ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, F.I.T.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

JUNE ROCHE

Fashion Director,

Milliken & Co.

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Interviewed by

Mildred Finger
This is the story of Milliken, Inc. and of its founders, the Milliken family. Founded in 1865, it remains today a privately held company, considered to be among the largest privately held companies in the U.S.

In its years of existence, Milliken, Inc., originally known as Deering Milliken, Inc. has been involved in the production of yarns and fabrics, including cotton, woolens, and polyesters.

There are several members of the Milliken family actively engaged in the business, including Roger Milliken, the chairman; Minot Milliken, whose story is told here, and Gerrish Milliken.

A supplement by June Roche, Fashion Director, describes the role of the fashion office over the past twenty five years.
Q: ...for the Fashion Institute of Technology's Oral History Collections, this will be an interview with June Roche, Corporate Fashion Director of Milliken and Company, as a supplement to the interview with Mr. Minot Milliken of Milliken Company. The date is July 13, 1984; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Before we start to talk about the time that you entered the Milliken Company, could we just hear a little about you and your own background? How you came to the business and what you did before?

A: Okay. I was a student at the New Bedford Institute of Technology, later called the Bedford Tech, and today called Southeastern Massachusetts University, and the Milliken Company came to the school to interview. They were basically looking for a man to hire, because in those days women really weren't in textile classes.

Q: When you say "In those days," you mean about 25 years...

A: 25 years ago. And because I was a Dean's list student and my grades were so high, they seriously considered me and sent me to New York for further interviewing and subsequently I was hired to be a textile designer. I had a Bachelor of Science degree in textile design and fashion from a technical textile school.

Q: What was the situation in the fabric business, specifically at Milliken, when you first came here? As far as fashion was concerned?

A: Well, at that time we were called Milliken Woolens and I was hired to go into the dress division as an assistant designer of fabrics, an assistant fabrics stylist, to spend my time designing new weaves for dress fabrics and colors for dress fabrics. At that time the dress business was
hot. We made wool crepes--fine wool crepes--and wool/nylon blends, like worsted; also very plied yarns, Sand 2 twisted yarns and some very fine lightweight dress fabrics, mostly in wool and wool blend categories. And shortly after that this category of sportswear started to become more important than dresses. Up until then our dress division was our largest fashion division, so to speak, other than grey goods. But for the fashion area of women's apparel, dress fabrics were the hot ticket and the thing that you had to keep changing the colors on more frequently and the styling on, because it had to flow with what was happening in fashion; with whatever texture that was "in", or the pattern that was "in". And after I was here.....

Q: Could you describe what the process was...? You said you were the assistant designer of dress fabrics. How did you work with the people who were here?

A: Well, at that time I had a hand loom set up by my desk and I would weave little hand loom swatches of new patterns. I tried to dream up new fabrics, perhaps with a little mohair yarn or a little bouclé yarn to get new textures. So it was the designing of solid and fancy fabrics, creating little patterns that would work in dresses. Fine little blend plaids or end and end and pick work was very fashionable at that time, and so we'd make a lot of little end and end, pick and pick patterns....

Q: And what would happen to those patterns after you had designed them?

A: Then we would put them together in some attractive presentation and then present them to the Jonathan Logans and the Mindy Malones, or the Leslie Fays, and all the other dress names that were strong at that time.
Q: Now, up until that point, there had been nothing...None of these patterns were shown to or talked about with the technical people in the mills?

A: Well, my superior...My immediate boss was the head designer for the dress fabrics and I was his assistant, so he would decide this was what we were making. We would send the instructions down on suggestion sheets to the particular mill who would-be making that fabric, and they would follow our suggestion sheet and lay it out in the manner in which we had executed it on the paper. And then they would submit to us this new experimental development. And then we would pass it through all the fabric adoption requirements to adopt a fabric--Did it shrink? Had it passed all the proper testing and the weight requirements and the width requirements, until we knew we had a fabric. And he and I would do that together, and then it would be adopted at one point and it would change from being an experiment to a fabric that had an actual style number and would be ready to offer....

Q: And then would be shown to the Logans and so on...

A: Exactly. And so far as fashion, with dresses at that time--it was 1960 --they were very fine woolen crepes, light and sheer, and then a few patterns, just very fine glen plaids and this end-end and pick and pick work became the most fashionable of the pattern designs, which is very fine work, fine lines. And then shortly after that a fabric named loopette came in.....

Q: How do you spell...

A: L-o-o-p-e-t-t-e...And Loopette had little mohair loops in it. And so it was a thicker look than the fine look that had been in, and it was more of a junior fabric, in the junior dress market. We had to really always
make new fabrics so very quickly, because there was a fast fashion turnover fabric wise in the junior dresses. Other big names at that time in our fabrics were "Astalot" and "Cué nella".

Q: Could you spell those?

A: A-s-t-e-1-o-t and C-u-e-n-e-l-l-a, and those were probably our two biggest fabrics in 1960 for dresses. They were both...One was a crepe and one was kind of a worsted look.

Q: But they were still woolens.

A: Still woolens, but very fine and lightweight. And then came the Loopette, and then we started other little novelty yarns, because suddenly novelty yarns became "the look". And I can remember Daniel Hechter was styling for Mindy Malone and they were using the Loopette fabric.

So, my job was to come up with some new, working fabric each season; for the spring season something light in weight, and then for the fall season a little heavier, and new looking patterns, and, of course, a whole new color range on each one of those different styles; the different fabrications would get different colors. There would usually be 10-16 colors each on the fabric. So, we were influenced by fashion and the whims of the looks of dresses. We had to reflect it in our fabrications. Then it wasn't long after that that dress business started to lose its volume to the sportswear business, and the Bobbie Brooks' at the time, and the Russ Togs started to use large amounts of fabric, and we eventually closed our dress division completely, for dress fabrics, because the business wasn't getting the kind of volume that we wanted, and we put a lot of...We put all our emphasis at this time into the sportswear fabrications. This would have been somewhere around '63, '64, '65--along in
there--And that was the time of woolens, wool flannels, which we had always been selling; the piece dyed wool flannels, solid wool flannels to sportswear, and we also had flannels in the dress division--piece dyed wool flannels. But now, plaids became a big category. Wool, all wool and wool blends, patterned goods, yarn dyes for the sportswear market. We started producing enormous amounts of plaids, so it took an awful lot of styling. I would have to design a whole collection of tartan plaids--black watch plaids, ancient tartans, re-colored tartans--We knew every clan by heart. I've forgotten the names of them now, but every different clan tartan would be requested for...like the Christenfeld, for his pants, and each one wanted his own tartan plaid. So we made endless numbers of tartan plaids and colored them. They were either authentically colored, or recoledored to suit fashion, with jewel colors or whatever was happening at the moment.

And then heathers came in. The look of sheltland and heathers and that was the look of "the Villager" and "John Meyer of Norwich", and that was the time of heathers for the sweaters and heathers to be used in plaids, so our yarn division...We made a compatible store with the yarn division that sold yarn to sweater manufacturers; we made stock dyed heathers for the sweater yarn, and used the same colors, stock dyed yarn in the woven bottoms, so that in the fabric in the plaid, you would have coordinated package of the yarn for the sweater to match the plaid of the solid heather oliver in the woven bottom.

Q: When you were making all of these plaids, what were the actual steps in the process between the design of the plaid and the actual offering of them to your ultimate consumer, the apparel manufacturers?

A: Okay. The first thing that would happen is that we developed
a base fabric, so we knew how many...the construction of the fabric, and that was taken care of. Then it meant choosing the colors to dye on the yarns that would be used in these yarn dyed plaids. So I would have to send to the mill the question: the colors they would match on this particular yarn. They would send back their matches and I would either approve or reject them, and I would send back their matches and I would either approve or reject them, and I would be aiming for perhaps 40 different colors. From those 40 different colors, I should put in enough colors that I would be able to design from that any kind of pattern I could want, so I made sure I had all the necessary ingredients to make these plaids. So first we'd get the colors dyed on the yarns. Once I had all these yarns dyed with the colors (and each of them were numbered), then I would start making up what we call blankets, and that was a graph on which I would design the plaids, and actually lay out on the layout the number of "ends and picks" for each plaid--You know, 12 ends of black; 4 ends of red; 15 ends of white, very specifically, in a graph, so that the mill could exactly take this information and then work on the loom....So that I would lay out on a graph...So all they wanted to do was follow this. So I would say, "13 ends of black, number 2603. 10 ends of red, number 3201," so they knew which yarn to take by number and how many ends to draw in...

So then, I would send down this whole layout that would encompass the whole width of the fabric, which was probably 58-60" wide, and in that whole 58-60" I had designed all the way across different plaids so that there may be 20 different patterns laid out in the width of those goods. And then I would make the filling arrangements, going across the filling so I could get all different kinds of true crossings and odd crossings. And this would become
a blanket. When they actually had it on the loom and were ready to weave it, I would then fly to the mill and watch it as it weaved on the loom to make corrections as they went along. So that if I decided, "Oh, that's pretty, I'd like to add a few more ends of this, and I'd like to put another color in the filling," I could stop the loom and add it and put it right on. This is like...a blanket is a designing tool for designing many patterns at once. Then when this whole blanket has been woven up, you then cut it all apart and you get from it 50 to 100 different color combinations and many different plaids. Some might have been hound's tooth checks, some might have been tartan plaids—you get a whole variety of patterns. You cut up this entire blanket and then make your boards from it and then divide up all these patterns by themselves. Then when you choose...When you cut it up and you find one little pattern you like from the blanket, then you take that one little pattern...I would then write up a layout making that one pattern the whole width of the goods, and you would repeat it over and over, so that now it becomes the yardage of that plaid. So the blanket was a style too. Now, actually, I would have to go to the mill before I sent that blanket down if it was a heather, because in order to make...When I made the package dyed yarns, for the yarn dyes, those the mill would match and send to me. But to make the heathers, I would go to the mill myself to mix these stock dyed heather patterns. We would mix together three or four different colors and kind of blend them together with a little brush until you got the look of the heavy yarn, because the heather could be made up of 2-3-4 colors. So I would go there to actually make these stock dyed heathers, either for the Milliken open line or for specific ones I was designing to be confined to The Villager or John Meyer. So I would be
in the mill actually making them, until we got the yarns developed on those heathers properly, and then put those heathers into plaids; designed them with the packaged dyed yarns, combining solid yarn with heavy yarn, or all heavy yarn or a combination of the two. So I would design many blankets out of many different yarn sizes for different qualities, some being all solid yarn, others being heathered yarns, and then you'd get this voluminous amount of patterns, choose the ones you thought were the most salable, and mount them up by categories so that they told a story, and then the ones that you decided would be good go ahead and get the yardage and make a layout and send that to the mill and tell them to go ahead and weave X amount of yards of that pattern.

Q: Would you think of the "X amount of yards" as being the sampling yardage so that you could sell them to the manufacturers for actually putting huge quantities to work?

A: Yes...They would be sample yardage first, and they would order... After they had the sample yardage they would order their own production yardage.

Q: What was the time span between the time you actually came to plan a fabric like that and the time you had your sample yardage?

A: Well, the time that you first decide the colors in the yarns and get those in and get those yarns all dyed in those colors and then layout your blankets and see them woven and cut apart and choosing the ones you're going to make, that whole process would be about 3-4 months. And then another month to get the finished sample yardage.

But when fashion would come in..You see, once you had an idea that was selling (like the heathers) then each season you had to change it a little...
to make it new looking for next year. So I can remember shortly after the heather packages had had their run, and didn't look new anymore, we then started to throw nubs into the heathers and made a mix of nubs with heathers, with a nubby look; a nubby tweed, the look of the Harris tweed. And we made solid fabrics that were all over heathers with nubs, and we used a heathered nub yarn into the fancies, as well, so that was like the next step after the heather, to throw the nub in. And with some of the solid yarns, I can remember one of the things we did...I decided to ply the yarns together. We had a twisting machine here in New York. I took two yarns and tried them on a twisting machine to make a two-color twist. And then on the little hand loom, I wove a hand sample using all twisted yarns so you had a marled look, the look of two colored marled twist, which is another form of...

Q: What kind of look?
A: M-a-r-l-e-d and twisted; a two color twist. So that made a whole new look of an exciting construction.

Q: Now, how many designers and assistants were there in the firm doing this kind of thing, through the various divisions, for the various categories?
A: Well, we had a wool coating department at that time, and we had a person designing the whole coating fabrics, which were solid, piece dyed. We had eliminated the dress division. In the sportswear division, I, myself alone, for about seven years, was doing this fancy line on the sportswear fabrics. We had another fellow who was taking care of just the wool flannels, making sure the colors were executed properly on the solid piece dyes for sportswear--wool flannels and some others that followed. Let's see...Three of us were doing the sportswear line, and we would have the duties divided up, I forget in
what manner. Oh, I know. One person was doing "bathrobe patterns", which was a big category at that time. Men's bathrobes. And working out of a different mill, which made a different blend and a finer worsted look.

Q: Well now, through this period, the work that you were doing was essentially "designer". When did the character of your work begin to change? And when did...

A: Oh...let's see. Well, once the designing was done, and we had cut up all these blankets, we had chosen the patterns and put in the yardage on the patterns, then I would make presentations, mounting up all these patterns in some attractive way with themes. At that time, although theming is very common today, it wasn't that common at that time. And also, colors often didn't have names at that time; numbers with no names. So color naming was a new idea; theming was a new idea.

We wanted to first expose our line to the West Coast, because they worked earlier than the rest of the United States. So as a test, to see how our line was and for early reaction (and also for sampling), we would take the whole line out to the West Coast. San Francisco and Los Angeles, and perhaps Dallas. And we would go with our Sales Manager and a Sales Rep and I would package up the line to take on that trip and we would make presentations. We would rent suites in hotels and we would invite our customers in and we would show them the line. We would get a little routine going where I would show it for the categories, for the different categories and themes and they would pick up and talk on other subjects. Well, as it developed, I found that what worked better would be to make garments of these fabrics. So, instead of making boards, I started now making garments out of our fabrics to show how it looked
made up. Well, after you show the garment once on a hanger, you think how much nicer it would look on a model. So then I started hiring models as we went from town to town, and the next thing, you know, we were out in a swimming pool putting them all up on a diving board and making more formal presentations... 

Q: What year, about, was that, approximately?

A: About '67-'68. And so it became more showmanship. So, once you actually design the line, now to present it properly was very important and to have a beginning and an end and a reasoning, and showing what was happening in the silhouette, as well; that this was going to work with the new silhouette; and that's how it kind of grew. So then, I was working one to one with customers, making these presentations over and over again, one customer at a time, and then back in New York we would continue to do the same thing in the showrooms here. And over a period of time, we just became more sophisticated about adding more presentations and more formal ways of showing our line. And then after nine years of styling, I became the fashion director of Milliken and...

Q: Had they had one before?

A: Yes. They had had to my recollection back in 1960, the fashion director was Julie Buddy, and following Julie Buddy was Doris Van Patten, and then assorted ones for three or four years until I became the fashion director ..from the inside as opposed to hiring people from the outside for the fashion director. They decided to take my technical knowledge and put it into the fashion office.

Q: Well, the amount of fashion in the product would then have increased,
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is that right? As opposed to the earlier years when styling would have been
done by people who had the technical background, but were not fashion people
trained to be interested in trends.

A: It was always a problem with some of the men who were very tech­
nically oriented to know what colors to put in or what kind of patterns to
make and to have that fashion side to it. It was difficult. At that time,
all of our stylists were men.

Q: And each division had a stylist?

A: Yes. Each division had a stylist. And, of course, we had a room
with permanent handle weavers. We had two or three girls who full time were
sitting reading handles all day, while I and the other two designers were
continually laying out handle layouts, feeding them so they would just have to
follow this chart of what to do with all the numbers, and everything laid out
for them, and they would be weaving constantly, all day; that's the amount of
patterns they were putting out that side. Those were the special ones that
were requested by a Bobbie Brooks. They might have seen something they liked
on our open line and now they wanted their own color combinations, so I would
continue making changes and alterations in new patterns for confinement, and
as I said, we kept permanently busy, two and three hem handle weavers full time
and we gave many out. We were jobbing work out to the handle weavers at home.
We had more work than the in-house staff could produce. And that went on about
five years.

Q: How many collections of fabrics were shown a year?

A: Two collections. One for the fall-winter season and another for
the spring season.
Q: And an occasional addition depending upon specific needs of a specific manufacturer?

A: Yes. They did the open line for anyone to buy from, and then many confined patterns. Because patterns...People wanted their own particular look, because they would be so marked. They would be identifiable in the stores so we spent a great deal of time making confined work.

Q: At some point, is it so that your own work became much less in the technical areas and much more in the promotion areas?

A: Yes. Well, originally I was making those fabric adoptions, which meant weighing by grams and very technical layouts, laying out all the end and end and all the blanket work. And then when I became Fashion Director I stopped doing actual designing of fabric. I was still directing the colors to be used, setting the trends for Milliken and what the color direction should be. But now I had to work with promoting our fabrics and showing them to retailers as well as manufacturers, and the press, and in larger groups as opposed to one and one. And putting together exhibits and displays of fabric and also spending a great deal of time working on the breakfast show to see that the fashion was in there. We had a retail consultant who advised on the breakfast show as well, Miss Rose Levain, and she and I worked closely together and she was doing all the garments and accessories that would be used on the stage at that show.

Q: Now, over the years Milliken's fashion directors have been going to Europe for various ideas, is that right?

A: Yes. Milliken always supported sending their Fashion Director to Europe to bring back ideas, as well as many of our technical people and
development people. And those with the styling department also went to Europe to attend the major fabric fairs, such as "Interstoff" in Frankfort and sometimes Milliken would have as many as a dozen people at Interstoff at one time looking at the fabrics that other countries had developed. So...

Q: But the ideas that you were looking for really, ultimately, were made part of your thinking and your thinking became that which you developed into presentations which were shown both to salesmen and to paramount manufacturers and to stores.

A: Yes. And to the press. So that the fashion office was responsible for putting on these formal presentations. They could have been in the form of an exhibit, they could have been a fashion show. Slides were not used back in those times. I can remember buying slide equipment for the company and putting on the first audio visual show, which was about 1970-71--'69-70-71--building in the theatre six projectors and three dissolve units and a computer. At that time no one had heard of dissolve units and computers. I went off to Europe with a camera, and that was the beginning of what has followed since, numerous audio visual shows; coming back with slides and making a new format presentation based on audio visual. And we had always been interested in boutiques. At that time the European boutiques were novelty and people would shop Europe to look for the new fashion coming from the boutiques. So boutique presentations, which once were shown in garment form, now we started showing through slides. What was happening in the rest of the world...

Q: Just one other thing...I know your automotive division is a very important one. But...and you are now very much involved with their presentations too.
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A: Yes. Well, this show...This show that I'm talking about that started around 1970 evolved slowly to today's '84 to having such a following that we have to put it on every day in New York for a period of a month and a half--a period of six weeks--so that everyone attends it...

Q: Twice a year.

A: Once a year. For the fall season, which is our large season. So it's done for all the apparel manufacturers in the New York area the month of October and half of November. Then it goes on the road to Chicago, for Sears; then it goes Dallas, Los Angeles and San Francisco markets. And then about eight years ago we started to bring it to Detroit, at the request of General Motors, who had seen it in New York and wanted more of their stylists and designers to have access to the presentation. So over the past eight years--now to '84--that show has built to an audience of 400, and now we put all of the automotive designers together in one room where originally we had kept them separate--Ford, Chrysler, GM--Now we put them all together in one room and it's become an industry event and they look forward to this presentation, which tells them what's happening in fashion and fabrics and color, and how it relates to the exterior colors of cars and the interior colors for the seat fabrics and the new trends in fashion in fabrics for car interiors.

Q: So there is really a company wide interest in the fashion trend development, as it pertains to all the industry?

A: Yes. I think this came about...There's more of an interest in fashion and maybe more importantly more of a recognition of the importance of color, even though color was always important...Manufacturing in many products didn't seem to put the emphasis on it. Today there's such a following in
wanting to hear about these fashion presentations because of the color forecasting involved in it and the importance of color, even making or breaking a product. So people, both the apparel and the home sewing end, the automotive end and the home furnishings end all attend this presentation. It's also done in High Point, North Carolina, which is the furniture capital of the United States. Because Milliken also makes fabric for upholstery, drapery curtains and, of course, carpeting. So, color is a common denominator in all of these products. And so this fashion and color presentation works for furnishings, automotive, and apparel. And we have found that usually the colors start in the fashion apparel fabrics end, because that is the smaller price ticket, changing a woman's blouse or a man's shirt, and then it goes on to home furnishings and then to automotive.

Q: So actually your job really has evolved into something quite different from what it was in the beginning, which was really very much of a fashion styling job of fabrics. And now it's a presentation of the message of the company, the fashion thinking.

A: And the direction that's coming for the next two years ahead. the general flow-theme-direction; mood and feeling that's coming our way for the next two years. So that our manufacturers can be--our customers in all three of those areas--can be prepared for it.

Q: Right. Thank you very much. That's very good. That really fills in the holes.

A: The fashion office is a service for all the customers of Milliken.

Q: Let's go back for a minute to the recognition of a change in fashion as reflected in the change of the fibers being used. Because that's
probably the fashion end of a business recognition of a long range trend. So, could you discuss your shifting from wool to other kinds of fiber?

A: Well, we mentioned earlier that we were even called Milliken Woolens at one point. Our name has changed today; we're just Milliken and Company, because we no longer offer wool, because Mr. Milliken recognized...

Q: Mr. Roger....

A: Mr. Roger Milliken, with his own foresight, recognized the importance of polyester and the impact that polyester was going to have on the market, and restructured our mills and our equipment to change from woolen--the weaving of woolen, the spinning of wool--to a polyester. And, of course, polyester has made an enormous impact on the world. And we were there early on it and made a total commitment to being one of the major suppliers of the Mass American market to the texturized polyester. So, in a way, that's guessing fabrics and fashion. There definitely was a switch; a switch from the wool to the polyester, that a machinery change...That was a total change, not just a styling or color change. That was a major change and a major commitment. So we have become a polyester house for some time now, and will continue to be that until he finds it's time to change to something else. But he's definitely been the guiding light for these major decisions which are so strong, which are fashion decisions in their own way.

We also had a great deal of cotton products at one time; cotton blends. We have to a great extent gone out of the cotton area for a variety of reasons, including government regulations because of the visinosis.

Q: The what?

A: "Visinosis", I guess it was a disease...

Q: How do you spell that?
A: I think it's V-i-s-i-n-o-s-i-s. But we can confirm that...Which is that the employees of the plant would breathe the cotton fibers through their nostrils and it would create, I believe, a lung problem, some kind of a problem. So the government put very strict regulations that had to be implemented in the plant and it was very expensive to do. And so that was part of the reason that we dropped cotton, in addition to the fluctuating prices and the instability of cotton prices and wool prices...Did he bring that up?

Q: No. There was no discussion of that...Was Milliken ever in the print business? You talk about plaids during the wool period, but...I'm not aware of polyester being done in print, for example.

A: No. Mr. Milliken had made it a policy not to go into the print business. This was one of his concepts. He decided we should be a major supplier of the base goods; the grey goods; the unfinished goods that gets sold to other printers and converters, but not to get involved with the tricky business and fashion quick turnover of prints and the inventory involved in prints. So we have never been a roller printer or screen printer, but we are the major supplier to all of this industry of the base fabrics.

Q: June, what about the natural fibers and fabrics about which there has begun to be, in the last couple of years, a lot of talk? How would Milliken get involved in those fabrics, if it did, or if it does?

A: Well, this would definitely be Mr. Roger Milliken's decision. He would determine, as he did when we moved from woolens to polyesters...He has put us into the business of using more cotton in our blends of polyester and cotton right now, but to a small extent. And over the next few years he should be implementing some new decisions as to how much more to get involved now in
cotton and cotton blends and woolens, and if we get into the natural area...
Of course, the spun polyesters have a more natural "hand", so he's been very involved in having us switch over to spun products, and still he has given us the challenge of working with polyester to make it look and feel as natural as possible, through spuns and new techniques. And, of course, there's enormous support of our research center, where they're constantly trying to find new ways of working polyester to make new and more natural effects. There is such a shift coming now in fashion desires; there may be a shift in Milliken to other new products that we haven't had before, as once we didn't have polyester...

Q: In the case of Milliken, that's such a major business decision that involves retooling and other enormous undertakings. It's not just a question of getting into the fashion of something as it is in the apparel field. It really means major investments in new...

A: And it's long term, not short term...

Q: Right. Well that's very interesting. Thank you very much.