ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ISRAEL MYERS
CHAIRMAN EMERITUS
LONDONTOWN CORPORATION

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

DATE OF INTERVIEW

Wednesday, March 2, 1983

INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
Londontown Manufacturing Co. Inc., now a division of Interco, Inc. (it was acquired by Interco in 1976) became a manufacturer of rainwear many years ago. Israel Myers, father of Jonathan Myers, was first in the business of making men's suits, but became a manufacturer of raincoats during WW II. He built it from a tiny business to one whose volume was $8,000,000 in 1961 when his son, Jonathan, came into the business. In 1976, when the company was acquired by Interco, Inc. the volume was $72,000,000. In 1982, when Jonathan Myers left the company to pursue a new career, the company's volume was over $150,000,000.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ISRAEL MYERS

ORAL HISTORY

1 - 3  History of Baltimore as clothing producers

3 - 5  Personal early history of Israel Myers and of his father

6 - 9  In 1919, I. Myers goes to work for the clothing company later to become Londontown

10 - 11  More about Londontown's history until the Depression; I. Myers acquires Londontown with one partner in 1930

13 - 16  Operating a men's clothing firm in the 1930's

16 - 19  How Londontown decided to make raincoats

19 - 23  I. Myers tries to get contracts to make Navy uniforms; finally gets contract for rubber raincoats for the army

23 - 25  Learning how to make rubber and synthetic rubber raincoats

26 - 27  Introduction and success of the cotton raincoat

28 - 32  Introduction of dacron/cotton, after much research and development

32 - 34  Early efforts to sell the dacron/cotton raincoat, subsequently a great success story.

52  Acquisition by Interco

53  Review of I. Myers' early history
Q: ....for the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology...This will be an interview with Israel Myers, Chairman Emeritus of Londontown Corporation. The interview takes place on March 2nd, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Is, before we start to talk about your own personal history and involvement with Londontown, could you take a little time and tell us about Baltimore as a city in which a lot of menswear, and also women's wear, was produced. How did it get to be a city of this kind of manufacturing?

A: Well, Baltimore got to be a big clothing center for the simple reason that it was a port of entry for many Polish and German and Russian Jews who came to this country in the early part of this century, and the latter part of the last century. As a matter of fact (I do not have figures to substantiate it, but) I venture to say that at one time Baltimore was the largest in the country. The reason for that is that it was the home base and the scene of operations for Henry Sonneborn and Company.

Q: How do you spell that?

A: S-o-n-n-e-b-r-n. It's the same name that you've seen over and over again. From this grew Sonneborn Oil Company and many, many other companies. Henry Sonneborn was a German. Not a refugee, a German immigrant to this country. I don't know; sometime in the last century. And he built a tremendous business. It was the largest...I think at one time they were the largest clothing manufacturers in the whole country, and they held that position until after World War I. Several years after World War I. The whole Sonneborn family was involved in it. His brother-in-law, I think it was, that was Sigmund Sonneborn, who became the...I think he was Dr. Sigmund Sonneborn. I know it was a Sigmund
Sonneborn who became President of the company when Henry Sonneborn died. And, of course, out of this...Many of the people who worked there went into business for themselves...Most of the people who were in the clothing business after World War I and who are there now can trace their antecedents to a father or a grandfather or an uncle who came out of the Henry Sonneborn company. As a worker.

For example...Londontown is one of them. The man who started Londontown was a man by the name of Roten.

Q: R...?
A: R-o-t-e-n. His real name was Rotensies, who was a nephew of Henry Sonneborn.

Q: R-o-t-e-n...?
A: R-o-t-e-n-s-i-e-s. Rotensies. And they changed it to Roten.

Q: And he came out of Sonneborn.
A: He came out of Sonneborn. And we made very fine clothing at Londontown. Sonneborn...Henry Sonneborn made popular priced clothing. Lebow came out of Henry Sonneborn Company. One of the Lebows was a cutter there. And he...Ben Lebow was a cutter, and he went to work...started his own business with his brothers. And they made very fine clothing. And when I speak of very fine made clothing, I speak of clothing on the level with Hickey Freeman.

There was an M. Stein & Company. I don't know whether they came out of Sonneborn, but they had to come out of Sonneborn because everybody came out of the Sonneborn Company at one point. And, of course, Sherman started in Baltimore. Now, they didn't come out of Sonneborn & Company. And Greif came out of Sonneborn. And these were two tremendous giants in the clothing industry, and are still big...
concerns. Not as popular as they once were, nor do they make as fine a garment
as they used to make. But they were the popular priced field... Or what goes for
the popular priced field today. That gives you basically what happened with
the men's clothing.

In the ladies' field, there were some smaller concerns, no
giants as you had in the men's field, like Henry Sonneborn & Company, or Sherman
or Greif.

Q: All right. Now, let's start to talk about you. Where you
were born, and how you got started.

A: Well, I was born in 1906, and in 1919, when I got out of
high school, I happened to answer an ad in the paper that they were looking
for a stenographer. And I had learned shorthand in high school, and I was
going to law school at night....

Q: I'm sorry. What year was that?
A: 1919.... No, 1923. 1923... 1919 was when we came to Baltimore
from Lynchburg.

A: Oh. I didn't ask you about that. Were your parents from
Baltimore also?

A: My parents were from Warsaw, Poland. And they came into
Baltimore in 1905 and I was born in 1906. My father came in 1904, my mother
came in 1905...

Q: You mentioned Lynchburg...
A: Lynchburg... I grew up there as a youngster.
A: I see. You moved from Baltimore.
A: From Baltimore to Lynchburg when I was seven years old,
and then back to...or six years old...and then back to Baltimore when I was thirteen years old.

Q: Your father was not in the clothing business.
A: My father was a tailor. In those days...There was very little ready-to-wear, especially in ladies'. If you wanted a coat, you went to a tailor and he told you how many yards of goods you had to have and how many yards of lining, how many spools of black cotton, white cotton, basting cotton, how many lead weights you wanted for your coat--He would tell you what to do. Then he would send you down to the department (he worked for a department store; I think he got a quarter on the dollar, and the department store got 75¢ out of every dollar that...)

Q: Is this how your father worked?
A: That's how my father worked. And that's how most tailors worked in those days I think.

And you would buy whatever cloth he told you to buy and as many yards of lining as he told you to buy, and bring in two spools of silk--whatever he told you to get--and then he'd cut a coat for you. He'd show you a fashion book. I wish I had some of those fashion books now. Because they're beautiful, you know. I can see them now. But they're gone. You may have some up at the Fashion Institute.

Q: It's possible; I don't know.
A: And you would pick out the coat you wanted. What you wanted to look like. He used to say nobody ever came out looking the way those fashion books showed them. The coat came out, but a woman would come in who weighed
250 pounds and she wanted to look like a Size 18; she didn't look like an 18, but she got a coat that was a reasonable facsimile of what she wanted.

Q: So he always worked...

A: And he was a fine tailor. He was what they called a custom tailor. And that was my father's background.

I once asked him to teach me how to sew. And he said to learn how to sew you had to learn how to bend your fingers to tie the knot. And he said, "I'll break every bone in your hand before I teach you how to sew. You'll never be a tailor. So get an education."

He was wrong. I wish I'd learned how to sew. But I did learn how to learn what quality sewing was, just from working with him. I used to sponge the cloth for him.

Q: This was after school, or...

A: After school, or at home in the kitchen, or whatever. There were no sponging plants in those days. They were just coming into their own, sponging plants.

Q: So that the fabric came into a firm and had to be sponged.

A: You bought cloth, you bought 3-4 yards of cloth or 5 yards of cloth or whatever it was, and then I would sponge it for my father by wrapping it in cotton and then soaked completely and wrapped up cloth, and...to describe it...You put a weight on it and let it rest there overnight, and the next day you took it out to make sure you didn't put any water creases in it. But it was a very intricate way of sponging a piece of cloth. But that was the method; we didn't know any other method. That was all. Sponging plants came in just about that time, were beginning to come into being. And that was it.
Q: Okay. Now we get to 1923 and you are out of high school, and....

A: And I happened to answer a blind ad, and it was Londontown Clothes. It wasn't even Londontown Clothes yet; it was Mackover, Roten & Company.

Q: That you must spell. M-a-c-k.....

A: M-a-c-k-o-v-e-r, Roten, R-o-t-e-n, & Company. These were three men. Mackover, Roten--Theodore Roten, and a man by the name of D'Elia. I think he was from Ecuador or Uruguay, of Italian extraction. He was the designer and tailor. He was a fine tailor. He came out of Henry Sonneborn Company too.

Now, they needed a salesman, and the only really top notch salesman in Baltimore at that time was a man by the name of Cohen, Nat Cohen. Nathan Cohen. They employed him, and brought him in...They didn't employ him. They brought him in as a partner. But he wanted his name in the company. Mackover took his brother's place, who was not functioning in the company. Bernard Mackover took his brother's place. And they didn't want to put Cohen's name in the company, because it would be too many names. It would make it Mackover, Roten, Cohen...And then D'Elia would want his name in. So they needed a name. And they went to a man by the name of Joe Katz, who was at that time the hottest thing in the advertising business in America, I understand. I remember meeting Joe Katz many years later. And Joe Katz came up with the name Londontown, because at that time Edward was the Prince of Wales, and when he fell off his horse and had his leg put in a cast, the next day every young American wanted to fall off a horse so he could get his leg in a cast, so he would look like the Prince of Wales. And everybody had...And all clothing that you see,
to this day, your fine names, all have an English connotation. Because of that. There was... I can't think of all the names, but if you back... it's Fashion Park, Hyde Park, Londontown. Everybody had something English in their name, and the models were made... called with English names. The Picadilly model, and the Gilford model, and all English sounding names. This was true of Hickey Freeman and everybody else. As a matter of fact, I think Picadilly was a Hickey name. And everybody copied everybody else's, or somewhere near it. That's the clothing business, the way it was when I came in to it. And when Joe Katz came up with the name Londontown, that was the name. And it became very popular. We made a very fine garment, and our competition in those days was Lebow. They made, in some respects maybe, a better garment than we made. But they were in one field, they were a Broadway type clothing--peaked lapels--and we were the Brooks type clothing. Natural shoulder. They made rope shoulders, we made natural shoulders. We competed with each other, but on a style more than make. In make they were as good as we were, and we were as good as they were.

Q: And the price range was approximately the same.
A: The price range was approximately the same. So, that was the story of Londontown's entry into the clothing business. And when 1929 came along...

Q: And in 1929 for you, you went in as a salesman.
A: As a stenographer.
Q: As a stenographer.
A: And, of course, I worked there and... You've got to understand the background of all these people. I'm not downgrading them; they were nice
people. But Teddy Roten—and he was a great guy; he really was. But he was known as the "Meshugenah." You know; everybody had a nickname. And Nat Cohen was also a great guy, but inclined to be very lazy. He would go on the road and he'd sell up the production, and then he'd come back and he'd play cards at the Elk's Club from morning till night. He'd come in the morning, read the Daily News Record and leave. Then he took up golf, and he'd go out to the golf club. And that was it. Teddy Roten, on the other hand, was work and work and work and he would foam at the mouth and raise hell with everybody. He accomplished very little, because people just didn't have the confidence in him. He was a nice person. Hard worker. But he didn't accomplish anything. D'Elia, on the other hand, was the artist. If you came to him with a problem—You know, TR said do this or do that—he would say, "Why do it?" You'd say, "Better ask him." He'd say, "It's not my job to ask him. You ask him."

So I wound up running the business as a kid and, you know, by ... They abdicated; that's all. Nat Cohen abdicated, Teddy Roten abdicated, and D'Elia abdicated. So it wound up to me, I had to make decisions. So by the time I was 18, I was an important cog in the London Town business. And then, of course, in 1928, things began to get tough and in 1929 they were really rough. Now, we went out of business.

Q: Londontown went...
A: Londontown went out of business.

Q: But the corporation...
A: ...was called Mackover, Roten & Company. Londontown was not a corporation. Then when the Depression hit finally, Cohen and I left to go in with two other men, into their business—which was a concern called
Korman & Wasserman. Also, Wasserman came out of Sonneborn as a cutter, Korman had been a grocer; his brother-in-law. And they were a very successful business. They didn't belong in the quality end of it, because they were looking for cheap clothing. And they did very well. And Cohen and I wanted to bring them up to our standard of clothing, and it was impossible to do.

Well, that didn't last too long. It lasted I think about two years, and we had to get out of there. They went back to their old standards, and we continued to try to make Londontown clothes again, the way it was, during the Depression days. Which was impossible to do. People were not paying the prices. The most popular suit you could get out at that time was a $25 retailer. $15 was all you could sell it for wholesale. And...

Q: And this was considered moderate, or medium priced...

A: Well, it was considered moderate or medium priced clothing, in those days. Anyway, the range from $25 to $50 you could sell. Retail. If you got above $50 you were in Hickey's class. $65 was a Hickey-Freeman suit already. They made fine clothing. They came out of Rochester. Rochester became the central point for all fine clothing at about that time, because they had Hickey-Freeman, Michael Stern, Fashion Park--that's just a few of them. I can't remember all the names. Keller-Heuman & Thompson--all fine clothing houses. Hickey was the top. Chicago began to produce some fine clothing. There was Hart, Schaffner & Marks, a society brand. And Oxford Clothes. Philadelphia began to produce some nice clothes. There was a concern by the name of Scheier. It went out of business many years ago, but they made fine clothing. And Daroff & McCransky came up at that time, in the middle class.
Q: Daroff and...?
A: McCransky. Two names. Daroff was one--H. Daroff & Sons. And I think it was L. McCransky or...just McCransky. I don't recall. And they became giants; both of them. Daroff later became Botany clothes.
Q: Botany. Right.
A: And for all I know, they may still be in business; McCransky may still be in business. I don't know. I'm sure no Daroffs are left in the Botany business, as there are no Hickeys in the Hickey-Freeman business.
Q: Right. But anyway, getting back to Londontown....You were using the name through this period?
A: Through the whole period we used the name Londontown.
Q: And so by, let's say, '29 or '30, when you were really in the Depression, you were nonetheless continuing.
A: That's right. We continued...Londontown never went out of business was far as the public was concerned. We went out of business as far as the banks were concerned. But not as far as the public was concerned.
And we were a good company, you know. We made a good product. We never made a cheap product. That pretty much tells you the story, the background of Londontown.
Now, from there on...
Q: Before we get on to the next phase....At this point you are still a very small operation, I assume. Did you have a sales force of any kind...
A: No, no. We had a sales force in 1925...from 1924, '25, '26, '27, '28 we had...a man by the name of Buford Taylor in the South, and a man
by the name of Sam Seligson, on the West Coast, and Nat Cohen. That was our sales force.

Q: You had no showroom...
A: We had a showroom at 200 Fifth Avenue.
Q: In New York.
A: In New York. We had it in conjunction with Seinsheimer & Company, which was an outfit in Cincinnati.
Q: Could you spell Seinsheimer?
A: S-e-i-n-s-h-e-i-m-e-r. Seinsheimer & Company. And they may still be in business, I don't know. They made, you know, low end, popular priced clothing.
Q: Uh huh. At that point were you part of the union? Were you...?
A: Oh, we were always union.
Q: And that was Amalgamated.
A: Amalgamated.
Q: Uh huh. And just one other thing about that period...How much at that time did it take you to buy the Londontown name and whatever assets they had.
A: Well, in 1930, when we really got into trouble, the business had to be liquidated.
Q: I see.
A: And I was instrumental in helping to liquidate a lot of it. And, of course, by this time there was a feud between the Rotens and the Cohens. And we wanted the name Londontown, Cohen and I, because we were going to continue it. And the creditors, literally, gave me the name Londontown.
They sold me the machinery and the equipment, or what was left of it. If I remember correctly, it was $6,700, and they threw in the name just to get rid of it. Yet, they didn't lose any money on us. We wound up, I think we paid within 2-3¢ of the complete dollar, with everything. It was... We went out of business, but we didn't go bankrupt.

Q: You liquidated.
A: We liquidated. So, that's the story about how Londontown got started. And how I got into it, as an owner.

Q: Right. So that by 1930 you were an owner, or part owner.
A: Part owner. Right.
Q: Okay. So let's take it from there.
A: Well, from 1930... And then we went with Korman and Wasser­man, and then when they got out, after a couple years, Cohen and I continued it on our own. But it was rough going, because we didn't have our own shop anymore. We...

Q: You had been producing on the premises.
A: We produced on our own premises, and we had to go to a contractor, and we didn't... We never got the kind of product that we wanted to make. Nobody could make it, because unless you had pride in what you were doing, it just wasn't there. And these people, it wasn't their baby, you know. So we had to work with contractors. And there were a couple of good contractors in Baltimore at that time. Not many. I really remember only one; we used him, but he didn't make anywhere near the product that we made when we had our own shop. That later became Modeste Clothes, for instance, but the whole thing began to change. And these changes take place and you don't realize that there
are changes. You're making things from day to day, you know. This is what we've got to do today, in order to exist, so we do it. We don't think of it that way, but when you look back in retrospect, that is what took place.

Q: What was the volume of the business in a reasonably decent year, let's say, in the thirties?

A: Oh, I don't remember, but it wasn't a lot of business. I mean...

Q: $200,000 a year, for example? Would that have been...?

A: At the most.

Q: That's really small...

A: We didn't think of it in terms of volume. How many suits can you make? How many coats can you turn out? 100 suits a week is very good; you did 125, you're on top of the world. If you only got 50, you were having troubles.

Q: Did you sell the suits before you made them, or did you make them first and then...?

A: We sold them before we made them. We'd go out and get orders, and then we'd begin to make the suits. And invariably, in those days, things were so rough that people would give you an order, and if the season got tougher they'd cancel it on you. Even though they'd confirmed the order. So they would take it all in. You went out, you took an order, and came back home and you made up a list and the swatchbook showed six suits, five suits, four suits, eight suits—when you sold 16 suits you bought a piece of goods. Sixteen suits was 52 yards, it took 3 1/4 yards to make a suit. And that's the way you figured it. If I sold eight I bought a piece of goods. Invariably, if somehow, you
had 200 styles in the line—many more than you needed—you'd have piece goods bought for it. And then when the piece goods came in, you'd send it out to be sponged and when it came back you cut it, and as you were half way through the season, and you sent out swatches to your retailers... Now, if you didn't have what he wanted, you would substitute, but he didn't know that you had substituted because he didn't remember what he had bought. So if he bought a brown, you'd send him another brown. We'd send him a swatch. He'd confirm the order, so you were safe. Because you had a piece of brown goods. But, as you cut... Then he would cancel on you. What are you going to do now? This was common, ordinary business, to cancel right and left.

Q: Really.

A: Today I don't think they could get away with it.

Q: These were mostly specialty stores I assume.

A: Mostly specialty stores. That's right. Department stores were not important in men's clothing. At all. There were a few that did a fairly good job. Hochschild's and Hutzler's in Baltimore did a fairly good job in men's clothing, but most of them did not. Macy's, of course, was a giant, but we didn't sell them. We were interested in the specialty shop, men's specialty store. For instance, in New York there was, well, Brooks Brothers was there. And there was... They became a big chain...

Q: Weber and Heilbronner?

A: Weber and Heilbronner, they started out as a specialty shop. Wallach's was a specialty shop, before they became a chain. Broad Street, they were one of our big customers as a matter of fact.

Q: And was the business that you were doing for the New York
store being done out of the showroom at 200 Fifth Avenue?

A: Out of the showroom at 200 Fifth Avenue. In New York. But the business with the men on the road, that was the bulk of the business. You'd be getting in from the men on the road. We'd go on the road...For instance, when I started out, I started out with Newport News and I sold Carmires in Boston. Those stores are all out of business. Schulman...And then I'd go to Portsmouth, the Levinne Brothers...Rappaport...I'm giving you names that I recall; this is going back over 50 years...From there to Suffolk, Virginia. S. Levy & Sons. All men's specialty shops. Then you'd go to Newport News, and in Newport News you sold Wertheimer & Company. That is, we did. And Numanskys. And Charlottesville. In Charlottesville we'd sell..... Thomas and Lewis Saltz, by the way, started in Charlottesville, then later went to Washington. The Numansky Brothers. And in Lynchburg there was Woods, S.H. Franklin. And then you'd go on down into North Carolina...

Q: I think I have the picture. These were all specialty stores, and most of the business was obviously in their hands...

A: Small specialty shops. Very good ones. In Charlottesville there was M. Kaufman & Sons. It was a very fine shop.

Q: And these were all stores that did their own alterations.

A: Their own alterations. If they had to they'd send out to a seamstress somewhere, to cut someone a pair of pants or something like that. But mostly they had their own tailors, one or two tailors, working for them. In a big store they had two tailors; in a small store they had one tailor. A smaller store, they would send it over to one of the other stores and get it altered. It was a fascinating business in many ways.
Q: And it continued like this... until what year?

A: It continued like this until, as far as I was concerned, until 1940, '41; when we had the breakup. And, you know, somebody said to me one day, "How did you get the idea for London... for a raincoat?" I really didn't get an idea for a raincoat. It's a very cute and true story about what made me go into the raincoat business; what gave me the idea that a raincoat would be a good thing to do.

It was 1938. I was on the road, and I wound up in Williamsport, Pennsylvania on Thanksgiving Eve. And here again, there were two stores: There was Abe Stern, and a store three doors down from them called Stern Brothers. These were his two brothers, with whom he had had an argument, and he got out. They were brothers, and they had had an argument. Abe built a marvelous business in a store called "The Hub." He married a girl from across the street--I think her name was Ulman. Now, you've got to understand: The Sterns were Russian Jews, and the Ulmans were German Jews, and they couldn't stand Abe. There was this feud going on. And when I came in there, Thanksgiving Eve, to ask Abe to work with me on the new spring line which I had with me, he was a very nice guy but a very abrupt sort of a guy. "I can't work with you today." And he had the appointment with me. "You'll have to stay over till tomorrow." I said, "I can't. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving Day." "I don't care. You're not going to work with me today. You want to stay over, you can work with me. If not, you can go home. You can't travel anyway. It's bitter cold." And it was. It was bitter cold. He says, "You got a heater in your car?" I didn't have a heater in my car. "Well, you can't travel in this kind of weather anyway. Put a heater in your car." "Well," I said, "I don't have the money for a heater."
"I'll lend you the money. Let's have the heater put in." Well, he went around to the garage, and they put a heater in that afternoon. $45-50-60, I don't know what it was. And we were in business again. He said, 'Well, you'll pay me when you can.' Well, I paid him, of course, a couple of days later. I didn't want to be indebted to him. And the next day he... Now, he was notorious for canceling orders. He would let you cut, and you had all these goods cut, and then he would cancel. So, he worked with me that day, and I was fuming. I was fuming! I had a wife and a baby.

Q: This was now Thanksgiving.

A: This was Thanksgiving morning. And I didn't call home, because who had money for a long distance call. You didn't place any telephone calls. And we got through with the order, and I was so damn mad that I took the order and I said, 'Thanks, Abe,' and I tore it up right in front of him. And he says, 'What are you doing that for?' And I said, 'You know the order isn't going to stick anyhow. Now start writing an order that you'll honor.'

   Well, he had to chuckle himself, because he knew his reputation. And he says, 'You're right.' And he sat down and he wrote an order, and that order stuck. That taught me something. If you stuck to your guns, you could get what you wanted.

Q: Had he overbought on the first order?

A: No... He was just... If he liked it he bought it, because he knew later he could cancel it. If you invested in the piece goods that was your headache; it wasn't his... You know. They didn't take you into consideration at all. Just... He'd write any kind of an order. And there were a lot of them that did this. There was a guy in Chicago by the name of Hirsch who was...
notorious for it. Then he'd buy it for closeouts. You had to get rid of all this goods that you had cut.

Well, that next day, Thanksgiving Day, going home, was a bright, clear day, but it was bitter cold, and I was wearing a Montenac Sedan overcoat. You know what a Montenac Sedan is?

Q: I don't even know how to spell it.

A: It was a French cloth.

Q: Would you spell it?

A: M-o-n-t-e-n-a-c I think. Sedan--S-e-d-a-n. And it was a warm coat. Now, I had the heater in my car; I'd never had the heater before. And I didn't know too much about regulating the heater, and on my way home, that afternoon, Thanksgiving Day, it was unbearably hot. Unbearably hot! So I stopped on the road, took my coat off, put it in the back of the car with my samples, and went home. And I kept thinking to myself, "You know, if this is the wave of the future..." I'm trying to recapture what I was thinking. "Who needs a Montenac Sedan?" Which was an expensive coat. I think it was $125, and that was a very expensive coat in those days. And I liked nice clothing. So I took one for myself. "Who's going to need this kind of clothing?" Nobody needs this kind of clothing anymore. And women were buying cheap little raincoats for their boys, going to school. They were wearing coats for $5-6 at tops. This was the day when Plymouth came into their own. Up in Boston, I think they were. Alligator...It was expensive. $7-8 for a raincoat. And here I am with a Montenac Sedan coat that would sell for $125 or $150. Nobody wanted it, you know.

Q: And this was a coat you were making?

A: This was a coat I was making. A fine coat. All of our
clothing was fine clothing. But nobody wanted it. You didn't have to have fine clothing. The Depression was on, and the industry was drying up. Nobody realized what was happening. The only ones who really realized it were the ones at the low end, maybe because they didn't know any better, or didn't care, or circumstances... But they were the smart ones, because they did business. We in the upper end did little business. How Hickey-Freeman survived I don't know.

Q: But now, not to get away from it, this is when the idea came to you, of a lightweight...

A: Of a lightweight coat. I didn't think of it as a raincoat, but there was going to be a lot.... Because I figured buses are going to have heaters, and streetcars are going to have heaters. In those days buses didn't have any heaters. Streetcars didn't have heaters. Nobody had heaters. Trains didn't have heaters; mini-trains didn't. That came later. I remember riding on the train up to Duluth, Minnesota and freezing on the train. Just two cars and one of them had a little stove in it. Actually a little coal burning stove, in the car. And it went from St. Paul up to Duluth. And it was cold. And up there, when it gets cold, it really gets cold!

So.... Then when the war came along, people were getting contracts to make uniforms. Now, you can say whatever you want to, but unless you knew somebody, you couldn't get a contract. And I didn't know anybody. So I talked to the quartermaster every day. The train left Baltimore at 5:18 in the morning, got into Philadelphia sometime after 7:00, maybe 7:30, just enough time so I could catch the streetcar and the subway out to the quartermaster, which I believe was 2600 South 20th Street, or something like that. And that
goes back a long time.

And I'd come out there. And, of course, I became a fixture out there. Everybody who saw me or knew me figured I must work there or do something there. I was doing nothing. I was just trying to get somebody to listen to me. But nobody wanted to listen. And...

I've got to go back again. In 1924, when we were making fine clothing, we had a customer in Norfolk by the name of Carr Mears in Boston. Norfolk at that time was the headquarters for the United States Navy. Carr Mears in Boston outfitted more naval officers than anybody in the country.

Q: I'm sorry. Would Carr, Mears be C-a-r-

A: C-a-r-r, Mears, M-e-a-r-s, the two names, and Dawson.

Three names. Carr and Dawson were still in the business; Mears I never met. But old man Carr (I'll never forget the first time I called on him), he was a grumpy little guy. And as a matter of fact, when I introduced myself, he said, "I don't have time to talk to you." And I said, "Mr. Carr, it's my first day on the road," and he said, "Your first day on the road?" And I said, "Yes. And you're the first man I've come to." This is 8:00 in the morning, and I'd just got off the boat. And he said, "What made you come in to see me? Don't you know I eat salesmen?" And I said, "Well, you're a good store in town." And he says, "Well, if you bring the line in here, I'll look at it." Of course, the big deal was, you went into a hotel and got a couple of cigar boxes and propped up a table with a slant a little bit and showed swatches, and you had a model... I started out with all the lessons intact. I had a model with me... And he gave me an order. It was my first trip on the road.

Q: And you were saying, he was the one who supplied a lot of
naval officers with their clothes.

A: Yes. Not only with their clothes, but with naval officers' uniforms.

Q: I see.

A: Now, what was a naval officer's uniform? It had a cloth.... it was made by Herbert Lawton & Company....and it was called 8601 blue. That was the style number. Our Lot number for it was Lot #1710. I'll never forget that. It was a wide wale blue, and it was a double breasted jacket. It's the same uniform they wear today, with bayonet slits on the side. Otherwise it was a regular suit, and the buttons' facing was a little bit different, and a double breasted jacket. And we had made those for him by the ton. Desmond's was anxious to get that business, when the Navy went out to the West Coast. Johnny Carr, as he was known in the trade, went out there to open up a store. And this was about the time I ran into him, in 1929 or 1930. And he said, 'What have they got out there? Nothing but a bunch of bums and whores and pimps. The Navy's not going to stay out there.' He didn't realize that we had two coasts. The Navy stayed there, and his business began to dry up. And Norfolk began to dry up. At one time when you came into Norfolk, it was like the Navy yard. All these sailors and officers, all over the place. Norfolk, and Portsmouth was right across the river. Ah...You got me started on...

Q: And that business went off to the West Coast.

A: That's right....

Q: So, because of the earlier background that you had in making Navy uniforms...

A: That's right. So I thought, well, if the army's making
uniforms, why doesn't the Navy make uniforms? So I proposed that, and I went to Washington.

Q: As one of your regular trips.

A: No, this was a side trip. Philadelphia was a regular trip. Almost every day, you know. And I wasn't getting anywhere. So I said, "Why doesn't the Navy make a uniform for their officers?"

So, I went to Washington. I don't remember who I saw. But whoever I saw there thought, "E-h-h...They're not going to make it." But it gave him an idea. Apparently, two weeks later an announcement comes out that the Navy is going to supply the officers' uniforms for the Naval officers, and the uniforms are going to be made by Kohn & Goldman, which became Worsted Tex, and Hickey-Freeman. Nobody else. Those were the two concerns that they had picked.

Well, I was out in the cold. I had an idea, but it didn't work for me. It worked for them. Then, when I went back to Philadelphia again, which I had been doing anyhow, one day I'm sitting in there and an officer comes by--I'll never forget him; a Lt. Kaufman--He came from Toledo or Cleveland or somewhere around there, as a civilian. But as an officer, he was with the Quartermaster. He said to me, "Which department are you working for?" And I said, "I'm not working for any department." And he said, "I see you here all the time." And I said, "I'm looking for a contract." "Can you make raincoats?" And my idea of a raincoat is what I had seen was what I had seen Plymouth making, the alligator cloth. And I said, "Sure, I can make raincoats." "I'll get you a contract." He comes back ten minutes later, and he said, "I got you a contract for 10,000 coats." I said, "Could I see one of them?" He said, "I'll let you
see it." He comes back with an enlisted man's synthetic rubber. It wasn't synthetic; it was a rubber raincoat. He said, "Strap seams, cemented...."

On my desk I still have the roller....

[Side 2]

Well, I'd never seen it. And he said, "Well, I'll send you somewhere. They'll show you how to do it." And he gives me the name of a concern in New York. I don't remember the name, but I think they were at 912 Broadway. And I got on the train that morning and went to New York, and I got there just about noontime, and the guy says, "Well, we're making 'em, but you won't be able to make 'em." I said, "Would you mind showing me what you do?" He said, "I'd be glad... But it's lunchtime now. Everybody's gone to lunch. Come back after lunch."

So I went downstairs, I went to the drugstore and sat down at the counter and ordered a chicken salad sandwich--I'll never forget it--and a milk shake. And all of a sudden a guy walks in and sits down next to me and he starts out with a typical English accent, "You're in the raincoat business." I said, "No, I'm not." "What were you doing up in the shop?" I said, "I came up because I wanted to find out how you make the raincoats." So I had to tell him where I was from. He says, "I'll show you how to make them, if you'll give me a job." "You've got a job."

So I hired him right there. He came down to Baltimore the next day, and he went to work, and he did know how to make the raincoat. But what he didn't know--and which we were all a little nervous about at the time--was that the government was switching from rubber... Because the Japanese had the

-23-
rubber supply, and they were switching to synthetics. And nobody knew how to make these seams stick. Well, we figured it out. I mean, the government figured it out. We all... We both hit on the answer about the same time. And we began to make rubber, or synthetic rubber, raincoats for the government. We made them. Minnesota Mining made them. A lot of people gave up on them. I remember walking into a shop in Philadelphia and the guy says, 'Oh, that junk! We wouldn't touch it with a 40 foot pole. You want to see it?' And he pulled it out from under the table. They threw it away. They just wouldn't bother with it.

But I couldn't afford to throw it away. Because I had to make it. That's all. And the first 10,000 coats I made, I think I got every one of them back.

Q: Good heavens!
A: Because the seams did not stick. Then we figured out how to do it, and we began to make good. And when we did make good, I think we made the best raincoat the government ever got.

Q: But wouldn't the 10,000 raincoats be enough to bankrupt you?

A: Well, it didn't, because what we simply did was... The way the government examined them was, you know, they would examine three boxes; I think they came 50 to a box, and if only two of them were rejects, then the whole shipment was accepted. If you had three rejects, then they would examine another box. And if three or four were rejects, then they would reject the whole shipment. So, actually, what we did was we shipped them back to them again, but we spaced them out in future shipments. We didn't improve on them, because once they were done, they were done; there was nothing you could do.
about it. But again, we had a tough inspector, fortunately, and we had to make good. His name happened to be Kaufman too. He came out of New York, originally, and I think he was related to somebody in the raincoat business. But he knew what he was doing. So he made us make good.

Q: Well, while you were making the raincoats for the services, what were you doing for private...? Nothing?
A: We were busy as we could be. Because there were not enough people making the army raincoats at the time. Nobody wanted to make it. There were a few of us making it, and those of us who did it did a good job and did very well with it.

Q: And that was really your first experience, working with synthetics, too.
A: Working with what?
Q: With synthetics.
A: Oh, yes. Yes. It was everybody's first experience. That was the beginning. And then, you know, I realized that maybe this was the way of life now, because at that time, we were beginning to learn from the Chinese. The Chinese were supplying their armies with two sheets of cotton fabric. They didn't have any wool, or anything like that, but this created a vacuum, and that made a warm coat, Chinese soldier...

Q: That was two layers of fabric...
A: Two layers of fabric. So, you didn't need a heavy coat. You didn't need a Montenac Sedan. I kept thinking about my Montenac Sedan coat everytime I made a coat. Well, I was right. Who the hell needs this heavy coat? The lightweight coat is the wave of the future. And this turned out to
be right.

On top of it, we did things that most people didn't want to do. Particularly in the South. Operators were always white. You rarely found black operators. And the only thing that I did that I planned on was that I figured, if this is so, there's got to be a lot of black women who want to sew, who can't get jobs. We will teach the black women how to sew. And we did. We were the first shop in Baltimore that disintegrated...that integrated blacks and whites. As a matter of fact, I remember one day bringing a white woman in and introduced her to the foreman, because she was going to sew...She took one look and said, "I ain't gonna work with them." And she wouldn't work. And a lot of them felt that way, but they worked. You know. A lot of them never even started. Today our shop is practically all black. And many, many shops, all black operators. And this was the beginning of the big shop that we have today.

Q: So...Post-World War II, you were still essentially going to remain in the raincoat business.

A: That's right.

Q: And at that time...Somewhere in through there, the name London Fog was developed.

A: Well, that came about because in 1951, I think it was 1951 or 1952, I continued to make cotton raincoats after that, you know. Not synthetic rubbers. But right after the war I began to make a very fine coat. Much better than Alligator. I knew I had to make a good product, because my competition at that point became Alligator, who was the only known name in
rainwear. Plymouth, which was good, Wales and Rainfare, they were in the Middle West.

Q: And these were all men's raincoats.
A: I knew nothing about ladies' coats. All men's coats. When I began to make cotton raincoats, I did well with them. I sold good stores. We didn't set the world on fire, but those retailers who recognized a good product bought my coat. I was a little higher than Alligator or Wales or Plymouth or Rainfare, but they were willing to pay the price. I remember going to Abraham & Straus, and a man by the name of Charlie Wigham was the merchandise manager, and he looked at me and he looked at the product and called his buyer in and he said, 'Why do I have to buy your product? What makes your product so good? Who's your competition?' And I said (and I got smart alecky; I knew I had his attention), I said, 'I've only got one competitor.' And he said, 'Who's that?' I didn't answer him. He said, 'Well, who's your competitor?' I said, 'My only competitor is ignorance. If your buyer doesn't know what he's doing, that's my competition.' With that he laughed, and turned around to his buyer and said, 'Give him an order. You've got a good product.' And that was the beginning. Well, not the beginning, but that's the idea.

Well, I was doing a tremendous job with J.C. Penney and a tremendous job with Sears, Roebuck.

Q: On the same merchandise or had you...?
A: The same merchandise. Cotton raincoats.

Q: The same styles.
A: The same styles. Both of them got the same styles. I didn't change for anybody. Because I knew there was only one way to make them; it had to be a uniform volume.

Q: A very basic coat.

A: A basic coat. Single breasted raglan. That was the big selling coat. And when...One of my biggest suppliers was Wamsutta Mills. And one day I'm in New York and I ran into Maury Becker, who was the buyer for Sears, Roebuck, and I was always looking for something new. There had to be something new, something different. And coming out of a style line like Londontown, I couldn't understand why everybody had to make a...Back again, the tan raincoat. In those days, everybody had the tan. Why can't they sell something else besides the tan raincoat? There must be something else. And Maury Becker said...I said, "Is there anything new, Maury?" "Yeah," he said. "See Jimmy Axelrod." That was...I just mentioned the name of the mill...

Q: Wamsutta.

A: Wamsutta. He said, "He's got something new up there."

So I went up to see Jimmy Axelrod, with whom I was very friendly, because he was our biggest supplier of cloth. I said, "Jimmy, do you have anything new?" "No, nothing." And I said, "Now, Jimmy, look. I just saw Maury Becker, and he didn't swear me to secrecy, but you've got a cloth here that's new." "You're crazy. Oh, wait a minute." He opens a drawer, and he said, "You must mean this piece of crap." And I said, "What is that?" It was the first dacron and cotton. And I looked at it and I said, "Is this water repellent?" "No." And I said, "Could you make five or ten yeards, and make it water repellent?"
"You're not going to make a raincoat out of that are you?" And he answered it. "But you would. Nobody else would, but you would...Yeah, sure," he said, "I can treat it for water."

Q: I assume they had been treating it as just plain cotton....
A: Just plain cotton.

Q: There was water repellency before that.
A: Oh, yes. But this wasn't going to be treated at all. This was a new fabric, a new idea. Well, it took a long time to get the cloth, because when you'd sew it...It was partly....At that time, I think it was 60% dacron and 40% cotton. And when you sewed it, the needle going through would heat up the dacron. Dacron, basically, is an oil, made of an oil base. And the needle eye would get clogged up and the thread would break after you sewed two or three inches, so you could make no progress. So, for the first two or three months, I was fooling around with this coat, trying to make this coat, and getting nowhere. And my own help, my own supervisor, said, "What do we need it for? We're so busy. We've got..." At this time, we were growing in the cotton end. We were supplying Sears, we were supplying Penney. "You don't need this. What do you need this headache for?" "Joe, let's work on it."

We had a telephone call from the DuPont Company in Wilmington. "Mr. Myers, would you be interested in talking to us about new rainwear fabric we're bringing out?" I said, "Sure. But what makes you call me?" They said, "Well, the more we look around, we're looking for a good quality maker, because this is going to be an expensive cloth, and we need a good maker. And we keep coming up with your name. Why don't you let us talk to you."
I said, "Why, sure." Wilmington being only an hour away from Baltimore. The guy's name was Taylor, who came down from DuPont. William Taylor. Two men walk in. He had a bolt of cloth under his arm, small bolt, maybe 20 yards. And he says, "This is the cloth we talked to you about," and so on. And he said, "This is on the QT; nobody knows about this. We're not advertising it or promoting it in any way. We'd like to keep it quiet." And I said, "Mr. Taylor, I don't know what's so secret about it, because I think I'm making a coat of this right now, or trying to.

Q: In other words, that was a dacron-cotton.
A: It was the same cloth. It was cut off from that same piece. The coat that I was trying to make. And he said, "You can't. This is the only cloth in the world like it, now. What I've got here in my arm. You can't be making a coat out of this." So, I said, "Look, I haven't been sworn to secrecy. So I'm going to show it to you." So I sent up to the shop, and they brought it down to me in pieces. You know. Front, back. And when they brought it in he looked at it and he whistled. And he said, "Where did you get this?" I told him. And he said, "That's what it is, Wamsutta's." He said, "They were not supposed to let this out to anybody." And I said, "Well, I've been making it now for two or three months already. Or trying to make it." And then I told him the problems. And he said that's what he wanted to know about. And we worked on it I guess for about a year or more before we finally got the coat ready. It got to the point where nobody wanted to make that cloth. And I would go from one mill to the next mill to the next mill. And finally we wound up with Reeves Brothers. And the reason I went to Reeves Brothers was they used to make a cloth that Alligator was so popular for. They made a very
fine cotton raincoat material. They wouldn't sell me any of it. And I went there. And when I convinced them that I wanted to make the cloth, they said they would make it. Well, here again, they wanted an order for 200,000 yards; then they settled for 100,000; then they settled for 60,000. And finally, I said, "Look, I'm not going to give you or God an order for 60,000 yards. When it comes in, if the cloth tailors well, I'll buy more. If I sell half of it and can't sell the rest of it, you're going to get it all back. If I sell more than half, I'll take the rest of it." And they wouldn't talk to me at first. And I found out they were peddling it everywhere in the world and nobody would take it. And so finally they came back to me and said, "Okay, we'll take your proposition."

Q: Do you happen to remember how much it cost at that time?
A: Oh, roughly around $2. They fluctuated the price from day to day. They were...

Q: For what? 48 inches or...?
A: This was a cloth, I think it was about 42" wide. 42" wide. Their price was astronomical. They were getting all kinds of prices for it, or trying to. And they finally agreed that they would work with me on that basis.

Well, I don't remember how much yardage it was that I had to take--10,000 yards or whatever it was--And they shipped it in, and I began to try to promote it. Now I finally made a good coat...And there are so many things you had to....We had water dripping on the needle. We tried a cool needle. And the next day, the bottom cases were rusted, so you couldn't sew it with the machine anymore. And then we tried an air vacuum blowing on the
needle. So the machine sort of created its own fan, and that wasn't practical. And then we had something else that made the place smell like chicken feathers burning all the time. It was...We tried every...

Q: It sounds like a very expensive research and development project.

A: For me it was expensive. You know, for 3M, it wasn't expensive, because they knew how to research and develop. I was...We were not chemists, you know. I was fortunate that I had a young Russian kid with me who was very dedicated. If I gave him a problem, he licked it. And he worked at it and worked at it and worked at it. Night and day. Well, when we had it licked already, and it began to take off, I went to Saks Fifth Avenue. And again, I went to Jimmy Axelrod, because his boat used to be next to Adam Gimbel's boat, or his son's boat, so he got me the audience with Adam Gimbel. Otherwise, I could never have gotten in there. Before I went up there, I put a swatch of it in a cup, poured water in it, and the next morning it held the water. So, when I went in there, I can't remember what his merchandise man's name was--his buyer's name was Gustafsen--and he didn't even want to talk to me--because the thing comes through him, you know. We later became very friendly, but...They bought the first batch of goods. And there I made a deal. I don't remember how many coats they bought, but again, I made the same deal, but the other way around. I sold them these coats--and nobody was going to get the coat for at least 30 days. They would be the first ones to have it for 30 days.

Q: Selling it for how much?

A: In those days, $29.75.

Q: Cost or retail?
A: Cost was around $19. And this was really taking a figure out of thin air, because we really didn't know what our costs were going to be. And we began to make this coat, and...

Q: I'm sorry. I interrupted you. You said you made the deal with them, which was...

A: If they didn't sell this coat, they could return all the unsold coats to me. You know, within 60 days. I don't remember...

Q: Approximately how many...

A: Oh, maybe 200. Just a few coats. But then, with this encouragement, I went and I sold it to...What was the name of the concern that later became...not Jacob Greene; that was in Philadelphia...It was a Reade concern, in New York, too. Reade. A men's specialty shop. Very fine. I remember they had a store in Rockefeller Centre. And I took it from there. Went from one store to another. In Washington, we tried to get the Hecht Company to buy it. They wouldn't touch it.

I gave to all the salesmen on the floor, at The Hub in Baltimore. I gave them each a coat, if they would sell. And then the Hecht Company in Washington then decided...But I made a deal with Lewis and Thomas Saltz, whom I knew very well, because he used to sell clothing. And the first coat I made was a half and half...I have a picture of it in some of the papers that I sent you. A half and half coat. Half cotton, half dacron and cotton. And I washed it, and I didn't treat it, I didn't press it or anything, and I wore it like that. And I walked into Lewis and Thomas Saltz with it.

...Lew Saltz, who was the buyer, was on vacation. Tom, who was a window dresser and is still living, looked at the
coat and said, "How ya doing, Is?" And I said, 'Well, I'm doing alright; I'm making a new coat here," and I had one hand in my pocket, and I just exposed the washed part of the coat, and he said, "Is that the coat?" And I said, "Yeah," and he said, "How you doing with it?" And I said, "I'm doing very well with it." Well," he says, "I don't think that's so hot." And I said, "Well, what's the matter with it?" And he says, "It's a different coat. One side of it is..." And I said, "That's what I wanted you to notice. It's the same coat." And I showed him where I'd joined the seams...

Q: In the two different fabrics.

A: And he said, "Well, I'll be damned." And, of course, this was an unusual treatment. And this was upon us. This had not been pressed up or anything like that. And he bought some coats. And with him I had made the same deal. Anything you sell...I didn't say I'd take it back. But..."It's confined to you for 30 days or 60 days." I don't remember which. "Nobody else in Washington can have it." And he bought it on that basis. I had offered it to the Hecht Company first and they had turned it down. They didn't want to have anything to do with it. In the meantime, I sold it to them; I sold it to Woodward & Lothrop. By this time the Hecht Company had begun to hear about the coat from their Baltimore store, and I get a call from the guy, who has since died--a young guy--and he wants to buy the coat. I said, "I can't sell it to you. I can't sell it to you for at least 60 days." 'Oh, to hell with you. We're more important than any of these other people, and if you can't...' You know, they didn't get the coat for years and years and years. The used to waylay me on the golf course after that, to sell them the coat. It was almost an instantaneous success.

-34-
Now, I had to have a name for it. Again, I had a salesman working for me by the name of John Taylor. And in the Pennsylvania Hotel, where I used to go...

Q: In New York.

A: In New York. I'm ready to go home, and he sees the coat, and I said, "John, this coat is fabulous. Really, it's a fabulous coat. But I'm having trouble coming up with a name for it." I had sold it to Saks Fifth Avenue already, without a name. And I said, "I've got to have a good name for it. And I was flirting with 'daclon' and 'londac,' and in talking to DuPont, I complained to them, I said, "If I make a good coat, you'll only kill it, because you'll do the same thing you did with nylon, you know, or rayon. It's a good name. Everybody will have it and it will become a generic name. And I won't have anything." So, they said, "No, if anybody tries to do that, we've learned from that. If anybody tries to sell this cloth under a name that sounds like it, like dacron, we'll stop it. They can't have an inch of this cloth." So, who do I go to? I go to DuPont, for the name. Dacron. And they sold dacron to Londontown. Or Londac—a combination of London and dacron. "We told you. If anybody tries to use this name as a generic term, we will stop them. Again." So here I am. Stuck. I've got a good cloth. What can I do with it?

So I'm telling this to John Taylor, and he says, "I've got a good name." He says, "Give me one of those letterheads." In the Pennsylvania Hotel. I wish I still had that slip of paper. I threw it away. He writes something on it. And I looked at it and I said, "I think it stinks." And he said, "I thought you'd like that." It was Friday evening, and he said, "I know you
want to go home early Friday." He says, "Why don't you go kick it around and come back." The name was London Fog.

And I went home with it. And I forgot the name. The next morning, I happened to go to the office, and the advertising man comes in—name was Ted Neuhoff—and I said, "Ted, you're just in time. I have something I want to advertise now." And I told him the story. And he says, "Well, we can come up with a name." And I said, "Well, what do you think of this?"

And I was wearing the same suit, and I had the coat on. I don't even remember looking at the slip of paper... I said, "What do you think of this name?" And I showed it to him. "I think it stinks." And I said, "That's what I said. You got a better name?" He said, "I can give you 20 better names." I said, "Well, let me hear them." And he said, "Well, give me a couple days." Monday morning he came in with a list of names. You know... Aquascutum is pig Latin for "Water, stay away." This is what he had. Some pig Latin names. And I looked at them, and I said, "Ted, you know, the more I look at all these names, the better I like London Fog." And he said, "You're crazy. That's throwing your money away." And we wound up in a violent argument. And I said, "You want to advertise it, that's the name. That's the name I'm going with." In the meantime, I've sold Saks Fifth Avenue, and they don't know the name yet. And when I deliver the coats, they've got to advertise it. And the first ad... Do you remember ever seeing that ad? It's a man wearing a coat... I'm sure it's in that...

Q: And I'm sure that... As I recall, that's the first time they ever used a name?

A: That's the first time they ever used the name.
Q: Uh huh. Because in those days, they used only Saks Fifth Avenue.

A: And they didn't do it again, either. They just used it that time. After that I couldn't...I had a horrible time with them trying to sell them. They never bought any more coats. Of course, Gustafson was mad at me anyhow. But that coat took off like a kite. Sold it to Lord & Taylor. I sold it to...

Q: B. Altman.

A: Altman. Everybody bought the coat. I'm trying to think of the name of the specialty shop here...who bought it. I can't think of it...It wasn't Jacob Reade. That was Philadelphia. It was a similar sounding name.

Q: Whitehouse & Hardy?

A: No. No, no. They were a factor at one time, but...At any rate...And all over the country, the coat began to move like crazy. This is the story of London Fog. This is how it began. As a matter of fact, the New York Times ran an article on the name, that week, and it said, "Every once in a while a name comes along that is more descriptive of a product than the proverbial 10,000 word picture. Such a name is London Fog."

Q: After the introduction of that first successful coat, when did you begin to add new styles to the line?

A: Almost immediately. You see, I had always felt that there had to be more room for fashion and style and colors, and we were the first people in the raincoat business who made more than one color. We put an olive shade in; we put in a herring bone weave in the cloth; we had different linings. Which the raincoat people didn't do. They made one color and one style, or they made two styles--a double breasted and a single breasted. By this time, we
were making a double breasted and a single breasted, and we made the first single breasted trench coat at that time, which we are now just beginning to show again.

Q: Incidentally, did you have a designer at that point? Or how were these developed?

A: I had a designer, but he made the patterns according to the way we told him we wanted it.

Q: So he was basically a pattern maker.

A: Joe Pulitano and I would tell him what to do. Joe Pulitano was a fine custom tailor who had been with Londontown for many years. He came to us in 1928, from Fashion Park in Rochester, and he was the one who told him what to do and how to make it, in order to make a good product. And he still comes in maybe once a month. He's in his eighties today.

Q: But anyway, once the coats were launched, you did start to add new shapes. New silhouettes.

A: Uh huh. Of course, one day I was at Wanamaker in Philadelphia, and the buyer there said, "Miss Bell wants to see you." "Who's Miss Bell?" Miss Bell was a ladies' buyer. And I said, "What does she want to see me for?" "She wants to talk to you about a coat for ladies." "Tell her to go to a ladies' house. We don't do ladies' coats. I'm scared of ladies' coats." He said, "Do me a favor and see her, because she's a real powerhouse in this building, and if I don't do it, she'll make my name mud. So let's get that over with right away." So I went to see her and I said, "Why don't you go to a ladies' house for a raincoat?" And she said, "I would, except that they don't know how to make coats." "Oh," I said. "You buy a lot of coats." She
said, "They don't make coats like you make yours. I want a good quality coat." She says, "I only want the same thing you're making now for men. All I want you to do is put a dart in for the bust, reverse the buttons." Which I knew, of course, because my father was a ladies' tailor, I didn't tell her that. And she said, "Make the same coat. Make it according to ladies' sizes. You can get those. I'll give them to you."

Q: Before you go on with that...About how much was your volume at that point? In the menswear area?

A: This could have been around 19...?

Q: '55 I believe.


Q: A year?

A: A year.

Q: For the entire Londontown business?

A: Well, no....for the London Fog coat.

Q: But you were still producing your cotton coats.

A: We did about a million dollars. I'll never forget it, because I remember when the bookkeeper said, "You know we'll do a million dollars this year?" That was a landmark, believe me. I didn't realize what a big business it was. So...But on the London Fog coat, the dacron cotton coat, it started out very small but it grew like crazy. We had a deal with Reeves that they were supposed to confine the cloth to us, you know. And before it was six months old, they had to confine it to us for a whole year. And by the time the coat was six months old, they were trying to sell other people. And the one thing I'll say for them, instead of selling other people,
they came to us and told us that they were going to sell other people. And I was licked. And this same woman, this Eva Sheen, who was my bookkeeper, she said, "How can they do that to you? You've got an agreement with them." I said, "What kind of an agreement?" She said, "In your files there's a letter. I wrote it myself. That they have to confine it to you for a year." Sure enough, we had the copy of the letter they had signed, and that was it. I went back to them and I said, "You can't sell it to anybody else." So they backed off.

Q: Uh huh. And that fabric remained with you.

A: Well, now everybody's got it.

Q: Yes. But it remained with you for the period while you were establishing it.

So, what did happen with the women's rainwear business?

A: Well, it took off just like the men's. We just made a coat, it was a plain raglan coat, and I think we called it the Duchess coat, and there's got to be a story on that somewhere too. I'll have to get it for you and send it up to you. I forget the whole thing.

Q: When did you start going to Europe, and what were your purposes?

A: In 1957 I started going to Europe. Looking for new fabrics. Looking for new ideas.

Q: And at that time, I think, you began to do some licensing also, didn't you?

A: No, no. That came later. Around 1960, we had the license, the first one in Canada. Fried. He came to us. Joseph Fried. He's still
a licensee of ours.

Q: And he produces the same coat in the same style...

A: Almost the same. Whatever changes he makes he makes for himself.

Q: All right. Do you just want to go on with it...When did you begin to...You started to say...You mentioned your licensing started in 1960.

A: 1960 was when the licensing started...I think that's about right. And it's grown ever since then. Today we have, not only the coat, but we've licensed a lot of products. I have very little to do with it, but it's grown like Topsy. Henry Naiman and Hirsch Langenthal have been instrumental in bringing in...They're in New York now, prospecting licensees for shows...

Q: I can pick up on the licensing and other more recent things in a subsequent interview, let's say, with Jon. So why don't we stay with the things that you have most to do with. For example, you had...the advertising that you have done goes back a long way.

A: The advertising goes back to that first ad for Gimbel's.

Q: Saks Fifth Avenue. And that was the beginning of our advertising. We had a concern...an advertising concern by the name of Daniel & Charles. They were our first advertising...The guy in Baltimore didn't last very long, because he just didn't have the idea of what we wanted. Daniel & Charles captured the idea of what we wanted, and for a couple of years they went great guns. For several years. And then, of course, they got very smug and they thought they were the cock of the walk. Nobody could tell them.... Nobody could talk to them anymore. And we went to another guy--I forget his name now--but we didn't stay very long with him. Then came Gilbert. And
Gilbert really captured the flavor of what we wanted in advertising. This is where we really began to take off.

Q: Is Gilbert part of AC&R?
A: No. Gilbert was very successful with us, and we stayed with him until AC&R came along. And again, all of these advertising companies are, like everybody else in a job. They think they know it all; they are accepted. They don't have to prove themselves anymore. We would never have left Daniel & Charles if they'd have been a little more innovative, but they didn't. The innovation came with Gilbert, where we ran ads, like "water off a duck's back," for example, showing a duck wearing a London Fog coat. You've seen some of our advertising.

Q: Sure.
A: It was beautiful advertising. Then AC&R came along, and I guess AC&R has been with us for about ten years...

Q: One of the interesting things about your business has been the way in which your advertising and sales promotion generally has dovetailed with the increased distribution and sales throughout the country.
A: Well, we had to change. We had to change because the country's changing. The retailer's different today than it was then. I mentioned that in the next 15 years there won't be any department stores left at all, as we know the department store. Because there will be a series of specialty shops. The idea of the 40% markup that they used to get, for example...If you're going to sell a coat for $100, they get...you get $60 for it. It's gone.

Q: Now it's all...If the coat is going to retail for $100, it has to have approximately a $50 cost price. It's keystoned in other words,
A: It's keystoned. We could always figure that if you wanted to sell it for $50, you could sell it wholesale for $30 and it would retail for $50. No more. As a matter of fact, now they mark it up to $80, and then sell some, and then mark them down. Clara Hancox ran a column the other day that was very good. Try selling at a regular price sale. This is our regular price. It's not going to be any less, but it's not going to be any more. And nobody does that anymore. Nobody. You pick up a paper, and everybody's running a sale, particularly clothes. Almost any item. Everything's on sale. Nobody sells goods at regular prices. And I don't know how they can work it.

Q: Well, I think at the moment it's a question of panic.
A: Of what?
Q: Panic.
A: Well, it may be. I don't know. But they've brought the panic on themselves.
Q: Right.

[Tape 2/Side 1]

Q: ...of the Fashion Institute of Technology. This will be a second interview with Israel Myers, Chairman Emeritus of Londontown Corporation. The date is April 28, 1983; interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Is, I would like to go back and talk about some of your experiences in Europe, which I don't think we have covered quite adequately. So, could you talk about the International Rainwear Council that you were involved with? When it was started, and what it was intended to do?
A: Well, it started approximately in the Fall of 1957. I had called on Katenberg in Holland. They've gone out of business since then. And I told them I was on my way to Italy, and he asked me to stop in and see...

Q: I'm sorry. Would you spell Katenberg?
A: K-a-t-e-n-b-e-r-g.
Q: Thank you.
A: And when I saw them in Italy, that started a trend or thought between...They knew each other, Katenberg and the Italian...His name escapes me at the moment, but I have it on record and I'll give it to you. And they said, "Why don't we start this association between us, so we can exchange ideas?" And that was the beginning of it. They took the ball from there, and I heard from them by mail after that. And then I went back again to Italy and Holland in the summer of 1958, and from there we took it...Other manufacturers in Europe came into the picture then. And the object of this was to exchange ideas on styles, workmanship and fabrics and so on. And it was very enlightening, really, and very fruitful for everybody. Except that each one had his own idea of what style should be. So we never got down to cases concerning, "Well, this has been decided on as a group style, generally." And we're still in that boat. The Italians have certain styling ideas and they hammer away at them. And the Dutch have their own styling ideas, and the Germans have their styling ideas, which conform mostly to the Dutch. And the English, of course, have theirs. They're closer to what we do here than anybody else. That's the story of...And, unfortunately,
there were various problems that came up. I saw the first automated system for putting through bundles, you know, on a "conveyor."

Q: For shipping purposes?

A: No, no. This was putting through bundles for operations. In Italy. It's a Swedish operation. It's got a name to it; it's called.... automated movement of bundles, you know. In baskets. For the next operator, and the next operator, and the next operator. We've got it now in Knoxville, Tennessee. When I came back...almost 20 years ago, our engineers said it couldn't be done. And they still resent it, but we've put it into.... ...so it's working beautifully. But in Italy, they've been doing this for a long time. In Sweden they started it 20 years ago.

Q: So you were able to exchange technical information as well as fashion...

A: They had meetings between themselves...Two meetings a year. Since the companies were so close to each other, they would have meetings between themselves.
Q: So what this organization really was all about was ex­changing technical information.

A: As well as styling. Styling ideas. It was very, very fruitful. To everyone.

Q: Did you also exchange customer lists? Was there any in­volvement of stores?

A: No. Nothing like that, no. We also found that they would steal ideas, you know. For instance, I had the idea for the bachelor button, and some gal....

Q: What's a bachelor button?

A: A bachelor button is a method of sewing on a button so it doesn't come off anymore. See, when you sew a button on, you knick it... See the knick on there?

Q: Oh, yes.

A: You knick a button, you can sew it on better. The button is sewn on by hand. And these buttons were sewn by machine. And when you sew it on by hand, as you sew it, you leave a little... See, as you sew it you put your fingers in here, and the space that your fingers take up, the button is hanging loose. Then when you get through sewing, you wind it around....

Q: Wind the thread around...

A: Wind the thread around, and you raise the button up like that, which gives you the shank or a knot on the button. And you couldn't do this with a machine. It had to be two operations: one with the machine, to sew the button on, and the machine to do the knicking. So you had the button sewer and the knicking machine. Two different machines.

Q: And this is something that you developed here?

-46-
A: And I said, "It's got to be done in one operation," and I suggested we do it by hand. And they couldn't do it; it took 15 years to develop it. And a young guy that I had working with me as a mechanic, I said, "Joe, you've got to work it out." And he too said it couldn't be done. And he left the company. He walked in one day and he said, "Boss, I think I know exactly how to do it now." So I gave him a button sewer to take home with him. I said, "Take the button sewer." That's when he came back to us. And it was very complicated, the way he worked it out, but it worked. And we opened up an account in Boonesboro several years later, and they had a mechanic in there and he showed him what to do, and he said, "Oh, there's got to be an easier way than that. I can figure that out. I can do that much easier." And he did. And today it's done almost automatically. See, if somebody has an idea, and if you plan it, and then if the other guy wants to do something with it, he can.

Q: You've always had a special feeling for buttons, haven't you?

A: Not only buttons. Anything. I always think there's a better way to do it. A better way, a quicker way. A less costly way. Sometimes it's more costly, but it's better. You've got to make... You've got to want to do it. That's the important thing. If you say, "Well, nobody's bothering me, so why should I look for trouble?" Well, you won't have any trouble until they roll you over. But that's the way things are developed in this business, and I'm sure any business.

Q: Let's talk now about that whole big subject of going public, being offered mergers for your business, or acquisitions by other companies.
of your company. There's a long history there. Would you talk about that?

A: I think the first offer I had to be acquired—and it struck me as rather odd, because, you know, I guess a mother or a father thinks of his child as "my little boy" or "my little girl" you know, and you refuse to admit that that child has grown up. As somebody said one day, "I'm fifteen years old, and I still have to tell you what time I go to bed at night?"

It's true. You may be accepted by everybody else, but your own mother doesn't accept you as a grown up person. You still have to account for what you do. I think it was Botany who was the first one...

Q: Were you public then?
A: No.
Q: So this goes back a long time.
A: Oh, yes. Botany wanted to acquire us. And I couldn't imagine what they wanted me for....business. As a matter of fact, I remember, a friend of mine came to see me one day and stopped dead in his tracks and he said, "I don't understand you. You're always talking about 'your little business.'"

At that time I think we had, maybe we had 150 operators. And I said, "Bob, this is a little business." And he said, "Are you crazy? This is not a little business. This is a big business." And I looked at him as if he were crazy.

Q: This must have been somewhere in the '50s?
A: Yeah. I would say in the late '50s. Yes. Long before we went public. So Botany wanted to acquire us. And Stetson Hats wanted to acquire us. And the reason Stetson Hats wanted to acquire us was because of an accountant who...Charles Frenald, of Philadelphia, who was an accountant...
for Stetson Hats. See, these people knew about businesses. And I didn't know anything about other businesses. I was interested in my business, that's all. I didn't know anything about other businesses. And you know, you talk to me about paying me so much money, and giving me stock, and it sounded very glamorous to me. But I couldn't go for any of them. I saw I was going to lose my independence. If I wanted to do something, I wanted to do it. I didn't want to have to account to mother. I'm 50 years old now; I didn't want to have to account why I'm doing this.

Q: You were very entrepreneurial by nature.
A: That's right. So that was it. So there was Botany, and Stetson, and then came... When I finally went public, that's when I met Bob Shuman fortunately.... Then I began to get offers from.... Oh, Stan Shuman came to me one day after we had gone public and wanted to sell me on the idea of selling out to General Mills, and I was very fond of Stan Shuman and I knew I had to keep it quiet, and they offered me a phenomenal proposition, which I should have taken. I had just lost Molly....

Q: About what year was this?
A: 1968. That summer, of 1968, before they acquired David Crystal. I think we were the first approach to the apparel industry. They owned the business; they owned a monopoly, besides their mills. And I was ready to accept it. And I thought I'd tell Jon, I said, "We mustn't tell anybody about this. Keep it quiet." I didn't tell.... And then Bob and Stan Shuman and I were playing golf one day, and Stan was the guy who had arranged it all, and he'd do a fantastic job for me. He really was going to sell it to General Mills, he was sold... And then Bob hollered down... Maybe it was fate....
He said, "You know, those boys don't know business." And I looked at Bob, because I had said nothing to him, I said, "What do you mean?" And then I realized that Jon had talked...

Q: What was the name. Jonathan?
A: Jon......

Q: Hirsch. Your son-in-law...
A: I only told Jon. The only person I told. I was alone now. Molly, had she lived, she would have known. Somebody's got to know what I'm doing. So I said, "I'm going to tell you what I'm doing; I think we ought to do."

Q: And they weren't ready to sell out at that point.
A: I wasn't...They weren't ready; I was.

Q: You were ready.
A: Oh, yeah. I was ready. I only expected to live a month or two after that.

Q: But there, you had a natural succession in the business. And you were still ready to sell?
A: Because I knew that Jon really loved the business.

Q: I see.
A: But he was a newcomer; he didn't know anything about it.

Q: When was the Revlon offer, or discussion?
A: Afterwards.

Q: After that.
couldn't sell to him.

Q: You met Charles Revson.
A: Oh, yes. I knew I could never live with him.

Q: What, as far as you were concerned, were the advantages of selling out?
A: Well, the advantages of selling out... For one thing, if you sold out to a big company, that gave you enough money to push you into anything you wanted. You wouldn't be afraid to take chances. There were some things that I wouldn't take the chance on. Because, you know, I figured I may not... if it doesn't work out. For instance, we went into the outerwear business. The idea was a great idea. This was Jon's idea, to go into the outerwear business. We had the wrong guy. We lost a couple of million dollars. We had been a public company by that time already, and we had all this money in back of us, and he never made good. We recovered from it, but it was very crucial for a while there.

Q: So the risk factor, or minimizing the risk, is the important thing.
A: That's right.

Q: In becoming part of a bigger company. What were the disadvantages of selling out, as far as you were concerned?
A: Well, the disadvantages were that you would be told at all times what to do. Again, I'm coming back to the mother and child syndrome. I want to go out to play, you go out to do your lessons. You got to eat this, you got to eat that, you mustn't eat this, or you mustn't eat that.
I didn't want to be told what to do. I wanted to do it my way. I'm a stubborn darn fool in that regard. I think that was an article that was written by Clara Hancox.

Q: Oh, of course. That's right. Because she was there then. This covers a great deal...This was written in 1968. And it covers a lot of the material we have talked about...But it does also go into considerable detail about outerwear.

A: That was just before the offer from General Mills.

Q: And perhaps that had something to do with the offer from General Mills...It's really a very complimentary kind of article.

A: Stanley Shuman was the moving force in the General Mills proposition. He was very low keyed, when it came to that kind of thing, but he was the one who brought it about. And he was surprised when I turned it down. It was a very generous offer, but of course the whole bottom fell out of the apparel industry that year, in the fall of '68.

Q: Yes. Right. What were the circumstances of the acquisition finally, by Interco, of the merger, or....

A: Well, they had been after us for a long time. Because by this time I was really after Jon, and Jon turned it down two or three times. And finally, I don't know when it began to percolate in his mind again. I know somebody called me one day and said, 'Look, I've told you about this. These people want you and you ought to talk to them,' and I said something to Jon, and Jon said, 'Talk with them now.'

Q: Interco, of course, is much more of an apparel conglomerate than any of the others, and, presumably, would understand more about the
problems.

A: At that time it was strictly apparel. Retail and manufacturing. They weren't in the furniture business yet. They've only had the furniture business for the last couple of years, last three or four years. And that is the story in a nutshell, as far as Interco is concerned. And John did all the negotiating with them; I didn't do any negotiating with them at all.

Q: Let's go back a little bit, then, and talk about the family entrance into your business by Jon. Because when you started the firm, it became Londontown. You really had no connection whatsoever with families. How did this work as...Once you're in business, how long had you been in business when Jon was born, and how did life develop so that it turned out that he came into the business?

A: Well, John was...I had been in business for myself approximately seven years when John was born. Because I went into business around 1931, '32—that's when the original Londontown went out—and I maintained and kept the business going, as a clothing business, until the war. Jon was born just prior to World War II. He was going to school, as a youngster, and as my business prospered, he went to college, and he wanted to become a dentist, and applied to dental school and had been accepted to dental school. In the meantime, of course, he ran off and got married.

Q: But before that, he hadn't known anything about the business.

A: He came down occasionally and worked during the summer.
He worked...He was supposed to work during the summer, and he worked for about a week and had a chance to go to camp, and "Would I mind if he went to camp?"

And I did mind, but his mother said, "Let him go to camp," and he went to camp. He never spent a whole summer down there; not once. But he was a good worker when he came. But, you know...I'm a parent, he wants his son to go to camp so he went to camp. And then he got through school. And as I said, he'd been accepted to dental school, and then he got married in the meantime. So he came in one day. And he now was working there; he was working during the summer now; a married man now. During the summer. Had a baby on its way. And he was supposed to go back to school now; to dental school, in the fall. And I told him that I would like to sell the business, maybe, when he said, "Well, Pop, I think maybe I'd like to come into the business." And I said, "Well, if you want to come in, come on in." I didn't care what it was. I thought we should keep it. So he decided he wanted a part of it, so he came in and I told everybody I wasn't...

You know, I'll tell you, the first one was Genesco at that time. Because when I told Jon about Genesco, that's when he said, "I think I'd like to take a crack at it." It was the next day I told Genesco, "I'm not interested in selling." They didn't know why, but he was the reason I wouldn't sell.

Q: Right. Family succession. And so he came in, and...?

A: So he came in, and he did well, even though he didn't like the business. He never said he didn't like it. But later you could see that he did not like the business. I guess he was a little like me. He didn't
like to be told what to do. And I was constantly telling him what to do. And what not to do.

Q: Uh huh. But he went all through the various areas of the business--production...

A: Oh, yes. He was in the factory, in production, record keeping and customer relations and selling...He had every bit of it. He got the whole treatment. Nothing was kept away from him. He got the beans as well as the plaudits. Took it all.

Q: And the business really began to grow because of what?

A: Well, the business began to grow, really, before that. The business began to grow during the war. I took a war and new fabric ideas and new models and new styles...

Q: Well, actually, the war itself caused you to change the entire product mix.

A: It changed things. Everything was changed. As I said, you go along and you don't realize what's taking place. What changes are taking place, every day. Even today, in this business, certain things are happening all the time. I saw something this morning that I hadn't seen before. There's a new cloth came out--I don't see these things anymore--It's water repellent, it's a water proof cloth. It's supposed to be washable. Maybe it is. I don't think it is. But it looks great. Beautiful cloth. This could change the whole picture of the business. Just as dacron changed the picture. Nobody in our industry was interested in dacron at first.

Q: I do remember the story that you told that probably helped
to change the course of things in the rainwear industry most dramatically, and that was the experience that you had when you were wearing the, I think you called it the Monterey Sedan or something like that. It was too heavy, and you said, "Now that cars have heaters now...It's going to be a light-weight..."

A: A Montenac...

Q: A Montenac Sedan. Right.


Q: Now that was a change of lifestyle because...

A: That came in in 1938. I remember it vividly. It was right before Thanksgiving, it was cold...

Q: You did tell us that other story, on the other tape, but that reminds me that this kind of major lifestyle change really had tremendous changes on what happened in the business.

A: That's right.

Q: Now I would think...

A: Many years later.

Q: Right. Right.

A: Many years later. Because nobody had a cloth like this dacron and cotton which was brought out.

Q: And then subsequently you added the liner to the coat.

A: Right.

Q: So that it could become a year 'round coat. And that was another major factor.
A: That's right.

Q: What about... In terms of the business expansion, you had been selling primarily to specialty stores. But then, post World War II, the big stores began to diversify and expand their operations into suburban centers and add branches.

A: Before that even. My business went principally to J.C. Penney and Sears, Roebuck Co., because they could use volume. In one or two models. And it was easy to make and cut down costs. And since we were the only ones who had a quality rainwear product, we were very acceptable to both Sears and Penney. We did a big job. Then we began to sell the specialty stores, and we began with the dacron and cotton, which was a post-war operation, right after the war.

Q: Uh huh. But your really big volume stores, apart from Sears and Penney, must have become also the big stores like Macy's, which had many branches.

A: Oh, yes. They became very important to us in the '50s.

Q: And that's how the business, I would think, began to...

A: That's how we began to expand. Not only Macy's, but every big store in the country was after us then. And nobody else had this product, that we made. So we were important to them, and they were important to us.

Q: And the... diversification into outerwear came later.

A: It came later. Jon could tell you all about that. I had very little to do with that.
Q: Okay. Now, is there anything else that you want to cover, that we haven't?

A: No, I think I've covered everything. I hope I've given all the information.

Q: Okay. Thank you very much.