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UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY DEED OF GIFT

The University of Baltimore’s Oral History Collection is comprised of taped interviews of people giving first-hand accounts of some aspect of Baltimore history which might otherwise go unrecorded.

You have been asked to give an interview. A tape recording of your interview will be made. The tapes, along with an abstract of their content and, in some cases, a transcript, will be deposited in the University of Baltimore Archives, 1420 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21201. These materials will be made available for research by qualified scholars, for educational use, for scholarly publications, and other related purposes.

I,______, have read the above and, in view of the historical value of this information, agree to the recording of my voice and my stories. I grant the University of Baltimore the full use of this information in all media known and unknown. I grant and assign all my rights pertaining to this information to the University of Baltimore.

Signed:__________________________

Name (print)_____________________

Address________________________

Telephone_______________________

Date___________________________

Interviewer_____________________

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On November 30, 1997, I, William Caughlan, interviewed Mr. Allan Wetzler, founder and CEO of Wetzler’s Inc., a women’s clothing store chain. Although Mr. Wetzler had a chain of stores all around the Baltimore metropolitan area, his first store was located on Monument Street. This store acted as Mr. Wetzler’s headquarters from 1927 to 1982. Mr. Efrim Potts referred Mr. Wetzler to the HEBCAC/University of Baltimore oral history project; it was felt that Mr. Wetzler would have valuable information and insight on East Baltimore, since he had been in business there for so long.

Overall, the interview with Mr. Wetzler did not go well however. The reasons for this had mostly to do with his health. Claiming to be 92 years of age at the time of the interview, he explained to me that his memory was not what it used to be, nor did he feel in perfect health on most days. He was very willing to be interviewed though, and so, I was very willing to try. The difficulty with interviewing Mr. Wetzler was not only due to health reasons. As will be explained later, he was also just plain unwilling to speak in detail about East Baltimore.

On the day of the interview, I phoned Mr. Wetzler to see if he was feeling well enough to be interviewed. Mr. Wetzler told me that he was not feeling too well, but that he might be able to give me a half an hour’s worth of interview. This was disappointing, but I felt that we could at least get in a few of the questions that I had prepared for him.

Despite his claim that his memory was failing him, I was still hopeful that Mr. Wetzler would be able to answer the questions having to do with major life events. My hopes were somewhat dashed when I saw that he looked very tired when he opened the door to let me into his apartment. This feeling of hopelessness though was nothing
compared to the feeling I got after asking the first question. I asked him about his family background. After a long pause, he explained that he did not “recollect” much about his family background; he then picked up a press release on himself, and began to read directly from it. Much of the interview went this way: I asked a question and he would either say he did not recall, or he would answer by reading directly from the press releases or the newspaper accounts of his life that he had sitting next to him. (This accounts for the instances in which he speaks in the third person about himself.) As the interview went on like this, I began to feel more and more discouraged. I felt that the questions I had prepared were useless, however, I did continue to try to use them throughout the interview.

Mr. Wetzler’s ability to recollect was not the only reason why I was unable to get information from him about his life and about East Baltimore. As is obvious from the interview, he was able to remember some things. One of those things was about East Baltimore and the changes that he witnessed through his years on Monument Street. His response to my question, “Do you…recall the changes that occurred” in the neighborhood around Monument Street, and “…how it affected your business…” was, “I recall it, but it had no bearing at all.” When I tried to rephrase the question he replied, “I can’t answer that question.” Not long after this I informed him that I was turning the tape off. (The information I give from here on is entirely off the record.) With the tape off, I asked Mr. Wetzler if he could recall the changes that had happened in East Baltimore through the years. He said that he did, but that he did not want to talk about those things on the record. I asked him why this was, and he replied that he did not want to come across as being a racist. I then asked him if he was a racist; his answer was an adamant
“no”. I tried to explain to him that he would not sound like a racist if he indeed was not a racist. He then told me flatly that he did not want to speak about East Baltimore on the tape. After this, I turned the tape back on and attempted to continue the interview. This was difficult, as most of the questions I had left, concerned East Baltimore. I could also tell that Mr. Wetzler was getting tired and probably wanted to stop.

I would like to say a little something here about the quality of the tape. I did everything I was supposed to do to ensure good sound quality. I familiarized myself with the machine, and I even tested it in Mr. Wetzler’s apartment before the interview was commenced. The quality was fine during the test, and so I can not account for the poor quality that resulted during the interview.

Although my experience seemed to be largely a negative one, I have learned quite a bit from it. First of all, I have gained much more respect for reporters and other people who rely on taking oral history for their work. It is definitely not as easy as it seems. Second, after transcribing the tape, I found that with a little more effort, I probably could have gotten more information from Mr. Wetzler than I did. I believe that because the interview did not go as well as I had hoped, I gave up on trying to get the kind of answers I was looking for, especially after seeing him struggle so much, and begin to give answers to my questions straight from the newspapers. On the other hand, part of me feels that if I had pursued the answers to my questions more vigorously, I may have aggravated Mr. Wetzler, and he may have withdrawn all cooperation. Finally, I learned to be just a little more forgiving of myself. Initially, I was very much upset with myself because the interview did not go so well. Later, after receiving some encouraging words from Dr. Elfenbein, I came to the conclusion that many of the problems I had, were ones
I had little control over. I also realized that this was my first attempt at doing anything
like this, and so, should not have expected it to go as smashingly as I had hoped.
Interviewer: I'm ah speaking with Mr. Allan Wetzler, um you're probably most well known for your, for your ah, owning and president and CEO I suppose of ah Wetzlers ...  

Allan Wetzler: Wetzlers...  

I: ...clothing. Um, for this interview, the first thing I would like to know ah is something about your family background. Um, the first question is, when did your ancestors first arrive, ah, here in America. Do you...  

AW: Oh ah, (long silence) That's a hard question for me to answer... because I don't recollect when they did arrive.  

I: O K.  

AW: I know, that ah, I was born in 1906, I moved to Baltimore with my parents in 1916.  

I: O K. So you were ten.  

AW: What's that?  

I: You were ten years old then.  

AW: Yes.  

I: From where did you move?  

AW: I moved from Pennsylvania. My father came over, and then he moved to Baltimore, of course.  

And ah, in 1920, I entered Baltimore City College [High School], graduated in 1924. At City I was business manager, of a publication which featured activities of the school, magazine Oriole. And I graduated in 1924.  

I: And, did you go to college from there?  

AW: I attended Maryland University Law School, then decided to follow a business career. From 1925 to 1928, I opened a ladies apparel store on Monument Street.
Eventually, I opened six more stores in Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County. I was married to Anna Greenbaum in 1928. We had three children, Bob, Bunny and Benny, five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. For activities I was President of Har Sinai Congregation, board member of the Jewish [welfare?], active in Red Cross, and The United Way. President of Monument Street Business Association, and Chairman during the World War [II] of two affiliated merchant neighborhood stores....I might not have made that clear. At that time...the ah...the ah...Congress voted that ah...they wanted ah, someone to represent them in this area during the World War, regarding the activities in this area.

I: That was during World War II?

AW: Yes, World War II. I was a representative of the merchants of the [neighborhood Baltimore?]...of all Baltimore neighborhood stores.

I: What ah, were your responsibilities then, when...if you can recall?

AW: I don't recall. I don't recall.

I: That's ok.

AW: I was board member of the Baltimore Maryland Retail Merchants Credit Bureau. I was board member of the Suburban Club. I was board member of the advisory committee, of distributive education of Baltimore City, ah of Baltimore schools. Board member of advisory committee of distributive education...I just repeated that, I'm sorry.

I: That's ok.

AW: Board member of the American [?] Society, a national organization. I was also a member of the Rotary Club of Baltimore, member of a commission appointed by Governor Nice, for the formation of uniform commercial codes.
I: That was um, that was during ah the 30s. When ah, by Governor Nice, 'cause he was Governor during the depression…

AW: It was later than that.

I: Was it?

AW: Later, oh yes, about 1950. I got it hanging up in my bedroom there, the actual charter…

I: Oh, ok.

AW: …that he gave me. I was appointed by Mayor Schaefer to Baltimore Executive Unlimited. During World War II, I represented [OPA?], as a representative to the retail industry. I was a member of Score, a service that was devoted to serving individuals, or companies, a branch of the Small Business Administration. During World War II, I served in the Coast Guard, during…touring Baltimore Harbor, Harbor. Received the Medal of Honor for my contribution in Jewish affairs, board member of Levindale for the aged. I was in business for fifty-five years, and retired in 1982. My hobbies: fishing, golf and photography.

I: So that's pretty much your whole career in a nutshell…

AW: After I retired, I...[moved to this?] retirement community. I have ceased all activities now...on account of my health.

I: Yeah...tsk, Let's see, I know you have trouble, um, recalling certain things, um...if it's ok with you, would it be ok if we ah, if I try to fill in some things with some of those questions?

AW: Yeah, sure.
I: And if you don’t remember, that’s, that’s quite alright…Were you, do you know if you, were you ah, born in a hospital or…

AW: No

I: No?

AW: I was born at home.

I: And ah...

AW: In Bentleyville, Pennsylvania.

I: In Bentleyville. Ok, um, and do you, do you, ah, what did your father do?

AW: He was in the clothing business. Men’s clothing.

I: Oh, ok, so that’s how you ah...

AW: Yes.

I: Did he open a clothing business when he moved here to Baltimore?

AW: Yes. In the South, from the Carolinas ah, to Georgia.

I: So, he was a traveling salesman?

AW: …And I used to go down [with him] and visit each of his stores. And when he died, they were closed up. And I went into the ladies business.

I: Ok. And ah, I recall you saying that you were um, you wanted to open a men’s store. but you didn’t have enough capital…

AW: Right.

I: Um, why, why is it, that it takes less capital to open a women’s clothing store?

AW: Because the men’s were more expensive and ladies were cheaper.

I: Ok, the clothing?

AW: Yes.
I: The ladies? Ok. And your first business, ah, that you opened, was on Monument Street.

AW: Right.

I: And that was ah, at the late 1920s? I, I don't recall.

AW: (Long silence)...Early 30s.

I: Early 1930s. And that was ah, so that was pretty much ah, during the Depression.

AW: Yes.

I: Um...was it difficult to be starting a business during the Depression?

AW: It's always difficult to start a new business.

I: But ah, I would assume that with the Depression that might have been ah, that would have been even more of a challenge.

AW: Well, you just gotta...try to do the best you can.

I: Alright. And obviously you were very successful. I mean, you ah, were in business for fifty-five years....What um...what was the clientele like, the people, mostly from the neighborhood?

AW: Oh yes, when I started...they were from the neighborhood, yes.

I: Um hmm. And ah, describe what the folks who lived there were like. Where were they from, and what were...

AW: They were family oriented people, and ah, they liked shopping on Monument Street.

I: Right.

AW: They had their, all their families there, the children etc.

I: So everybody ah, went shopping together?
AW: I presume so... I was in business fifty-five years... and then I thought that was enough. I retired at seventy-six years of age.

I: At seventy-six?

AW: Yes. And I felt that I had carried out and earned my retirement.

I: Alright. Did you ah, liquidate your business, when you were...?

AW: Yes.

I: Ah. Were your, any of your ah, sons interested at all in your business?

AW: No, he had his own business.

I: Oh ok. So you didn’t have anyone to pass it on to?

AW: No, I liquidated it... My ah, closing was not due to economic hardship. And ah. had no bearing on my decision, I just wanted to retire.

I: When you ah, liquidated did ah, did that include, did you have all six stores at that time?

AW: Yes.

I: So... And um, I’m wondering where your office was located?

AW: What was that?

I: Your office, for your business. where...

AW: On Monument Street.

I: So you went down to Monument Street...

AW: That was my office.

I: Ok, did you live down...?

AW: Did I do what?

I: Did you live close to the store?
AW: No, not particularly.

I: Where did you ah... where were you living...

AW: We lived about ah, ten miles away from the stores. I had to travel everyday and Monument Street was my headquarters, where I had my office.

I: Ok.

AW: When I retired, it wasn't because business was down, as I pointed out, my stores were still earning a profit.

I: Hmm.

AW: [So, if they closed last week?] If I was twenty years younger, I would not have closed them.

I: So, ah...

AW: In fact, I had a harder time during World War II, maintaining my business.

I: Really? Because of rationing?

AW: Whatever it was, I don't recall.

I: (Long silence) Do you ah, do you recall the changes that went ah... that occurred along Monument Street, that, that whole neighborhood, and ah, how it affected your business, if it affected your business at all? Do you recall any of that?

AW: I recall it, but it had no bearing on it at all?

I: At all?

AW: No.

I: How would you describe the changes though, that ah, through the years? Something's that stick out in your mind. The changes in East Baltimore?
AW: (Pause) I can’t answer that question…. I can tell you that ah, from the ah, perspective of the clothing industry in general, unemployment was the greatest problem. People would take care only of necessities. The man will wear the same old suit to make sure he can provide for his family. As for women’s apparel, he believes that the industry is secure even in difficult economic times because a woman will always buy a new dress.
I: Hmm. So that’s ah, that’s a pretty good business to go into then, I would assume.
AW: Well, at that time I had no choice.
I: Right.

AW: (Pause) At that time, I also saw the growth of discount stores, as another problem for the retail clothing business. Area distributors agree that discounters are taking a larger share of the market because the problem… because the public has less money to spend on clothing. However, I was, I predicted at that time, which came true, that malls, ah in general, featuring stores of all kinds ah, of materials and sales, would eventually take over the downtown business. Which it eventually did, and I predicted that twenty years before it actually happened.
I: Wow. So you could see, you could see that coming from a mile away.

AW: Yes. I predicted it.

I: Probably ah, I suppose in retrospect, um, you feel that you got out of the business at a pretty good time then?

AW: (sigh) I can’t answer that.

I: Ok. Ah, [I was] wondering about your business philosophy, did you have any kind of a philosophy that you ah...
AW: Well, I would do unto others as others would do unto me. And ah, my philosophy was open, and I just wanted a fair deal for everybody. I didn’t want to take advantage of anything or anybody.

I: Alright. It served you well then?

AW: It’s been my philosophy all my life.

I: Hmm… That’s a good philosophy to live by.

AW: If I had been twenty years younger, I would’ve never closed the stores.

I: Right. Ok. (very long pause) Let’s take a break here for a second…

At this point the tape was turned off. After discussing the progress of the interview so far, the tape was turned back on…

I: Ok. Here’s ah, one question I missed: Where did you get the capital to open your store?

AW: I didn’t have any capital, I only had three thousand dollars. And as my business succeeded I, my capital improved.

I: Did you have folks working for you right from the start?

AW: Yes. I had three or four employees, part time.

I: Part time? And ah, and as your business grew, then that increased?

AW: My capital grew.

I: And ah, when did you ah, first begin to expand?

AW: I can’t remember… To be accurate.

I: Right.
AW: It was probably, I think, ten years after I first went into business that I expanded. I recall now, it was ten years later.

I: Ok, pretty fast.

AW: Yeah.

I: Was that just one store?

AW: Yeah, then I opened up other stores. [The rest is unintelligible, but the interviewer thinks that he said that the information about his expansion was in the newspaper article he was holding.]

I: Ok. Um, ah, what I’ll probably do, what I’ll definitely do, is I’ll put that newspaper article in with the tape...

AW: Ok.

I: So people can refer to that.

AW: Then will you mail it back to me?

I: Yes, I will definitely send it back to you. Um...I was ah, I’m wondering how you kept up with the fashions of the day.

AW: Well, that was easy. Because you went along with the times. Fashions change, you change.

I: You kept your eyes open.

AW: Yes.

I: I’m curious about the clientele of your store, what ah?

AW: It was the general population we catered to.

I: Mostly ah, initially, I assume, from the neighborhood.

AW: What’s that?
I: Folks form the neighborhood

AW: Wherever they were, the neighborhood or they traveled across town, to the various shopping centers I was in.

I: Ok. You still ah, you still hear from any of your employees or any...

AW: I answered that before. I ah, told you that I hear form an employee and I hear from a customer every now and then.

I: Yeah, yeah I remember you telling me that before, we didn't ah, ah get that on tape.

(very long pause)

Here's one. Um, I was wondering if ah, there was ah, something else that you might have wanted to do, ah other than retail? Um, you mentioned that you went to law school...

AW: Well I, I don't think there was anything else, once I went into the ladies business, apparel retail stores, I had no other plans. I celebrated fifty years in business before I went out.

I: That was just before you went out.

AW: Yes.

I: So ah, you made the press quite a few times. This is quite a, a ah, this is the front page of the financial section.

AW: Yes.

I: It's a good size article. (Long pause) I think that's been about a half-hour, so, um...

AW: So if you take those, you'll send them back to me.

I: Yeah, I'll send, yes I'll definitely send these back to you, and ah...

This was the end of the interview. The tape was then turned off.