show it to you. We used, I think, as the cover a wonderful bedroom that
was done by Tony Duquette on the West Coast who was a set designer, you know,
and did wonderful jewelry design. I later wrote an article about him called,
"The Magician," which he made into a whole book.

I had a hard time learning and winning the confidence of the
architects, who were so important to our readers because Elizabeth had maddened
them so. I mean, Phillip Johnson smashed the phone down when I called him the
first time. I said I was working for House Beautiful, and he banged the phone down, and I called him back and said, "I'm the new editor," and he said, "In that case I'll talk to you." And actually, he talked to me a great deal, as did (finally) four or five other leading architects. I, of course, was fortunate to have Elizabeth Sverbeyoff come.

Q: How do you spell her name?

A: S-v-e-r-b-e-y-o-f-f. She is a splendid contemporary architectural editor. I mean, in the fields where I really didn't know anything, I did try. I mean, I got the best people I could and believed in them. And visually, we had a wonderful magazine. And we had wonderful writers. And we had interviews by the designers--furniture designers--because I felt the fashion industry had such a cult of personalism, but that the home furnishings industry had almost unknown people. And I found them very articulate and very colorful so that it wasn't difficult to make an interesting series of issues. Oh, we did a lot of pioneering issues. Jack Larsen speaks well, Ed Wormley writes brilliantly; he's really almost an 18th century wit. It was a joy to be an editor. I certainly enjoyed almost every job enormously. I was so proud of our magazine.

Q: Well, now, in 1971, you left the magazine... And that was apparently, again, a very important....

A: Well, it was a personal decision, again, because Tom thought that we were at the age where we should stop working so hard, and he said, "After all, we really want to be together, and why don't you travel with me?" He was doing work in London and Africa and Iran, and he thought, I was enthusiastic about what I was doing, but he thought that it was getting to be time when we would just need each other. So...

So, when I took over his business after his sudden death, I really didn't want to, but I had a commitment to do a huge hotel in Toronto; a $95 million hotel, which had just....
Q: By that time (that was in 1971), had his business begun to become concentrated on interior design?

A: Well, that's... Yes. He was just doing that, by that time. He had a fine reputation already, and I arrived on great platform. But I didn't tell the client frankly that I had never designed anything, including my own bedroom. Even at House Beautiful I had a very highly developed visual sense, but when you're married to a genius you... I just loved everything he did, and he did it for me thinking I would like it. So, I didn't do anything personally. I wrote about everybody and thought about it, so... I called up everybody after my husband's death to tell them that I was not particularly equipped or qualified to continue. And the first... This is a very good story, I think.

The first or second man I called (I didn't know any of these clients).... One of Tom's prides was that they had him because they liked his work, not because we entertained people. I called up a man I didn't know, who had signed a contract with the Rye Town Hilton Inn. At that time, Hilton had partners. They had Rockefeller to help with the New York Hilton and Uris, so it was called "Rockhill Uris," and was part of the Hilton empire. And this was Tom's first job with Hilton. The contract for Rye was signed by a man named Richard Buford. Now, I called him, and I said, "Mr. Buford, I want to tell you that I'm not a designer and I don't think you should be bound to honor the contract. I think you should have somebody else. And I know you've spent years trying to find somebody to do this unusual inn," because Tom told me this. And he said, "Who's talking?" And I said (I don't know why I said it), I said, "Sarah Tomerlin Lee." And he said, "You don't mean Tom married you?" And I said, "Who am I?" And he said, "My favorite editor. You want to know what you said about the pioneer and leadership?" And he even recited two of my editorials to me, on the phone. Now, you wouldn't
expect a man who is in the big tough building industry to memorize an editorial.

Q: I'm sorry. What did you mean by pioneer?

A: I meant people had stepped out of a long progression of people doing exactly the same thing. And by stepping out, I said that they sometimes lead. And talked about some of our most important architects and interior designers.

Q: Okay. So he had read your editorial....

A: He learned it. So we had tea and he said, "You're not going to give up. I believe in you. You are going to run your husband's business. You're going to finish the Ryetown Hilton Inn."

Q: I'm sorry. This was the Rye Hilton Inn?

A: Ryetown Hilton.

Q: Right. Ryetown Hilton.

A: He said, "What are you going to show everybody tomorrow?" We had tea that afternoon at the St. Regis, and he said, "What are you going to show everybody tomorrow?" And I said, "Tomorrow? My husband's just been gone two weeks--What do you mean? Certainly no corporation would think that with the designer gone, that they could have another meeting at this time." And he said, "Well, Tom's assistant said there would be no change." I said, "He left. He left us. He walked out at the first meeting I had." And he said, "Well, do you want to know what I think the Ryetown Hilton should look like?" And I said, "Yes." So he drew pictures on the napkin. And then he said, "Are you going to go back and look over the blueprints?" And I said, "I don't understand blueprints really. No, I'm not going to do that at all. I'm going to bed and try not to cry tomorrow."

So, I met Charlie and he said, "Are you really going to go to bed?" And I said, "Yes. I don't think I can handle this. I will call up Joe Bradswell,"
SARAH TOMERLIN LEE

who was my great friend on the magazine when I was really stuck and didn't know how to disguise air conditioning, for instance. We had two pages where we had to disguise it, and he would come in with it the next morning. And I knew he was anxious for work and I knew that he had endless brains and knew this field brilliantly. So I called him and asked him if he would meet the Hilton people with me and let me say that he would be my consultant if they decided to stay with us. And I would introduce him to everybody on the staff.

The next morning... Oh. I had said, "Can't you stop everybody?" And he said, "No, they're all in the air. There are people coming from California and Chicago and Florida—all the Vice Presidents are coming to meet you." Well, I suddenly wasn't too sorry for them. I thought it was an impossible assignment to expect anybody to carry on. Because Tom was the design force. And they all came into Tom's office and I said, "Now, I want you to put your chivalry aside. It's true that I'm a widow—a very sad widow—but that has nothing to do with the job. And I have to tell you that I've never designed anything at all. And this is the staff, and here's Joe, who's a very good designer, and I think I have very good taste and I think I'm very creative and imaginative, but I don't know the market from the hotel's viewpoint. Nor do I know structurally very much. So, I want you to feel excused." And they all stood up and they said, "Well, little lady, we'll go to lunch and we'll come back and give you our decision."

Well, I don't know what Mr. Buford said. They all turned their backs to put on their overcoats and they looked like a football huddle, at the end of the room. Mr. Buford was saying something and they turned around and started taking off their coats and they said, "No. We're not going to do that at all. We're going to teach you what we know. We're going to have sandwiches here and we'll probably have supper with you. We're
going to tell you everything we know. We're going to support you all the way in this venture. Mr. Buford tells us our best hope of having a creative, entirely new look, is to believe in you." Now, I've always wondered what he said, but he says he doesn't remember. But I think what makes people change their minds is always a fascinating subject. I remember Miss Daves once made a speech on that subject. She said she'd been studying the Jesuits and their conversion powers, and she... It was a brilliant speech. She ended up by saying, "Well, what really makes somebody change their mind," and she kind of shrugged her shoulders, "is just wishing on the cusp of a new moon."

Well, we had a great experience with the Ryetown Hotel. It's been their most successful hotel, all except where they had gambling, and it's because it's so entirely different from other Hiltons... Mr. Hilton came in one afternoon when I was out there, slipping along—he was in his nineties—and he said, "This doesn't look like a Hilton. I think I'll put money in this company." No, we've done seven Hiltons since then, and we have their confidence.

Q: Yes. And have you stayed pretty much with hotels of various...
A: That's all we do.

Q: That's all you do. So that you work for various...
A: We've done 17 hotels in New York City, and we worked for Hyatt...

Well, not much for Hyatt. Sheraton, we've done six Sheratons. We've worked for some of Tom's clients, of course. The Dorals—there are seven Dorals. And we've done office buildings, among other things. We've done a boat for children on the Hudson River, but we really don't do private decorating at all. Can't, don't want to.

Q: And what was the size of the staff when you took over?
A: About three.
Q: About three?

A: But it had been larger. See, Tom was getting to the viewpoint that he was going to be a consultant and that we were going to travel around together, and he wasn't going to try to worry about a big staff.

Q: But, it was three and today it's thirteen, as I understand it.

A: It's fifteen. And I have tried not to get too big. I really have purposely not done or tried to do anything that I can't oversee and take care of, and have an input. Because that's the only difference. All things are equal. The market is the same for everybody. It's what you do with it. You can all buy the same lamp or the same rugs, or.... You know, it's how you mix it. It's really like being an editor.

Q: Suppose.... Just as an illustration, take one hotel that you've done and just give us a quick summary of how it really works.

A: It depends entirely on whether your client is experienced. When Hilton gives you an assignment, they are so knowledgeable. And it also depends on the architect.

Q: Your first contact is yours with the client? Then....

A: Not always. Sometimes the architect calls you and says, "Would you work with us on this job?" That often happens. And so.... We've worked with I.M. Pei. We've worked with five architects.

Q: Well, then....all right.

A: The client usually calls you. I'll tell you one very unusual, not typical, but interesting... I came in this office one morning, and I had seen a big stretch out limousine on the street, and I had thought, "Well, that's not for us. I never saw such a long limousine." And here was.... I mean, this is fifteen stories, after all. Where did that man go in that limousine? And....

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I came in and this little man was sitting across the desk from me and I said, "I didn't know I had an interview or an appointment." And he said, "Well, you do." And I said, "But I don't know who you are." And he said, "I'm a very rich man," and I said, "Well, that doesn't help me very much." And he said, "You are going to do my hotel." And I said, "Well, you must tell me who you know if you won't tell me who you are." "I know everybody you know. My name's Jack Parker, and I've been told to believe you and trust you, because I've never done a hotel." Well, I was immediately won over. It was such an opportunity to do something wonderful. Because this man... I said to him, later, "You are entering one of the most (sometimes vicious) competitive fields at any rate..." I shouldn't have said vicious, because it is competitive. Actually, they help each other a great deal. "And you are 50 years behind Hilton and 45 years behind Sheraton, and 35 years behind others, and you just think you're going to have one hotel and you don't have any referral system, which is so important to the life of a hotel." He didn't even know what that was. He thought he was going to run it. And...That just...It was a great challenge to do something successful for him, because he had implicit faith. If he hadn't been like that I wouldn't have broken my head over it. He had a very peculiar--what do they call it?--footprint. His property was a very peculiar shape. It was a square on 55th street-56th street--a shallow square with a long alley going to 57th street--18 ft. wide and 100 ft. long. And his architect was Mr. Birnbaum, whose business had always been apartment houses, and that's how they had known each other, but they had never done hotels themselves. And I was very disturbed by the bossiness and the lack of imagination and I went to see what they were going to do with that long corridor one afternoon, and they said, "Well...."

Q: The architect said...?
A: Yes. We are always with the architect's office, because I was a little concerned... And he said, "Well, we're going to have down lights in the ceiling and cement frames..."

Q: What kind of lights in the ceiling?

A: Down lights. They're sunken you see. And I said, "Do you think that's going to bring people in? From 57th Street?" And he said, "Oh, yes." Well, that wasn't Birnbaum; it was the assistant talking. So, I didn't sleep. I went home and I thought about all the narrow spaces that I had seen that excited me in my life, and I remembered the library in Dublin at the University, and I remembered Holyrood, and I remembered the Vatican library—a very long line of cross window lights that were so exciting. And then I remembered Sir Kenneth Clark's "Civilization," when he had been in the Vatican library and he said to the camera, "One wonders if man has ever had a really great idea in an enormous room," and turned around and walked until he was just a tiny little man, the lights going across him as he walked back. And I thought, "That's what I must do with that."

But then I realized that you can't foreshorten people. I mean, you don't know which way they're coming, so it's not like a stage. Like Vicenzo, with Bellatio, doing that marvelous trick with the eye, which is what I had been thinking about that night. I drew a little picture and then I called up my son Todd, who is a fine architect in Boston, and I said, "Are you busy this Sunday? Can I come this morning?" And he said, "Come at once." So he and I sat on his rooftop under a striped sheet, which he put up, so we're like in a marvelous tent in the desert, and we drew all day. When we finished that night, he had done the beautiful inner court and that long parade of mirrors that's six stories high. Mr. Parker... It was a beautiful set of drawings that he had mounted in his office. He did exactly what we said. In fact, he said (pardon me for being so boastful) to a lot of hotel
owners like Mr. Tisch and people from the Hilton... Everybody was there; it was a private lunch and all the owners... He said, "I did just what one woman told me to do, and I'm $95 million poorer as I stand before you today because I have done everything she said."

Q: And the hotel is...?
A: ...never landed a nickel. The hotel is 100% occupied.
Q: Which hotel is it?
A: It's the Parker-Meridian. Everybody holds hands when they go in. I was determined to have the Vivaldi music playing, and leaf patterns on the marble floor. We did this as cheaply as we could. I mean... We had real wooden columns and we did not marbleize it; it's glazed and quite shiny in there. We had beautiful mirrors, to reflect and reflect and reflect.

Q: I'm sorry. In this kind of a situation, where you have developed the original concept, it's then executed, I assume, by people in your office?
A: That's right. And you know, we have such good draftsmen. They've all had architectural training, so that you could build from our drawings. And that's quite unusual. With Todd's help, we did a great deal of the creative drawing, the architectural drawing at the Palace. I mean, that big stairway was done by Todd and developed in this office -- That big double stairway that everybody thinks was always there. The beautiful oval ballroom in the Palace -- Todd had the idea to do an oval ballroom and not have any dividing walls, but just have a beautiful, enchanting little room.

Q: Now, when Todd does this kind of work for you, do you pay him?
A: Yes.
Q: You do?
A: I do.
Q: So he works as a consultant?
A: He is a consultant, on a regular basis.

Q: And in your... On your staff, do you have people who, let's say, do one...perform one function, like selection of fabrics for all the projects?

A: We have one account executive per project who oversees the writing and the requisitions and the presentations. The color boards. It's a very complex and detailed job. We do phases of design. Conceptual design at first, where I go to the client and we talk and then we show them ideas of what we're thinking. We hate to do that, because we don't want the client to stop us until we've really developed it. You have to judge the client, as to how soon you let him in on what you're doing. But that's all right. It certainly gets easier as you build a reputation; then they're very deferential.

Q: Once the concept has been accepted by the client, then you assign one of your account executives....?

A: Well, then we work on the budget. Usually I assign the key person from the beginning so we work together. It would be hopeless if I tried to do everything and I don't. I couldn't keep anybody here. They're all very proud and morale is very high, and just because... Then, more or less, depending on the job, they have responsibility for telephone calls and winnowing the budget down or building it up is something that an account executive does. We have a division here of people who just handle the marketing; three or four people right now, where we do a rough budget. We get approval of the budget, and then we make a demonstration of boards and color, carpets.... We usually design the carpets or have designers work with us. Not the mills. We do it independently, because we want to control it and not feel guilty about using somebody else's design, if you work with a mill you have to do that. Also, we have a much better hold on the whole idea. I mean, right now, this morning, I'm working on doing over a room in
Miami called, "The Hall of the Conquerors," when it was in its full Hispanic flavor. And now it's going to be very surrealist, and I've discovered a French artist who's going to do a 19 ft. mural, which goes right down into the sea. But I'm doing it with black and white marble floors and you go up the steps and instead of having Queen Isabella on the throne, you kind of step in and see. And we've discovered... You know those old wonderful hands that came out of the Cocteau film, "Beauty and the Beast?" We finally found that source. A lot of white plaster and beautiful columns and a vivid blue rug with black and white marble edges. I think it's going to be very exciting for Florida. There's a new look for Florida.

Q: Yes.

A: They... The client doesn't understand it at all and has asked us to have a rendering done to see if they want it. That's due this afternoon. We have wonderful renderers. We have six renderers. They never seem to be convenient, you understand. This man lives at the tip of Montauk; his name is Fox, and he must have done 2,000 things for us. His fee is around $500. We had a renderer (who Air France will only use; no one else) who is in Montreal, and his fee is $1,500 to $2,000. He works months on a rendering. He does light on people's hair; that kind of detail—which isn't always necessary. It is if you're going to reproduce it. But if you're just going to show a client, that's not—that's excessive, and also slows us down. That's the great fun of the job; working with artists.

Q: And apart from your total permanent staff, you do use a lot of outsiders.

A: Oh, yes. We have a wonderful rug designer, who also did our wonderful ceiling at the Park-Meridian. He must have done 200-300 rugs for us. He is essentially a designer of fabrics. He and I do wonderful rugs. Really. He will come and bring you, after a discussion, a black and white
drawing. And then we work with yarns, viewing the palette, and he brings it back colored and then we adjust it, and then we see a sample by a rug company, using that pattern. This is a long, detailed progression. So we don't design many light fixtures, because that's beyond us. Although we recently put in some light fixtures that we designed at the Waldorf-Astoria, which are stunning, I think. We're very pleased.

We do a lot of bathroom designs. We have six really fine designers who are very well trained and educated, and each one of them, ideally, has a draftsman, who might also have a detail draftsman to work with. So that, you see, after the budgets are finally approved, and when the concepts are approved, then we do the drawings, the paintings of.... Now, we for instance are doing the Willard Hotel in Washington right now, which is right next door to the White House. It was built in 1902, at the same time the Plaza was built, a year earlier. That is a historic landmark, and we had to go through four different boards in Washington to get a single design approved. It's unbelievable. So far, we've averaged 100%, so that's pretty good. We haven't done the bedrooms yet, but we've done enormous public spaces. They are four stories high, these great marble columns. It's a wreck. I mean, the building's been empty seven years. There's not even a faucet left. The budget... The budget is running $90 million. It's colossal. We have nine hotels in Washington we're doing right now. Isn't that staggering?

Q: Yes, it is.

A: I don't mean they're all, for instance, ground up. We're just breaking ground. And they're very interesting. For instance, one is a French hotel; that's the Weston. We want it to look like the Paris Ritz. We have a beautiful belvedere glass dining room that we're doing in the garden, inside, with the walls of the hotel. It is just exquisite.

Q: And the third one is?

A: A modern hotel at Dulles airport.
Q: Sarah, what about fashion in designing?

A: Well, in our field, we don't know who's coming to dinner. This is the difference between interior design for private people and public design. We are also in the midst of an enormous wave of interest in hotel design such as has never been, I think, since the early grand days of the big palaces that were called hotels. The blanket... Howard Johnson, and even some Hiltons; where you just didn't know where you were when you woke up in the morning is all over. The feeling that 80% of the travelers are men and, therefore, you have to use brown or red, is over. Thank goodness, during the last ten years, it's finally died. Fashion is slower to come to this kind of design than I think it is where you have the wonderful, eccentric designers in home fashion. But it's happening here, and there's... The budgets are greater. They're looking for much more beauty and a lighter palette and more mirrors and... It's much more fun. As you know, many, many lovely big trees... And you now can have fountains and great paintings and you can really spend money on art now and statues. I find it.... It's just as good as you are. There's nothing to stop you now, and that's wonderful.

Q: And hotel people are willing to pay for all these accoutrements?

A: That's right. Because hotel rates have gone up from say, $18 to .... Well, we do many rooms that are $150 a night. So they can do it. When we design a hotel, we design the plates, the uniforms, the menus, right down to the cake of soap. The packages in the bathrooms -- we do everything.

I have to tell you one thing. When I was beginning and I had the Hilton -- because of Rye, I had the New York Hilton right after that; it was the same team of executives and one day the Vice President called me over (and I had been told not to work with him as he had no taste). That's what his boss told me; "See me Sarah. Don't worry about him." And that man sent
for me and he said he didn't care what I was doing, I should come at once, and I thought I was going to be fired, because I don't believe in jumping over people. And I'd been told to, but still I don't believe in it. And he closed the door to his office and I thought, "Well, that's it. That's the end of Hilton." And he pulled up a chair and kissed my hand and said, "I just quit. I'm going across the street to Sheraton, and I want you to go with me." It was such a flip from what I thought, you know? And I said, "No, I couldn't possibly go, I'm very loyal to the Hilton. And if I was still the Vice President of Lord & Taylor and my Advertising Manager was writing ads on Sunday for Saks, I would fire him in one minute. I don't believe in creative people working for competitors." And he said, "That's where you're wrong. You're very naive. Come and see my boss, Mr. Solomon." So he dragged me into "Solomon's" office and I said, "Do you want me to leave here?" And he said, "No, Sarah, I want you to do my competition, because if you do them both, they'll be different. The person won't be looking over our shoulder here, who's at the Sheraton, to see what you're doing. Not if you do them both. We're trying to build up the West Side of New York, and the best way is to have you do us both." That was such a surprise to me. But when I say, they're competitive but... Many times I've gone into a man's office and seen my drawings for another hotel; they've had lunch and they'll see it. They know what we're all doing and they're very, very generous with each other, I think.

Q: Yes. And also I think it makes good commercial sense, even though it's not obvious. But it does make good commercial sense.

Let's talk a little bit more about your involvement with FIT which I gather goes back a very long time?

A: Yes, well, Tom, I think, was with Shirley....
Q: Shirley Goodman?

A: Shirley Goodman...long the Director and founding father...

And Tom did all their first graduating exercises and fashion shows and lectures on display. He gave his time for years and years to FIT, and, of course, he was so enthusiastic about it. He thought it was a most stimulating setting for creative young people, and that the spirit was just marvelous; that there was no parallel to it that he knew. He had studied at the Art Students' League and Traphagen and he had had a wonderful experience there, teaching. When he first came to America from England, where his father was Consul-General, he taught design at Traphagen, when he was 19 years old. But this was another... He was already in display at Bonwit Teller, you see, and I went to all of the shows that he did and watched what was happening, and I did get to know those people very well. So that... I mean, a few talks... But it wasn't until I left House Beautiful that Shirley said, "We'd like you to put a book together on American fashion." And it took nearly four years of my life. And then she asked me to work on curriculum for FIT, because they had millions of dollars given to them finally, by the State, which...

So I worked with the new President and all the heads of the departments for...

It was the summer that Tom had died that I was down there, half of every single day, and up here for the other half. It was a very busy time, but very good to be so occupied. And I think I was employed by FIT for six years on a part-time consulting basis. My heart is there. They have been very generous and supportive, and many members of the faculty are very good friends of mine.

Q: And what about.... I'm just thinking of things outside the world of, specifically, of work. What was your relationship with Fashion Group of which I know you became President while you were at Lord & Taylor.

A: Well, I was always a member of Fashion Group because it was very important for me as a copywriter, working for either cosmetics or for fashion
itself, or to know everything I could about fashion, and I found it a great source, so I went to every lecture I possible could. I was on the Board for a long time and got to know Claire McCardell very well and five or six other people, just because of the Board relationship. Pauline Trigere became a great friend, and I... It was just part of my business life.

Q: It's really... To use a word that's been over used in recent years, but it was a kind of network, wasn't it?

A: It was a network. You're absolutely right. Because everybody was so supportive of everybody. Really wonderful. Then, when I went to Lord & Taylor, I guess they decided I was important enough to try to be a President. I enjoyed it, although it was awfully strenuous, to be President. They had a good staff, but we were in such a growth period that we were opening up various cities and Japan was coming to see us, and we were going to England and it was very interesting. Eleanor McMillen was there at that time.

Q: Yes, that's right. Now, Sarah, I think we talked pretty much about your life up until the present, really. Could we go back and tell us about some of the things that happened over the years that you think demonstrate the universality of certain concepts of the fashion and interior design world? For example, you had started to tell me about an experience with Schiaparelli. So, would you...

A: Well, I'll try. During the war...

Q: The Second World War?

A: The Second World War, yes. Bonwit's... I was at Bonwit Teller as Chief Copywriter, and Ms. Pennoyer was the Vice President and Mr. Holmes was President; they decided to extend a hand to any the Paris couturiers who were here, who had fled because of the war. And they said they wanted to turn over... We had a very good, under Fira Benenson, a
very good salon division, which I think, like Bergdorf Goodman, presented
originals and then copied them. But they also had a collection of their own
originals done in the manner of haute couture, and so they offered Schiaparelli
their services, both to their seamstresses and their materials; everything,
and said, "We will have a show of your fashions and we will see that we have
windows and full ads, full page ads; we would like to do this for you." And
they did, and she had a presentation and she had center front Fifth Avenue
windows, and she didn't sell any merchandise at all. She sold, I think, a
suit which had, I remember, big round buttons made like a world—with the
world topography on them. There wasn't any wit left, and you know, her
clothes were amusing, and that was what was part of it, this wonderful kind of
gallic look, wit. She was so desolate at this failure, and Mr. Holmes finally
said, "Sarah, you take her to lunch and talk to her and see if you can
understand it, and see if you can help her. Talk to her anyway. These are
war times, and how can you tell anything about the public view? Their interest
really isn't in fashion now, and you must comfort her." So, she started to
tell me why she thought she hadn't done well here, and she said that it was
the climate of New York; that there was such a difference between a Paris
morning and a New York morning. When she opened the door of her office in
Paris, there was a line of people with wonderful buttons and trimmings and
ideas and fabric. But when she opened the door here, there was no one here.
She said, "Anybody in New York can do anything you tell them to, but they
don't come to you with concepts. There's no supporting..." In her mind
there wasn't any supporting industry just grinding out great ideas for people
like herself. She said, "I realize I really was an editor selecting and
putting together." She said, "Of course, I thought of silhouettes. I had
beliefs in color, that kind of thing. Beautiful things, but I am really
evaluating myself very differently after my experience here." And I think she really never was a great designer again, do you think so? I think that was the end. It's like the war made her extremely nervous and sad. I think it was shattering to creative people.

Q: But I do think the point about the lack of supportive people is a characteristic of the New York fashion vs. French fashion.

A: Now, it's a little bit like Paris must have been for me here as an interior designer. The things that come across my desk are just fabulous. I don't think of them. I do think of a way for a whole room to look or a whole building to look, but the supporting power of creative designers, who have absolutely beautiful fabrics and beautiful wood surfaces and new treatments, and wonderful furniture now, is so stimulating. I think that's what she was talking about. It certainly is true of our industry.

Q: It's true of interior design today and you're saying it was not true of fashion design in those days?

A: In those days.

Or perhaps ever. I don't know. But certainly in those days.

I think one of the most interesting things that I lived through, periods, was when I was Cosmetics Editor and afterwards -- and I do want to talk a little bit about Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein -- I was Helena's lifelong friend, or very best friend, for, I guess.... I say lifelong, I guess 19-20 years. I had breakfast with her almost every morning and I... Did I say this before? I was her innovative thinker about the development of new products. The whole "Tree of Life" thing I thought of, and did the packaging for.

Q: I didn't realize that you had worked for Helena Rubinstein.

A: Yes, I did. Twice. On and off for seven years.

Q: While you were working for somebody else, then, right?
A: No, I was on her staff. I missed a key period there, I've lived so long. When I was Editor of "House..." ...Cosmetic Editor of Harper's Bazaar, I got to know her, of course, but I had already met her before that and when I had retired at one of the periods in my life, Elizabeth Arden asked me to write her biography (this was 1953), and I was living in the country and I was writing free lance, and I had written five or six booklets for Arden, and I was also writing for Helena, because we were dear friends. She was a wonderful woman; I would love to talk about her for an hour.

Q: What do you think are some of the connections between the various aspects of your very diversified career?

A: Well, I would say chiefly imagination. I think I've been chiefly observant, which I didn't realize at all until this has happened to me now.

Q: You mean your interior design business?

A: Yes. I don't think that hardly anything I ever read or any play I saw that I retained in my mind, has gone without some building up of a little extra edge on whatever I had to undertake, whether I was writing copy or doing a store promotion or writing advertising. The latitude...If you're at a certain level of imagination or taste, [the latitude] is very wide, and it's very much the same thrust, whatever the final outcome of what you do is. It's almost the same impulse. If you know how to write. If you just babble and know the language, and have concepts, whether they wind up on a flat page as a photograph in a magazine, or whether they ever become a billboard, of which I have done many, or as a radio or television commercial, which I've also written. Or, now, in the case of hotels... I was driving through the country the other day and thinking about you, and
realized we had done 47 hotels in ten years, and no two remotely alike. Some people say they know that a job is "Tom Lee," but I don't know how they know. Because we try to analyze—as you do in advertising—as we're trying to affect. What their reaction will be, and try to come in... Although you know that is ground work, you try to come in at a different angle on their perception, so that it isn't the same... I mean, this is true in retailing. You have a whole public to approach, and you have to analyze what their backgrounds are; the people you think that would be interested at all in what you present. I had a strange experience with the income tax bureau one day. My man said that I shouldn't go and talk to the interviewer because he would be making less money than I, and he would resent me as a woman, and all that kind of business, and I said, "Well, I don't want to have to pay any more tax, I am only as honest as I know how to be, and I'm tired of having you tell me that 'You only have $2,000 more and you're so lucky to pay.'" I said, "Let me go and talk to him." He was very nervous, my tax man, and he introduced me to this fellow in the bureau. He was a cripple, and he looked like the "Phantom of the Opera." And I had worked out a thing called, "In Defense of Career," and I wrote this out as a paragraph saying my husband and I had so many different clients and different friends in different fields who were business friends...whose babies and whose weddings and divorces or...had to be recognized somehow by us. And we had certain expenses that were not the responsibility of our present employer, but were our legitimate business expenses as career people, which was..... I knew it had never been put down just like that but I said it and he said, "What career?" And I said, "Well, I'm the Vice President of Lord & Taylor." And he said, "What's Lord & Taylor? A woman's club?" And I suddenly realized this enormous gap that there is. And I said, "Well, do you read
the Post?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "You don't read the Tribune or the Times or the Telegram?" And he said, "No. Never." And I said, "Do you ever go south of 42nd Street?" And he said, "Never." And I said, "Do you take the subway?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, you wouldn't have heard of Lord & Taylor I suppose. Is there a woman here that we could talk to?" And he said, "My boss is a woman." And here is this enormous lady, who is very, very black and she came in and he said, "Miss Smith, did you ever hear of Lord & Taylor?" And she slapped her thigh and said, "Lord a' Mercy, it's ma favorite store." Well.... When I talked to him, it was as though the ground had opened. He had not heard of my store. And sometimes when I was the Editor of "House Beautiful" I traveled through the country, and I'd look at all the people's poor houses and terrible neighborhoods, and I would think, "Well, they're really not to whom I am writing and they shouldn't be probably." It's the view of who you really have to reach, and it's the same thing. Who wants to go to the Palace Hotel? It's not the person who's going to stay on the West Side, and.... You know. You start there, and you have to figure out who your public is. Then you try to think of what their education might be and where they travel and what they expect.

Q: That's a real marketing technique isn't it?

A: I suppose it is. And it's very important to designing. And then there's always a little thing about... You have to realize in hotel work that, as in fashion, people should enjoy it. Otherwise, why do it? Why not just have clothing that keeps you warm.

Q: Sarah, you've raised a question.... You've talked a little bit about your experiences with the IRS and in regard to your situation as
a woman, and you referred to that man's supervisor, who was a woman...

Have you run into discrimination over the years because you were a woman?

A: Quite the opposite. Not at all. I feel like.... I have been in fields where women weren't honored. At Lord & Taylor, they used to ask me at the Board meetings, "What is the woman's viewpoint," which used to make me furious. I would say, "Very much what I think yours is." But they hadn't had a husband who believed in creativity in women and their reliability and their strength and talents, and a father and a grandfather who also believed in women. I had never had any of this problem and certainly in advertising it was quite the opposite. People respected you very much.

Q: So the only place you really ran into it was at the IRS?

A: That's about right. That was the only time I ever had it.

And I have felt that it's been a big asset to me. It doesn't mean that you have to be flirtatious or take advantage.... The old idea of women.... Of sometimes being ruthless and sometimes also using all their wiles, is long over, I think. I think the new crop of young women who have degrees in Business Administration are really magnificent, and they go in and talk exactly as men do, and sometimes maybe with a little more style. I haven't had any problem. I don't really understand what it all is about, but I guess it's real.

Q: Yes, I think so.

A: I guess I've been lucky.

Q: I'm sorry... You were starting to say that you had an important point to make about age.

A: Yes. Well, Helena Rubinstein, who lived to be 94, used to think that it was a great asset, because you knew more, if you kept your mind active. You had a bigger library of experiences, not only with ideas
but with people, and history. She was absolutely proud to say how old she
was. Of course, it's one thing to have, as she said, $60 million a year; you
can be anything you want to. But,... I really feel that it's many times
the old person, the older person, who doesn't do the trite thing, because
they know who they are. They don't do the banal thing. They can cross
that off. They can get right down to fresh, new kernels of thought, far
more than a young person starting out, who might think they had a brilliant,
new idea. I have now lived long enough to see the same crop of ideas coming
up over and over and over, and with the same kind of enthusiasm. And, of
course, it's fun to move along with those people, you're all right. But I
think it's been a great asset to me, who was pretty far along when my
husband died. So much so that we felt we were facing retirement. Of course,
we thought we had this much time to enjoy it. It seems to be, in this field,
where people are spending $100-$150 million, a great comfort to have
somebody who has more years.... I think they don't question the fact that
we won't be careless with their money.

Q: That's very interesting.

A: I think that is, yes. I understand in advertising now that
youth is still what they're looking for. I don't see very much brilliance
in advertising today, however. No matter how young the youth. Occasionally.
But it's not the great period of advertising that it was 20 years ago, I
don't believe. It's interesting to me, from here, to see the waves of
creativity, and where they hit. In display, for instance, immediately after
the war. It was a high point. It was like the theatre, that came and went.
And certainly in publishing, the same is true. The rise of the advertising
man who became the publisher is a long way from Conde Nast, who believed that
if you had a treasure in an editor you respected him and let him have his head.
That was the whole gist of why you would buy a magazine—the creative force of somebody. They were not looking for parallels in advertising lineage with editorials, which has been, I think.... It's damaged layout and art work and general editorial policy....

Q: Just as one final thing... Would you talk a little bit about how you feel about young people entering whatever field they are prepared to enter, or wish to enter. How do they do it? What are the important qualities and qualifications? That's a big question.

A: That is an awfully big question. I don't know....

Q: Well, let's talk about creative young people.

A: It's very.... It's easier to judge a creative writer because it's down, you can read it, than probably someone who brings you a sketch of what they think of in our field, which hasn't been realized. It's very hard to tell.... I think schools like FIT, that have a very active department, where they arrange interviews for you and really back up their training of you, are absolutely marvelous. Most people who I've known who have gotten started in the field were able to because of friendship or school or parents—that's not to be undervalued. And I find that most people on Vogue and Harper's Bazaar and in most advertising agencies, if you call them about somebody you think has talent, they see them. It's awfully hard to realize that some people are too busy to see young people, no matter what; how much you want to. There's an end to strength, and I hate that. My husband vowed to see people one morning a week. Whoever, whatever artist or sculptor wanted to see him, he saw. He just... He blocked out half a day, because he had an awful time getting started.

Q: How about the relationship between natural creativity and training, in a skill or craft -- do you have any feelings about that?
A: Well, natural creativity can be destructive, if there's nowhere for it to go. As my husband used to say to me, "ideas are very cheap. It's how they are carried out that really makes them..." I remember once he did a beautiful, beautiful packaging for Lily Dache, based on the thought that it would be a crystal clear, transparent crystal. And it was finally done in opaque plastic. The design didn't matter at all, by the end of it, because it was destroyed, his interpretation. And that... I mean, creativity.... Unless it's channeled, is madness often. I mean, it's odd to say this, but I'm forced to see people all the time who have a great idea about something that doesn't apply to anything, really. You have to analyze the need and the possibility of its being achieved. And that only can come through experience and training.

Q: In other words, if somebody has a design -- whatever it might be -- if it's to be realized properly, then that person should know that it can be done or that it can't be done?

A: You see that it may be a prototype for instance. Something that Bonnie Cashin is very interested in raising money for, so the poor people, who are just getting started, can have the opportunity of having a model made. There are all kinds of pitfalls to that because of lawsuits and who had the idea first and all that. It's very touchy.

Q: Yes, and now you're talking about Bonnie's idea. But getting back to the person who has the idea... Do you think there's an advantage to that person knowing that something can be executed?

A: Oh, yes. Of course. I have become a cropper with ideas (because every once in a while I do have ideas which are just out of nowhere); I thought.... I was turned down by American Can to be an advisor to them on the development of products for American women. They thought I
was too Vogue and to Bonwit Teller (this was about five years ago). They said they felt I didn't understand the American woman. So I'm just thinking, "What does everybody have as a problem?" And I thought, it's a pretty unattractive wastebasket. That's the one thing that is in everybody's house, I think, and should really be solved better than it is. So I thought, "Well, with all these thick materials that I'd been working with in interior design, wall surfaces, why don't we do wonderful plastic or vinyl, in decorator colors and designs for different rooms in the house; fold them up flat like bags in a supermarket. Since they're heavy they would stand up straight if you opened them up, and they'd be very pretty. It would be a wonderful gift item. So... Two days later I went back to American Can and I said, "How about this? We'll call it a 'trasket.' It's the difference between basket and trash." I thought that was very clever and I wrote a little song about it. And I showed them everything and they were very interested. So... It didn't sell them on me, but they took it to three different factories that fold and cut paper, and they came back and said, "Your idea is very nice, but it will cost us $5 million to cut it, and we couldn't possibly make it back. And we don't know that it would have wide enough acceptance to justify such a thing." And the same... I had a wonderful idea for poison for people's bathrooms, where they don't turn on the light at night, and just take some medicine. I did it with a surface, with little bumps on the surface and I took it to Squibb. And then I did a little thing to paste on that glowed in the night, that said, "poison, poison, poison." I thought that was a good idea... But they wouldn't do it. It cost 2½¢ to guarantee that everybody would have it. They couldn't possibly spend 2½¢ on a label.

You asked me about creativity.... You have to know who wants it and how it's going to develop, and if it's worth it. I don't mean to be negative
about this.

Q: No, that's fine.

A: But I just cite those... I must have had 10 or 12 ideas like that that came absolutely a cropper.

Q: Yes. So, it's interesting that even a really successful creative person like you can come a cropper from time to time.

A: Well, you see, I don't know enough about some of the things that I think of.... You have to learn that. But I'm not sorry that I keep on trying.

Q: Sure. Right. No, because sometimes you can learn more from doing a thing incorrectly and have your lesson taught from that.

Sarah, thank you very much. This has been very interesting, and...

A: I've enjoyed it. I'd forgotten so many of the things that you've reminded me of.

Q: I'm glad. Thank you.

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