

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
ALABAMA JEWISH HISTORY PROJECT**

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<Begin Disk 1>

INTERVIEW BEGINS

Sandra: Today is January 19, 2012. I am with Michael and Richard Pizitz who have agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. I am Sandra Berman, the archivist. I am very appreciative that both of you have agreed to participate in our project. I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about the family background: when the Pizitz family came to America, why, and how they ended up in Birmingham [Alabama]. If you could start there.

Richard: Our grandfather, Louis Pizitz,¹ came to the United States in the early 1890's. He came from Bialystok [Poland, now Belarus]. When he arrived in the United States, he basically knew no English. He had a relative from the area where he lived. He went and stayed with her. He started selling . . . peddling in New York. Eventually [he] got enough stake and decided to go south. He peddled his way from New York to Swainsboro, Georgia. En route, he started with a pack on his back in the proverbial . . . Horatio Alger-type,² I guess. Eventually [he] got a mule

¹ Louis Pizitz (1868-1959) was the founder of Pizitz, a major regional department store chain in Alabama. The chain was founded as the Louis Pizitz Dry Goods Co. in 1899 in Birmingham, Alabama. He was born in Brest Litovsk (today Brest, Belarus) and lived in Bialystok, Poland before immigrating and settling in Birmingham.

² Horatio Alger Jr. (1832-1899) was an American writer who became famous for writing over 100 books for young working class males portraying rags to riches stories. His characters gain wealth and honor and ultimately realize the "American Dream."

and a wagon and continued until he got to Swainsboro where he eventually . . . where he married, and where he opened a small store.

Sandra: Who did he marry?

Richard: He married Minnie [Smolian] Pizitz.

Sandra: Her maiden name?

Richard: Don't remember.

Sandra: Do you remember the name or do you know the name of the store in Swainsboro?

Richard: I think it was 'Pizitz.'

Sandra: Pizitz. Was it general dry goods?

Richard: Yes.

Sandra: Did he ever talk about why he came south?

Michael: He had a relative in Swainsboro . . .

Richard: Yes.

Michael: I think he had a relative in Swainsboro, don't know who it was. He settled in Swainsboro. [He] lived there not long—I don't know whether it was two or three years or something like that—and came to Birmingham about . . . 1896 or 1897 would be close. He said the reason he came to Birmingham, or the reason he left Swainsboro, is his wife said he could never make a living [and] that it was too small a city for him to be successful. He chose to come to Birmingham for whatever reason. He did not have any relatives in Birmingham.

Richard: Incidentally, according to our grandfather, when our grandmother, Minnie Pizitz, said, "We got to leave Swainsboro," the two cities they narrowed it down to were Atlanta [Georgia] and Birmingham. But they thought Birmingham had a much better future than Atlanta, with the iron, and steel, and coal. That's why they came here rather than Atlanta.

Sandra: How did the store get started here? Where was it and was it a general dry goods [store] in the beginning?

Michael: When he originally came here, he still peddled. He still went house-to-house. It's amazing when we were growing up in the business in the mid-1950's, late-1950's, how many people would come into the store and said Mr. Louis had been to their house out in the country. He stayed at more homes than people have stayed in Hilton hotels because everyone we met said he'd been here, and he stayed here for the night. Eventually, after peddling and raising enough

money, [he] came to Birmingham and opened a small store on 1st Avenue North, which was a block from the store he later built in the mid-1920's, which is directly behind you there.

Sandra: Did he ever discuss what it was like peddling and going into these homes? For a young Jewish man to be travelling the Deep South?³

Michael: I don't ever recall stating how it was, but I know that he had his wagon and would go out, evidently, for some time. He didn't go out overnight, because he stayed with a lot of these people, where he sold goods. I got the impression that he had wound up with a regular route, where he went back to see people on later trips that he knew to sell. From that, I guess, when he raised enough money, [he] decided to open a small store which was probably about 1896, 1897, or something like that.

Sandra: Did he still have a large family in Bialystok? Did he bring anyone else over?

Michael: He brought a lot of people over. I don't know at what point, but he brought several relatives over to the United States. There were . . . we had relatives in Tennessee and in Georgia, as well as in Alabama. But I do know he did bring some other people over, yes.

Sandra: Did his wife work in the store?

Richard: Not to my knowledge.

Sandra: So how can you explain . . . so many stores . . . so many people started out that way peddling goods . . . the pack, and now the horse-and-wagon and the small store. They never reached the size of the store like Pizitz. Why do you think he was able to achieve such success?

Michael: I'll go back. He told a story to someone that used to work at Pizitz and they wrote up the story. He was a unique individual. When he was in Russia—or Poland which today is Russia—at age 17 or 18 or 19, he was supervising several hundred men back then. They were in the . . . What were they called? Shoddy?⁴

Richard: Rags, yes.

Michael: I don't know whether they produced it, but shoddy was some kind of fabric or rags and they would load it in these train loads and ship it to another part of Poland. But at that time he said he supervised, even at that young age, several hundred men. One of the reasons he came to the United States, [as] he told in the story, is one time the winter snows came and they ruined

³ 'Deep South' is a descriptive category of the cultural and geographic sub-regions in the American South. Today, the Deep South is generally considered to be Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina. Some people add Florida and parts of Texas as well.

⁴ An inferior quality yarn or fabric made from the shredded fiber of waste woolen cloth or clippings.

the entire shipment because these were all open cars. He decided it was too harsh in Poland. It was too harsh to make a living.

Richard: He also said that he and a partner owned . . . shipped the shoddy which they hadn't paid for, and it was ruined, and he had to leave, is what he said. He also studied briefly for the rabbinate . . .

Sandra: Really?

Richard: . . . in Russia, before he came over.

Sandra: So was he a religious man? When he . . .

Michael: Yes, I would say he was religious. He was very . . . became very active in Temple Beth-El.⁵ He helped organize the first YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association]⁶ in Birmingham. He was a unique individual who people were attracted to. He did things back then in the 1890's and early 1900's that people I don't think can do today. I don't think many people I've ever known could do what he did with basically not being able to speak English, with almost no money when he came here to be successful, but he would . . . people were attracted to him. I don't know that he was deeply religious from practicing in his home, all the different religious events. I don't know about Friday nights and so forth. I do know he became very active in all places of Jewish life in Birmingham from Temple Beth-El . . . He belonged to all three temples: Emanu-El,⁷ Beth-El, and Kneseth Israel.⁸ [He] helped found the original YMHA, was involved in the founding of Hillel⁹ in Tuscaloosa [Alabama], and was involved in the new Birmingham Jewish Community Center¹⁰ in Birmingham. He really was very involved, not only in the general community from the retail business, but in the Jewish community in Birmingham.

⁵ Temple Beth-El was founded in 1907 and was originally on the Northside of Birmingham and was affiliated with Orthodox Judaism. Today it is affiliated with Conservative Judaism. The current sanctuary was built in 1926 on Highland Avenue on the Southside. Its current rabbi is Rabbi Randall Konigsburg. (2016)

⁶ The Young Men's Hebrew Association was set up in various cities of the United States for the mental, moral, social and physical improvement of Jewish young men. The first YMHA was started in New York in 1874 and spread across the country in the following years. They still exist today and are more like social clubs.

⁷ Temple Emanu-El is a Reform Jewish congregation. The community first held *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* celebrations in 1881. Before the synagogue was built, the community met at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Land for the synagogue was purchased in 1884 and the building was inaugurated in 1889.

⁸ The first Orthodox congregation to organize in Birmingham, Alabama in 1889.

⁹ Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life is a Jewish campus organization. Its mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish students so they may enrich Jewish people and the world.

¹⁰ The Levite Jewish Community Center began as the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA) and was founded in 1887. It was a center for the Eastern European Jews of the Northside. Throughout the years, it served as a meeting spot for all sorts of Jewish organizations and was the site of many social events. In the 1950's, it became the 'Levite Jewish Community Center,' and moved to a \$1,000,000 complex on Montclair Road.

Sandra: Did that sense of Jewishness . . . belonging to all three different synagogues . . . where did your family . . . First of all, how many children did they have? Your grandparents.

Richard: My grandparents had three children.

Sandra: Sons? Daughters?

Richard: Our father, Isadore Pizitz, and he had two sisters Silvia Pizitz and Bertha Pizitz Smolian.

Sandra: Did all three of the children or their spouses enter into the business?

Richard: Our father was eventually . . . ran the store. Our aunt Silvia ran the New York office. She was . . . that was ostensibly a job, but it was not a full time job, certainly. She was very much into art, was an art collector, and actually made a living buying and selling art. Our aunt Bertha, or 'Aunt Bob,' she married a man named Joseph Smolian. He came into the store and worked in the store for many years.

Sandra: There's a Smolian family in Atlanta. Are they related?

Richard: They're . . . yes, and they're in Chattanooga [Tennessee] too. They're all somewhat related.

<discussion about technical issues, interview resumes>

Michael: I don't know the Smolians in Atlanta, but there were Smolians in one of the cities . . . some other city in Georgia.

Richard: Chattanooga also.

Sandra: Chattanooga.

Michael: Chattanooga, but somewhere else in Georgia. They may well be related to the ones from Atlanta.

Sandra: Growing up, where did you attend? Beth El? Or Emanu-El?

Richard: We were always Emanu-El.

Sandra: How did he make that choice? Because Emanu-El is much less . . .

Richard: Our parents wanted Reform,¹¹ they were not interested in Conservative.¹² 'Big Papa,' Louis Pizitz, always . . . even though he belonged to three temples, he really only went to Beth-El.

¹¹ A division within Judaism especially in North America and Western Europe. Historically it began in the nineteenth century. In general, the Reform movement maintains that Judaism and Jewish traditions should be modernized and compatible with participation in Western culture. While the *Torah* remains the law, in Reform

Sandra: I love that, 'Big Papa'?

Richard: That was what we called him.

Sandra: Was there a 'Little Papa'?

Richard: No.

Michael: That's what almost everybody called him too. He made a lot of people call him 'Mr. Louis' and 'Big Papa.'

Sandra: Big Papa!

Sol: Excuse me a minute <coughs>.

Sandra: So your grandfather stayed at Beth El, and you grew up at Emanu-El . . .

Richard: Right.

Sandra: What was it like growing up in Birmingham during the 1940's, 1950's. What was the community like for the two of you?

Richard: The Jewish community in Birmingham is very small. It was small. It was obviously smaller then. Our family moved to Mountain Brook¹³ which is suburban, where most Jewish families today live. [We were] one of the early Jewish families to Mountain Brook. Our family moved there in the mid to late 1930's. There were very few Jewish families in Mountain Brook at the time. Birmingham was rife with antisemitism. There was quite a bit of antisemitism which Michael and I got to enjoy during our school years.

Sandra: Can you give us some examples of some of those incidents?

Richard: Little incidents. I belonged to Boy Scouts.¹⁴ There were two or three Jews in the entire Boy Scout troop. Basically we were often chased home after the meeting. My bicycle . . . you know how it was . . . you were a Boy Scout, you were, what, 12 years old? When I was 12 years old, my bicycle during the meeting was run up the flag pole and dropped to the ground.

Judaism women are included (mixed seating, *bat mitzvah* and women rabbis), music is allowed in the services and most of the service is in English.

¹² A form of Judaism that seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more flexible approach to the interpretation of the law than Orthodox Judaism. It attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and *bat mitzvahs*).

¹³ Mountain Brook is a city and suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. It extends along the ridges known as 'Red Mountain' and 'Shades Mountain.'

¹⁴ A youth organization in the United States. It was founded in 1910 to train youth in responsible citizenship, character development, and self-reliance through participation in a wide range of outdoor activities, educational programs and at older age levels, career-oriented programs in partnership with community organizations. They wear a uniform and earn merit badges for achievements in sports, crafts, science, etc. The boys start as a Cub Scout until age 11 and can move up to be an Eagle Scout.

There were physical altercations. I don't mean that this was a large group, but there were a small group of six or eight people our age who, basically, liked to terrorize Jewish kids.

Sandra: How did you both deal with that? What was the advice you received from your parents about dealing with it?

Richard: Fight back . . .

Michael: There were not . . .

Richard: . . . I guess was about the answer.

Michael: I don't remember . . . I don't remember any physical altercations. There were verbal . . . They did use to often chase people. The classes back then were not over . . . the average class in Mountain Brook . . . Dick [Richard Pizitz] didn't go to Mountain Brook, he went to Lakeview [Elementary School], which was in the city of Birmingham. We moved to Mountain Brook in 1937. Then he went to high school in Birmingham where . . . I went to high school in Birmingham too. The same people back then that were antisemitic were also anti-black. It was generally the same people. When I graduated eighth grade, there were maybe four Jewish people in my class out of about 30 people. The antisemitism was not terrible, but it was overt. You could see it. You could feel it. The same thing with the racial situation. The same people who didn't like Jews or whatever, also did not like blacks. When I went to high school . . . I went to high school at Ramsay where a lot of Jewish people from over the mountain went. Ramsay was made of about, probably, 40 percent people from Mountain Brook, very few of whom were Jewish. The rest of them were people who lived on the Southside, which was all ethnic groups: Italian, Greek, Polish, everything else. The Jewish people seemed to be friendlier with those people than they were with the Mountain Brook people. They more or less stuck together. There was . . . again, there was antisemitism, but it started to lessen because the Mountain Brook people in Ramsay High School . . . [Richard would] have to speak, he went to a different high school . . . the Mountain Brook people in the Ramsay High School were really at a minority. They weren't in the majority. [But] the Jewish people were an extreme minority back then.

Richard: I went to Phillips High School, which is inner-city Birmingham. There were probably 2,000 students. I don't think there were ten Jews at my high school. There, I did not experience any antisemitism. It was in Mountain Brook where we lived where the antisemitism was pretty strong. Are you familiar with the book, *Carry Me Home [Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution]* written by Diane McWhorter? It won the Pulitzer

Prize, maybe three years ago. It's basically a very, very thick story of Birmingham in the Civil Rights Era, centered around her father [Martin McWhorter]. Her father lived six houses from us and he was definitely a participant. Not one of the worst ones, but he was a participant in the anti-Jewish situation. It was cited in her book. There were frequent mentions . . . In a Pulitzer Prize winning book, there were frequent mentions of Pizitz and Pizitz Department Store, and so forth.

<tape is interrupted and then resumes>

Michael: . . . [anti]semitism was mainly in Mountain Brook.

Richard: Right.

Michael: It wasn't in Ramsay, it wasn't in Phillips. It was mainly in Mountain Brook. For some reason, it always was about four or five or six or eight of the same people. It wasn't predominant with everybody. I was in an eighth grade class. I don't think there was one person in my class that was what I would call a violent antisemite. There were some above me, one or two below me. There weren't that many, but the ones that were didn't make any bones about it.

Richard: You came along four years later. It was easier then.

Michael: Yes, it was easier, there's no question.

Richard: The real bigots were . . . fights.

Richard: I'm going forward a few years. When I'd been married a couple of years—this would have been in 1957 or 1958 perhaps—my wife and I went to an area in Mountain Brook to look at . . . we saw an ad for a house, and went there. The real estate agent who I knew . . . I can't remember his name today, who was not in any way an antisemite . . . We went to see the house. He said, "Dick, I'm sorry, we can't sell you this house." It was because I was Jewish. This was somewhere near Dunbarton [Drive]. It's a heavily Jewish area today.

Sandra: But Mountain Brook wasn't restricted in the . . .

Richard: No, but . . .

Sandra: But certain streets were?

Richard: There were areas that were restricted.

Michael: Right.

Richard: Developers that restricted. There was another town, Hoover¹⁵ and Vestavia [Hills]¹⁶. . . Jews really could not buy there.

Sandra: I didn't realize that there were within Mountain Brook . . .

Richard: There were pockets of Mountain Brook where they would not sell to Jews.

Sandra: So since that was occurring, were most of your friends Jewish or not Jewish?

Richard: Jewish.

Sandra: Did you associate more with your Temple friends?

Richard: My friends were more Jewish. Growing up in the early . . . in the teens . . . there were two Jewish fraternities in Birmingham: AZA [Aleph Zadik Aleph]¹⁷ and Pi Tau Pi.¹⁸ A lot of that was . . . people stuck together with that.

Michael: Back then—I'm going back to Ramsay High School where Mr. [Sol] Kimerling¹⁹ went—the social life was almost all Jewish. There were many other phases of life, where it was mixed: in athletics, in general studies. Being in school where there were—in high school—very few problems between Jews and gentiles, I had many gentile friends. I ended up rooming in college with someone I went through 12 years of grammar school and high school with [but] who was not Jewish. The antisemitism pretty well stuck to Mountain Brook because that's where most of the Jewish people are. You don't have antisemitism where there are no Jews.

Sandra: Having both experienced that, do you feel that it has been a factor in how you have led your lives? Or how you raised your own children?

Richard: That's a hard question to answer. I would say no, if I had to give a yes/no answer to it. Society had changed a lot by the time our kids came along. I don't want to say there was no antisemitism, but when my kids were growing up, it was very, very small, really.

¹⁵ Hoover is a city in Jefferson and Shelby counties in north central Alabama, United States. The City of Hoover was incorporated in 1967 and named after William H. Hoover, a local insurance company owner. Before that, the area had been known as the Green Valley community since the 1930s. The largest suburb around Birmingham, Hoover is part of the Birmingham-Hoover, AL Metropolitan Statistical Area. Hoover's neighborhoods and planned communities are located along the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

¹⁶ Vestavia Hills is a city in Jefferson and Shelby counties in the State of Alabama. It is an affluent suburb of the city of Birmingham. It is the third largest city in Jefferson County, after Birmingham and Hoover. The population of Vestavia Hills is 90 percent black (2010).

¹⁷ The Grand Order of the Aleph Zadik Aleph (AZA) is an international youth-led fraternal organization for Jewish teenagers, founded in 1924. It currently exists as the male wing of B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, an independent non-profit organization. AZA's sister organization, for teenage girls, is the B'nai B'rith Girls.

¹⁸ This appears to be a chapter of AZA.

¹⁹ Sol Kimerling (1930-) was a native of Birmingham, Alabama. He graduated from the University of Alabama and served in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. He worked in the family business in Birmingham, M. Kimerling and Sons, a scrap metal business started by his grandfather and expanded by his father. He was President of Birmingham Jewish Federation and a board member of YMCA.

Michael: I know this ain't your question, but when the racial troubles started and peaked in the 1960's, the antisemitism not necessarily had gone down. The target became blacks, not Jews, back at that point in time. One story that might be of interest, talking about antisemitism in the 1960's. Dick mentioned Vestavia and Hoover, which were pretty well restricted. There were almost no Jewish people in either one of them. My grandfather, in the 1930's, lived in an area which is now part of the city of Vestavia. In 1942 or 1943 he could not get enough gas stamps to . . . you probably don't remember that because you're too young . . . couldn't get enough gas stamps to drive to Birmingham.²⁰ So he moved into the city, but he retained a lot [of] acreage in Vestavia. I don't know if [it was] 50, 60, 100 acres. I don't know what it was. In the 1960's our parents donated that land to the city of Vestavia. It's off Highway 31 in Vestavia. They put a stipulation in there that it could not be used commercially. It could only be used for a city park or something on that order. The city of Vestavia came back to our parents when they decided they wanted to use the land. I guess that was what? <to Richard> Late 1960's?

Richard: I'd say later than that . . . 1970's.

Michael: Maybe early 1970's. They said, "We want to build a school. We built the high school. We want to build our first middle school here. We would like your permission to do it." It was not in the deed. They were not allowed to build a school. There was a lot of discussion back and forth. Our parents went back to them and said, "We will agree to it. We would like the school named 'Louis Pizitz.'" Now, this is a Jewish name in a city that was not one percent Jewish then. Mountain Brook was . . . may have been 10 or 15 [percent] back then, but still they turned it down. They said, "We can't do it, but we will name the street Pizitz Drive." Our parents went back and talked to the people making the decisions. They were adamant, "If we're going to change the deed so it can be a school, we want it to be called the 'Louis Pizitz Middle School.'" After a lot of discussion and negotiation, they agreed to it. Today it is the Louis Pizitz Middle School. But I don't think there's any question, they did not want a Pizitz School in Vestavia back in the 1970's when there were so few Jewish people there. It's still Louis Pizitz Middle School. It's been remodeled many times since then, and it is on Pizitz Drive in Vestavia. It was an interesting story, what happened back then.

Sandra: I'm surprised they haven't tried to change the name over the years.

²⁰ During World War II, gas was rationed on the home front. War ration books and tokens were issued to each American family, dictating how much gasoline, tires, rubber, sugar, meat, coffee, shoes and other goods.

Michael: We used to talk about . . . maybe they didn't want the name Pizitz because they couldn't . . . the football cheers with Pizitz didn't make a lot of sense.

Richard: At one point, the high school was on that actual land. They didn't want exactly the football team with the name 'Pizitz,' because it was hard to cheer for that. That's when it became the middle school, I think.

Sandra: That's great! That's a great story.

Richard: Because there's no football at the middle school.

Sandra: Having both gone to Emanu-El, were you *bar mitzvahed*?²¹

Richard: No.

Michael: There were no *bar mitzvahs* back then.

Richard: They didn't exist at Emanu-El.

Michael: There were a few people. In fact, when he was confirmed²² and was a *bar mitzvah* age, I don't think anybody could be *bar mitzvahed*. By the time I did, four years later, if you went to Emanu-El and wanted to be *bar mitzvahed*, you had to go to Beth-El and go to the classes at Beth El to be *bar mitzvahed*. Very few people got *bar mitzvahed* back then.

Sandra: How did that sit with your grandfather? Did he want you to be *bar mitzvahed*? Do you remember?

Richard: I never remember the subject coming up.

Michael: I don't either.

Sandra: I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about your father and how the department store, under his presidency, grew to become this chain of department stores. Was it under him or was it under your grandfather that that expansion started?

Richard: As Michael said, they started the store in the late 1920's . . . 1927.

Michael: The new store.

²¹ Hebrew for 'son of commandment.' A rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday.

²² A coming of age ritual that originated in the Reform movement which scorned the idea that at 13 years of age a child was an adult. They replaced *bar* and *bat mitzvah* with a confirmation ceremony at about age 16 to 18. In some Conservative synagogues the confirmation concept has been adopted as a way to continue and child's Jewish education and involvement for a few more years.

Richard: It was built in two phases. [It] was completed I think, in the second phase, in about 1933 or 1934. It was . . . if there was ever a less opportune time to build a 230,000 square foot downtown department store, it was in the height of the [Great] Depression.²³ Our father came in to the business in 1929 . . . no, earlier than that, 1925, maybe . . . after he got out of college. The store was a very large downtown department store. It was the largest downtown department store. We didn't start getting . . . we didn't open our first branch until about 1953 or 1954 . . .

Michael: [No].

Richard: . . . I would think.

Michael: It was later than that.

Richard: Maybe . . . I don't . . .

Michael: Late 1950's.

Richard: Yes, I guess it was a little later.

Michael: Late 1950's.

Richard: Late 1950's. Michael and I were both in the business by then. Our father was a very good merchant. He was very conservative, that's probably why the store survived the hard times and the [Great] Depression. Our grandfather was an instinctive merchant. When he was in his late eighties, he still stayed on the sales floor . . . the women's apparel floor . . . that was the love of the business. He had a chair there, and would sit there for four or five hours a day. Customers all came up to him and knew him. They would ask him how this coat looked on them . . . when he was in his seventies and eighties. Dad was not as much an instinctive merchant. He was a merchant, but he was strong in the operation and advertising and credit phases of the business. When Michael and I came in we were the ones to push more for the branch stores. We eventually ended up with 13 stores around Alabama.

Michael: All the expansion came . . . our grandfather died in 1957 . . . We had one store then. The next store was the Bessemer [Alabama] store, opened two years later, or the Roebuck²⁴ [Alabama] store. I don't remember. The expansion came during our father's . . . when he was president. Then we pushed it more as we got older. Dick became president, and we pushed expansion more into the 1970's and the early 1980's. Dick was telling an interesting story about

²³ The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. The time of the Great Depression varied across nations, but in most countries it started in about 1929 and lasted until the late 1930's or early 1940's. It was the longest, most widespread, and deepest depression of the twentieth century.

²⁴ Neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama in Jefferson County.

the difference. My father was a businessman and did things by the books and understood the numbers and the figures and so forth. Our grandfather, Louis Pizitz, had an instinctive feel for merchandise. He didn't worry about books. A couple of stories: one time he came into the store, probably at 10 o'clock or 10:30. The sales people on the first floor were underneath the counters. They were taking stuff out and putting it up. I can't imitate his Jewish accent, because he never spoke good English, but he asked the salesclerk, "What are you doing?" The salesperson said—I think it was in lingerie on the first floor—"Mr. Louie, we're taking inventory. We're counting the merchandise to see how much we have." [My grandfather] said, "You don't need to do that. There's no point in doing that. I started with nothing and whatever we got is what I made." That was a typical story. He didn't know what inventory was.

Another story that always stuck in my mind. It'll tell you the type of merchant he was. One day he's on the first floor. It was Easter and we were selling Easter bunnies. There was a big table with these \$3 and \$4—whatever they were back then—Easter bunnies. There was this woman with a young child . . . black woman with a very young child. The child was crying. She wanted one. The mother said, "No, no." My grandfather came up to her and said, "What's wrong?" She said, "I can't afford it." He picked up one and gave it to the mother to give to the child. He went up to his office. He had someone—his secretary—call down there, to charge it to him. [He] said, "How much was it?" The salesperson did not want to make him feel bad so he told him it was \$1.99. He immediately went to my father and said, "We're selling those bunny rabbits too damn cheap!"

Michael: That was the type of merchant he was, he had a feel for what he was doing. He did not go by the books.

Sandra: Was there ever any question that your father would go in to the business?

Richard: No.

Michael: [No].

Richard: There was never any question about my father's sons, Michael and I and Merritt . . .

Richard: . . . it was destined, what we were born [to do].

Michael: When we grew up we'd always have dinner together every night. When you're in the retail business it may be unlike the scrap business or the oxygen business or other things. At night, every night at the dinner table, it was stories about the business. It's easy to talk about on

account of customers and everything else. From the time we were six or seven or eight years old, that's all we knew, was department store business.

Sandra: Did either of you ever think, "Hmm, maybe I'd like to do something else?"

Richard: No, not really.

Sandra: Which one of you is . . . are you more like your grandfather or your father? In terms of business, more of the merchandiser or more of the numbers person?

Richard: I think Michael and I both are a mix.

Michael: Yes.

Richard: I really do. Our younger brother, Merritt had zero feel for merchandise, zero interest in it. His interest was in [the] operations part of the business, personnel, warehousing, and that sort of thing. He would not have known a coat from a toy. I mentioned the business had a very difficult time in the [Great] Depression, like most businesses. Our father and grandfather told us a story. [The]First National Bank had loaned . . . I was four years old at the time, Michael was about to be born, so we don't know and we weren't around. The president of First National Bank called my grandfather over to the bank. He was very delinquent on a loan. They had evidently tried to collect the loan from him. He had no money. It was the height of the [Great] Depression. The president of the bank said, "Mr. Pizitz, we can't go any further. You haven't been able to pay." My grandfather took the keys and put the key on his desk and he said, "I guess you're in the department store business then because I can't pay." He left his office and walked to the corner to walk back to the store which was a block-and-a-half away. The president ran out and caught him on the corner and said, "Mr. Pizitz, let's discuss this a little further." The bank didn't want to be in the department store business.

<interview is interrupted then resumes>

Sandra: You were saying during the [Great] Depression that your . . .

Richard: During the [Great] Depression, the State of Alabama had no money. They issued scrip²⁵ to the teachers. The scrip was . . . people thought it might well be worthless. Pizitz accepted the scrip, \$1 for \$1 and locked it up in a safe. It was a year, or some years later [when] it was redeemed by the state for 100 cents on \$1. Our grandfather also bought coal mines in

²⁵ Depression scrip was used during the depression era as a substitute for government issued currency. Because of the banks closing temporarily and the lack of physical currency, someone had to come up with another form of currency to keep the economy going and a way for trade to continue. Therefore the old idea of local currency was reborn. Paper, cardboard, wood, metal tokens, leather, clam shells and even parchment made from fish skin was used. At one point, the U.S. Government considered issuing a nationwide scrip on a temporary basis.

those times so the people could keep working. The coal mines were operated . . . obviously he didn't operate them, because he didn't know how to, but had people to do it. [He] eventually sold the coal mines back. But at least the miners could keep working. That was an important part of Birmingham's economy at the time.

Sandra: Did he also extend a lot of credit to the customers so they could buy on time and pay it off?

Richard: Yes.

Michael: The bank at the time, which was the First National Bank of Birmingham,²⁶ also told him not to take the scrip, because it would not be worth anything. He continued to take it. That's probably one reason why the store became successful after the recession. These customers, who had shopped with him—who couldn't shop elsewhere—had some loyalty. [They] kept shopping at Pizitz because of what he had done during the early 1930's.

Sandra: If you can talk a little bit now about Southern society [and] Jim Crow.²⁷ How did the store deal with its white customers and its black customers? Were there separate fountains in the store? Were there separate dressing rooms during those years?

Richard: There were separate fountains. There were separate restrooms. There were never separate fitting rooms. Apocryphally, in Diane McWhorter's book that I mentioned, she said there were separate fitting rooms, but there were not. Some stores did have that. We did not. The rest . . .

Sandra: How . . .

²⁶ First National Bank of Birmingham began its life as National Bank of Birmingham in 1872. The name was changed to First National Bank of Birmingham in 1884 after merging with City Bank of Birmingham. The name AmSouth Bank was adopted in 1989 and after merging with Regions Bank of Birmingham in 2006, it has been known as Regions Bank.

²⁷ Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. The name seems to have originated in the song "Jump Jim Crow," a song-and-dance caricature of blacks performed by white actor Thomas D. Rice in blackface in 1832. As a result of Rice's fame, "Jim Crow" became a pejorative expression meaning "Negro" by 1838 and the later segregation laws became known as "Jim Crow" laws. Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the southern states of the former Confederacy, with a supposedly "separate but equal" status for black Americans, although in reality this was not so. Some examples of Jim Crow laws are the segregation of public schools, places, and public transportation and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. Private businesses, political parties and unions created their own Jim Crow arrangements, barring blacks from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, from shopping or working in certain stores, from working at certain trades, etc. In the middle twentieth century, the Supreme Court began to overturn Jim Crow laws on constitutional grounds. Rosa Parks defied the Jim Crow laws when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, which became a catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement. Her actions, and the demonstrations that followed, led to a series of legislative and court decisions that contributed to undermining the Jim Crow system. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 officially ended Jim Crow laws.

Michael: Segregated restrooms, segregated restaurant. Everything was segregated, [except] the shopping experience and the fitting rooms, as Dick mentioned.

Sandra: Did you ever talk about those issues in the home? Was it a subject of . . . for so many of our interviewees they all said, “It was just how it was.”

Richard: That would be our answer. It would be my answer, and I think Michael’s too. That’s how it was until the early 1960’s.

Sandra: Can you reflect a little bit about the changes that started to happen and the effect it had on the store during the early 1960’s?

Richard: You’re speaking of the Civil Rights era?

Sandra: Civil rights. Yes.

Richard: Basically, almost until Martin Luther King [Jr.]²⁸ came to Birmingham, there was quiet. There was no—if you want to use that bad word—‘agitation’ for change. The restrooms were segregated. They were accepted. We even . . . I didn’t learn this . . . I didn’t know this at the time. White customers were listed on our charge account records as ‘Mr. and Mrs. John Smith.’ Black customers were ‘Mary and John Smith,’ without the ‘Mr.’ and ‘Mrs.’ in front of it. I never knew that when I came in to the store, that that existed.

When Martin Luther King came to town, there were boycotts, there were riots, and there were demonstrations. Things had to change because Birmingham was about going to explode otherwise. All of the focus was on the retailers because Dr. King could not exactly boycott U.S. Steel,²⁹ or the First National Bank, or Alabama Power.³⁰ The black customers were

²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) is best known for his role as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs. A Baptist minister, King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, serving as its first president. With the SCLC, King led an unsuccessful struggle against segregation in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, and organized nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, that attracted national attention following television news coverage of the brutal police response. King also helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. On October 14, 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolence. In 1965, he and the SCLC helped to organize the Selma to Montgomery marches and the following year, he took the movement north to Chicago to work on segregated housing. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. His death was followed by riots in many United States' cities. King was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was established as a holiday in numerous cities and states beginning in 1971, and as a United States federal holiday in 1986.

²⁹ U.S. Steel, also known as United States Steel Corporation, is an integrated steel producer in North America and Europe with an annual steelmaking capacity of 22 million tons (2017). U.S. Steel was founded in [1901](#) when banker J. P. Morgan engineered the merger of the Carnegie Steel Company, Federal Steel Company, and National Steel Company, and was expanded in 1907 with the acquisition of Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company which was based in Birmingham.

major customers in the downtown stores. There were very little suburban businesses in 1963. It was basically focused downtown. The boycott aimed at the major downtown department stores, the vast majority of which were Jewish.

Sandra: How effective was the boycott?

Richard: Very. It . . . not the boycott itself . . . it also created an aura of fear. The white customers were afraid to come downtown because of the daily demonstrations and the police. I'm not going to go into civil rights that much because [Sol Kimerling], the resident expert of the world, is sitting to your right, on civil rights. Essentially, they came . . . To stop the demonstrations and to stop the bomb threats, the department stores met with the black leaders. There were a number of white leaders—young lawyers and such—that were involved in the negotiation. [They] agreed that on a given Monday all the department stores would take the signs off the drinking fountains. Two weeks later, on a given Monday, the signs came off the restrooms. A few weeks after that, the sign . . . the restaurant became integrated. The biggest step, the one we feared the most, we had . . . none of the department stores had any black salespeople. The department stores agreed to put on, on a given day, a couple of black salespeople each. That's the one we feared the most because people were thinking about losing their jobs and the blacks taking over all the jobs. There was not even a ripple with that.

Michael: All the stores did not do it, however.

Richard: Right.

Michael: The largest stores did it, but all . . . some of the stores refused to put on black salespeople. The ones that did, nobody brought in salespeople from outside. We took in . . . we did, and Loveman's³¹ and Parisian³²—the other downtown stores—took black employees that had been there. [They] had been visible to customers. Either they were elevator operators or

³⁰ Alabama Power Company is a public utility, and the second largest division of Southern Company. It generates and distributes electricity to most of the southern two-thirds of Alabama. Its headquarters are the Alabama Power Building in downtown Birmingham. The Alabama Power Company was founded in 1906.

³¹ The store was originally founded in 1887 as A.B. Loveman's Dry Goods Emporium at 1915 Second Avenue in Birmingham, Alabama, by Adolph Bernard Loveman. Moses V. Joseph of Selma, Alabama, soon joined the company and it was renamed Loveman & Joseph. In 1889, the company became Loveman, Joseph & Loeb with the addition of Emil Loeb. The name was later shortened to simply Loveman's. In 1923, the business was sold to the Philadelphia-based City Stores Company. After City Stores filed for bankruptcy, Loveman's closed its doors in 1980 after 93 years in business in Birmingham.

³² The Parisian Dry Goods and Millinery Company was founded in 1877 by two sisters, Estella and Bertha Sommers, in downtown Birmingham. The Parisian department store chain spread throughout Alabama and the Southeast, eventually reaching as far north as Michigan. The Proffitt's Inc. department store chain bought the Parisian franchise in the 1990's and sold it in 2006 to Belk's Inc., which discontinued the Parisian brand.

worked in an office or something like that, where people saw them. These are the people that became the salespeople initially. There was not a ripple.

Going back to the boycott, Dick said the boycott was successful or relatively successful. We were equally boycotted by blacks and whites. The blacks' boycott was really more effective, more organized than the white boycott, because the blacks would bring leaders into town. They would demonstrate, where the whites did not demonstrate nearly as much. The downtown stores suffered from white and black boycotts, not just white boycotts, when this went on.

Richard: The white boycott was, I don't think, nearly as strong. As Michael said, there were no demonstrations or real organization. The boycott is that we were integrationists, that we had given in to all these demands.

Sandra: In other words, you couldn't win. You were caught in the middle.

Michael: [Yes], it's true.

Richard: Two weeks or a week before we agreed to put on the first two black salespeople, as Michael mentioned. One of them was an elevator operator, a lady named Molly Daniels. The other was a member of the housekeeping staff, her name was Adoris Hicks. I still remember those two names and that's 50 years ago. They were gutsy to agree to accept this at the same time, but the people in the store had known them for years and liked them. Rather than bring, as Michael said, rather than bring in outsiders.

I went to the president of the First National Bank a few weeks before. I said, "Mr. Hand³³, the department stores are going to have to do this. You know about it. How about, the same day, you're putting on some black tellers? You're on the board of Alabama Gas,³⁴ how about getting them to put on some black people to accept payments at the window?" He looked at me and he said, "Richard, this is a retailer's problem. Not my problem." That was the mood of the power structure in Birmingham at the time. It was a retailer's problem and none of the other . . . no one did it but a few stores. When we integrated our restaurant, there were only three or four

³³ John Anthon Hand (1901-) was a native of Rome, Georgia, and a leader in the Alabama banking and financial community. He served as an appointee to the Federal Reserve System for five years before embarking on a banking career that culminated in 1956 when he was named president of the First National Bank of Birmingham. He retired in 1972 as chief executive officer of the bank.

³⁴ Alabama Gas Corporation, known as Alagasco, headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, is the largest natural gas utility in north and central Alabama that provides energy to 460,000 homes and businesses. Its history dates back to 1857 when it began its life as Laclede Gas Light Company in St. Louis, Missouri . In 2017, Alagasco, Laclede Gas and Missouri Gas Energy merged and was renamed Spire.

stores that had restaurants in-store. We agreed on a given Monday to integrate it. Over the weekend, mighty Sears, Roebuck³⁵— who was not a locally owned store, obviously—converted their restaurant to self-service with food machines and removed all the chairs. Over the weekend. On the Monday they didn't have a restaurant anymore.

Michael: One, two, three, four . . . five downtown stores integrated and Sears closed their restaurant.

Sandra: That's amazing that they weren't local. Sears was a national chain.

Richard: Yes, we had very . . . the fear what was going to happen with integrating these things was much worse than what actually happened. We had daily bomb threats, but we never had a bomb from the Ku Klux Klan³⁶ or the White Citizens' Council.³⁷ As Michael said, we had loads of charge accounts closed by whites. Apocryphally, you can tell many stories of what went on. I remember going out at the height of that summer. On one side, on the 2nd Avenue side of the store, black people were demonstrating for rights. On the other side of the store, on the 19th Street side, the White Citizens' Council was demonstrating against us, calling us integrationists. The police were on the corner keeping the two apart. I thought we had achieved a perfect balance at that point. I could tell you a lot more about why Birmingham, and obviously Bull Connor³⁸ was why Birmingham . . .

Sandra: We spoke with . . .

Richard: . . . a lot of other reasons. But there were a lot of local leaders in that boycott that were much stronger and much more effective than Martin Luther King. One of whom you'd

³⁵ An American chain of department stores founded by Richard Sears and Alvah Roebuck in 1886. It began as a mail order catalog company and opened retail locations in 1925. It was bought by Kmart in 2005. Sears was the largest retailer in the United States until October 1989 when was surpassed by Walmart.

³⁶ The Ku Klux Klan (or Knights of the Ku Klux Klan today) is a white supremacist, white nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, anti-black secret society, whose methods included terrorism and murder. It was founded in the South in the 1860's and the died out and come back several times, most notably in the 1920's when membership soared again, and then again in the 1960's during the civil rights era. When the Klan was re-founded in 1915 in Georgia, the event was marked by a cross burning on Stone Mountain. It is still in existence. In the past it members dressed up in white robes and a pointed hat designed to hide their identity and to terrify.

³⁷ White Citizens' Council (WCC) was an American white supremacist organization formed on July 11, 1954. After 1956, it was known as the Citizens' Councils of America. It had about 60,000 members, mostly in the South, and was opposed to racial integration during the 1950's and 1960's when it retaliated with economic boycotts and strong intimidation against black activists, including depriving them of jobs. By the 1970's its influence had faded.

³⁸ Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor (1897-1973) was the Commissioner of Public Safety for the city of Birmingham, Alabama, during the years of the Civil Rights Movement. His office gave him the responsibility for administrative oversight of the Birmingham Fire Department and the Birmingham Police Department. Through his covert actions to enforce radical segregation and deny civil rights to African American citizens, he became an international symbol of bigotry.

probably know of that died a couple of months ago was Fred Shuttlesworth.³⁹ [He] probably had more to do with it than Dr. King did.

Sandra: Personally, during that time period, how would you describe the fear that you were feeling for your family, for yourselves?

Michael: There was fear, there's no question about it. It never came to pass, but there was fear. I had never had a gun in my life. I had young children, but I got a gun. I remember I kept the gun under the bed. I kept the shells in the closet and I had the bolt in the drawer. I couldn't have got the gun together in an hour.

Richard: I did the same thing. I never had a gun.

Michael: But I did have a gun. I remember that our parents used to get phone calls at three or four in the morning, threatening phone calls, and always the 'Jew' word was connected with the 'N' word and the . . .

Richard: The threats were all from the whites.

Michael: Yes.

Richard: We were never threatened by blacks, ever.

Michael: Correct. My father went to the police. The police or somebody suggested [to] get a whistle and when they start talking, blow that whistle and then hang up the phone. It really was only threats. There were threats over a period of months. But the threats were only from the whites, not the blacks. The blacks were more effective at boycotting. The whites were more effective at instilling fear.

Richard: When Michael mentioned the gun . . . We both did the same because we had children. We didn't want to . . . My wife said, "What are you going to do when the White Citizen's Council knocks on the door?" I said, "I'm going to ask for ten minutes just to assemble the gun!"

Sandra: Being members of Temple Emanu-El, Rabbi [Milton] Grafman⁴⁰ was a spokesperson for civil rights. Do you think his activity was helpful to you or a hindrance?

³⁹ Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth (1922-2011), born Freddie Lee Robinson, was a U.S civil rights activist who led the fight against segregation and other forms of racism as a minister in Birmingham, Alabama. He was a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), was instrumental in the 1963 Birmingham Campaign, and continued to work against racism and for the alleviation of the problems of the homeless in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he took up a pastorate in 1961. He returned to Birmingham after his retirement in 2007. He helped Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement. The Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport was named in his honor in 2008.

Richard: Rabbi Grafman was . . .

Michael: Favorite subject.

Richard: . . . a recalcitrant spokesman for civil rights. He was status quo. He was not a leader. Later he became a leader, I will say that. Remember when Dr. King's letter⁴¹ from the Birmingham jail was addressed to Birmingham ministers, one of whom was Grafman ? He was addressing them because they weren't doing anything. They weren't taking a leadership role. I don't mean just Bishop [Charles] Carpenter,⁴² who was a . . . <to Sol Kimerling> . . . What was he? Episcopalian? I don't know what he was.

Sol: I think he was Presbyterian.

Richard: Presbyterian, I guess. He was addressed . . . the ministers . . . The leading white rabbis, ministers, did not take a leading role until after . . . until later in the game.

Michael: But when they did . . .

Richard: Yes.

Michael: . . . At the time, Rabbi Grafman was the only rabbi that got involved. The same thing with the ministers. There were a limited number of people when they did get involved. The people that got involved did step out and get involved. They just came along late. We had done the same thing. We did not change because we were satisfied with the status quo also. We never had any problems. We had no problems with the blacks. We had no problems with the whites. Until the pressure came, we didn't change. With the ministers . . . the same thing, until the pressure came, they didn't change either.

Sandra: Atlanta, with Rich's Department Store,⁴³ had similar kinds of experiences. I know that the Magnolia Room⁴⁴ would not integrate. Then once he did integrate, he was boycotted by

⁴⁰ Milton Louis Grafman (1907-1995) was an American rabbi who led Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, Alabama from 1941 until his retirement in 1975. He then served as Rabbi Emeritus from 1975 until his death in 1995. He was one of eight local clergy members who signed a public statement entitled "A Call for Unity," criticizing the Birmingham Campaign, to which Martin Luther King, Jr. responded in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

⁴¹ The 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' is an open letter written on April 16, 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr. from the Birmingham jail. King had been arrested on April 12 after marching in Birmingham in defiance of a court order banning the same. An ally smuggled a newspaper into King which contained a statement by eight white clergymen who spoke against King and his methods. The letter provoked King and he wrote a response that defended the strategy of nonviolent resistance to racism. It said that people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws and to take direct action rather than wait potentially forever for justice to come through the courts. The letter was widely published and became an important text for the American Civil Rights Movement during the early 1960's.

⁴² Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter (1899-1969) was consecrated Bishop of the Alabama Episcopal Diocese on June 24, 1938 and served until 1968. He was another author of the "A Call for Unity" sent to Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁴³ Rich's was a department store retail chain, headquartered in Atlanta that operated in the southern United States from 1867 until 2005. The retailer began in Atlanta as M. Rich & Co. dry goods store and was run by Mauritius

the White Citizens' Councils and white supremacists. It's very similar. Yet, Atlanta had a much calmer period. Do you think that's because Atlanta had better leadership? How would you . . .

Michael Yes. Atlanta . . . always during that period . . . Not always, but during most of that period, in the 1950's and 1960s', Atlanta definitely had more business leadership back at that time. Birmingham had political leadership. But times changed. There were people that came along who were good leaders here. Alabama and Birmingham have had a history of political problems, going back to the 1950's and 1960's, to this day. Atlanta definitely had leadership that was more concerned with the future and the growth and the success of Atlanta than the Birmingham leadership was.

Richard: Atlanta was calling itself "A City Too Busy to Hate."⁴⁵ You know the term. The biggest difference . . . There was very little business leadership in Birmingham. There was a lot in Atlanta. The biggest single difference was the newspapers. The *Birmingham News* . . . Remember, television was not a factor then. There was television, but television news, editorializing, did not exist. The *Birmingham News* was a status quo, racist newspaper. The *Atlanta Journal*, the *Atlanta Constitution* had . . . was it . . .

Sandra: Ralph McGill.⁴⁶

Richard: . . . Ralph McGill . . . had leadership. Though . . . if there was a major . . . when the buses got burned . . . the Freedom Riders,⁴⁷ it was on the front page of every paper of the United

Reich (anglicized to 'Morris Rich'), a Hungarian Jewish immigrant. It was renamed M. Rich & Bro. in 1877, when his brother Emanuel was admitted into the partnership, and was again renamed M. Rich & Bros. in 1884 when the third brother Daniel joined the partnership. In 1929, the company was reorganized and the retail portion of the business became simply, Rich's. Many of the former Rich's stores today form the core of Macy's Central, an Atlanta-based division of Macy's, Inc., which formerly operated as Federated Department Stores, Inc.

⁴⁴ The Magnolia Room was the restaurant in Rich's Department Store in Atlanta. After Rich's refused to integrate the restaurant a series of sit-ins were conducted by students, including Martin Luther King, Jr. They were arrested at the restaurant. A boycott of the store followed the arrests, and by the fall of 1961, Rich's began to desegregate.

⁴⁵ This nickname seems to have originated with William B. Hartsfield (1890-1971) the mayor of Atlanta for six terms between 1937 and 1961. It was under his direction that Atlanta became a world class city with the image of "the City Too Busy to Hate."

⁴⁶ Ralph Emerson McGill (1898-1969), American journalist, was best known as the anti-segregationist editor and publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper. He won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1959.

⁴⁷ Freedom Riders were civil rights activists who rode interstate buses into the segregated southern United States in 1961 and following years to test the United States Supreme Court decisions *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960) and *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946). The first Freedom Ride left Washington, D.C. on May 4, 1961 and was scheduled to arrive in New Orleans on May 17. At this time, the Jim Crow travel laws were in force throughout the South. The Freedom Riders challenged this status quo by riding various forms of public transportation in the South to challenge local laws or customs that enforced segregation. They often provoked a violent reaction which the police let happen without interference. In one case in Anniston, Alabama the mob stopped a bus by slashing its tires and then firebombed it. They tried to bar the doors so that the riders would burn to death but ultimately the riders escaped the bus. The mob beat the riders after they escaped and nearly lynched them.

States. The *Birmingham News*, I think it was on page 50 below the classified ads. They buried stories like that. They . . . during the . . . I remember going to Vincent Townsend.⁴⁸ What was his job? He ran the newspaper . . .

Sol: Yes, he was the head . . .

Michael: . . . editor.

Richard: He ran the *Birmingham News*. During the time we were agreeing to put on the salespeople and agreeing to the fountains . . . asking the *Birmingham News* to desegregate the social pages. They had, for the whites, beautiful pictures of the engagement. If a black got engaged there was . . . two lines that says . . . and it was on separate pages always. He said, “No, that’s not something we care about doing right now.” They didn’t . . . The two newspapers, I think, were the biggest differences between Birmingham and Atlanta as far as leadership.

Sandra: Do you feel the police . . . Bull Connor, the police [commissioner] . . . did you feel that they would protect you if it got violent? Were you secure in their . . .

Richard: They would protect us from the blacks.

Michael: Yes.

Richard: I don’t know about the whites.

Michael: We felt fear. The police, back at that time, were much more concerned about controlling the blacks and opposing the blacks, because the blacks were demonstrating. The whites for the most part were not demonstrating. There were not white marches.

Sandra: How long after this period did the white customers start coming back? Renewing their charge accounts . . .

Michael: We did not lose . . . The boycotts were effective, but you can lose 10 percent of your business and be effective. We never had . . . We had many thousands of charge accounts. I don’t know what the number was, but tens of thousands, probably. The number that closed their accounts were small. It was a small percentage. It was mainly threats of what they were going to do. One story that just came to mind is my father . . . We had one or two suburban stores in Bessemer and Roebuck. A customer called my father. We had just integrated the restrooms and the restaurant. [He] closed the account and I’m sure called Pizitz every name they could think of.

⁴⁸ Vincent Townsend (1901-1978) former *Birmingham News* executive editor and assistant to the publisher, was a journalist during some of the most newsworthy years of the last century, in one of the most newsworthy cities. During the turbulent years of the civil rights movement, Townsend worked tirelessly behind the scenes to promote better interracial relations and was in touch with city, state and national figures, who consulted him for advice.

Before he hung up, he said, “Mr. Pizitz, close my account. I will never shop in that store again. I’ll just shop in your Roebuck store.” That was the mentality of some of the people we were dealing with.

Sandra: Did your father or the two of you ever meet any of the prominent civil rights leaders? Did you meet Martin Luther King?

Richard: Yes, but our father was more involved than we were.

Sandra: Did he have any thoughts about the kind of man he was? [Martin Luther] King [Jr.]?

Michael: At . . .

Sandra: Did he talk about it?

Michael: At the time, I was youngest and just a few years out of college. My grandfather had a history of doing things for the blacks before almost any Jewish people and many white people. He was involved in raising money for the first . . .

Richard: . . . Holy Family Hospital.⁴⁹

Michael: . . . Holy Family Hospital . . . first black hospital in Birmingham. He and another man were in charge of raising money for it. He also raised money for the first black swimming pool in Birmingham. When it came time to boycott, they didn’t care what my grandfather had done. They treated us as bad because we were big. We were [as] prominent downtown as anybody. We had a lot of resentment towards all the black leadership. Even though we’d not gone out and integrated voluntarily, we felt that at least we have history, or a family history, of doing things for the blacks. Some of these other stores had no history. It made no difference. They did not boycott Sears, Roebuck and Sears closed their restaurant. Of the five downtown restaurants that were all integrated, they boycotted all of them. We had some resentment towards the black leadership at that time. What we did, we did because we were basically forced to do from a business standpoint. That’s why.

Richard: I don’t totally share Michael’s opinion there . . .

Michael: Oh.

Richard: . . . about resentment.

Michael: That is my feeling.

⁴⁹ Holy Family Community Hospital was a full-service hospital located in Ensley—a neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama—developed in 1946 by the Sisters of Charity, a group of nuns from Kentucky, to serve inner-city African-Americans. It was the first and only hospital in Birmingham where black doctors and nurses could practice during the Jim Crow era. The hospital was sold in 1968 when it was renamed Community Hospital and again in 1986 when it was renamed Medical Park West. It closed in 1989.

Richard: Because we had done well before, I don't totally share it. It was resentment what they were doing to the retailers. They were singling us out. A few people, but . . .

<interview is interrupted, then resumes>

Richard: . . . wonderful negotiations after it started.

Michael: I know that, but initially . . .

Sandra: Before it started, did the white merchants try to talk, knowing that this was going to probably happen? Did they try to talk to them about going slower and taking it a little bit . . .

being less provocative or less . . . Initially? Were there any talks?

Michael: Initially, I don't think there were any negotiations, either by the whites or the blacks coming to the whites and saying, "We want to get this . . . we want to do these things." It wasn't until the pressure started to build, they were basically . . . To my memory there were no negotiations until there was pressure.

Richard: Remember, Martin Luther King [Jr.] had tried this in Georgia, very unsuccessfully.

Sol: Albany [Georgia].

Richard: Albany, yes. Albany.

Sandra: Yes, in Albany.

Richard: I was thinking of what I was trying to say. Albany. He [Martin Luther King Jr.] had the perfect storm in Birmingham. That's why he came here. He was invited here, obviously, but the perfect storm was when he had Bull Connor. Secondly, Birmingham had just done something miraculous. They'd had an election to change the government from a three-man city commission, which were three bigots, to a mayor-council.⁵⁰

Michael: Two-and-a-half.

Richard: Two-and-a-half bigots, alright.

Sol: Who was the half? Waggoner?

⁵⁰ Birmingham had a form of government that consisted of a three-person commission. In 1963 the three commissioners were Eugene (Bull Connor), Art Hanes and J.T. "Jabo" Waggoner, Sr. (all staunch segregationists). The November 1962 election called for a referendum to change the form of government from a commission to a mayor and a nine-member city council. The referendum passed and was followed by an election for mayor and city council members who took their oaths of office on April 15, 1963. However, the commissioners did not go quietly. They filed a legal challenge to the election and refused to leave City Hall. For a while there were two parallel governments and Bull Connor remained in control of the city's police and fire departments. On April 23 the Alabama Supreme Court ruled against Connor, Hanes and Waggoner and they left City Hall.

Michael: Jabo Waggoner.⁵¹

Richard: Waggoner probably was half.

Michael: He was half.

Richard: There were two governments sitting. The three commissioners would not leave office. They filed a lawsuit saying that the election was wrong. Illegal. You actually had two sitting mayors. You even had a situation where both mayors were signing paychecks for city employees because they didn't know which would be the duly constituted government, eventually. When King came in here, you had a perfect storm of which government could act. Plus Connor was there. He was the best thing to ever happen to the Civil Rights Movement, obviously.

Michael: I remember reading the paper one day, apropos of what Dick was saying . . . even the paper . . . television or something . . . Someone said, "There's always something going on in Birmingham. We have two mayors, a King, and a parade every day."

<general laughter, interview resumes>

Sandra: When did things start to calm down? How long after the boycott? When did you see a shift?

Richard: That was the summer of 1963 when everything happened. I would say by the end of that year it started to calm down.

Sandra: Did the integration in . . . start slowly to evolve peacefully after that?

Richard: Yes.

Michael: In the other industries too. Nobody integrated until after the retailers. To my knowledge, no one integrated until after the retailers.

Sandra: Moving back to the retail business and to the whole issue of what happens to family-owned business in most major cities, what do you see as the demise of the big department store in Birmingham, as well as what happened to Rich's in Atlanta? What was the progression here like?

Richard: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Sandra: By the 1980's, the . . .

⁵¹ James "Jabo" Waggoner Sr. was a Birmingham city commissioner in the early 1960's. Waggoner, along with "Bull" Connor and then-Mayor Art Hanes, governed Birmingham during much of the Civil Rights Movement. The three were forced out of office in 1963 when the city adopted a mayor-council form of government.

Michael: The demise of the downtown stores was strictly the suburbs. I mean, it was people started building suburban stores, whether it would be Atlanta, Birmingham or any other city. People started shopping where they lived, whereas before everybody came downtown. You had a transit system where you got downtown in 15 minutes in any large city. Things started to change as stores started going to the suburban areas. Then people started shopping in those areas where they lived. Now, the eventual demise of the department stores, which are making a comeback today . . . but when the department stores started to go down in the 1980's and even early 1990's, it had to do with all of . . . The department store was a place where you could buy anything. You could buy piece-goods to make a dress. You could buy candy to eat. You could buy all of your clothes. You could buy your television and everything else.

As we moved into the 1980's and probably late . . . probably 1980's and then the early 1990's, it was the advent of the "Big Box Retailer."⁵² The people like the Best Buys⁵³ and the Circuit Citys⁵⁴ dominated the electronic business. The Home Depots⁵⁵ and Lowe's⁵⁶ dominated the business that things at some stores sold at that time. Then all the apparel national chains started to open these large stores, so all of the sudden you did not have to shop at a department store. You could shop elsewhere. The department stores saw their worst days probably in the early 1990's and early 2000's.

The department stores today, which are almost . . . because of what had happened, the department store industry was the same as every other industry. The large chains started buying up the independent. That's what's happening basically [with] all business in this country, whatever it is, whether it's rental cars, airlines, or anything else. The department stores were no

⁵² A 'Big Box Retailer' is a retail store that occupies an enormous amount of physical space and offers a variety of products to its customers. These stores achieve economies of scale by focusing on large sales volumes. Because volume is high, the profit margin for each product can be lowered, which results in very competitively priced goods.

⁵³ Best Buy is an American multinational consumer electronics corporation headquartered in Richfield, Minnesota, a Minneapolis suburb. It was founded by Richard M. Schulze and Gary Smoliak in 1966 as an audio specialty store, Sound of Music. In 1983, it was renamed and rebranded with more emphasis placed on consumer electronics.

⁵⁴ Circuit City was a multinational consumer electronics retail company that operated stores across America. It was founded in 1949 by Samuel Wurtzel as the Wards Company and pioneered the electronics superstore format in the 1970s. The company's name was changed to Circuit City in 1989. The company faced increasing competition and management issues. In 2008 it declared bankruptcy and in 2009 it closed its stores and ceased operating.

⁵⁵ The Home Depot was founded in Atlanta in 1978 by Bernie Marcus and Arthur Blank and has grown to be the largest home improvement retailer in the United States. The first two Home Depot stores opened on June 22, 1979, in Atlanta, Georgia. The Home Depot operates stores in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Guam), all ten provinces of Canada, as well as Mexico. (2014)

⁵⁶ Lowe's is an American company that operates a chain of retail home improvement and appliance stores in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Founded in 1946 in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, the chain is the second-largest hardware chain both nationally and globally, behind The Home Depot.

different. The department stores today are all controlled by three, or four, or five large national chains. But they are making a comeback. They are catering to customers in their markets. Macy's,⁵⁷ who's been very successful is trying to . . . they've got a slogan, "My Macy's," where they try to have different merchandise for different customers in different parts of the country. Today, I think department stores are making a comeback and doing things differently. What happened is they got out of a lot of these businesses that they could not compete with the Big Box Retailers such as electronics, television, home appliances, hardware, the car business, and a lot of these other businesses. They concentrated on what they could do well.

Sandra: When did you sell Pizitz?

Richard: End of 1986.

Sandra: What led you to that decision?

Richard: We got an offer.

Richard: We were doing very well. We had our best year ever. We were opening two large branch stores in 1986. Another department store chain⁵⁸ came totally unsolicited [and] made us an offer, which we thought was quite high. We shopped the offer, could not improve it, and sold the store.

Sandra: Was it sad for you?

Richard: It was very difficult . . .

Michael: Difficult.

Richard: We agreed that we would not sell unless the three brothers, and our two sons who were in the business, were unanimous. I would say the first vote was probably three-to-two and eventually got to be five-all. It was very difficult.

Michael: It was difficult on account of the people. We were very close to our people. We had people work for us for 40, 50, and 60 years. We stayed in touch with a lot of them years after we sold. The difficult thing were the people. It was very difficult making the announcement to the people we were selling [to]. What we were doing was something . . . we were already one of the largest 10 independent department stores in the United States and 20 years earlier, we probably

⁵⁷ Macy's, originally R. H. Macy & Co., is a chain of department stores owned by American multinational corporation Macy's, Inc. As of January 2014, it operates 850 department stores locations in the continental United States, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Guam, with a prominent Herald Square flagship location in New York City.

⁵⁸ On December 10, 1986, the news broke that McRae's Department Store would be taking over Pizitz on the last day of the year. McRae's was a mid-range regional department store chain founded and based in Jackson, Mississippi, with locations in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Florida.

weren't in the top 30. As all these others had sold out, we became bigger as an independent. There was both things as pressure to do that, but the difficulty was our people.

Richard: It was also very hard giving up something we'd all done all of our lives.

Sandra: Also, the store was an icon in Birmingham. That must have been difficult for your family as well as the city to lose the name. I know some of the descendants of the Rich family in Atlanta . . .

Michael: It was . . .

Sandra: . . . it was a similar kind of feeling.

Michael: It was very similar. When we sold out in the end of 1986, we were the last independent department store. The only large independent store at that time was Parisian who sold out a few years later. It was hard for the city.

Sandra: Do you miss it?

Richard: Yes.

Michael: For a while. For a while, but we're . . .

Richard: But it was . . .

Michael: . . . still in the retail business.

Richard: Thank G-d we did it, considering what happened afterward. It was definitely the right decision, but sure we missed it a long time. I had great difficulty knowing what to do on Saturdays because I'd worked every Saturday in my life.

Sandra: It must have been a strange feeling that first morning when you didn't go to the store.

Michael: We went the first morning. We worked for about two weeks until they fired us. We were the first three people gone. The three brothers.

Richard: I . . .

Michael: When they took over . . .

Richard: I offered to stay one year to transition and they didn't . . . they were right, they didn't want a Pizitz . . .

Michael: They were right.

Richard: . . . in there, because the people were too loyal to us.

Sandra: But you've managed, or you have stayed in the retail business.

Richard: Right.

Sandra: What are you both doing now?

Richard: Well . . .

Sandra: What is the business now?

Richard: Our two sons are the active management, but we have . . . we did operate for 30 years . . . we started in 1974 . . . but we operated 35 Hallmark Card and Gift⁵⁹ stores in about seven states. We were probably the fifth or sixth largest Hallmark operators in the country. We sold that business back to Hallmark about 2004 or 2005, I guess. We started in . . .

Michael: It was earlier than that.

Richard: What?

Michael: Earlier than that. It was more than five years ago.

Richard: No, it was 2004, because we operated [for] 30 years. The first was 1974. We have a few cookie stores, Great American Cookie⁶⁰ stores, franchise stores. We grew that business. Today we have 38 stores. We're the largest cookie operator in the country. We're in ten states with Cookies today. We also opened in . . . <to Michael> . . . Gus Mayer?⁶¹ 19 . . .

Michael: Late 1970's.

Richard: . . . 1978 or 1979. We bought a Gus Mayer specialty store, which was a very upscale store in Birmingham. We bought that store and we subsequently, about three years later, bought one in Nashville. We still operate these two Gus Mayer stores—very high price upscale women's apparel stores. A year-and-a-half ago, we got into the frozen yogurt business. We have 15 frozen yogurt stores operating in about five or six states today—32⁰ Yogurt Bar⁶² is the name of it. So we have three businesses: upscale apparel, cookies, and yogurt. We're the only business in the world that sells yogurt, cookies, and designer dresses.

⁵⁹ Hallmark Cards is a privately-owned American company based in Kansas City, Missouri. It was founded in 1910 by Joyce Hall, Hallmark is the largest manufacturer of greeting cards in the United States.

⁶⁰ Great American Cookies is a chain of independently owned and operated franchised stores that specialize in gourmet cookies, especially cookie cakes. It is a franchise brand in the portfolio of Global Franchise Group. With more than 290 stores in the U.S., Great American Cookies stores are most commonly based in malls nationwide, particularly in the Southeast. The company was founded in 1977 by Michael Coles and Arthur Karp, and has its headquarters in Atlanta.

⁶¹ Gus Mayer is a Birmingham, Alabama based, family-owned, upscale specialty department store that caters to upper-end clientele and is known for its high-end fashions. The two-store chain is owned by the Pizitz Management Group. It has locations at the Colonial Brookwood Village in the Greater Birmingham area and The Mall at Green Hills in Nashville, both of which are known as high-end retail centers. Founded in 1900; the original Gus Mayer department store was located on Canal Street in downtown New Orleans. At one time, there were more than 20 Gus Mayer stores across the Southeast and Southwest. In 1975, when the stores were being sold off individually, the Pizitz family purchased the Birmingham operation and later added the Nashville location. These two are the only remaining Gus Mayer stores today.

⁶² 32⁰ AYogurt Bar is a Birmingham based, family-owned business with stores in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. (2017)

Sandra: Do you have a yogurt store in Atlanta?

Michael: Not ours.

Richard: No, we're in Carrollton, Georgia, but not in Atlanta.

Sandra: We need one in Atlanta.

Richard: There are too many in Atlanta. There must be 100 in Atlanta today.

Sandra: The one that's closest to me just went out of business so I'm looking for a new yogurt [place].

Richard: A lot of them have . . .

Michael: Yogli-Mogli?⁶³

Sandra: No.

Richard: No, no, not Yogli . . .

Sandra: No it was part . . . it was at Ansley Mall,⁶⁴ part of Smoothie King.⁶⁵ It was one of their yogurt places . . . or 'Smoothie something.'

Richard: We're trying to go in to mid-sized towns rather than the Atlanta [sized cities].

Sandra: I have a . . . <to Sol> . . . did you . . .

<tape is interrupted and then resumes>

Sandra: You've managed to stay in the retail business all these years while so many of the other families have not. What was the difference? Why did your family stay in this business?

Michael: There are two answers to the question. One, the retail business—unlike a lot of businesses—is a business that you talk about every night. I talked about it to my children every night because there's always something going on. Maybe it gets in your blood more than the average business or more than many businesses that may be mundane . . . in something where it's not customer oriented . . . where you talking about it all the time, so it stayed in our blood. Also, we had the advantage, we have . . . I've got two children and Dick has one in the business. We had three children that wanted to go in the business. Not all of our children. Between us and

⁶³ Yogli-Mogli is a chain of self-serve frozen yogurt shops with locations in Georgia, Illinois, and Pennsylvania (2017). It is headquartered in Durango, Colorado. Yogli-Mogli started in May 2009 in Sandy Springs, Georgia, the same year the company began franchising.

⁶⁴ Ansley Mall is an open-air shopping mall in the Piedmont Heights neighborhood of Atlanta at the intersection of Piedmont Road and Monroe Drive near the Atlanta Beltline trail. Ansley Mall opened in 1964, sending Midtown Atlanta's Tenth Street shopping district into decline.

⁶⁵ Smoothie King Franchises, Inc. is a privately held New Orleans-area-based smoothie franchise company with more than 900 units worldwide. The first store was opened by founder Steve Kuhnau in Kenner, Louisiana in 1973.

my younger brother, we've got eight children and only three are in the business. Only four live in Birmingham.

We had a generation coming up that wanted to be in the business. The two older ones, in fact all three of them to some extent, had grown up in the business. They wanted to continue it. It's a combination of those two things that we stayed in the retail business. The apparel business we're in is not one that you could expand like a cookie business. It's very . . . It's a difficult business to expand because of the nature of the business. It's easy to put a cookie store anywhere or put a yogurt store anywhere. If a cookie store or yogurt store is not successful, they're three times bigger than this room. You just close one. You can't do that with an apparel store. It was a combination of family and it's a business that's been in our blood for forever.

Richard: I agree with Michael. One, we didn't want to retire, because we don't have a lot of outside interests. I play tennis, but if I play once or twice a week, that's all I can have. Sol, he can play . . . he's got more endurance than I do. We're very competitive. We're entrepreneurial and we like what we're doing.

Sandra: Looking at the city of Birmingham, how do you see it moving on in the future? Are you positive about its future or not?

Richard: Not.

Sandra: Why?

Richard: Back to the same thing of leadership. Back to the biggest problem you have in Birmingham. Jefferson County, which is where Birmingham is, has probably 32 different municipalities [and] 30-odd different governments. There's no cooperation. The County, as you know, is bankrupt because there's been fraud and what have you. The political leadership has been very poor. The business leadership doesn't live in Birmingham. They live suburban today. The cities that have succeeded in the South—I won't even mention Atlanta, at the moment—are the cities like Nashville, [Tennessee], Charlotte, [South Carolina], and Jacksonville, [Mississippi] where there's been consolidation of government. We tried consolidation. We had something called "One Great City, One Great County," which was back in the early 1980's. It was beaten down. Had that happened, I think Birmingham would be a Charlotte or a Nashville. I guess it's discouraging because I don't see, I don't think . . . Birmingham's not going to go

away. If you did not have the University of Alabama-Birmingham⁶⁶ here, UAB, this city would have collapsed because industry . . . U.S. Steel, once employed 25,000 people in Birmingham.

Today I doubt they employ 15,000 people. I'm not too . . .

Michael: The problem is what he says. The business leadership lives in different cities. They're not involved in it because they can't be directly. As far as running for office, they can't be involved in running Birmingham. Still, Birmingham is what makes the whole area go. All the banks are in Birmingham. The insurance companies are in Birmingham. The big businesses are still here, but the leadership of these businesses are not here. It's a problem that may never be solved. There are some moves to get cooperation between Birmingham and some of the suburban areas. But it's slow and difficult. That's probably our biggest problem today that'll be difficult to overcome.

Sandra: I think on that note, we can . . .

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

⁶⁶ The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) is a public research university in Birmingham in the U.S. state of Alabama. Developed from an academic extension center established in 1936, the institution became an autonomous institution in 1969. UAB is the state's largest employer, with more than 18,000 faculty and staff and over 53,000 jobs at the university and in the health system. An estimated 10 percent of the jobs in the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Area and 1 in 33 jobs in the state of Alabama are directly or indirectly related to UAB.