

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Sam Loeb. We are recording at Loeb's Men's Clothing Store at 125 North Water Street in Decatur, Illinois, on April 29, 1986.

Q. Mr. Loeb, you told me that you have always lived in Decatur. Where did you live as a child?

A. I was born in the 900 block of North Calhoun Street. Shortly thereafter, my folks moved to 535 North Morgan Street. I went to Gastman School through the fifth grade. That's at the corner of Church and North Streets.

Q. That's the school that has been torn down now, isn't it? You must have had a few memories when you saw it come down?

A. It was torn down only a few years ago.

Q. Did you continue in the Decatur schools?

A. I went to Ullrich School, Central Junior High School, Decatur High School for the last three years, and then to the University of Illinois.

Q. What was your major subject there?

A. General Business. But I had eye trouble, I've always had eye trouble. That was the reason I left school after a year and a half and decided to try business in 1936.

Q. Let's talk a little bit about your childhood. Did you have fun when you were a child? What did you do for entertainment?

A. When I was a child, I participated in all the sports of the day. I played a lot of baseball, football, and basketball. As a youngster, I was always interested in athletics. Then when I got to Decatur High School, I was on the basketball team for three years. I also worked at the same time. My father had a small clothing store in the 700 block of East Eldorado Street. I worked there after school and every night until 9:00 p.m. I had a good life back in those days. My father was a good provider. My life was excellent.

Q. Did they give you chores to do at home?

A. I had to do all the chores. I had to cut the grass, wash the dishes.

Q. You didn't have brothers or sisters?

A. I had two brothers and a sister. My oldest brother died just last September. I still have a sister living here and a brother who is a very successful manufacturer in Los Angeles. But I never left Decatur. My home life was excellent. There is one thing my mother - who died in

1936 - always impressed upon the children. She said, "With our background we cannot be like silver - we must be like gold growing up in life.

Q. That's almost poetic, isn't it?

A. It isn't poetic, but that is what was always stressed when we were growing up. I try to follow that principle in my family.

Q. When you left the University of Illinois, you had a ready-made job, didn't you?

A. When I left school, I went to work for my father, but I aspired for bigger things, so in the latter part of 1932, I acquired this building and opened a men's apparel or clothing store in early 1933 - and I'm still here.

Q. Great! Let's find out something about the men's clothing business. What changes have come about?

A. This store is a traditional type of operation - semi-conservative, high quality - only the very finest apparel. As a matter-of-fact, there haven't been any huge changes in operation.

Q. In other words, you haven't had to add women's wear?

A. From time to time our major supplier - Hart, Schaffner, and Marx - makes women's tailored suits, and we sell them on several occasions. Now for this coming fall we are going to use a limited number of women's Hart, Schaffner, and Marx, but nothing else.

Q. It's obvious from the store that you don't cater to women.

A. No, we're a men's operation. We don't have the room and I have all I can do right now.

Q. It's obvious that you have kept your old customers, your traditional clientele. I am sure they have good taste. Have they made any changes in their demands - what they would like in clothing?

A. I don't think so. In most cases, our customers come back to shop this store. We have a few who have been trading here for fifty years. But I have found that there is a complete turn-over of customers every eight to ten years because of retirement and death. But we have always been able to attract new customers.

Q. And they don't demand blue jeans or western wear?

A. We don't sell blue jeans or western wear or appeal the the "mod" group. But we've always been extremely traditional, and as a result, we've had over fifty years of good, solid business.

- Q. There must have been some changes in style even in this traditional business. I've noticed even in my limited observation that men's suits change.
- A. There have been very few changes in men's fashions of the traditional type. However, what few changes that have been made are relatively minor.
- Q. Like width of lapels or cut of the coat?
- A. That's right, they have to do something to attract new customers or make the current wardrobe look tired.
- Q. Yes, I've noticed that sometimes men's ties are narrow - sometimes they're wide?
- A. That's right.
- Q. But what about materials?
- A. Years ago all the materials for clothing consisted of all wool.
- Q. Even in the summer?
- A. In the summer - all wool, yes. Years ago - maybe 25 or 30 years ago the poly-fabrics came out - but I'm going way back now. Today, most of the summer suits are poly-wool. This is better since that type of fabric has better shape-retaining qualities. Otherwise, there have been very few changes.
- Q. But men's wear has become more comfortable over the years? There is some relaxation, isn't there?
- A. There has been a great change in the fact that people are more sports-minded than years ago. Years ago men never wore sports shirts. Maybe when they were around the house or playing golf, they wore them. Perhaps the sports coat has come into its own. Years ago men never wore sport coats. We never even carried them, but today 40% of our apparel sales is in sport coats.
- Q. But even these are tailored, aren't they?
- A. Oh yes, they're made just like a suit coat, but the fabric is different, the color is different, the style is a little more informal, I would say.
- Q. What do you think of the problem of foreign manufacture of clothing?
- A. Very serious - a very serious problem. Today, 40 to 50% of men's clothing coming into the United States is made abroad. As a result, it has created a great deal of unemployment in the clothing industry.

- Q. What do you think the answer is?
- A. Well, I'm not dodging your question, but you have the same problem in the shoe industry. Perhaps 75% of the shoes are coming in from abroad. Well, I don't think I've told you anything.
- Q. You've told me a lot, Mr. Loeb, but let's talk now about downtown Decatur. You've been in this very same place since the 1930's?
- A. Since 1933.
- Q. But the downtown has changed?
- A. When I opened up, this was considered a very poor location. The reason why was that in the early 20's the chain stores were coming in to downtown America. The best locations in those days were in the 200 and 300 blocks of North Water Street. That remained until the advent of the shopping center. Then the big chains moved to the shopping center for parking reasons. As a result, the 300 block of North Water Street was a block of empty buildings. Then in addition the downtown mall didn't work out. There was no mall in the 100 block of North Water. People could drive up and run in the store for five or ten minutes, pick up packages, or drop folks off. But you couldn't do that in the 300 block because there is no parking in the area. So this block became the best block in the city. Also, this block is between the three banks. So we will continue to remain in our present location.
- Q. Evidently you feel that there is hope for people coming downtown?
- A. I feel about the business of downtown Decatur this way: stores that have a good reputation and have built up a strong following over many years will be able to continue to flourish. However, new stores opening up without any identification will find it very difficult to be successful.
- Q. It's encouraging to think that stores with a fine reputation like yours, and like women's stores downtown, are continuing to flourish.
- A. You take Van Law's, Williams, Haines and Essick's, Raupp's - those are names that have been downtown for many, many years. They have built up a very strong following.
- Q. And there are professional offices downtown that draw people, as well as banks.
- A. Sure.
- Q. I think you have a very interesting point - that the downtown will continue to thrive in the traditional way.

A. And another important facet is this: people can get better service downtown, better selection and fine quality. So I am very happy in my present location.

Q. Well, it's very encouraging to hear you say that. We have appreciated you sharing your experiences with us. We hope you continue in this very same place for many years.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. Sam Loeb. This is Betty Turnell.