ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

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INTERVIEWED BY
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Alfred Solomon founded Madcaps, an accessories firm whose specialty was hats of all sorts, in 1941. Prior to that, he worked for several trimmings firms, where he learnt a great deal about the European markets.

A devoted interest in fashion has kept him enthralled in the business since a very early age.

Madcaps remains a very small entrepreneurial business, with the management team of Alfred Solomon and Janet Sloane.
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Q: Janet, would you start out by telling us about where and when you were born, and something about how you grew up?

A: I was born in New York. My mother and father were also born in New York, so that we're that rare breed: native New Yorkers. I was born near Columbia University...

Q: When?

A: In 1913. In October. And late in life I learned I was a Scorpio. I hadn't realized there were signs when I was born. I went to public schools early on. I had two much older brothers. One was a lawyer --he's dead. He was 10 years older than I am. And the other, with whom I am now in business, is 14 years older. So that I truly was the baby, and the girl, in a family with two boys. So that was lovely. Except that I like to think I wasn't spoiled, except that I grew up with adults, which I think helps a lot, if it can be managed.

I went to public schools, as I say. Elementary schools. And then I went on to a Junior High School which my middle brother had gone to. It was an experimental school called Speyer Junior High School...

Q: S-p-e-i-e-r?

A: S-p-e-y-e-r. And it was advance. It was....it was not progressive, but it was very innovative, about which I remember very little except that we were all terribly bright. Anyway, from there, we moved further down in New York. Down to 88th Street and Broadway and I went to a school called Hamilton Institute for Girls, which was not terribly far away. It was around the corner. It no longer exists, it was lovely and it was kind of cozy, looking back on it now. I applied to Smith. Why I didn't apply to many other
schools I don't know, but for some reason or other it appealed to me, and my whole family wanted me to go to school and to college. And I rather liked the whole idea. The head of the school was very helpful. I can't think of what her name is now, for the minute. Besides which I'm sure she's dead, so it doesn't make any difference. At any rate...I was accepted and I went, and parenthetically, I must say, that I shouldn't have gone when I did because I was...I entered in September and I wasn't going to be 16 until that October, and even then that was really too young. I should have gone to a preparatory school, perhaps, or spent a year somewhere. I wasn't deliriously happy the first year I was there. It was fine, and I grew to love it, of course, but that's quite young, not to be away from home--that didn't bother me at all. But it's young to be totally independent, as you should be when you go away, and when you go to college.

Q: Did you know already the kinds of subjects that interested you?

A: I was interested in English always. I'm fascinated with words. And I was interested in art, not necessarily as a painter, but I've always been interested in the theatre and I thought....I'm not so sure that it was crystallized when I was a freshman or sophomore, but I think that that is what I was pointing to. And I became an art-English major. I must say, at that time it was marvelous at Smith....Math was considered a science, so that if you fulfilled your science requirements in other areas, you didn't have to take any math, which was fine with me. You had to have whatever you had to have to get in, and passing whatever those exams were to get in. And anyway...all was well. And I graduated. However, I graduated in 1934, and that was not a
boom year. Things were not awful...like in '29, after all, was the crash. So there had been a certain amount of recovery. But not an awful lot. Oh...Also, by the way, we had moved from 88th down to 72nd Street, but...And then subsequently, much later than that, we moved to 55th Street, and those are the only apartments, other than the one that I'm living in now, that I've lived in my whole life. Which is really rather strange. We were not a mobile family insofar as we were transitory. We didn't move around a great deal. We sort of settled in wherever we were. And anyway, I thought that I wanted to do theatre design; costume design and theatre design, and found that there were a great many difficulties attached to that. First of all there was an apprentice period. I had an interview, I remember, with Henry Dreyfus and he said, "I think this is fine, but unless you're prepared to spend years and years and years, and join a very difficult union, which may or may not accept you, it's kind of silly. You're talented but you're not a genius, so see if you can apply whatever talents you have somewhere else."

Well, since I also liked words, I went to Abraham & Straus in the advertising department, and was very lucky to work with a marvelous woman who was then head of the whole department. Someone by the name of Swenson... Q: S-w-e-n... A: S-o-n...There was an Advertising Manager under her, and I was in the production department to start with. The store was large then, but it was nothing like the way stores are now. I don't know quite how to say the difference, but everything was smaller, even though they were big. It
was always part of the AMC, and Federated, but it had...It was a neighborhood. And, of course, that doesn't exist anymore, anywhere. There weren't the million branches that they have, and it was much cozier. And I stayed there for....I can't remember, really....But I stayed there for...I don't know...Four or five years....

Q: What year did you say you got out of college?
A: 1934.

Q: So you were then 21? Is that right?
A: No, I was only 20.

Q: You were born in 1913.
A: Yes. Nineteen going on 20. I left there because I had an interview with Mr. LeBoutillier, who was the head of...

Q: L-e-B-o-u-t-i-l-l-i-e-r....
A: ...who was the head of Best & Company, in New York, and I was hired...also for the advertising department...and was there for a year or two. Left there because I had an offer to be Advertising Manager for a wholesale brassiere company, Bali Bra. At that...This was now in the war. We were in the war. December 7th had happened. I left that job to do volunteer work with American Womens' Voluntary Services, in the motor corps. Actually I had joined it before the war, and we used our own car. I had joined it the summer before. When December 7th came, we were called to become part of the motor pool for the services in New York. Everything was so sudden that there was no motor pool. There had to be considerable transportation of officers, men, whatever, from...We worked for the Army, we worked for the Navy, and we....They had no way to get to the Kearney shipyard or whatever ships were
being thrown together.

At any rate, during that period, there was another kind of voluntary service that I got involved with, which was the aircraft warning service. A friend of mine, who had been in the Army, was shifted up to New York, and they started that in the telephone building on...I think it was 26th Street or 16th street...I can't remember...on the west side, which was the worst kept secret in the whole of New York. It was absolutely top secret; with radar and an operations room and the whole thing. And I was on the 6-12 shift, and you would get in a cab, be very careful to say, "Drop me please at the corner of 26th Street and 8th Avenue," and they would say, "Oh. Going to the aircraft warning service, eh?" At any rate, I worked there during...before it was operational. At that time, just about that time, my brother, who had...Who had been in business for many, many years with Madcaps....

Q: He founded Madcaps?

A: He founded it. It became Madcaps from another business, which was related, which was to do with other accessories and ornaments, which he would go to Europe and bring back. He'd been going to Europe since 1921 or '22, and he...It branched into soft...Madcaps. Really, it was a marvelous description of it. The ornaments he brought back had been sold to both 7th Avenue and to millinery designers. But by the time that I joined the business—because it seemed to me and it seemed to him that my talents would work well for that; there was nobody there styling. There was nobody there doing public relations or promotion or whatever—And it seemed that it was, as Samuel Goldwyn said, a "much needed hole that had to be filled." Any-
way...I...the volunteer job ended after a while, and Madcaps began really to take off. And it's a unique business...

Q: Excuse me. Now, you joined it somewhere around 1944...
A: Ah....Yeah...I can't remember. . . No, the war ended in '45. It must have been...Because I was doing the night shift at aircraft warning for...It was have been about '42, '43....somewhere through there. A lot of this will be absolutely authentic...A lot of it will be very, very approximate. That's what I'm saying.

Anyway...We were very instrumental (I use the "editorial we" because it wasn't really me)...The millinery business as such....And we don't think of ourselves as being millinery; we think of ourselves and always have thought of ourselves, as being an accessory house. And that has to do with the philosophy of selling and designing and having...and merchandising....... Because there are very few occasions, when somebody makes up their mind to go out and buy a hat, it is bought to go with, it is bought on impulse, it is bought because somebody wants to complete an outfit. Very often it's bought for an occasion, but rather fewer times than for the other circumstances that I mentioned.

Now, in the beginning, as we say, the departments in big stores were the salon, a budget department, and a basement department. Well, all of those words, now, are like reading ancient history. Ancient history, because that kind of designation doesn't exist now any more at all. And we had a good deal to do with changing that. Business helped, but we convinced the management of stores that the kind of merchandise that we were selling, particularly, which was fashion; it had nothing to do with selling price; it had only to
do with selling fashion and the idea of fashion.

Q: But still at a medium to moderate price.

A: Yes. Yes. Not cheap, but not what was then called designer level. And we thought that there should be someplace where a consumer could walk into a store, a lady could walk into a store, pick up a hat, and decide to buy it. In other words, satisfy the impulse she had to buy it when it was there, which, logically, meant a hat...what became a hat bar, which was totally non-existent. I won't go through the various steps that it took to convince management, but they were able to start it, and it was successful. Plus the fact that they too were finding that their departmentalization in stores had to change. Certainly that was too early to find the competition from what has become known now as "boutiques." But all that grew...The hat bars were successful. They were successful for many reasons. But the departments before had been run the way you run a department that has maybe five or six or seven turns a year, and that's not the way an accessory department runs. As a matter of fact, the whole women's softgoods has come round to a merchandising principle that we have been selling for I don't know, 30 years, that you buy closer to the point of sale. You buy....There are quick changes in fashion. And you have to be flexible, and you have to be elastic, and you have to be able to fulfill a consumer's need when she wants it. She doesn't necessarily want to buy four months ahead of season. And certainly, fur coats have to be merchandised differently from an accessory.

Q: How many collections do you show a year? How many groups do you show?

A: We continually show. Each season runs into the next season. It
is now December, 1982. Last week we were still selling felt hats to shops throughout the country who wanted immediate goods. We had been selling spring for six weeks.

Q: For delivery when?

A: For delivery, depending on what the item is, for delivery the end of January. Depending on the location of the shop; depending on the condition of the stock. I must say again, by the way, that the whole.... I have to go back, because I don't know quite how to phrase this without sounding not the way I want to sound...A business like ours, which has to have things that are new; has to have things ahead of time; and which may look strange the year before, really has to have the kind of reception in a consumer (in our consumer, which is the store; the middleman), of somebody who'll recognize that. If we had to depend on the "majors"--the so-called majors--at this point in time, along with many, many other manufacturers, we would be out of business. And the reason for the enormous success and the enormous proliferation of what have been known, what became known as boutiques--which doesn't mean import; it doesn't mean anything; it means a shop devoted to women's clothing and accessories. It might even be a minichain. Also specialty shops. Not necessarily Mama and Papa stores. These people are on top of whatever their particular area is. All of their buyers are on top of their...whether it's dresses, shoes, hosiery, whatever...They too are bound by budgets; I don't mean that they fly by the seat of their pants. But equally, they recognize that they have got to be flexible enough to jump in when you have a buyer from a store sent to New York at market time, at enormous expense, but sent with no money to buy; only to look at the market. There's something wrong with the way that
store is run. The way the department is run. I don't think you can run any store, no matter what size, primarily by printout. Computer printout. Particularly when you're running a business which is a good percentage emotional, based on impulse; based on someone's likes and dislikes, not necessarily absolute needs.

Q: Janet, what happened in the days when there were buying offices that specialized in millinery alone. Do they still exist?

A: Not that I know of.

Q: Because they became offices for buying millinery and wigs....

A: I don't think that they were ever buying offices. I wonder if what you mean are the leased departments...

Q: You're right.

A: Well, they don't exist anymore either, except for one. There used to be several. And what that meant was that they went to a store and offered them X amount of money to run that department. It was successful for a while, but it was never as successful as the store next door, because there the syndicate's prices always had to be slightly inflated. And the sum and substance of it is that they've all gone out of business. And for the one or two that are left, the stores gradually are coming round to taking back their departments. Actually, it's a funny kind of thinking on the part of store management. When a department in a store is not doing well, obviously, the store looks to find out what the problem is and how to correct it. The easiest thing to do is to shirk all responsibility and give it to somebody else to run. They don't do that with coats.

Q: They do it with shoes sometimes.
A: Well they do it with shoes a lot. But that's not because it's particularly done badly. That's because it's competitive. The millinery departments never were competitive.

Q: What happens, thought, when you have stores that are not close enough to the market to shop as frequently as you're suggesting they need to, to get the latest things in your area.

A: There are...Whether or not there are...We have never been in the various local markets. But there are markets all over the country.

Q: There are not many firms like Madcaps?

A: Not many firms like Madcaps, but tiny little shops...I don't know that...I don't mean to denigrate them, but whatever they are they are. More and more and more, people are traveling... There are thousands of people who go to Europe. It's extraordinary, the small shops, all over this country, that go to Europe.

Q: And do they come to you on the way, or when they come back? Is that what you're saying?

A: No. What I'm saying is that they come to New York to buy, or they go to Chicago to buy, or they go to the West Coast or Dallas; but they come to New York once or twice a year. And then they write to us, and we send them an assortment...

Q: So that you're doing, really, a much more personal business, than is possible, let's say, in apparel. Because you place orders...I mean, would you explain how this works? Will they say, "I'm giving you $3,000; write me an order."

A: They pick up the phone and say, "We need such and such." Now, this would not happen the first time. The first time they might write. Obviously,
in order for us to have sent them anything, they would have to have been on the mailing list, and they could buy from a mailing piece. But if it's somebody new, almost always they have been in once. We now, for the first time in the last five years, have more than one salesman. We have always had a salesman out on the coast, because it's so far away. But we now have two or three, and covering different parts of the country. However, it's...that whole business has changed too, it's irrelevant to this particular..

Q: It's not really irrelevant...

A: Yes it is because...Yeah, because it doesn't have anything to do with us intimately. The fact that marts have come up, been built up in various parts of the country, is a totally new way of selling. Years ago we didn't have any salesman. A salesman years ago took a line and went out and sold it. And he had a territory.

Q: In the accessories...

A: Well, in the...It also happened that the big salesman traveled with trunks. They traveled by train. They traveled by automobile. Well, it's economically unsound for that to happen now. No business can sustain that kind of expense. Nor can the salesman himself sustain that kind of expense. So what has happened is that there's evolved a mart in which they have a room, and they do some traveling, once or twice a year...

Q: Is that what your men do?

A: Yes. Now. Men and women. Because with our things, it takes a special type of person to...Not that they have to try them on. That's not important. But to understand what they're selling. In the accessory business, if
it's not belts--which anybody can sell--and jewelry anybody can sell. Sometimes it's a little special. We've branched out so that we have lots of other accessories.

I mentioned much earlier that Alfred had been going to Europe since 1921, but that was for a different kind of product. He later on, after he had actually started Madcaps and it had become headwear, he went over and he would buy models. He went to the couture. He went back to Europe in 194... I think '45 or '46. It was one of the first trips that one of the Queens--Queen Elizabeth or Queen Mary--whichever one, made after the war.

Q: All right. If you keep in mind that Dior's new look was in 1947, it might help place it...

A: Well, it was the first year after that, and the "new look" was not the first collection.

Q: But it was in '47...

A: Right. But he was going to the other people...And at the time he knew the modistes in Paris, having known them before the war. But we found that the couture was best for us to buy our models from because we had the theory that people were going to buy hats to go with the clothes that they were wearing, not buying them in a vacuum, and not that the milliners were not...

Q: When you talk about milliners, you mean like Paulette...

A: That's right...Paulette...Agnes...Maria Guy...

Q: Would you spell that last one?

A: M-a-r-i-a G-u-y....They were enormously talented...

Q: Now these were the people from whom Alfred was buying before the war?
A: Buying before the war, buying or selling them ornaments. And he would buy....Very often he would buy a model from them for his ornaments that he could show to his customers in the States. However, we found that the couture was much more important for us. And so we bought models from them. I had never been to Europe before the war, and I didn't go until 1947. I made my first trip in 1947, and we found that the couture was divided into roughly two categories, as far as we were concerned: people who did their own hats, like Fath and Schiaparelli and Balenciaga. And couturiers who would go to one of the milliners and have them do the hat. We found that for us the most successful were the ones who did their own; who had their own departments with a design, of a piece. I haven't mentioned Givenchy, because at that time Givenchy was only just starting...

Q: He opened in '52...

A: He was a...He was designing sportswear and blouses for Schiaparelli, and other things, and he opened his first shop, and his first couture house at rue Alfred de Vigny, and he was a success. Not an overnight success. I don't know how long it took him to become enormously identified with the couture, but he certainly was successful because he was enormously talented, and very innovative. Because he started...He recognized new products and new ideas and incorporated them into collections. He was the first one, I'm sure, who showed his models with wigs.

Q: Right. He was.

A: And after he had moved to his other house... at Avenue George V, he was the first one who used ultra-suede. And anyway, Balenciaga was very important for us because he was so prophetic in his things. Fath was because he was so amusing and...But we bought things from Jacques Heim, models from Dessès. We
bought models from Balenciaga, from Piguet... From all of them, where there was... We bought them, with the right--I must hasten to add--with the right to copy. That was the point of buying the models.

Q: What was the "caution" system like...

A: There were two different systems. Either there was a fixed sum, against which you bought, which you paid; or, there was a required number of models to be bought. So that if it was X amount of francs that was the "caution", you could either buy up to whatever that was, or more as you needed it. At Balenciaga, it was always five models. So that whatever you bought, it had to equal the five models.

Q: Were you allowed to buy toiles...? Did that exist with millinery?

A: Yes, you could buy them... In millinery, they're called spartres.

Q: How do you spell that?

A: S-p-a-r-t-r-e-s... We didn't do that, however. We had them made in whatever... In an actual fabric. Whether it was fabric, velvet, velour, depending on the season... or straw, or whatever. And all the models had to be released at a certain date. You had, one had, at that time, commissionaires (buying offices) over there, who were your buying representatives, who were not licensed but recognized by the couture. And as a matter of fact they had to always accompany... They made your reservation at the House and you went with someone from them. And then you bought the stuff, and whatever it was that you were buying--dresses or toiles or hats--at the release date, they delivered to the commissionaire's office, and they all came, almost all on the same plane, as they came back. And there'd be big trouble if somebody released something before. They were even restricted as to photographs and what not. It was really a dif-
different kind of world. Now things are released almost before they open. And anyway, a name which has not cropped up before and didn't crop up even in Paris until after Dior died was...is St. Laurent. And St. Laurent was the young man who took Dior's place, was appointed to take Dior's place when he died very suddenly. He had been in the House, and he was there for...I don't remember...I should think four or five years. I don't really remember when he decided that he was going to have his own House, which indeed he opened. And it was very interesting, because he opened in the winter, and Alfred Solomon was there that January and was at his first show, which was 20 years ago this past year. And we received an invitation to go to his 20th anniversary party over there, because he had been, as a matter of fact.... There wasn't anybody else there from the millinery business. As a matter of fact, I don't think there is anybody else, or very few manufacturers who ever went. There were millinery buyers who went, however. But that no longer exists, because now...What was at one time the hat bar department in a store for pickup and impulse buying, in addition to the salon, has become THE hat department in the store now. The stores are very quick to reduce space of something that is not selling, they think. And there's no doubt that there are peaks and valleys in this business. I would be the last to say that there have not been. However, there has always been business. Here we are. It might have been a little harder to find, but a lot of what happened was due to the way the item was merchandised, and that's what I meant before about the proliferation of the small shops. They never gave up the accessory business. They never gave up having some hats around. They never gave up...because there were always women who wanted them. It's perfectly true that they were not around in the millions for
a long time, with bouffant hairdos and teased hairdos, and the fact that women spent a great deal of money having their hair done. It meant that the customer was not going out to spend a lot of money unless it was a special occasion, just to scrunch her hair down. On the other hand, there were a lot of people around who still wanted it. There used to be a man out in Kansas City who was the merchandise manager, the president of a store out there. This is many, many years ago, and it's before my time. And he sent his buyer to the market, and she came back and she said..... And I would mention his name if I could remember it....unfortunately I can't. But she said, "It's just terrible. There is not a single thing new in this whole market." He said, "Listen, you take the next plane...," or train--whichever people were traveling at the time--"...back, and you stand at 53rd and Fifth Avenue, and you let me know what you see people wearing." "O-o-h," she said, "All right." And she came back and she found that....I must say, by the way, it was a fashionable corner, as it is now, a fashionable section for women to pass on their way shopping, going to lunch and so forth...And she found at that particular corner they were all wearing, for the sake of argument, a little calot at the back; a little cap, with a flower, or a this or a that, with a trimming. And she must have seen a dozen while she was standing there. And she called and told him and he said, "Buy them. Buy them. There must be something. Do you have any?" And she said, "I've never seen those before." All of which is a tiny little point to prove there is always something new if you recognize it. And the big stores had a tendency not to have money for it when it happened. Whereas the small shops, which is more elastic and flexible in its rules, would have it.
Anyway....We were among the first people to buy from St. Laurent, and this...All of this, mind you, is before any ready-to-wear. They all had their own, what they, the couture houses, called boutiques, which was a slightly less expensive kind of shop, within the couture. But it was not ready-to-wear. That burgeoned...I don't remember exactly how that started. But it did, with a lot of the couture houses going out of business, because of....whatever....deaths in the case of Balenciaga; Griffe died, a lot of them died, and were just never carried on. In addition to which I think they found economically that there were more people who wanted the label but could not afford the total made-to-order, and the prêt-à-porter started. We were asked to do the Rive Gauche hats for St. Laurent here in the States. And we were asked because we were really the only people who had any experience with designers. Many, many years ago we did something called.... Many years ago we did something with Jacques Heim which was called Jacques Heim Jeune Fille, and I think that was the first time that had ever been done. It took a little getting used to. The lines of communication were not as fast. The lines of communication were not as thorough. And he was not as well known throughout the country as many of the names today are known. We also did the same kind of thing with the people who were making the clothes for Jacques Fath. We also did them for Ricci. It used to be called Mademoiselle Ricci.

Q: Was this a license? Was this a licensing operation?

A: It was a license. It wasn't a specific license...

Q: It wasn't a formal contract at 5%...

A: ....We always paid them a royalty, but actually the royalty is
more than that. We've always done that. But it was not... We were the only people that... First of all, nobody else knew how to do it. There were a great... No, ... not a great, but there was.....
A: I think I left off with a special technique attached to this....And one of the things which has caused me to grow grey and old in the business was the fact that we do not add to a collection which has been designed by a designer, because we think that that might sell. And that's what happened with a great many manufacturers. They would have, oh, five or six or ten, however many, items within the collection, but feel it needed a few things more, and they would throw them in from their regular line, and to make a long story short, they didn't sell and they went out of business. Happily, and I touch wood, that has not happened to us. It does take a special technique.

Now, there is something else that has been added to this whole business, and that is something called "free standing boutiques," which have been opened by designers--French designers, Italian designers, Japanese designers--Everything is so close now. Everything is so quick. Everything happens so fast that it's almost immediate. It's very interesting that during the couture period, one went by sea. It took five days to get there.

Q: You're talking about pre-World War II...

A: No I'm not. I'm talking about after World War II. One always went one way by ship. This is before ready-to-wear for couture, twice a year. If there were two or three collections a day, everybody was exhausted. There was a collection in the morning; there was cocktail time. Everybody went to the Ritz, or to the Plaza Athenee....And there was lunch at a fashionable restaurant, where, indeed, business was conducted. Not necessarily buying or selling, but you saw people, and that's important. And then there might be a collection in the afternoon, if you could manage to get to it
by 3:00. And then there were cocktails and dinner and so forth. One always traveled with evening clothes. And there was a lot of work done. There were a lot of contacts made. Business was very good. Everybody profited by this whole thing. But it was, in effect, leisurely. It was a two week period. And there were a lot of couturiers who showed. The difference now is so enormous. People go for a weekend. People go for three days during the week. There are six or seven or ten collections a day or something.

Q: You're talking about the prêt-à-porter. 

A: Now I'm talking about the prêt-à-porter, which did not start out that way, but has proliferated and grown to that number. So much so that they've had to, from the sheer logistic point of view, had to have a central place to have it. And I might add, they've been all over Paris with that "central" place. It's now about as grand as you can get. But the same tired old tents they've shown in all over Paris, but now they're in the courtyard of the Louvre. And I guess that that's where they'll stay as long as they'll let them.

Q: Do you... You no longer cover couture?

A: No. Only...

Q: Only the prêt-à-porter. 

A: And we don't cover the couture because we've found that the people who are most valuable for us are very important in the press. And so it's better for us to go....

Q: What is your arrangement as far as money is concerned, with people in the prêt? I mean, there is no "caution," as there was...

A: No, no. No. There is no caution for anybody.
Q: Right. Exactly. I know that.

A: That doesn't exist. Either you buy or not. Now we do do
...Under license we do St. Laurent and we do Givenchy. We have off and on
toyed with one or two others that we've been asked to do, one or two others,
and have thought better of it because that's too much on one's plate. This
is enough, along with Madcaps, because we found....There's something else
that happened over the years...We do much less importing than we used to.
We used to have...We used to be the distributor for a French manufacturer,
which was fine because it was a quality that doesn't exist anywhere else in
the world. Well, they went out of business about ten years ago...

Q: A French millinery manufacturer?

A: A French millinery....French body manufacturer. Pure felts.
And they went out of business. It was a family business and they went out of
business. And we found that within that period that 95% of our business is now
made here in the States. And we found that that's much more acceptable to people.
On the whole we find that...We have a very big business in handwork. In hand
crochet. Actually, that was the first group of Madcaps that was ever made. Hand
crocheted woolen hats. Well, we still do that, but they're fashion hats. They've
no relation to the stuff that comes in from the Far East. A lot of the stuff
that comes in from the Far East, a lot of that copies what we have done here, in
a simplified way, and in synthetics, acrylcs. Ours are 100% wool, and in the
summer when we do the cotton, it's 100% cotton. The only synthetic that we use
for that kind of work is chenille, and there is no pure chenille. That's rayon.
It's pure rayon. So I guess it fits into the same category.

Q: Where is your production done?
A: Oh, it's done all over. There are factories...There are three factories...
Q: In New York City?
A: Right. And it's done throughout...
Q: You don't own the factories? They're contractors.
A: They're contractors mainly. We may be sole distributor for them...it's not distributor...We may be the sole customer for the factory, but it's an independent owner.
Q: Did you ever have your own factories?
A: Not as such. But there are factories who have worked only for us. Because we find you have to have one like that in order to do the special things that we do. And certainly the people who do crocheted work do that only for us.

Now, we found that among other things, all the talk--and this immediacy now, with the talk about the imports--If the American market is competitive with the world market, in whatever the item is, it's going to succeed. And on the whole, more and more, the American market has become competitive. Because, the foreign market has gotten higher. Years ago, the trash of the world used to come in from Japan. I'm not necessarily talking about ready-to-wear because that didn't exist....But all the junk around--gadgets, whatever--were made in Japan, and it was cheap, cheap, cheap. Well, that's not true anymore. Plus the fact that they have developed their own softgoods market. Not cheap for heaven sakes. So the standard of living all over the world has risen, and except for a few isolated pockets, where everything is very, very cheap, gradually they're rising to meet our standards.
And so if we could get the actual hands to make things, that becomes our problem here. On the whole, our industry is small. And it's gotten smaller. I think it's because people didn't change with the times. I think it's because they didn't recognize that a change was coming. I think because they were not, unfortunately, able to weather the valley that we went through on the way to the peak. And I think that because of that, it's become a highly concentrated business.

Q: There was a period a few years ago when you were making things like capelets...

A: We still are.

Q: You still are.

A: We do that. We do feather boas. We do maribou jackets. We do fur jackets. We have, for the last three years, done masks, because we decided there was a need for a kind of fantasy, if they only used them for display, or if they only used them at holiday time. We found that they also sold to people who also had lingerie departments. Small shops who had a section and bought them for that. We do belts. We don't do leather belts, with sizes. We do passamenterie belts. We do a fabric, kind of a novelty kind of a belt such that one size fits all.

Q: Now, did you start that in order to overcome some of the valleys? Was that the motivation?

A: Not only that, although certainly I think that contributed to it. Not only that. But we decided that we wanted to be the complete resource for a shop. A shop that had X amount dollars to spend. It's very difficult to go to a great big "star" house and lay down an order for hundreds of dozens of something. Well, at one time--we don't of course anymore--but at one time
we brought in French scarves—challis, silk or whatever. And they could buy a dozen scarves if they wanted a dozen scarves. Along with the hats, and along with two dozen belts, and along with a bit of this and a bit of that. Which constituted their order for us. No way could they do that in the scarf market. So that it filled a need, in addition to being of great help to us. We are basically head wear.

Q: How would you... In terms of percentage, how would you... how much would you...

A: Oh, I would say 80%... 75 or 80%...

Q: Really.

A: Definitely. But, we have always been totally varied. In other words, we make straw hats, felt hats, fabric hats, feather hats, fur hats, crocheted hats, men's hats. We've gone into the men's hat business. We made a hat about six or seven years ago that was a fedora made by a women's factory that had a totally soft hand, and it coincided, happily, with the man who wanted not a rigid hat... Because no matter how bad the women's hat business was, it was nothing like what happened to the men's hat business... Which, also, now is coming back. But, this was soft. It had, for the sake... just to itemize it, it had a ribbon sweat band. Well, a man's hat has a leather sweat band, and we are now making men's hats with leather sweats bands again, because the man... again... wants a formal kind of hat. But there too it's a question of trying to find your customer, or creating something that a customer wanted but didn't know they wanted. And that soft kind of slouchy, velour hat, which we had been selling to women, in different proportions, suddenly became very good for men. Well, we've gone on. We've always had caps, whether they're the flat
top racing cap or whatever...flat top. Like...It's an English...so-called English cap. But we do...I think I forgot leather...We have a special section--and it's quite a large group, too--of weather hats. And this has become such an important part of the business that the big stores have made outposts of...whether it's weather hats or rain hats, or whatever...storm things...And before that they were kind of the orphans of the department. They always had a few. Now they have become a business in themselves. They have a rain buyer. A rain hat buyer in many stores. I don't think I've forgotten a category but I may have, because...You know, with 4,000 hats in the line....

Q: Well certainly the winter...The kind of winter hat which is either a fur hat or a knit hat, has to be a very important category, because there, women will buy them not just because they need a special occasion thing, but because they really plain need it.

A: Well, they do. I do think there are cyclical phases to this business. I would say, and I think I'm right, that the fur hat business has not been terribly important in the last two seasons. There was for the lack of a better name, I hate it, but fun furs, sort of thing...Really what they were was less expensive when people were not about to buy a mink. They would buy rabbit. Well, if the rabbit was done with the same loving care as far as styling and fashion was concerned, the price was right, and you sold it. There is a marvelous hat that we do, there's no relation to what used to be known as a fur hat. And it's called a "trooper" hat. And, oh, I don't know how long ago; it must have been ten years ago. Someone came to us and said, "Would you be interested in the fur hat that the Russians wear. They were allowed to come
over, and they're here..." By the way, the Russian rabbit is considerably
different from the American rabbit, as many things are different in Russia..
It's a much longer, fuller animal. And we did. We bought them, and we
sold them. And then we made that here in a different, in a reduced pro-
portion sort of thing, and we called it a "trooper" hat, and it's what the
troopers do wear. That kind of thing has taken the place, in a younger
consumer, of the formal mink hat or sable hat, or whatever. Years ago, the
raccoon hat used to be a cheap...Well, not cheap, but a less expensive hat
that one could have. Well, racoon has become as expensive as anything else
at the moment. But on the whole, as a category, it is not booming. The
knits...If it's a purely utilitarian kind of knit, I suppose that's not really
what we make. They're really a little more chic than that. But I think in
terms of those as the batch that comes in from the Far East, and they need
weather in order to sell. And of course that's another thing that happens
with the big stores. They commit themselves a year in advance for an enormous
amount of money in wherever they buy them...

Q: The Orient...
A: Yeah. Whether it's Taiwan or Korea or Hong Kong. Wherever
it is. And in order to get them they have to commit themselves to an enor-
mous amount of money. Well, that could be a terrible, terrible situation, as
this year we had no winter. And they've got a week now, between now and Christmas.
This is just before Christmas. Happily it's turned cold and they've got the
hats. But that money is tied up....

Q: Yes. And they're not open to buy novelties and that kind
of thing.
A: Or for reorders. If they've got something that's selling, they can't reorder it because their money is tied up somewhere else. Not necessarily in Korea, but it's tied up somewhere. But, of course, that doesn't really happen to a small chain or a smaller...a small shop. There's another phase of the business which has grown up in the last...I'm going to say ten years; maybe it's only five...And that's the catalogue business. There have always been catalogues. I'm not talking about store Christmas catalogues or special promotion catalogues. I'm talking about businesses which are solely done through mail order. There have been some which, unfortunately, have gone out of business. But they are all over the country. On the West Coast, on the East Coast. Many of them have gotten publicity this year, as witness the Times story on L.L. Bean. But they're not all as big or as well known as L.L. Bean. If you are on mailing lists, as I am; if you've reached an age, you're on every mailing list known to man. Or, unfortunately, if you've written away for anything, once, you are inundated with catalogues. But I must tell you, anybody who is under the impression that a catalogue is cheap does not live in today's world. You can buy jewelry; you can buy fur coats; you can buy antique furniture. There's nothing you can't buy in these catalogues, and they run all year long. There are spring, fall, Christmas, and so forth. That's a business which is done on a totally different principle from our normal business, because it's a business that's projected. It's bought quite far in advance. None of these stores...not stores...None of these catalogue houses buys the line. There are items which they buy, and those items they buy for six months...delivery in six months, in eight months. And they buy for next spring or next fall, whatever the season is. It's a very lucrative
business, for both of us or obviously they wouldn't be in it, nor would we, if it were not.

Q: Do you design things especially for them?
A: Only if they want it. Only if they want it.

Q: What about private labeling? Are you involved with that at all?
A: Not really. When you say private labeling....

Q: I mean the way...
A: ...something for "Zilch" Brothers or...
Q: ...or Penney's or Sears as in ready-to-wear. . .
A: Penney's.....Those big chains have special fashion departments which are small . . . and they're not special designs or anything. They buy them, and they buy them under...since they maintain the price, they buy them under Madcap, under the Madcap label.

Q: That means you don't do private labeling. Because in ready-to-wear there's a lot of private labeling.

A: Yes, I know that's true. But we do do special things for people. For instance, Laura Ashley. Laura Ashley has the same thing in all their stores, and their stores are worldwide. For America....This all happens through contacts too, because....I've interrupted myself, as I do constantly....I know someone in Europe who has to do with Laura Ashley in Europe, who is an American but who lives there and she...once when we saw each other in Paris, said, "Really, there ought to be some way we can do this." And there are a lot of ins and outs to it, because the hats are made over there. They're special; they're expensive. They would be three times as expensive if they were shipped here, from Europe. So
they decided what it is that they want... Anyway, this evolved so that whoever was buying here came in and they decided that we were the right people for them..... Since the tastes here too are slightly different... Everything is not universal... Having said that communication is so quick, that doesn't mean that everybody likes the same things. Americans don't like everything that Europeans do. However... that's by the way.

We... They bring us their sketches or samples of what it is that they want and that they are selling over there, and we show them what it is that we have and we do, or we change, or we adapt, or we redesign, and it's been a very happy association. All that is the kind of thing I was talking about when I said small mini-chains, Limited stores--for instance, Ann Taylor. These stores are not Mom and Pop stores, but they are not what is known in the trade as "the majors." And on the whole, the majors are in serious trouble at this particular minute in time. A lot of it through their own fault. A lot of it because they can't handle the number of stores that they've opened. Oh, for many reasons... I can't tell...

Q: Well one of the things is that they can't turn on a dime, as can the specialty stores.

A: Well, and because they've gotten more stiff-jointed over the years, the bigger they've become. However... We're still in business. And successfully. Profitably. Last year was one of the biggest years in business. A lot of it is due to our genius obviously, but a lot of it is due to the fact that the whole industry has shrunk.

Q: Tell me something about... Let's talk a little bit about what working for stores did for you. Do you have any recollection of...?
A: Well, I do...I do understand a little bit how they work, and I understand a little bit of the politics of the store. Although, I must tell you that a store is run quite differently now from the way it was run then, no matter how big it was. I didn't work for a small store. At the time, Best was run differently from A&S. Now, everything is run differently from either of them.

Q: And Best, of course, was a specialty store, and A&S was a department store.

A: But, there was a much...There was much more rapport between the departments, and between and among merchandise men and buyers. There were many more experienced buyers than there used to be...

Q: There were many more experienced buyers than there are now, you mean.

A: Whatever I said, what you said is what I meant. Now, there was not the change every six months, which is likely to happen within a store now. A store...A buyer is in a place, and the next season comes around, that buyer is in another department. Having learned nothing about the previous department she was in. She also knows nothing about the department she's going into. She has the responsibility of thousands of dollars. I think people are brighter younger now, because they're quicker...I'm not so sure I believe that, but everybody says it's true. I do think that people can be around too long. I don't think that because someone has been on the job forever means they're marvelous. Equally, there is nothing like a familiarity with one's job, with the ins and outs. There is nothing like experience. I know that when there was an ad to be discussed with the buyer, it was interesting at the time that at no
time ever was A&S a fashion store. They always had considerable promotional ads and events going on. Having said that, the buyer knew a good deal of what it was the customer wanted. There was something that went on then that I think doesn't go on now because it doesn't fit into the way the store is run, and that is the fact that the buyer was on the floor a lot, and the buyer knew what the customer was asking for. And the buyer knew what she had in stock. And the buyer knew if the girls were bad housekeepers; if the sales girls were bad housekeepers. And all of that whatever it was was tucked away somewhere. If someone came in and said, "Do you have..." whatever it was, and they said, "Oh, no, we're terribly sorry." And it was there. But she knew that it was there. And she also knew that in her department at certain times of the year there would be requests for such and such. There are all kinds of instances that they might be aware of, or events that they might be aware of. Or, if it was, for the sake of argument, a big Catholic community, that used to be in...specifically in the hat business...They now of course...One doesn't have to wear a hat in church anymore. But at the time...We seriously considered one time asking the Pope to change that. But then we said, "Oh, it wasn't worth the trip over." We decided against it.

However, a lot of things have changed since then, and one of the things that has changed is the fact that the whole community is more restless. And so whether or not the actual young buyers change at the store's discretion, or whether she decides to change...not that she can always get a better job somewhere else, but it sounds more interesting and she will move. I think there was considerably less of that 20 and 30 years ago. People were fixed a little more permanently. There were also less households with two working people in them.
I don't know what this has to do with what I'm talking about...the Oral History...

Q: (cross conversation) ...discretionary income for expenditures...

A: If somebody wants to move on and be upwardly mobile, it becomes ...It's looked at from a different point of view from the way it was. So that with the experience...the experience was important. The experience of knowing how a department store worked. The experience of knowing the difficulties of the departmentalized store so that one buyer doesn't want another buyer's merchandise to be sold, even though it goes with...And the consumer would find it easier to buy it all there...They don't want their sales people selling somebody else's merchandise. Well, that doesn't happen in the shop.

Q: Janet, do you ever make trips to stores now? As just part of your...?

A: No. It isn't that I shouldn't, but I don't.

Q: But you don't.

A: Yeah. Right.

Q: Can you talk a little about Alfred Solomon, your brother, who is President of the organization? How did he get started in that business? Has that anything to do with family? Do they have any involvement...?

A: No, it had nothing to do with family. As I said, at first he had a partner. And it was in the ornament business. He had been to school in New York too. He went to college at night. But he had always wanted to be in business. My other brother did not. My other brother wanted to be a lawyer and became one. But his instincts were in the business, commercial world. And, indeed,
he has a special kind of...It's really too strong a point I suppose to say genius...But he does have a special insight into it. And the fashion business became more and more interesting to him. The ornament business fell out of favor, for whatever reason. He used to go to Czechoslovakia, to Coblenz, which is where the stone business was, because they would buy the stones.

Having been to Paris, to see what they were showing, he would go there. Making a side trip to the south of France....He has always been interested in other things...As I am...than business...He likes people. He likes gambling. He likes...lots of activity. He likes the theatre, as I do.

Q: How do you divide your responsibilities now?
A: We don't really.
Q: You don't.
A: He basically runs the business...
Q: Does he take care of the things having to do with finance, for example?
A: Yes.
Q: Administrative problems.
A: Yes. It's a small business, Mildred, so that it doesn't have distinct departments. And the two of us are the bosses. On the other hand, because it's a small business, we allocate responsibility...delegate responsibility. Not insofar as money is concerned. Also the fact that there is....nobody to leave this business to...We have nibbles over the years of people wanting the name, not the business, but wanting the name...It's a totally personal business. And that we weren't interested in...In their offers. But typical of his instinct for things...Twenty-five or thirty years ago...Long before everybody and their
grandmother had a perfume, he thought it might be amusing to have a Madcap perfume. A junior perfume. And went so far as to look into essentials oils and so forth. And even at that time realized that that would have to be a special and separate business, with a different....a totally different kind of merchandising theory and promotion theory behind it. And it...like many good ideas, sort of died aborning. Somewhere now we do have some of that essential oil, I think. In a slight bundle...

Q: Janet, what would be the kind of volume to be anticipated from a business such as yours...I'm thinking now of what I'm going to ask you in a few moments what the possibilities are for new businesses...What do you think a volume could be anticipated to be, in a business like yours?

A: It's very small. The profit margin is high, but the volume is very small. It has always been small, and it's always been a handful of very, very big companies, which are not fashion companies. They're just very big hat companies.

Q: Like whom for example?

A: Oh, International Hat, or something. Which was bought...by one of...a conglomerate...not so long ago. But the volume...There's no relation to Seventh Avenue volume.

Q: Give me an idea. Is it a million dollars....a couple of million perhaps.

A: You know...between $1 and $2 million is a very adequate business. First of all, it's a comparatively small ticket item. It's not bought the way other things are bought. It doesn't need $10-15-20-25 million in order to keep it going. It's a small...I don't know what the figure is for the entire industry;
the entire industry, which would include caps, hats... You know... All sorts of very cheap, very big items... I don't know what it is. But it's infinitesimal by comparison with what is know as Seventh Avenue. Now, I'm talking about the hat business. I'm not talking about the total accessory business. There are very big scarf houses. There are lots of smaller ones. I don't know what the volume on... in a bag business.... What's the volume in the bag industry...?

Q: It could run into $4-5 million... in a business like Morris Moskowitz, for example.
A: Well, I would say, to strike a... $2 million, $2 million five... That's... With many, many, many of the few much less... than that.

Q: Yes... What do you think the opportunities are... Or are there opportunities... for the young people going into their own business. Whether it's your kind of millinery business, or related accessory businesses?
A: Accessory businesses maybe have slightly more to look forward to. The potential I think is greater. I'm not... The only reason I hesitate about hats per se is that there are no craftsman left for a factory. The mechanics of making hats has changed. Plus the fact that it is very interesting that in a country this size, I think there's only one place that makes fur felt... you can't buy fur felts. If you want... I'm thinking now in terms of material and hands to make the material. There you have to buy import. Straws. Volours. They have to be imported. The actual product is made here, but the stuff is imported... not fabric.

Q: Do you have any idea how much money it would take to start such a business?
A: No. I don't. And there are people now starting all over, as
they do in the dress business. . and of course the people down in Soho, in Tribeca. They're all over. They're small, artistic, creative people who are making things. But this is not any kind of volume. This is not necessarily wholesale yet. And even if it is wholesale, it's small. A few years ago there used to be a phrase that the big stores used, called "creative merchandising." I may throw up. Because "creative merchandising" meant finding a little person somewhere who was making something special, but was not around the next season, unfortunately. Because the store would brag about its creative merchandising, but would never buy enough to keep them in business. So that they couldn't.... But that in a way was the start of the small person there used to be in the '20s on Eighth Avenue. Now it's moved to Soho. And these young people have started their own shops. Then, if those are successful, and they find their way up, creating things for a market, and they can make it ...Fine. Great. There's never been any harm; there's never been any danger in competition. There is danger in competition that's purely price. I'm not talking about that. But the fact that there are more people doing something good has never been bad for whatever it is that's being made. Ever.

Q: Okay. Thank you very much. I think that does it.