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: ... for the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be the history of Alfred Solomon, founder of Madcaps, Inc. The date is September 29, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Mr. Solomon, Madcaps is a kind of unique business in the industry. Would you start with when you went into the business or, rather, start before that. Where were you born, when were you born, how it developed that you went into the industry and then into this particular business.

A: Well, to answer three or four questions--I was born September 25, 1899 in New York City. After going to public school...

Q: Where did you live? What part of the city?

A: We lived at 123rd Street and Broadway. And my aunt was a dress... a blouse designer at that time. A very famous blouse designer. Don't ask me her name, I've forgotten what her married name was.

Q: Now at that time, the industry was a blouse and skirt industry wasn't it?

A: Blouses, skirts, coats and suits. And the giants were people like Wilton Schulhoff; Kaufman Gown made very beautiful things; Lerner Blouses, that afterwards developed into the Lerner Stores. And, of course, many others. And through my aunt I... My first job was with a firm called Emil A. Perle & Co., who used to go to the Paris collections, the openings....

Q: In what year approximately?

A: Well, that was possibly in 1919, 1920...

Q: After the First World War.

A: Well, the First World War I don't think finished until 1918.
Q: Excuse me. Was this what was called a fancy goods kind of firm?

A: No, I'll explain what kind of firm it was. They would go over and buy a collection from the designers. Designers in those days of course were none of the names that you have today. There was Martial Armand...

Q: You're talking now, of course, about Paris.

A: Paris. Yes. Paris had the only designers, and still do. But at any rate, Emil Perle would buy the collections and would bring them in, I forget the term, without paying the duty...In other words...

Q: In bond?

A: In bond. He would bring them in in bond, and then would hold showings in our showrooms, which I think at that time were at 320 Fifth Avenue, and would invite the top, higher priced firms with their designers to see the collections.

Q: Ready-to-wear firms?

A: Right. Manufacturing firms.

Q: And whose product was...

A: I don't think there's anybody left that remembers that from those days.

Q: No. That's why I am so interested.

A: And this is what happened. We would rent the models. We would charge, for example, a blouse firm to see the blouse collection. There would be 50-75 blouses. We would charge $5,000 or $3,000 or $2,000 or whatever the figure was. And the first one to see them would pay more. And the designer, with the
boss, would pick five or ten, which is what they were allowed to do for the price that they paid, and she would get one a night (that was my job, to bring them over), and they would work on it. They would take rubbings of the embroidery and the various details, and this is how they built their lines. Now, we would have coat and suit people who would come in and see the coats and suits, and dress people, so that a collection could be rented to... In those days there were hundreds of firms because they were downtown on 27th, 28th, 25th Streets, and the better firms were along Madison Avenue. As I said, Kaufman Gown would show up... And these people didn't have to go to Europe. They would come in and see these collections. There was another firm, by the way, doing that, renting the original models. But that was the inception of the influx of American designers who started to go to Europe. I made my first trip to Europe in 1924 on the old Leviathan.

Q: At which point you were 25 years old.
A: I was 24, maybe 25.

Q: And at that time you were working for the firm...
A: No, no. I had left that firm and gone into business for myself. This firm that I had been with, that imported the models, Emil Perle, (the partner's name was Berkowitz), had in turn opened a commissionaire office in Paris and then began to take care of the people that came over--the manufacturers whom he used to show in New York, Of course, then, in turn, when they came over to Paris, when they started to come to Paris, he took them to the various designers of that day. It's simple enough for you to get a list of the designers of that day.

Q: Was he an American? This man who was running the business in France?
Q: He was an American citizen, but I don't think he was born here. Emile A. Perle was the name of the firm; he was the man who put up the money.

Well, at any rate... (Later on I'll come back to him)... But at any rate, he had a great following. As a matter of fact he had some very big stores. One of the stores that he had... Let's see, the one that was at 36th Street and Fifth Avenue, Russeks. He had Russeks and he had several of the big stores. That was really the start of the influx in the '20s. And in the '20s I went to Europe three times a year. I would go over in May, October, and probably take another trip in between. At that time I was strictly in the trimming business, and that sort of thing, which we sold to the dress trade. We sold millinery trims which were pins and rhinestones and various other trims, that the millinery designers showed over there. We had Alphonsine, and Suz and.....

Q: Alfred, you really haven't said how you got that particular business. When you went to your first job...

A: Oh, yes... Oh ...

Q: Could you talk about that?

A: Yes. Because while I was with Emil Perle, we also had dress trimmings, and one of the trimming firms that came in to see us was a firm called the Royal Notion Company; and they offered me a job for much more money than I had earned. In six months I was a partner.

Q: How old were you then? About.

A: Well, I made my first trip to Europe when I was 24. I was probably 22.
Q: Did you have to put money in to become a partner?
A: That was easy in those days not much was involved. Maybe a few thousand dollars. But at any rate, so... Where were we?

Q: You had just... You went to join the trimming firm....

A: Well, at any rate, in those days my trips to Europe... I made a trip to Gablonz in Czechoslovakia before the Second World War. I would go to Gablonz and sometimes to Vienna and pick up things. For example, in addition to trimmings we also had perfume bottles made which I would sell when I got back to Paris because there were always perfume people over there, and some of them were just starting.

Then on one trip, on one of these trips, I found a crocheted beret, and I'm quite sure it was Schiaparelli at that time who was just starting, I bought some from her and brought them back here and we had them made here, and that developed into quite a fashion of angora berets.

At any rate... From that, along with the Anchor Novelty Company, which was the name of my firm, we formed another firm called Eton Knitting.

Q: E-t-o-n?
A: E-t-o-n. And we started to do hand crocheting. As a matter of fact, the original little girl who used to come and pick up our things to have them duplicated, you know, because they had a big group of home workers, where they did the crocheting... She still works for me.

Q: For heaven's sake.

A: At any rate... Then from the one hat, the crocheted hat, various shapes of beret, we started to get into... We continued to do business

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mainly with the Paris designers, who have continued, of course, to do the best designs in the world. The American designers have come to the front in the last few years...

Q: But what you were concentrating on were things that were primarily in the trimmings area and some millinery.

A: Not millinery. Never millinery. We've never been in the millinery business. We've been in the hat business and we've always...

Q: How do you distinguish between them?

A: Well, we distinguish between them because hats we consider an accessory.

Q: And millinery is what?

A: Millinery is something that becomes a formal, made-to-order, proper hat. I mean, where a woman goes in and has a hat made to order. And there were very, very few stores that had those. The big departments were Bergdorf, Marshall Field of Chicago, and, of course, there were many private milliners but...

Q: So you're making a distinction between a hat which you go out and buy as a hat...

A: See, we were able to anticipate what would happen with the department stores. They were allotting less and less space to hats. They called them..(because the stores are the last to change anyway; the big stores)...They continued to call it millinery, but the departments shrunk to where they were nothing. And we insisted all the time that hats were just an accessory, just as we consider shoes and jewelry and gloves and hair ornaments. Those are accessories. And as a result we've survived and we've never had an unprofitable year.
Q: Right. Okay, now. I'm sorry to have distracted you because I was interested in the overall philosophical concept. But let's get back to the '20s when you were traveling in Europe and buying from the designers. At that time were you buying also over there the materials that you were going to be using for your products over here?

A: Only if they weren't available here. We have always--and we continue to try to--make everything of American raw products with American labels. We have never, except for one interval when we brought things in from Italy and we represented the finest hat concern in the world, Flechet...

Q: How do you spell Flechet?

A: F-l-e-c-h-e-t. And their factory is down in Lyon. But 95% of our product that we sell is made right here in this country.

Q: So...in buying leather, for example. Isn't that something...Or weren't you involved in that?

A: Yes.

Q: I have heard so often that leathers were bought there in Europe by various parts of the industry here.

A: Well, there is the possibility that the raw materials that we bought were originally imported. However, it's my belief that the glove leather that we always used and still use, and suede, that's all American. It might be South American...

Q: So that your primary motivation in your travels was to see the models that were being designed.

A: Just fashion.

Q: Right. But you did start to buy some of the models too,
did you not?

A: We bought the original models.

Q: Right.

A: We bought the original hat models. When we came back, we would have a showing here for the designers in the hat business who would come in and see the hats and we would sell them the trimmings. This was the original.

Q: This was Mr. Berkowitz, with Emil Perle.

A: Yes, that's right. Originally. But then after the hat business became a bigger end of our business, the accessory and hat business, and we were selling the stores, then, of course (this is later), when we would come back with the hats from Givenchy and....

Q: Now you're talking post World War II.

A: Yes, that's right. 1946. At that point we would make our personal appearances, showing the copies of the hats. I mean, I have copies of the ads.

Q: Right. Let's go back to..I don't want to skip that many years. After the middle-'20s when you began to make these trips, what happened with your business? I mean, what were you then doing?

A: Well, we had three divisions. We had the Anchor Novelty Company.

Q: Was this your business now, that you'd gone into?

A: Yes. This was...I was a partner in the business with a man by the name of Goodman, Abe Goodman. We were in the Anchor Novelty Company, which made the crocheted hats and a few other things, and we then had a separate corporation called Pam Imports which was...
Q: P-a-m?
A: Yes. P-a-m, which was named after a girlfriend of mine. We which made braids and fabrics for the hat trade and in some instances the dress trade, where they used trimmings; straw braids and things of that sort. At any rate...We went through the '30s...

Q: In the same kind of business...
A: Yes, in those three businesses. And the hat business, the hat manufacturing business was not that good, and we were selling at that time to the hat manufacturers.

Q: Were you still at 135 Madison?
A: No, no, no. We were at 1 West 39th. At any rate, although originally, by the way (and this is interesting), when we started the Anchor Novelty Company we started in Astor Court. Do you know where that was?

Q: No. I don't.
A: The Waldorf Astoria, where the Empire State building is now.

Q: So the industry...
A: That was the Waldorf Astoria, and there was a street leading through from 34th to 33rd and there was an office building, an old office building, called Astor. That was Astor Court and we had...That was my first office.

Q: And what kind of...What other firms did you have in that building? Was it a market...Was it beginning to be a market center?
A: Well, there were lawyers and doctors and also fabric people and........Yes. Well, the building...The millinery jobbers' building was 10
West 33rd and that's still there. It's a bag building today, I think.

Q: But the street is a handbag street, yes.
A: Well, at any rate... So I would say approximately 1941 or something like that...

Q: Just at the start of World War II...
A: In 1941 we split up and my partner took the Anchor Novelty Company and I took Eton, which was making Madcaps. Madcaps was a registered trade name; and Pam we just dissolved.

Q: Pam had been making what?
A: Well, Pam was selling the raw fabrics, materials to the trade, braids and... There is a very little of that done today. There are no workers left. So that I concentrated then on the hats. And from 1941 to 1946 we didn't go to Europe because the war was on. And in 1946, right after the war, I went over to Europe again. And in the interim Berkowitz had failed. There had been a Depression...

Q: In what year?
A: A Depression! The manufacturers owed him money and didn't pay him, so he failed. And I went with another firm called Boas as my commissionaire. And I went back to buying the original models. In those days the new designers were Schiaparelli... Alphonsine was still there...

Q: I'm sorry. I don't know Alphonsine. How do you spell...?
A: Alphonsine. A-l-p-h-o-n-s-i-n-e. Alphonsine. Suzy. And, as a matter of fact, Givenchy at that time, was working in the boutique for Schiaparelli. You must have started to go over at that time didn't you?
Q: Yes, I did. I started in 1950.

A: It's interesting that at about that time -- it had been several years at that time -- Jacques Heim, who also was couture, started to have exclusive licensees to make his ready-to-wear, and we made his hats...

Q: Yes. The Jacques Heim Jeune-Fille collection.

A: It was all good stuff, and he was the first one to do it

Q: Right. Before we go on with Europe, let's go back and talk some more about what was happening with the business here. Who were the people in your business and how did you set it up from the point of view of the functions that had to be performed? Who did what? I mean, you can tell me anything...Perhaps there was only you, and perhaps you did everything. And perhaps there were two people. I know that you were not a huge management team; I have no such...

A: Starting from the inception, when we split...Well, I had a bookkeeper, a shipping clerk, a salesman. I had the normal staff...

Q: Of a small entrepreneurial firm.

A: Yes. Of a business which was starting with the least expense possible, but we had no difficulty in starting because first of all the product that we made (and that has always been true of our product) was different from anything being made so it was just a question...

Q: And were you calling yourselves Eton at that point?

A: We changed the name, when I took over, to Madcaps.

Q: And what year was that?

A: 1941 I think. And that was a confined label. As a matter of fact it was the first fashion label that Bloomingdale's had. Because Bloomingdale's when we started....In fact they had a separate department; a Madcap de-
partment. And Macy's was furious that we wouldn't let them use it. They had Anna Rosenberg there...

Q: Oh, yes.
A: Not Anna.
Q: Beatrice.
A: Bea Rosenberg. And she got somebody to make some hats under another name--Crazy Caps. That didn't last.
Q: You were selling the big stores. Now what kind of a sales setup had you had? Did you have a salesman who went to see all the big stores?
A: No...They came...
Q: How did this work?
A: We still don't have any.
Q: I see. But you're talking about a very special situation then, and I would like to hear more about how that worked.
A: It was nothing special. Because if you have a product... This is all cliches...If you have a product that nobody else has...
Q: But they have to find you somehow. Either somebody calls them or...
A: No, they knew me.
Q: Did they know you from Europe? Were they traveling in Europe at the same time?
A: Well, yes. That's true. A good many of the buyers did go to Europe. In fact many more than go today. I mean, today the buyers don't mean that much. But in those days those people knew quality and they knew fash-
ion to a much greater extent than they do... But they knew quality where today, I don't know...

Q: So what you're saying is...
A: Today the average buyer doesn't know... They don't know the difference between fur felt (which is the finest quality felt) and wool felt. We've had a buyer come in and say, "Well, what do I want fur felt for when you can buy 100% wool." There is an old-timer left... a hat man, Bud Solomon who used to be Harrison hats, and he was telling me the other day that he walked into Bloomingdale's and saw a wool felt hat being sold for $115 and that was the cheapest kind of hatbody that you could possibly have. But it's the only kind that's around today, except in a few instances where people, I guess, have an inventory and still have some fur felt.

But at any rate...

Q: But what you're saying that one of the things--and it happened on your trips, apart from the things that you were looking at and buying--was that you got to meet people. Right?
A: Oh, sure. That was...

Q: But that's an important plus.
A: Oh, yes. Outside of the fact that it also contributed to my knowledge of fashion because I'd watch it evolve. And I watched it change here. And, of course, in Europe... In Paris, particularly, one of the very big changes, has been that today, the designer, instead of specializing only in the lines that they were known for... For example, the designers here would make two or three lines a year; they would make a fall line, a spring line, a summer line and a resort line... Today those designers, with their names, have become very, very
important in other lines.

Q: You're talking now about apparel designers and licensing in various other products.

A: Well...Fashion.

Q: Right. That was happening in some of the accessory markets at the same time, because I'm sure you do have an awareness of what was going on. Did you ever meet any of the accessory people?

A: Oh, sure. The glove people...I knew them very well as a matter of fact. Some of them are still in business. But there was one fellow--Jules Higher, up in . . .

Q: Could you spell Higher?

A: H-i-g-h-e-r...But I think he sold out, and then the son of one of the original owners of Grandoe...I met all those....

Q: How big was this market, the accessory market, in the '20s and '30s when you were going to Europe? Were there 50 manufacturers at the quality level, 75, were there 15...?

A: Well, if you include hats, as we did, in the accessory market, there were very few, that were in our particular field. Because in those days we insisted that our product, when it went into a big store, would go on the main floor. Normally, the so-called millinery departments were all up on the third or fourth floor.

Q: Macy's was on the second floor, with your friend Bea Rosenberg.

A: Or the second, yeah. But they also had a main floor department.
Q: Right.
A: And this is the department that we aimed for. Because we analyzed it and we knew that 60% of the traffic in a store is on the main floor.
Q: So among the accessory people who were on the main floors, whether they were jewelry or belt makers or whatever, how many would you guess existed as firms in the better market, in the '20s?
A: Well, are you including jewelry and gloves?
Q: Yes. Jewelry, gloves, scarves--everything. Because you were somewhat involved...
A: Oh, yes, but...
Q: Just a guess.
A: I would say there were several hundred.
Q: Were there? As many as that? They were all small businesses then.
A: Well, it's essentially a small...Any part of the accessory business, as compared to the giants in the ready-to-wear business, they're all very tiny.
Q: Except for the ones which, of course, in recent years have been swallowed up as part of the big conglomerates.
A: Well, if they have, I mean....For example, I don't know. These figures, I believe, were released by one of the trade associations. In ladies' hats (which doesn't include men's)...A few years ago, at retail, not wholesale, at retail, there was only $300 million sold at retail. This is at retail.
Q: Yes, I understand.
A: Now, that means with the keystone markup, and the stores
usually take more, that means $150 million divided amongst all the manufacturers. Now, for God's sakes, one of the giants over on 7th Avenue—you mentioned Logan—they do $150 million themselves or more. (Cross conversation). .

Q: So now we're talking about a different period.

A: And I think that would almost apply to the jewelry, with the exception of very few. For example, in hats I don't think, I'm sure there aren't ten firms that do between $5-$10 million a year. And that's nothing today. We don't. We do under $2 million.

Q: And basically all of the accessory firms that you might think of in the '20s and '30s were small firms, right?

A: They seemed to be big in their own sphere. For example, there is this one firm who was in business at the time that we started in business, and they're still here...Betmar. They're still here. The original owner is dead. Today, there are many, many more new outlets, good outlets for hats.

Q: Like Frank Olive, is that the kind of hat designer you mean?

A: No, no, no. I'm talking about outlets, retail outlets...

You have "Casual Corner..." These people.

Q: Specialty stores?

A: These people use so much more because they're alive. We use so much more of them than the big retailers, or so-called big retailers. They don't mean anything any more. The average buyer for the big stores thinks she's a big buyer. The truth of the matter is it's pitiful. Because they come in and they're still using the same methods. A certain amount to this store, a certain amount to that store, and they come in and they buy. And for us...

Of course we like to sell the line. We don't like to sell a store two or three
hats. Because it's a label, right? And it's very hard to convince the buyers of the bigger department stores, and even the specialty store chains (I'm talking about big ones like Magnin's, that sort). They're not important any more. They're important to a designer of couture dresses. Very important. But....

Q: Talk a little bit about stock turnover. This is also a very high turnover product group. Is it still?

A: Well, it's quite different today. In the days...As I said, when we insisted on the merchandise being on the main floor, there were many instances where we received the stubs every day from the stores and we kept a unit control...

Q: Did you? Here?

A: Oh, yes. We kept a unit control book, and we had as many as 50 stores.

Q: About what period was this?

A: Oh, this was in the late '40s, early '50s, up to even a few years ago. There are people who now ask us to go back to it and we're not going to do it anymore. But there are many things that I would do if I were younger. Because that was a very successful operation.

Q: Tell me about some of the things you would do if, as you say, you were younger, and if you were starting it, I guess, and doing it again.

A: Well, we would do exactly the things we did years ago.... Where the store would put in the line, we would ask and say we would cooperate. We would have a girl here who would actually be like an Assistant Buyer. As the stubs came in they were marked off against the stock...
Well, we would keep the stock... As the merchandise went in, we simply marked the colors and just made a dash. Then when they were sold, they were crossed off.

Q: So that you maintained this kind of control for perhaps 50 stores in their heydey...

A: You would call the buyer and say, "Here are the hats, you received 40 pieces, 36 pieces, and last week you sold 18." And since we always asked them to keep a three week supply, they would have to order again.

Q: And this is something which, if you were starting over again, you might conceivably be interested in doing.

A: We would help the stores with markdowns.

Q: In those days.

A: In return for the space, we would... We had separate departments. Madcaps departments. Bonwit's Philadelphia, we gave two showings a year, when I would come back from Europe. All over the country. It was fun too. It's still fun. It's a great fun business.

Q: In terms of the way in which you sold your merchandise, you had a salesman in the New York... You had sales people right here. When did you move here, by the way, to 28 W. 39th Street?

A: Forty years ago.

Q: Forty years ago? Oh. So you've been here since the early '40's.

A: Yes.
Q: I see. And...
A: This was a famous restaurant.
Q: Was it?
A: Lawrence Coffee House. They had dancing downstairs.
Q: I see. You've been here for 40 years, and during those 40 years you did have, obviously, a showroom in which there were people selling and buyers who were coming in to you. Did you also have a sales person who traveled; who went to sell the stores?
A: No. I made personal appearances. Peggy came along with me to some of them.
Q: When did...You had a brother who was in your business for a period of time...Never?
A: He was a lawyer.
Q: Sorry. That was somebody else. And Janet Sloane came into the business, of course, and took over some of the PR and...
A: PR and advertising.
Q: Right. Exactly. Sure. And I think I know the history pretty well, from the time that you really made your efforts in the areas of licensing and so on, because I do have that in Janet's transcript. So I would like to go over a few more things. When you had started your business, as you indicated, you really did not need a lot of money. In those days, how much was a little bit of money? Just as an idea.
A: Fifteen thousand.
Q: And was this money you were able to raise on your own, or did you go to banks or...? How did you raise money then?
A: Well, I got it from my father and mother.
Q: Was your father ever in this kind of business, incidentally?
A: No. But there was no problem about the money.
Q: If you had had to, could you have raised money through a bank?
In those days?
A: I sould have, I guess. As a matter of fact, the only time that we ever used a bank was in '47 or '48, when we needed angora, which is made in France, for the angora berets. So there was a rush and I walked across the street. At that time I was in the Manufacturer's Hanover. It was just the Hanover Bank & Trust Company...
Q: Before the merger.
A: And there were only three millinery people in that bank. One was Edgar Laurie and one was a fellow by the name of Silverman. I remember that because when I went in to open the account, they said, "You know, we don't want any millinery people."
Q: That was about what year?
A: I would say it was the '40s, late '40s. Anyway, we opened an account and I went over and said I wanted some money, and he said, "Well..." And it was very little; $10-$15,000. And he said, "Well, your balances aren't that big. You're in the bank, but it doesn't amount to very much." This was the Vice President in charge. He said, "What security do you have?" And we had a piece of property that the business had bought up in the Bronx, and we had bought it because there was a subway coming through. At any rate, he said, "Oh, we're not into real estate. To hell with it." But he gave me the money and we paid it back in 6-8 months. And that was the last time. We've never used the bank.
Q: So that basically you've been working with your own money.


Q: And you had enough of a cash flow... So that that means that there was enough of a continuity from one month to another, unlike the apparel industry when there are peaks and valleys.

A: Because we've always been able to anticipate because we're in the accessory business. And the accessory business includes, as I said before... we were the first ones to make a one-size glove. It was a knitted glove.

Q: Well, now, that's interesting. Talk about the product mix, because you have diversified.

A: Well, we've been, as you can see, in scarves, hats, at one point in gloves; we even made a glove last year. It didn't do anything much, but... When the used jeans...You know, the rewashed jeans came in, we bought them by the carload and cut off the bottoms... and sent them out and sold them. In other words, we managed to keep abreast of fashion and anticipated to some extent...

Q: So that you would not have the valleys that you would have... that you would function on a reasonably even keel throughout the year.

A: And we have never confined ourselves to one raw material in hats. There have been people who specialized only in felts. When felts are no good, they're finished. We've always made fabrics, felts, straws, knits--we made a complete line of headwear. In other words... And I'm sure there are many firms, not particularly well known, on the West Side, who are in business in the second generation, most of them, who have also continued to have a profitable, not a tremendous million or multi-million dollar business, but have always managed to make a good living and live very comfortably, as have I.
Q: Could you talk a little bit about labor. You, I gather, make most of your merchandise here. And does here mean New York City and environs, or do you use other areas?

A: Well, we use factories all over the country.

Q: Oh, do you.

A: Have to. All over the country.

Q: Could you give me some examples of things which were made in other parts of the country?

A: No, I can't pick any particular thing because we have straws that are made, some of them...Well, for example, we use a firm that you should know, International Hat Company. We've used firms like that all through the country, when they've had the right items.

Q: How do you find them? You don't have a special person who is in charge of production?

A: No. We know what they can make by this time. We know that the hat comes in...If Janet sees something in Europe now, or I may go to Italy for a few days, and there's something there, I can look at it and think of somebody who might be able to make it; somebody who might even have the die, 25-30 years ago, because there are only a couple of die makers...There's only one left. There's only one block maker. See those blocks up there? They're wood blocks. Well, actually, there's only one man making those and he's not too well. And it will be an awful blow if he goes out of business.

Q: Where would hat blocks be made in that case?

A: I don't know. There's only one left in Europe as far as I know. Because that's really a craftsman.
A: To make the wood blocks particularly is a very, very precise craft. And an art. They're now being collected by antique dealers.

Q: I would think so, yes.

A: And some of the big artists have used them; you know, decorated them with glasses and so forth. And they had a showing up on Madison Avenue in the auction. What's the name of the auction room up there?

Q: Well... Sotheby's?

A: No.

Q: Doyle?

A: Well, at any rate, there was an art gallery...

Q: It is Sotheby Parke-Bernet.

A: Oh, Parke-Bernet. That's right.

Q: Okay.

A: Well, at any rate, there was an art gallery that had quite an exhibit. I have pictures of it. I have pictures of that exhibit that I found in London, in one of the London papers at the time. That's a very interesting part of the business... .

Q: Someday you will give those to a museum, I trust.

A: I would assume, the ones that are left. They have to be refinished though and that's quite a job. But in the meantime I've been giving one here and one there to friends as wedding gifts and...

Q: Save them for a Costume Institute. They really have historical value... . So the blocks were being made by a group of people who have really pretty well died out. What about... And therefore the merchandise that you have that comes from other parts of the country, I assume does not include the sorts
of hats that require blocks, right? It's a whole different kind of
collection, I assume. You were talking, for example, about your crocheted
hats as often being made as part of a home industry, so to speak.

A: The hats today, most of them, are being made on metal blocks
by machine. In fact, there's very little hand work that goes into them, even
the so-called designer hats. I mean, they are shapes and then they put trims
on them.

Q: So it's a changing method of construction that continues
to exist.

A: This has the nailheads. Now the nailheads are put on but
the hat itself is blocked first. That particular hat was blocked on a wood
block, but there is very little of that any more.

Q: Anyway, when we were talking about labor and where hats are
made and so forth, have you been unionized, or do you belong to a union?

A: No, because we're not manufacturers.

Q: If you're not considered manufacturers what are you considered?

A: We're distributors.

Q: I see. That's an interesting distinction. You are con-
sidered distributors or agents then.

A: Not agents. Distributors.

Q: I'm sorry, I'm trying to understand... the terminology...

A: We distribute a labeled product, and one of the reasons
for that is we don't confine ourselves to any one type of hat. I told you.
Some are specialists in felts, specialists in...We carry a complete line.
The difference between us and the other lines is that ours is a fashion product;
the others, in most instances, are just a basic....

Q: Right. Alfred, could you talk a little bit about advertising and sales promotion and how that's affected your business over the years, if it has.

A: Well, we have never budgeted a lot of money for advertising. We've been very fortunate. We've been able, because of Janet Sloane, our Vice-President, to have a great many credits on magazine covers. In fact we just had a cover last month, and we've had many, many over the years. And from that standpoint, I guess, the publicity has helped us. But it isn't anything we hang our hat on. It's just the merchandise that sells and reorders.

Q: You started talking earlier and I interrupted you, I'm sorry to say, about the ideal setup that you would work out were you to go into the business all over again, and you started...

A: No, no. Not ideal. Because I think as our business is today it's very satisfactory. But there are many things that come to mind...I'm not thinking of them right now, but it would seem to me that I would go back to some of the things that we did years ago, which entailed having separate departments in the stores, and which, of course, have been taken up by some of the other label lines in the ready-to-wear field. But outside of that, there isn't very much I would change. I wouldn't have a big sales force of anything like that. It isn't necessary, because it's a comparatively small industry, as I told you, in volume. In this day and age, anybody over in the ready-to-wear market who does under $25 million is a small business.

Q: Right, right. And that's not quite comparable with accessories. $25 million gets you to be moderate to large.
Just one final sub....Well, two things that I would like to get your thoughts on. Number one, if you were to be asked by a young person—a recent school graduate or somebody who just wants to enter the industry—what kind of advice would you give about entering the accessories market?

A: Well, in view of my experience, I would say that unless they're quite willing to work and learn about fashion, not just running a business, then I'd advise them to stay away and go with some big outfit or go into something else.

Q: Do you think that it helps people, before they go into their own business, to work for other firms?

A: Oh, unquestionably.

Q: But the experience that you are suggesting isn't just the experience of running the business. It's really being immersed in fashion, and this is what you were saying.

A: Right.

Q: And then the final thing—How do you see the succession in your own business? What's going to happen to Madcaps?

A: Well, I haven't given that much thought yet. I haven't given any thought to retiring. I may not have any choice. But...

Q: You have no children who would be interested in coming in to take over?

A: No.

Q: So that you really have not pursued it or given it serious thought.

A: Not particularly, because this is a business where individuals
count for a good deal. Personalities. But the reason it is important for
the young...somebody new starting out to go into business is to learn how
the business is run, and that has a great bearing on whether or not they're
going to be successful. Because if they happen to be with a business where
the management is poor, which it is in the majority of the cases in the
fashion business, because the history of the fashion business...There aren't
that many firms that last; very few go to the second generation. Then, of
course, it's unfortunate. If, on the other hand, they go with a small firm
and they see how the business is run, they see how important it is to establish
credit and to see that the bills are paid and to adjust the standard of living
to one's income...If they can do that, then they'll stay in business.

Q: That buyer at...
A: She wasn't a buyer...

Q: To sum up, you developed your own philosophy of how you
wanted to run your business and with what kind of merchandise and you have
stayed with that.

A: It's almost the same today. We still run a hat that's ex-
actly the same as the Fortnum and Mason. Do you know Fortnum and Mason?

Q: Yes.

A: There was a Fortnum & Mason hat. Best's did it, and we
still run it and it's still a very big hat. With those stores that catered
to what we think is the bulk of the American market....

Q: Thank you very much. I appreciate the time and the interest-
ing things that you've told us. Thank you.