

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library  
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century"  
Ben Seigel (BS) interviewed by John Soltis (I), February 9, 1998.

- I: Mr. Seigel, when and where were you born?
- BS: I was born in New York, March 1913.
- I: March when?
- BS: March 13th.
- I: Oh, three days before my birthday. [laughs] whereabouts in New York did you live?
- BS: Oh, I don't remember. We left New York when I was still an infant. I know that it was on 1st Street that I was born.
- I: In New York City?
- BS: In New York City. My family moved to Winsted, Connecticut, while I was still an infant. So as a baby, I knew nothing of New York or where I was born.
- I: Why did your family move to Winsted?
- BS: Well, to begin with, my folks were totally illiterate and they came to Russia with my oldest sister and my older brother. And I was the first of the family to be born in the States -- New York City, of course, to be accurate. Pa got a job working in a candy factory in New York, where he got sick from inhaling the fumes in this factory. His sister, Aunt Anna, lived in Winsted, and when she found out that Pa took sick, she suggested that he move to Winsted, where she lived because it was a small town, less congestion, and nice and high, where the air would be cleaner. And it seemed to have worked because Pa seemed to feel better when we moved up to Winsted.
- I: What did your father -- your family -- do in Winsted?
- BS: Well, Pa was a shoe maker by trade. And a good one, by the way.
- I: [laughs]
- BS: He learned the trade from age thirteen, where his father sent him away to the apprentice shoe maker, and he learned the trade very well. But he wasn't in a position to practice his trade as soon as we moved to Winsted.

It took a while. So, Uncle William got him a job in one of the factories. So, unfortunately, the first job that Uncle William got for Pa was the Gilber [unclear] Company, where Pa had to [unclear] these wooden [unclear] frames into tanks of varnish. They'd load up a pole, where they'd slip through the [unclear] and dip it into this huge tank and hang it up to dry. So that didn't help Pa's lungs one bit, and he couldn't hold that job down too well. So, Pa got another job in another factory, but that -- the month that Pa went to work there, the factory went on strike. So that was two strikes against Pa. [laughs]

I: Yes. [laughs]

BS: And ultimately, he got a job working for an ice company, which was situated across the road from Highland Lake in Winsted, a rather popular resort. He was hired to cut ice when the lake froze over. He was hired to help cut the ice, which would be stored until the summertime, and then they would sell it to the townspeople.

I: Oh, okay. Sure.

BS: But, unfortunately, that winter it was very mild, and Highland Lake refused to freeze over, so he was stuck again. And this was a sort of a series that Pa had to struggle through, even after there were seven children. I was one of seven. It was a struggle for most of Pa's life, until we kids grew up, so we could take the responsibility, and start taking care of the family.

I: So, what brought you and the family to Bridgeport?

BS: Okay. Pa tried opening a shoemaker shop in Winsted. But being totally illiterate, he couldn't keep records, and people soon found out that Pa was very trusting when he did shoe repair work for them. They soon found out that if he told them they could pay him later, it was okay with him. But a lot of them didn't pay later. [laughs] So he had to close that up, and back to the factory. And then, finally, that didn't work out too well because [unclear]

being so illiterate, the very remedial jobs, and he couldn't handle them too well. But a very nice man in Winsted one day loaned Pa ten dollars to buy a push cart. He advised Pa to go into the [unclear] business because there was a man in Winsted who was very well off, being in that business.

I: What type of business?

BS: Rag picking -- junk.

I: Oh, okay.

BS: The title rag picking came later. In those days it was the junk business. Because it wasn't just rags -- it was scrap metal and [unclear] and lead, zinc and all sorts of -- copper -- pieces of metal that were part of the inventory that you accumulated, and then sold it to a dealer, who would then sell it to whoever was going to process or re-process [unclear]. So what they would do would be to go out and buy the stock, and then once a month, a dealer would come into the big city, load it on the truck, and take it out. And that's how he made a very meager livelihood for a few years. Let's see now. The sequence of events was that Winsted is very hilly -- very steep hills. All of them are up.

I: [laughs]

BS: And Pa had trouble, when he loaded that pushcart, pushing that pushcart, loaded with junk, up these steep hills. It got to him and it was very difficult. So Mr. Epstein, I think it was -- a very nice resident up there -- was aware of a situation and he loaned him enough money to buy a horse and wagon. So Pa came home one day with Daisy, who was the spitting image of Black Beauty. Did you ever read the book Black Beauty?

I: Oh, yes.

BS: Well, do you remember Black Beauty had a white spot on her forehead?

I: Yes.

BS: And a white spot on her hind leg -- this was Daisy. She had the white spots,

and I fell in love with her immediately. It turned out that I had to be in love with her because Pa couldn't harness Daisy. She was afraid of him. Pa knew that in Europe, a horse was a beast of burden, and he, unfortunately, approached Daisy as though she were a beast of burden. He was not gentle with her, and she wouldn't open her teeth to put the bit in. And so it was my job. We got along very fine. So it was my job harnessing Daisy whenever Pa went out on the road, and during the winter months, when the junk business would slow. He would again go and work in the factories, and I would look after Daisy after school and on weekends. So that went on for a while, back and forth between the factories and the junk business. As our family grew -- let's see -- I was number three, and we wound up with seven children. I was the third oldest. My oldest sister, after she went to grammar school, went to work at the factory, and only lived a few years after that. She died at age nineteen. My brother, Maury, was a very brilliant scholar and student, and he engineered the meager income with both of us as a team. He was the leader -- well, he was the management; I was labor.

I: I see.

BS: So we went out and we shoveled snow and we mowed lawns and we sold newspapers. When Pa was in the factory, we would harness Daisy and go collect garbage and take it to the city dump for thirty-five cents. We brought home these nickels and dimes after school and weekends, and that helped a little bit because we were not exactly poor. We were a little below the poor level. [laughs]

I: [laughs]

BS: We had to step up a little bit, a few stages, before we became poor. [laughs]

I: I see. [laughs]

BS: So we knew instinctively -- my parents never sent us out to do all this work,

but we knew that if we didn't bring home these nickels and dimes, that the food would be very sparse, and we couldn't buy the sneakers that we would have liked to have. So that became a part of our built-in activity in our young days, and that kept up until -- I guess I was about twelve. I guess I was close to thirteen, when things were so low that nothing seemed to work well. By this time -- I forgot to tell you that by this time, our Aunt and Uncle William moved to Bridgeport.

I: Oh, okay.

BS: They left us in Winsted to fend for ourselves. As I say, it didn't work well. And Anne's older son, Isador, was an awfully friendly, warm, jolly fellow, and was sort of a -- not exactly shiftless, but he didn't hang on to any particular field for any length of time. But he was so nice, and he liked Pa, and he got wind of the fact that we were stranded in Winsted, and had a very tough time making a livelihood. So one day he came up and he said, "Sam, I'm taking you to Bridgeport, and I'm going to get you a job." Pa packed the valise and went to Bridgeport, came back in two days and he said, "We're moving to Bridgeport. I got a job." Okay. We moved to Bridgeport, and landed on Pembroke Street, on the East Side. And that had to be 1927. I had graduated from grammar school at age thirteen, so that was 1926. So we moved to Bridgeport, and Pa was working for the Dupont Company in Fairfield. And strangely enough, his first job was working on fabric that had to be coated with plastic in order to make it waterproof.

I: Oh, okay.

BS: That was one of their products. So it seemed that that job that was unhealthy --

I: Here we go again. [laughs]

BS: Yes. But anyway, he hung in there, and at age thirteen, I got a job with

cousin Moe. Isador's youngest brother took a liking to me and he got me a job in a shoe store in Bridgeport on East Main Street in 1927, selling shoes, at a shoe store.

I: Where was that?

BS: East Main and Arctic Street.

I: Oh, okay.

BS: Where the bank is now -- there's a bank there now.

I: Yes, yes.

BS: So that was Schugutz's Shoe Store, and I was getting five dollars a week, and it was like striking oil because I got that whole five dollars every week, and only had to work seventy-two hours a week, which was --

I: Oh! [laughs]

BS: That was really good. It was a whole lot better than the nickels and dimes we were bringing home.

I: Yes. And just seventy-two hours a week, huh?

BS: Yes, it was only seventy-two hours a week. So it was really like striking oil. So I was very happy about that. Five dollars a week, went to pay for the rent for our family. It amounted to, I think, eighteen dollars a month. Four times five is twenty, so there was two dollars to spare. That went on for a few years, during which time I learned about shoes -- being a shoemaker's son -- so I was familiar with leather, and I had a first step-up already, compared to the other kids. I liked leather, and I liked shoes, and the job was great because I didn't have to get on my hands and knees to pull out weeds and clean the stall and stuff rags and stuff. This was really a very nice stage of my life. I also, ultimately, became one of the sought after shoe salesmen in Bridgeport because I was very, very diligent about fitting people properly when I sold the shoes because I had, in my own experience, trouble. Because my brother, Maury, was smaller than I was, and his feet

were obviously smaller. But he never wore his shoes out, and I was very tough on shoes. So to wear his hand-me-downs, I had to curl my toes up in order to wear his shoes. It was a very uncomfortable situation, and I vowed that I would not allow people to have that problem with their shoes.

I: [laughs]

BS: I also took a course from Dr. Scholl Company. Everybody knows Scholl.

I: Oh, yes.

BS: They had a correspondence course on the structure of the feet and legs, and you'd learn how to fit shoes properly, and they had a certain press that adjusted them for heavy people who flattened out those arch supports, and we had this press that would put them back in shape, which was a free service. So I learned how to keep people comfortable in their shoes, and the word got around, and I was offered jobs for much more than I was getting, up in the valley -- in Ansonia, Derby, Shelton and Norwalk. But I couldn't take those jobs because I didn't have a bicycle, and there was no way of getting there, so I had to stay. Because we lived only in walking distance from my job.

I: That's right -- you were on Pembroke Street, right?

BS: Yes. So, anyway, Mrs. Skydell, across the street, had a little dry goods store that was about twenty-five by fifty -- about the size of the old little drugstore used to be. And he had a shoe store. He sold all kinds of dry goods -- clothing, shoes and home furnishings and things. It was a mini department store. He carried just about most of the things that the department stores carried. And the shoe salesmen -- the drummers -- who used to come around to sell the shoes to the retailer -- used to say to him, "You know, Mr. Skydell, there's a kid across the street who is a great shoe salesman. Why don't you hire him so that he can build up his shoe department?" At that time, there were three people working in the store

and he had to take care of the shoe department himself. So it wasn't very much of a department -- about the size of a pantry. So his response would be, "I don't take help away from my neighboring merchants." The shoe store was across the street. They would say, "Hey, that man is your competitor." He would say, "I don't care if he is a competitor. He is a neighboring merchant. He is entitled to earn a livelihood, just as I am. And I'm not taking help away from him." However, he did. Mr. Skydell did ask me if I had any brothers or sisters, whom he would like to hire. And sure enough, my youngest sister went to work for him, and she did part-time babysitting for his youngest daughter, and part-time working in the store. She used to come across the street to walk home with me at night, when we got out of work. She always used to say on the way home, "You really should come to work for Mr. Skydell. He's such a nice man. He's such a nice man. And your boss is" -- well -- the [unclear] she used wasn't exactly kind. He was a frugal businessman.

I: I see.

BS: And I think that he used a different scale of expenditures than Mr. Skydell. Now we got up to a point where I was getting seven dollars a week, after about six months at that rate, and I began to realize that the kids my age -- my peers -- were having a good time. They were going to high school, and they went to football games and they had bicycles and they had sleds and skis and skates, and here I was, anything that I needed -- or anything that most kids needed -- we had to build ourselves. My brother and I had to build skis out of barrel staves, and make carts out of baby carriage wheels, scooters out of old roller skates.

I: [laughs]

BS: So that was our station in life in those days. But I discovered that I was being left out. These kids were enjoying going to high school and all the fun

things that went with it, and here I was -- I was just a spectator, rather than a participant. It was a different lifestyle. I became very unhappy about it, and I found out that there was an opportunity to go to night school, free, two nights a week. And I signed up for it for two subjects, to go those two nights -- commercial art. I thought that would be my cup of tea because I loved to draw. And business English. I thought, "Well, if I'm in business, I might as well improve my English."

I: Yes.

BS: So after about three or four weeks, my boss came to me one day and he said, "Benny, I have to take a dollar-and-a-half a week off your pay because I have to pay Tony the nights that you go to school."

I: Oh.

BS: Now, by this time, we had moved from Pembroke Street to East Main Street, and the rent was twenty-eight dollars a month, and my seven dollars a week was paying the rent, still. So I couldn't afford to take the cut, so I quit going to school, and stayed there and grew and grew, and my reputation grew because I learned how to trim the windows and I washed down the sidewalks and swept the rug and dusted the shoeboxes, and really became an important part of the staff. Staff -- I was the only salesman. There was a part-time salesman besides the boss himself. We got up to eighteen dollars, after three years. Now we moved to Putnam Street. That apartment had a furnace, so it was real classy now. [laughs]

I: [laughs]

BS: Really stepping up. Our lifestyle was totally different. So now I'm getting eighteen dollars a week, and things were looking very good. My youngest sister was working, and my kid brother was working part-time. I guess he brought home three or four dollars a week. One day my boss came to me and he said, "Benny, I'm opening a shoe store downtown, and I'm going to

manage that one, and you're going to manage this one, and you're going to get twenty-five dollars a week. So that was wonderful. Now I'm rich!

I: Yes!

BS: That's when we moved to Putnam Street. We moved from Pembroke Street to East Main Street, and then the next raise, we moved to Noble Avenue. And each apartment was nicer.

I: A little better?

BS: A little better than the other.

I: All of those still on the East Side?

BS: Still on the East Side -- yes. Because I had to be within walking distance of work. So I got that twenty-five dollars a week. Now, that's when we moved to Putnam Street. That was when we found an apartment with a furnace. It was a nicer neighborhood, and we had the fire engine next door. It was very exciting because the siren of the fire engine was a very exciting sound.

I: Right. I know it well.

BS: Oh, yes. There's a little grass in front of the house, and there were lawns in front of the houses and around. So I thought that was great. But this only went on for five or six months, of this new-found wealth. He came to me one night and he said, "Benny, I've got bad news for you. I'm closing the downtown store, and I'm coming back here, and you're going to have to go back to the eighteen dollars." I said, "Gee, Mr. Schwartz, I can't. Because we moved to Putnam Street because I got that twenty-five dollars, and I can't go back to eighteen. I can't pay the rent." He said, "I'm sorry, it's back to the eighteen." At that point, I quit and I went across the street and I asked Mr. Skydell for a job. The interview with Mr. Skydell took about thirty seconds. [laughs]

I: [laughs]

BS: He said, "Okay. You'll hang around here, and we'll find something for you to do." He didn't say, "You've got a job. Run the shoe department." So he was very casual about it, and awfully nice. He reached into his pocket -- I said, "When do you want me to start?" This was on a Saturday. He said, "Well, why don't you come in Monday." I said, "Gee, do you mind if I come in the following Monday?" He said, "No, that's okay. But why?" I said, "Well, I was supposed to have a vacation, and I quit, so I didn't get my vacation, and I would like some time off." He said, "That's okay. So, you'll come next Monday." He reached into his pocket and took out some bills and didn't hand them to me. He put them in my pocket."

I: Oh.

BS: I said, "What's this?" He said, "Well, you have to eat and you need a vacation. So maybe this will help." So I thanked him for it, but it was bad manners to take it out and count it in front of him.

I: [laughs]

BS: So, when I got outdoors, I count it -- what he put in my pocket -- and it was thirty-five dollars.

I: Which was well over what you were making.

BS: Double what I was making -- a week's paid vacation, on top of that. Now, what do you think I did?

I: I don't know.

BS: I came back the following Monday, rolled up my sleeves and went to work like it was another world, and I didn't stop until about forty years.

I: [laughs]

BS: In my retirement.

I: Forty years later?

BS: Forty years later.

I: And how old were you when you started working at Skydell's?

- BS: I was sixteen then.
- I: Sixteen.
- BS: I had three years of experience in the shoe business, and the first thing I did was to tackle the shoe department.
- I: If you don't mind, before we get into your career at Skydell's --
- BS: Am I going into too much detail?
- I: Oh, no. Not at all. This is great.
- BS: Wait until I tell you the story about how we came to Bridgeport. You'll tell me when.
- I: Okay. Well, why don't we do it right now.
- BS: Okay. After about four or five months working on the job --
- I: Up in Winsted?
- BS: In Bridgeport -- I said to Pa one day, "You know, Pa. It's strange that Uncle Isador got you a job and he can't get a job himself. He's not working."
- I: [laughs]
- BS: So Pa said in Jewish, "Cousin Isador didn't get me the job. I got it myself." I said, "You got it yourself?" Now, let me interrupt by saying that Pa was totally illiterate and never did learn how to speak English or write in any language, and particularly in English. What he tried to do was phonetically tried to sound out certain words that he thought he would understand the meaning of. For example, BAD was bade. TO was toe. He learned these few words. So he figured that they were things that he could read. So I said to him, "Pa, how come you got the job and Isador couldn't?" He said, "I got the job myself." I said, "How did you get the job yourself, Pa?" He said, "Well, I read a sign on a fence in front of Duponts." I said, "You read a sign on the fence, Pa? What did it say?" He said, "It said 'family help wanted.' And I'm a family man with six children." My older sister had died

by then. So I'm a family man. So I went in, and they gave me a job." I said, "Pa, I never heard of a sign that said, 'family help wanted.' How do you spell it?" He said, "F-E-M-A-L-E."

I: [laughs] Female.

BS: That's how we came to Bridgeport, because Pa read the sign on the fence for "family help." [laughs]

I: [laughs]

BS: How do you like that?

I: That's probably the best one yet! [laughs]

BS: So, that's how we landed in Bridgeport.

I: Yes. If he had known how to read, he wouldn't have gotten the job.  
[laughs]

BS: Right. That's correct. [laughs]

I: Before we get into the Skydell period, which is probably going to be the bulk of this, tell us a little bit about the east side. What was it like there, in your teens? I know you were working seventy-two hours a week, but --

BS: The East Side was great. When I first came to Bridgeport, as I say, I was thirteen. It was the first time I heard of or tasted Halavah. Halavah is a candy -- a sweet -- that is used in the Middle East, made of crushed almonds and pressed together, and sometimes covered with chocolate. It was a delicacy that couldn't be beat. So they had it in Bridgeport on Pembroke Street. They had my first exposure to corned beef, which we never saw. There wasn't a kosher butcher in Winsted, so they had to bring in kosher meat from Waterbury. Before we moved to Bridgeport, one of the teachers in the school in Winsted heard that my family was moving to Bridgeport. She came into my class one day and she said, "Benny, I hear that your family is moving to Bridgeport, and I want you to promise me that when you get to Bridgeport, I want you to go and see a place called the Post

Office Arcade in Bridgeport, and you'll see something really wonderful there." And sure enough, when I got to Bridgeport and made my way downtown, and found this cluster of stores with a roof over it, and a walkway right through it with stores on both sides of this walkway to go from one street to the other, with this roof over it, and there was a balcony in there, where there were offices upstairs, and a beautiful dress store and a men's furnishing store, in this indoor situation, and it was very exciting. So Miss Pickett was right. It was a wonderful thing to behold. I saw my first bridge that opened up to let boats go through. There were fantastic things that you didn't see in Winsted. My mother would go to the bridge near the railroad station, where boats would come up and sell fish right off, that they had just caught -- sell them right off the boat. These things did not happen -

I: In Winsted?

BS: Right.

I: You were mentioning all the different foods and things that you were exposed to in Bridgeport. What was the ethnic make-up of the east side?

BS: It was largely Jewish. In Winsted, there were only -- out of a population of about five thousand -- there were about eight or ten Jewish families. They didn't have a synagogue in Winsted, so the high holidays were celebrated in the police station, where we had our Yom Kipper and Rosh Hashanah services. Chief Slocum was very kind in allowing us to use the police station for our services.

I: Yes. [laughs] But on the East Side of Bridgeport there was a large Jewish community?

BS: Oh, a large Jewish population. There were Jewish bakeries, Jewish butchers, a delicatessen. The delicatessen was really very, very exciting. Salami and bologna and all kinds of goodies. And they even had public

baths. I think there were -- on East Main, which was a few blocks off from Pembroke Street -- there were a great many Jewish merchants. If I stop and think carefully, I think there must have been thirty or thirty-five merchants along East Main and Pembroke Street and the surrounding streets, with East Main being the main thoroughfare. East Main was where the trolley car was. Not only Skydell's -- there were two furniture stores down at the lower end of East Main. There was --

I: Friedman.

BS: Freedman Brothers, Leventhall. There was Miller's Department Store, Leroy Dress Store, Slessinger Shoe Store, a drug store, clothing stores. Between the fine Italian groceries and produce stores, it was so beautiful to see, but I don't remember the name of the nearest produce store, where they had all these fresh fruits outside, on the sidewalk, and it looked so tempting. They even had a furrier on East Main Street.

I: Really?

BS: Yes. Dentists, doctors, tailors. You name it. It was a self-supporting, self-sustaining community. A beautiful park, of course. Beardsley Park was beautiful. Seaside was just the ultimate in luxury and beauty.

I: Oh, yes.

BS: Washington Park, with the gazebo in the middle of it, where they used to have bands, played this popular music. That was before the jazz age.

I: [laughs]

BS: It was really exciting. The library --

I: The east branch library?

BS: The east branch library. The library reminds me about Cousin Isador -- when we were small, our family and their family -- the [unclear] in Winsted. While we used to mow the lawn for the library, neither my brother nor I were ever inside the library. He would just go to the office and collect the

thirty-five cents for mowing the lawn, but never was in the area where the books were. Well, one day, Cousin Isador came by and he took Maury to the library because he would take books out and take them home and read them, which was a pretty exciting experience.

I: Yes.

BS: The books that my brother and I read were books that Pa brought home with the junk -- the paperbacks that people would throw away with their newspapers and magazines. That's how I finally read *Black Beauty*, by the way.

I: [laughs]

BS: Jack Armstrong and some of the other heroes. Anyway, Maury went with Cousin Isador to the library, and he walked in and he was so overwhelmed with the hundreds and hundreds of books. He said, "Cousin Izzy, how can you -- with all these books -- how can you decide which books to take home to read?" Cousin Izzy said, "Oh, that's easy. The red ones." [laughs]

I: [laughs]

BS: Those were the kinds of experiences that we had, as kids. [laughs]

I: [laughs] Okay, so you're sixteen years old and you started to work at Skydell's.

BS: Yes.

I: Well, tell us about it -- the past forty years. [laughs]

BS: Well, I can tell you that it was a totally new life. It was like being in a new world. Because my boss, who became my father-in-law after -- let's see -- 1940 we were married. When we first met, we weren't formally introduced to each other. Mildred used to come down to the store sometimes after school and help her father sell thread and socks and things like that. She was a few years younger -- I guess four years younger than I was. She mistook me for being conceited. She didn't have much to do with me

because -- she didn't bother much because she thought I was conceited. I wasn't really conceited. I was really shy. And I was embarrassed about taking to girls.

I: Well, yes.

BS: I didn't know what to say to girls. I thought she was a spoiled brat. So, we didn't hit it off for quite some time, until -- it had to be when she started to go to high school that we both realized that we were both wrong. She really was a very nice person, and she ultimately realized -- at the same time, I suppose -- that I was shy -- not conceited. It was the exact opposite. But to get back to my job at the Skydell's, the biggest surprise was seeing the number of people who came through that door was absolutely remarkable because in the shoe store, if a half a dozen people came in to the store, it was a good day. That doesn't mean that you sold a half a dozen pair of shoes. You didn't always make a sale.

I: Sure.

BS: But if you sold three or four pair, it was not bad. On Saturday, if you sold five or six pair, it was also not bad. Well, when I saw these customers with the door kept swinging open and closed, and people would come in to buy a spool of thread or socks, or an apron, or a dress, or a blanket, it was amazing, and I said to myself, "Wow. If I could sell -- for every ten people who came in through that door, came in to the store to buy something, if I could sell them a pair of shoes -- to every tenth customer -- I could sell -- increase the business by three-fold or more. And that was my goal. That was my first goal. My next goal was to see that the window displays -- the windows were displayed by a friend of my father-in-law, my boss, who was an insurance man. But he used to like to [unclear] the windows. I guess in his view, he had had a little bit of experience there. So, from him I learned how to decorate windows -- trim the windows. They called it window

trimming. To display the merchandise. So, my first [unclear] was to see that the window had good shoe space. They were displayed -- men's, women's and children's, along with the men's, women's and children's merchandise that was on display. And that helped considerably, because whenever we put anything in the window in those days, we also put a price on it. And we continued that pattern for many, many years. It was my father-in-law, Mr. Skydell's theory that when people looked at something in the window that they liked it, that they thought it was very nice, they would take it for granted that it was too much.

I: Oh!

BS: That it cost too much. So if you put a shirt in the window with a matching -  
- with an attractive necktie and a handkerchief in the pocket, and perhaps a pair of suspenders to hold it up, or a belt around it, and everything looked coordinated and neat, people would come and say they liked that shirt and tie that's in the window. Now, that doesn't happen anymore. People don't window shop. But in those days, people did a lot of window shopping. Because they would walk to the movies, or walk to the grocery store, or walk to the drug store, or to the factory to go to work and go back.

I: Sure.

BS: So windows became a very important part of our program, to such an extent that as long as we were on the corner, we only had four windows to the front -- two on either side of the door. And there was a blank wall on the Harding Street side. So I persuaded Mr. Skydell to build two or three shallower windows on the [unclear] Street side, so that it would add to the display. And that helped, and I made certain that there were plenty of shoe displays in all the windows. And that was the beginning of the growth -- of the shoe department. Now, the shoe department got to be very strong and important, and I started to move into other areas. We hired a man who had

had his own shoe store in the old days and lost it. So we hired him -- he lived on the East Side -- to manage the shoe department, under my direction, of course, with the buying, in particular. The store had some old counter that I think one of the old Woolworth's stores downtown remodeled, and they got a bit of their old counters. So my father-in-law picked them up very reasonably. The counters were loaded with merchandise. There would be a stack of papers, some socks, some BVDs and some drawers of shirts on this one big counter. So that bothered me because in the shoe business, we displayed the ladies shoes in one area, and the children's in another, and the men's in another, and we sort of departmentized the shoes. So, why couldn't we departmentize the dry goods? If there was -- instead of just one stack of underwear and then something else in that drawer, why not make the whole row underwear? The BVDs or the shorts or the drawers or the undershirts, and so on? We did that -- started to departmentize with whatever space there was, which was very limited, of course. It got to a point where the shoe department didn't have enough space. And, by the way, I had to remodel the shoe department right off the bat because the shelves consisted of wooden packing cases that the manufacturers would ship to us. They didn't ship paper cartons. That came later. But these wooden packing cases -- we would open up on the sidewalk with a screwdriver and hammer and all the nails, and bring the stock in, and get rid of the packing case. But instead of getting rid of the packing cases, they became shelves, by playing them all along the long way.

I: Sure.

BS: But it didn't look nice, and it wasn't neat. So the first thing I did was have some shelves built so that there was no gaping space and everything was even and neat. I had a passion for neatness and orderliness, which if I can

go back and give you a little for instance about when I was eight years old.

I: Sure.

BS: One of the lessons I had in being neat was working for Mr. Dautrich on a farm, where we kids -- five or six or seven of us -- would work on the vegetable farm, pulling out weeds from the row of onions and beets and carrots, and so on. But we would weed them and pull out the weeds and go up one row and down the other, and we'd get ten cents an hour. His daughter, Helen, was the timekeeper, and when we came to work, we didn't come at a given time. It depended on whether our chores and our homework and the weather -- we would go over to the farm to do some work. And Helen would keep our time. Joey would come ten minutes to three, or maybe I would come eight minutes after one, and so on. She kept our time, and then as we left, she added up the hours and paid us all. If there was a fraction of a penny owed us, she would carry over to the next time to see that we got it. It was that kind of an arrangement. One day, Mr. Dautrich had assigned us kids to the front loads. I wasn't feeling good and I had to go to the bathroom. The bathroom was about two or three acres away from my row. I thought, "Gee, I have to go. I'll have to stop working." Sure enough, on the way, Mr. Dautrich saw me and it looked to me like he was glaring at me because he was a very militaristic man. He even had the military haircut, and very stern-looking and very orderly and very constant, and I thought, "Oh, my God. He sees me, and I'm not working. It's on his time, and I'm cheating by going to the bathroom." I got a little bit uneasy. Sure enough, I get back and about a half hour later -- the second time -- I had to go back -- and this time he saw me again. And now I was sure that my job was in jeopardy. I thought, "This is the end of my job," and that would have been a terrible tragedy, had I really been fired, which I thought I was going to be, for sure. Sure enough, I get to my row.

I'm on my hands and knees at the end of my row and I look up. Mr. Dautrich is standing there with his hands on his hips. His feet are in the stance reminding me of, in these days, the logo for --

[End of Side One]

BS: I thought this was the end of my job, which, of course, would be a terrible tragedy. Because in those days, people who were fired were shamed, and it was almost criminal for you to do something so bad that you were fired. You had to be either a thief or a liar, or something like that. Sure enough, I get to the end of the row -- I got to the end of the row -- and Mr. Dautrich said, "Bernie, is this your row?" I said, "Yes, Mr. Dautrich." He said, "Well, you tell Helen that I said that I want you to have eleven cents an hour, but don't tell the other kids." The reason for that was that when the other kids would pull the weeds out, they would let them wither there, in the path, and sometimes, not even pull the weeds out by the roots. Some of them just pulled the top off, and they would keep going. When I pulled the weeds out, they were pulled out by the roots, brushed aside, and I would pat the soil around each plant, and they would look nice. So you could cut my row with a knife. And that appealed to --that pleased him --so that that's how I got my first raise.

I: [laughs] You remember that.

BS: And I remember that very well, because for the longest time, even when I was six or seven years old, whether we were shoveling snow or mowing lawns or pedaling papers -- or whatever we did -- it was neat. It was neater than the other kids. We put our papers where they belong. They were there on time. When we mowed the lawn, we didn't leave any rough edges. When we shoveled snow, you could cut our sidewalk snow with a knife because it was nice and equal. And that's the way -- I wasn't brought up that way. My folks didn't tell me, "You've got to be neat." It was just

natural for me, I guess.”

I: Yes.

BS: So, for the rest of my life -- for the rest of my career -- the neatness, whether it was in the windows or the counters or the buying or the selling -- whatever it was -- it prevailed, and it got the results that were needed. Well, the other thing was that our relationship with the customers was thoroughly honest and straightforward and fair and consistent. My father-in-law always made a point of seeing that customers were given the same respect, whether they could speak English or not. Whether they were black or white or Turkish or whatever they were. In fact, you used to brag. As we grew and hired more people, by the time we had about twelve or fifteen people in the store, between the tailor shop and the receiving and the janitor and the office and the charge accounts, and so on, he would say, “Our store is like the United Nations.” He was so proud of that. Because it didn’t matter what your ethnic background was, what color you were. You were part of the family, part of the staff, and you did the job the way everybody else did. He was happy about it.

I: Just a great teacher.

BS: Yes.

I: I remember being impressed with some of that in the brief two months I worked there. [laughs]

BS: There you go. Then you know what we stood for.

I: Yes.

BS: Not having gone to high school did bother me when I got to Bridgeport in the early days, but I got so engrossed in my job, and as I progressed and earned more, it of course, trickled down to my family being better off because I didn’t buy a car with my money or do anything foolish with it. It all went into the family coffers. When we got to Bridgeport, I was the

oldest one at home, by the way, because my older brother -- I have to interrupt this pattern as we go along because as a short time, we lived in Torrington, Connecticut, which is not far -- about ten miles from there. During the winter, when the rag business was slow, he would find a job in the Torrington factory, and we used to go by trolley car to Torrington to work. So ultimately, we moved to Torrington with Daisy and all, because my parents found Mr. Cohen had a barn. He was a junk man, also, and he was a widower, and he lived alone, so we moved in and he became our boarder. My mother would feed him, of course, and he had a home, and we were paying him rent. So it was a comfortable situation. And during that period, there are a few things that happened to me that I think are worth repeating because it was the beginning of my belief in a fairy -- in an angel, rather. A guardian angel.

I: Oh, okay. Sure.

BS: The experience I had, and years later, after several experiences with having close calls, even as late as when I was in the Army and came home without a scratch, the close calls I had after I came back from the Army, I figured I must have a guardian angel looking after me, from the time I was a child. So it was in Torrington when we had Daisy, and strangely enough, when we Torrington, my father found that there were more customers -- more rags and junk in Winsted, where we used to live. Because he knew the farms and he knew people. So we would harness the horse early in the morning and on weekends, and we'd go back to Winsted. We'd come back in the evenings. And on the way back, Daisy was very fast. She moved very fast on the way home because a horse knows when they're going home.

I: Oh, okay.

BS: Especially when they're a little bit hungry.

I: Right. [laughs]

BS: So, one day, we're on the way home from Torrington, and we got to a spot in the road where the road was parallel with the railroad, about four or five miles, and the tracks were very close to the road. And about a mile behind us, the train was coming toward home blew the whistle, and spooked Daisy. She took off and I was driving because Pa was just dozing off next to me, and I couldn't hold her back. She really was galloping totally out of control -- you know, ten years old. You don't have the strength to pull her in.

I: Yes.

BS: We crossed the crossing. The train was yards behind us when we made the crossing, and as we crossed, between the rail there was a sort of a slight rise, and when we went over that rise, it was like a bomb, and Pa and I both -- the seat fell back into the wagon, and Pa and I both fell back into the wagon, as we crossed the tracks. And we had a huge lap robe. It was mid-winter -- real cold. And as we fell back into the wagon, the [unclear] fell on the tracks and was killed.

I: Oh. But you --

BS: But we remained alive.

I: You and your dad?

BS: Yes. And another time -- both of these events took place in Torrington. One day, Mr. Albert came to pick up our months' supply of junk, and Pa wasn't home. What we would do was weigh it, and he'd pay so much a pound for the cloth and so much a pound for the copper and the other scrap metals. So he wasn't home and Ma said, "Why don't you wait a little while. Pa will be home soon." Well, he waited about a half hour or more, and then he decided that he wanted to go see someone else and then come back. So, I was outside talking to him. He said, "Benny, go tell your mother that I'm going up to see Mr. Goldman, and I'll be back. And if you want to have a ride with us, you can." He had room -- he had his cousin with him,

who was being introduced to the junk business -- to the wholesale junk. There was room next to his cousin on his seat, in his huge truck. He said, "I'm going to see Mr. Goldman. If you want, you can come with me. Tell your mother that we'll be back in maybe about an hour or so." So I go in and I say, "Ma, I'm going with Mr. Albert to see Mr. Goldman." She said, "No. You stay here until Pa comes home." I said, "But Ma, I want to have a ride in the truck. I never rode in a truck before." It was different than a horse and buggy. She said, "I want you to stay here until Pa comes home. You're not going anywhere. You stay right here." So I went out and I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Albert. I have to wait for Pa to come home." About a half hour later a policeman came to our door and Ma answered the door and the policeman said, "Can you tell me where I can find the rabbi." Ma said, "Why do you need a rabbi?" He said, "Well, a Jewish man was killed by a train just a little while ago, and we need a rabbi to administer the last rites." Now, had Ma let me go to see Mr. Goldman --his cousin was killed. I was supposed to sit on the side where the train hit. So it would be me and the cousin. Mr. Albert sustained some injuries, and for the rest of his life, he had a huge scar across his face from here to here, but he remained alive and well. So that was one of the things I will never forget. It reinforces my theory that there is a guardian angel.

I: Yes.

BS: One time we were walking across Highland Lake that froze over, but there was one corner where the water was very active, and the ice was pretty thin. I had one of my newspaper customers who was around the other side of the lake. So this time instead of walking around the lake, which took a long time... [Tape Off/On]

I: So you were crossing the ice.

BS: I was crossing the ice, and I got across to deliver my paper safely, but a kid

did fall in. He didn't fall in, but he could have had there not been someone there to pull him out. But that kind of close calls.

I: Maybe there is someone watching over you.

BS: Yes. Do you want to go back to Skydell's now?

I: Yes. Let's see. We're in the 1930s. You and Mildred got married --

BS: That was not until 1940. But the things that we did in the store were so totally out of the ordinary, and maybe a little bit unorthodox. Maybe they were a little bit wild, but I found them all so wonderful and cooperative. He never questioned, "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that?" Shortly after the growth of the shoe department started, and we started departmentizing the rest of the store, we decided to put the shoe department down in the cellar. Now, we used the cellar for storage anyway for the boots, and arctics, and in those days, when it snowed, the people would flock in and buy the boots and the arctics, and they took up too much room in the department, so we'd run downstairs and bring them up to sell them. So what we did to sell them was just foundation and concrete floor. We called in a carpenter and built a plywood walls and shelves and put carpeting down and recessed lights, and if anyone was over six feet tall, they had them stoop down when they went down. But it was mostly women and average-sized people. So we prospered and the shoe department became a very important part of not only Skydell's, but we made it a point with my father-in-law's consent and blessing, to have sizes to fit everyone. Men, women, children. The theory being that -- let's say Mrs. Warner wore a size ten-and-a-half, [unclear] so there were a few other people who were [unclear]. So when we found a shoe that we thought would be universally acceptable, like a suede or a [unclear] pump -- in those days it was a classic, like men's button-down oxford shirts.

I: Okay.

BS: It was a classic shoe. But most of the stores would carry the middle sizes because the department stores needed turnover. They had the turnover four times a year. The stock had to turnover. And if you carried slow selling sizes or colors, you didn't make your turn -- you didn't turnover. So that was the theory. But we were aware that pleasing customers were more important than the turn. Because the turnover on what we called the belly-side -- the regular popular sizes -- turned over very well. So when you carried the twelve, triple quadruple A -- we get quadruple A's, also. Not in all the styles, but we had basic moccasin, a basic pump, and something that was suitable and [unclear] you could sell year after year. The theory being that -- let's say Mr. Alfano wore a size twelve-and-a-half EEE, but Mr. Alfano's wife wore a regular size 8, she wore a regular size dress. Mr. Alfano had a 52 waist, so he fitted in to a nice blazer, nice suits -- pin-striped suit or plaid suit. Because we found a supplier in Philadelphia that made large sizes, and made them scientifically slim-looking. There was something about the way that they cut them, so that when a man had a big belly, the weight of the extra fabric would make the back of the jacket come up.

I: Okay. [laughs]

BS: If there was too much weight here, it would pull down and pull it back up. But this Edelson family had one of the universities do research on fat people and design men's clothing that would not ride up in the back. It's something about the way they built the shoulder.

I: So you got that business?

BS: So we got that business, so we would fit [unclear] and all the fat people around. There were very many. Or the fat women. But the fat women have normal-sized children. But the fat men -- or the giant men -- had normal-sized families. So when we fit them -- when we had extra-long

made or extra-short made or extra-large made for us, we beat the competition because nobody would dare invest in that kind of inventory.

I: Oh, okay.

BS: Nobody would take the trouble to research it to see who made a garment that was worth expanding the size range, like Van Heusen shirts. We went to Van Heusen. I keep saying "we," but I was the instigator all this time, and I have all the backing from everybody. And when my brother-in-law joined the firm -- he married the youngest daughter -- he was skilled in the treasury and in the control. Handling the money.

I: The finances?

BS: Yes. And I was delighted because that made me -- I hated to handle money, and I hated bookkeeping, but he was very good at it. He is college grad, and very neat and had a lot of control.

I: And his name?

BS: His name is Buddy Katzen. So that freed me, by his control. He also controlled the men's department, and the office, which I was not interested in. But I enjoyed the thrill of having people come for something they couldn't get anywhere else, and seeing there was [unclear].

I: You thought that Mr. Smith, who had a 52 waist, would bring in his normal-sized family, and they would --?

BS: Oh, of course. Oh, by all means. Yes. Oh, yes. That was the case. And it wasn't just big, it was the short. One of our manufacturer's -- it was not only the legs that was short, but the rise had to be made shorter, also. Extra-long -- it's not just that the pant leg was longer, but the waist had to be longer so it wouldn't be above the belly button. So that worked out quite well, and right down the line, across the board, that emphasis never left until the day I retired. We constantly developed elements of the store that were not easily found anywhere else, and we made it easy -- we made it accessible

to the customer by having a parking lot. We were the first store in Bridgeport to have special parking lot for the customer, free. Otherwise, they would have to pay in meters, or park blocks away. And in time, they had the parking lot buildings that came in many years later.

I: How long did the store continue to prosper there? You started there in the 1930s, right?

BS: I started in the 1930s, and there were three people on the staff. One left, so I became the third person on the staff in 1930, when I started. And as we grew -- as we built the department -- we had to put on more salespeople, and ultimately, buyers for the different departments. In the men's department, my brother-in-law as the buyer, but he hired buyers. He did the directing and the controlling, so that he always had good buyers that went along on the level that he elected to take. So his being there made it easier for me to install these ideas and these new systems. It wasn't just the merchandise alone, but we made it interesting for the customers -- first of all, by having the nicest advertising that you have ever seen. When you have time, I want to take you downstairs and show you some of the unusual fantastic advertising that we had. There was no following the pattern for [unclear] anyone else, or using the systems or the ideas that other stores used. We had our own way of wooing the customers and pleasing them. We wanted our advertising to look nice, and to be realistic and to be detailed and accurate. It was really so simple. It was that same philosophy of getting that penny raise is what started to give me confidence in the fact that what I was doing neatly and consistently, I was rewarded. And my reward came at Skydell's because all these things worked so well that our income went up because we could afford it -- the business went -- well, the staff, for example. I was Number Three. When I retired, I think, there were about eighty-five people on the staff. And during my experience in the

store, we had gone up to a hundred people, at one point.

I: In what year did you retire?

BS: 1979. I started in 1930. That's about forty-nine years.

I: Forty-nine years. That's a pretty good run.

BS: Yes. We went from about a thousand square feet to forty thousand square feet, by the time I retired. And when I retired, we owned the whole city block. The first parking lot that we had, we had to tar down some garages. People in the neighborhood didn't have garages. In the old days, the houses on the east side didn't have garages, because people had never heard of them. They walked to work. Work was only a few blocks away. We had these wonderful factories like Singer Sewing Machine, Remington Arms, Bridgeport Brass, General Electric.

I: Sure.

BS: These wonderful --

I: Right there.

BS: All right there. So people were within walking distance, and they could afford to pay the mortgage on their house, they could afford to send their kids to school. They paid their beds. They were Slavish, Polish, Italian, Irish and Jewish. They bonded so well. There was no -- like, I can't remember any racism or discrimination. Everybody was somebody. It was really a totally different world. A totally wonderful world. But when the factory started to move out, one of the first was Singer Sewing Machine. They bought a plant in Kentucky or Tennessee, where they had power, and a building was put up for them -- a one-story building instead of the factory that we knew was three or four stories high. They were non-union help down there, so the factory just sort of deserted New England. I remember one after the other. The [unclear] in New Hampshire -- companies in Maine and Boston manufacturing. You could buy almost anything that you wanted

just in New England without having to go to California or Florida or Detroit. They even had an automobile manufacturer. The Locomobile was manufactured in Bridgeport.

I: That's right.

BS: So it was a beautiful time except for the interruption that had to go to the Army. But when I got back -- the day after I got back -- we picked up the same theme and theories and system that we had. And as I look at some of those ads -- before you leave, I want you to look at at least one or two that really impressed me.

I: Sure.

BS: My father-in-law was so interested in his staff that I remember one day, one of the gals was [unclear], and I couldn't get her to put the stuff back in the boxes and fold them the way they were supposed to when she was showing them to a customer. I said to them one day -- "Dad" -- by this time I was married. "So-and-so -- she's so messy. Why do we keep her?" He said, "Leave her alone. She needs the job."

I: [laughs]

BS: That's the kind of a person he was. "Leave her alone. She needs the job." Her having the job was more important than having her put the right thing in the right box. So I learned from him that you have to be tolerant and fair, and generou. He was such a wonderful man. He was such a role model.

I: Before we wrap up with this segment of it, as I may have said, this tape is going to be in the library, hopefully forever. [laughs]

BS: Oh, my God. Then you better edit a little bit.

I: [laughs] Is there anything else you'd like to say for posterity, or just anything you'd like to say to your grandchildren?

BS: Well, one thing I would say -- nothing to do with my experience in the retail business, but in general -- I think that most people feel as though after

they've been to school, they stop learning. And there is so much to know -- life changes so fast with technology and human nature, and with different countries bonding with us, and our learning about other parts of the world, I think that people should never stop learning. After I received my high school diploma last year, you have to exercise your body and your mind. They are two separate entities. And you never stop. It doesn't matter how old or how young you are. And also, we don't start young enough with teaching character. I started a program, which I call Better World Campaign. I issue a little card that -- I have a sample in my pocket. The school has it laminated.

I: “[unclear], as a member of the Better World Campaign, I will perform two good deeds every day, by making someone feel better, or by making something look nicer. This will help make the world around me a little better, and will help make me a better person.”

BS: They have a big class in the school, and the teachers [unclear], and so on. And they own -- that card belongs to them. I have it going in Daniel Farms School in Trumbull, and [unclear] and I started it by accident in Fort Lauderdale with a kindergarten teacher I met there.

I: [laughs]

BS: She was the first to implement it. And then a grand-niece who has a kindergarten class somewhere in New Jersey. They sent me letters and pictures of the class and letters from the children. But since my eyesight is going downhill and I don't drive, -- it's hard for me to drive -- I've turned it over to the Easton Senior Center, where the Director is going to try to establish a program throughout most of the schools, at least in this area.

I: That's beautiful.

BS: I firmly believe that character has to be built from the youngest age, and I think it's -- I think the teachers are the best ones to do it because they can

have fifteen or eighteen or twenty kids in their class. And if two or three or four of them respond, and learn how to have character throughout their lives, it can change their lives, and actually make the world a little better.

I: All right.

BS: So I'm very enthusiastic about [unclear] the area. I hope that the Director has all the letters and all the data about it. These glowing letters I got from the teachers and from the kids are really nice. The first letter I got was from Mary [unclear] in Fort Lauderdale and she said, "I never heard so many 'may I's' or 'please' or 'thank-you's' from her kids.

I: That's great. Lastly -- you slipped it in there -- you received your high school diploma when?

BS: Last year.

I: You received your high school diploma last year?

BS: Yes. That would be 1997.

I: Class of 1997. [laughs]

BS: Yes. [laughs] It was a special -- a one-on-one testing.

I: Well, you're never too young and never too old.

BS: That's the point that I'm trying to make with people, and that is that I made the mistake of not learning anything while I was working because I was so early engrossed in increasing the business and making it better. That's all I could think of. And it was like -- when I think back, you can compare it with digging ditches. You dig deeper and longer, and you have a deeper ditch, and the deeper the ditch is, the less you see of the outside world. It's that simple.

I: Yes.

BS: So I was digging ditches, and didn't see anything of the outside world. Because I was so totally engrossed in selling more of this item or that item or the other and wooing customers, and making the store grow. And it

worked.

I: And you got your high school diploma. [laughs]

BS: Yes. [laughs] So there was a little bit of glory involved there. And also, as I said when I was interviewed, it did a job for myself esteem. I do feel a little bit more entitled to receive it than I did when I was -- not that I learned that much more, but I did learn by taking these tests that I have more ability than I thought.

I: Okay, Mr. Seigel. Thank you very much.

BS: Well, I enjoyed this. [Tape Off/On]

I: Before we close we are going to talk a little bit about some of the community things that were done at Skydell's. Mr. Seigel --

BS: Yes. One of the things that I remember vividly was the fashion shows that we used to run, and we would charge a small fee, and the proceeds would go to the cancer fund. I recall our sales girls did the modeling on stage, in one of the night clubs a few blocks away from the store. We had radio program WNAB would send over one of the announcers, and we would clear an area in the children's department upstairs and put some folding chairs -- a couple of dozen folding chairs -- in there. We had prizes that were given to the customers if they met the requirements. Incidentally, when we were about to put that program on, it was supposed to be that people were supposed to answer questions that didn't require any particular knowledge, but these were questions that the average person might know about or hear about. But just before we were supposed to open that program and go on the air, a new law came out that you were not allowed to have a question-and-answer program because it would require people to read or have certain talent -- certain experience -- or read certain material. And it wouldn't be fair to the average person.

I: Oh.

BS: So it didn't take long for us to decide what to do about it. We changed the name of the program to No Questions.

I: [laughs]

BS: [laughs] It didn't take long to decide what to do about it.

I: Yes. [laughs]

BS: What happened is we would ask our manufacturers to give us free -- to donate prizes that we would offer the customer to whom we didn't have to ask questions. But what we did ask is can they produce an article on their person -- let's say, for example, someone had a white comb.

I: Oh, I see.

BS: Or, if someone were to have a crocheted handkerchief. Or, let's say, a picture of their child. Things like that that just came to us. And we gave the announcer a list of things that he should ask for. And we asked the customers to submit ideas about what they thought we should ask for. And the ones that we used -- we gave a free prize to the person who made that suggestion. However, this went on comfortably for a while, and we were having steady people come to visit us and to sit and listen to the program -- be a part of it. Until we discovered that one of the contestants would come with the market basket that had index on it, and with articles in that basket that she and her friends suggested that he ask for.

I: [laughs]

BS: So it was sort of doing a little bit of extra homework, and she and her friends were [unclear].

I: I guess so. [laughs]

BS: So that sort of went down the drain. Then we changed it to something else -- I forget what. But we gave -- for example, a company came out with a wonderful nurse's shoe that had very wonderful support, it was good-looking and comfortable, and easy to keep clean. We would give a pair to

the head nurse, so that she would get the word out that it was available to Skydell's. There was a special work shoe that pole climbers needed to climb poles. This had a built-in pocket for the spike that goes into the wood. We gave a [unclear] to the foreman of the pole workers. I remember that we sponsored a rodeo --

I: Oh, really?

BS: Yes. Somewhere in Fairfield, and during the program, my secretary would hand out a little tiny model with the name 'Lee' on it, so she would hand them out to the people there. [laughs] We advertised in church bulletins. People could call up and order a nightgown for their family or somebody who was in the hospital and we would deliver it to the hospital for them. We had a manufacturer make us special shoes for people who had a deformed foot. Let's say, we had one customer who wore a size eight-and-a-half on one foot and a size ten on the other. Now, normally, these people would buy two pair of shoes and throw away the one that didn't fit them.

I: Yes.

BS: So we had a manufacturer -- we would take a mold of the customer's both feet, and they would make a shoe to fit both feet. We went to great lengths. As I said, I took that course from Dr. Scholl, and we were able to fit people [unclear], adjust them when they went out of whack.

I: Skydell's wasn't just a store -- it was part of the community.

BS: Right. We raised funds. We had a drive for the United Way every year. We would appoint one of the executives in the store to contact every single person in the store and raise several thousand dollars every year for the United Way. I remember that on Sunday the store was closed, but I remember Mrs. Murphy, I think, would call up Mr. Skydell, who lived above the store and say she had to go to a funeral Sunday, and she needed shoes for her son. So he would open the store -- make it a point to open the

store for her, because she needed her shoes. That kind of thing. There were donations going in all directions that people came -- that Mr. Skydell was a very community-minded person. We had scholarships -- he gave a scholarship to the Housatonic Community College, the University of Bridgeport. He gave a fairly decent donation to the Catholic School before it became Sacred Heart.

I: Notre Dame.

BS: Was it Notre Dame? I believe so. So he made a substantial -- because there was no discrimination in his heart. He was just out for everybody. And I remember one day he gave a mini lecture to one of the sales girls because he thought that the sales girl was a little bit impersonal when she waited on a man who came in with overalls. And after this transaction was made and the customer left, he went over to the girl and he said, "You know that that young man that you just waited on could very well be a college graduate, and he could very well be able to buy and sell us -- could be very wealthy. But he was in work clothes, and some salespeople are inclined to treat them with a little less respect [unclear] regard. He would make it a point to learn Slavic, Polish, Italian, and encouraged us all to learn how to say some of their words that were in the language that the people spoke. People would come in -- neighboring merchants, as my father-in-law used to call it. They would be in the same business that we were -- competitors. And they would come in to cash a check or they needed some cartons to pack some merchandise in. If they needed cartons, we would go down in the basement to the [unclear] department, empty out some cartons, and bring them out for the competitors.

I: Going back to he wouldn't steal from the shoe salesman across the street.

BS: Yes. Now, getting back to me, we ran some huge events, like sidewalk sales. We had an event -- we called it an expo. The Bridgeport Expo. All

the merchants got together and offered wonderful values. We had a wonderful band -- march -- and I don't know if we had a stand set-up, but one of the popular band leaders would play music out in the street on the next block -- all free, of course. We gave out prizes for all sorts of reasons -- I forget what some of them are. But when I think back about all the things that we did that were different than anyone ever thought of or dared to do if they did think of it -- they didn't think of it. It was so natural for us to please people, and there was no thought about whether we're going to sell enough or whether we'd get new customers or not. We did. It worked. It always worked.

I: Sort of as a byproduct of doing the right thing.

BS: Yes. We had one. A model would come in and we called it informal modeling on Thursday evenings and Saturday afternoons. She would change her outfit about ten times in the few hours that she spent, walk over to customers who were browsing, and explain what it is that she was wearing. Some of our staff modeled, also, when we had the fashion shows. There were pictures of what they liked about the store.

I: The children?

BS: Yes. The children would do the drawings, and we'd give them a prize for the dress or a coat or a snowsuit or something like that. It was really fun, when I stopped and think back -- it was work, and you had to stop and rack your brain to do something [unclear] a little nicer or a little better. It got to be sort of -- let me say -- an occurrence. You'd walk in a store, look around, and then your [unclear] would report to you that something is not too attractive over there.

End of Interview