

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Small Business in Youngstown, Ohio Project

Small Business Experience

O.H. 168

BENJAMIN H. KASTER

Interviewed

by

James Duffy

on

May 12, 1975

## BENJAMIN H. KASTER

Benjamin Herman Kaster was born July 21, 1896, the son of David and Rachel Kaster. When he was about seven or eight his family lived in Youngstown on Poland Avenue and he attended South Avenue School. He attended Covington Street School after they had moved to a house on North Avenue. They moved again to a house on Grant Street at which time he attended Elm Street School for a short period. His total education was four years of elementary school, which he acquired at these three schools.

In his teens Mr. Kaster was employed by the Youngstown Towel Supply. In the 1920's he worked for the Kroger Food Company. Then, in 1930 until 1974, he was self-employed at the Kaster Food Market.

Mr. Kaster and his wife Esther are the parents of seven children. He is a member of the Jewish War Veterans and the 37th Division War Veteran's Association.

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INTERVIEWEE: BENJAMIN H. KASTER

INTERVIEWER: James Duffy

SUBJECT: Small Business Experiences in Youngstown, Ohio.

DATE: May 12, 1975

D. This is Jim Duffy interviewing Mr. Benjamin Kaster on May 12, 1975 at approximately 8:00 p.m. We're going to be talking about Mr. Kaster's small business experiences in Youngstown.

Okay Ben, could you give us some biographical information about your life up to the time that you joined the service in World War I?

K. Well, my father was a huckster, a fruit peddler. In those days, horse and wagon, no automobiles. And I used to help out on the huckster wagon. Rapped door to door with a basket in my hand selling bananas or what have you; bananas, eight, ten cents a dozen. They sold them by the hand, by the dozen.

Prior to that, as a kid, this was at the age of, possibly, ten, twelve years old, and around that time I used to be a downtown boy. Poor people; and I used to hang around the pool rooms downtown, learning the way of the streets. Had my experiences shooting pool, scrounging hard liquor from the end of the bar in the saloons, which wasn't too hard to get at ten cents a throw.

Oh, huckstering, as I said before, on a huckster wagon with my dad, who was known as Honest Dave and I can remember we used to keep our horse in a barn about a half a block away on Foster Street. We rented a barn, a dollar a month if I remember correctly. And I can remember one year and the horses were, for poor people, immigrant people like our family, horses were hard to come by as automobiles are today for poor people, not having money.

And I can remember one day being sent over to feed the horse, and I had done that quite a few times. And then I remember, as I say, one day, going over there, being sent over to give our horse oats for the evening. I left the oat bin open and the horse got out and got into the oat bin and over-fed himself. A horse, as you may or may not know, is not a very bright animal as a rule. And he continued to eat until he over-fed himself and became bloated. And my father discovered this the next morning when he went out to hitch him up for the day's business. And that was a sad week for the Kaster Family.

He took the horse, I remember, out along the avenue and run him up and down in the hope that his bowels would work, that there would be a movement through his bowels and he would be able to empty the oats that he had over eaten, but such wasn't the case and the horse died. And that was a real sad occasion for the Kaster family.

And how we came to get another horse, I can't quite fully remember, but it was through the efforts of a church agency that enough dollars was raised to get another horse, so we could maintain our livelihood instead of being recipients for charity.

D: Did you go to school?

K: Well, prior to that time, when I was saying . . . It just doesn't come back to me. We lived on Poland Avenue at that time. The corner of Poland Avenue and Cedar Street, which wasn't too bad a neighborhood, a poor house in that neighborhood. And I can remember of the Mahoning River overflowing practically every year and running us out of our downstairs kitchen. The kitchen was downstairs. And for days sometimes, we had to get along the best we could on the street level, which was the second floor. And these floods occurred pretty regular each year, because Poland Avenue at this spot was right on the banks of the Mahoning River.

And as I say, it wasn't too poor of a neighborhood, but we were on the poorer side of the street, which made the difference, because there's where the floods occurred every year. And on the good side of the street, the better-off side of the street, there were such names as, well, the one that comes to my mind is Kane. He was a policeman at that time, which was quite a standing in the community. And later he became a detective. And a little further down on the right side of the street also was his brother, I assume. I can remember this

although I didn't know them too well, called "Piggy" Kane; due to the fact that he raised pigs and we called him "Piggy Kane."

And further down the street, now this is Poland Avenue, further down the street about six blocks lived the mayor of the town, a mayor at one time. Gibson was his name, Mayor Gibson. He was a fine gentleman as I understood, just being a youngster. And the thing that sticks out in memory is that in front of his house on about the sidewalk point of his home, which was a lovely home, for those days, was a natural water spring which people used to come up and get buckets of water out of the spring. The water was excellent. It was known for it's water. And this was in front of his house at about the sidewalk level. And there was a cast iron, oh, about the size of a coffin, cast iron. The water would be running continually into this cast iron trough, was the expression that we would use; day and night, all the time, never shut off. It was a natural spring. It came from further back of Gibson's home, which was a hill in back of . . . You went up a hill, possibly a mile or so and then you run into South Avenue. Poland Avenue and South Avenue would be running about the same way as Poland Avenue. And we used to go down there and drink out of there.

People used to come and get pails of water at no charge. It was free. I don't know whether he was mayor at that time, but he was a mayor. And the wagon traffic used to drive up there. If you'd come by in a buggy or a wagon with a horse or a team of horses, they would pull up, slightly off the road and allow the horses to drink out of this steel trough.

D: And how old were you about this time?

K: My age at that time was possibly about seven or eight years old.

D: And you mentioned to me that you had gone to school for about four years.

K: Now, we get to the school part. Not four years, approximately seven, eight months. I can't be too sure of the time. I wasn't very bright. I was bright in the ways of the street, and living by your wits more or less within the law and legal manner. Because today, living by your wits, there's a reflection on it that's not . . . that could be so-so.

And I can remember going to school, I'd walk down Poland Avenue and I'd meet this former mayor or mayor's daughter at that time, whose name was Dorothy, Dorothy Gibson. And if there is such a thing as affection or love at that age, Dorothy was my girl. There was no such thing as going out at night or anything like that, but it was a highlight in my life, a point of distinction that Dorothy and I got along very well together; not after hours, but during school, on my way to school and from school. And we'd go up through the orchards. Those were orchards where there wasn't homes at the end of Poland Avenue. There was orchards and we'd cut through an apple orchard and walk through the fields about half a mile or three quarters of a mile to South Avenue where the school was.

The school, I don't know just whereabouts on South Avenue it was, but it seems to me that it would have been, I think I'm fairly accurate in this, would have been on Williamson and South Avenue. The South Avenue School it was called. The grades, I believe, run up to six or seven. And if I'm not mistaken, the building stood for years and years afterwards, idle, empty. Yes, the school was on the corner of Williamson Avenue and South Avenue. I'm positive of that now.

D: How old were you at the time that you attended school?

K: Well, about seven or eight years old. And I can't remember the grade that I was in the school, but it wasn't very high. You could count it on half the fingers of one hand I'm pretty sure. (Laughter)

D: Why did you finally leave school?

K: Well, we moved out of Poland Avenue after some years and from there we moved to, I'm not sure, but I think it was North Avenue, 421 North Avenue.

D: That's off of . . . ?

K: North Avenue runs parallel to Belmont or Wick or Foster Street. Yes, we moved to North Avenue, 421 North Avenue.

And if I may digress for a moment, the old home in which we lived, rented, many years later became a Colored Elks Clubrooms, which I think it is until this day. I'm not too sure, but I still think it is. The corner of Arlington Street and North Avenue.

But in those days, that wasn't too bad a neighborhood, either. Down below us, about three blocks, right at the railroad tracks, just before crossing over to Federal Street, West Federal Street, that's where the New York Central Station is right at the present time, there used to be an old car barn, streetcars, that is. And at the foot of North Avenue was the Buherle, German people, Buherle Brother's Grain and Feed Store; grain and feed, hay, oats, corn, and feed. I can remember going down there and buying fifty cents worth of oats any number of occasions for the horse until I permitted him to over-feed himself. And some years later, the Youngstown Towel Supply took a building right near the corner of North Avenue and Rayen Avenue which isn't too far from what is commonly called today or some years back, the "Monkey's Nest" or "West Lakes Crossing." That's the center right on the . . .

D: Route 422?

K: Girard. There's another landmark that I should mention here that was on the corner of Rayen Avenue. One of the old establishments of the City of Youngstown, was the Thornton Laundry. It was quite a big plant in those days. They done the laundry work, dry cleaning as it was in those days and laundry work, washing. And that was in my ten year old age period, I assume, I imagine.

And at that time I went to Covington Street School from South Avenue. I left South Avenue. I can't just remember the grade I was in. And I honestly can't be too sure of the grade I was in at Covington Street School and how long I went there. I don't know just how long, but it seems to me that the family bettered itself in a way.

Incidentally, these neighborhoods are not to be classed in the same position as neighborhoods are today for the same area, because when we lived on North Avenue, people by the name of Callan; there was Jackie Callan, he was a prize fighter. There was John Callan, he was a fireman, and a block east from us on the corner of Belmont Avenue and Arlington Street was John Cantwell, on a higher level family, better grade. All these people that I mentioned were on a higher level than we were at the time. They were more established in their mode of living and their length of living in this country and in the neighborhood.

D: Most of these people were established here long before your family was here?

K: Yes, we were immigrants. Not strictly off the boat, but in the secondary stage.

D: How about your teen years, is there anything there that you can remember that you might want to relate leading up to the time that you joined the army?

K: Well, first I want to mention that from North Avenue we moved to a house on Grant Street. We lived there and I attended Elm Street School on the corner of Elm Street and Grant Street only for a short period of time.

Now, as a boy, getting into the teenage category, class, there wasn't too much to do in those days. I did work for a time for the towel supply, the Youngstown Towel Supply as a driver. And duties were to load up the wagon in the morning with towels, small towels that today would be about the size of a face towel, what they called wipes. And I would drive down along after I broke into the route, which they only broke in for a day in them days. It was: get out and do the job.

I would go to some confectionary, ice cream parlors, which was a big thing, and saloons, which was the bigger, thing and replenish the wipes, pick up the old ones and give them a supply of clean ones. And I worked for a short time at that.

Then a little bit later, let me see, that's when I worked for the clothing store on Federal Street or was it before then? What was the position there? It will take me too long to think back on much of it, but that was some of the jobs that I had.

And then some years later, I had a brother-in-law that was a shoemaker--now this was after I got out of the Army--worked as a shoe salesman, was the shoemaker, Sam Levy was his name fine gentleman, but that's a brother-in-law; he's from Scranton.

And incidentally, I just ran across a card upstairs, that brother-in-law Sam, with a partner, managed to open a shoe store on East Federal Street. He'd quit the shoe repair business and got a job as a shoe clerk with Abe Brody and Sons on East Federal Street; a well known figure on East Federal Street, well known Youngstown.



Good class shoe store. And he'd got a job there and they'd met up there with another fellow by the name of Isador Pressman, who worked in a shoe store on West Federal Street. And after a number of years they got together and decided that they would open a shoe store through information gathered from a traveling shoe salesman from St. Louis. The Buster Brown Shoe Company.

This salesman represented the Buster Brown Shoe Company from St. Louis, Missouri. He was anxious to open new accounts and get more business. In those days business wasn't so . . . there wasn't too much to be had. So, he told these two men, my brother-in-law and this other man, Isador Pressman--Isadore Pressman or Ike, I forget what it was--about a town that really could use another shoe store and especially the shoes, actually it didn't have no need for another shoe store. But he needed to sell more shoes and, naturally, would want to sell more shoes so he sold them on the idea of opening a Buster Brown Shoe Store in Ashtabula on Main Street in Ashtabula, which I have a picture upstairs; on the lower end of Main Street near the Ashtabula Post Office at that time. They decided to open the shoe store there.

And for some reason or other I had just left the Towel Supply Company, whether they fired me or whether I quit is a good question. Chances are they fired me or layed me off. I don't think they fired me. There was some reason for it. They were discontinuing the wipes is what it was. They had no need for an extra horse and wagon for the Federal Street Route of wipes and I went to Ashtabula. My brother-in-law asked me to come to Ashtabula and I stayed at their home and they opened their shoe store on Main Street in Ashtabula. And I went to work for them for nothing a week, learning the shoe business, to sell shoes. I worked for them for several years and met my wife in Ashtabula.

She was going to school at the time and I'd spend my time at the American Legion Hall on Main Street and I'd look out the window on Main Street when I wasn't working and I'd watch the kids come from school, I think it was the high school, yes that was; because she went to school at Windomere where they lived on the West end of Ashtabula. And I spotted this chick coming from school and kind of liked the way she walked and mosied down one day along Main Street and got acquainted with her as she'd come from school about that time. And that's how I met my wife.

D: How did you eventually come back to Youngstown?

K: And that's how I met my wife. And we went together for a number of years. After a couple of years they couldn't pay me enough money to keep me going. I stayed at the YMCA in those years, both the time I worked in the shoe store and the time I lived in Ashtabula. All the time I lived in Ashtabula I stayed in the YMCA. Had a room there for several years. The first year by myself and then I was coned into taking in a buddy, not a buddy, but a nephew of Pressman.

He had come to Ashtabula and had gotten a job as "Rob Nickles." Get it? A conductor on a street car, (Laughter) After about two months of "Rob Nickles" I didn't like buddying up with a guy like him. I had a hard time, but I finally got him out of my room. I continued living at the YMCA.

And then the shoe store was only paying me then, first I worked for them for nothing and then they started paying me five dollars a week. And after a couple of years I found out that that just wouldn't make ends meet for me. I used to make a little money playing poker and if it wasn't for that and shooting a little pool, I wouldn't have been able to stay, even stay at the YMCA with the five dollars a week I was making.

I was a cheater at playing poker in those days. I couldn't cheat old grandma today, but I used to gather a few bucks like that.

Then I quit that job and picked up a job with a small Army and Navy Store in Ashtabula. And I picked up a job there for a few dollars more a week than what I was getting in the shoe store and I kept that job for about a year. And incompatibility with the boss and I left that after about a year. And at that time, Ashtabula had acquired a steel mill, the Ashtabula Steel Mill, Steel Works. The Steel Company I think it was called.

D: Do you have any idea what year this was approximately?

K: Oh, I couldn't tell you.

D: In the early Twenties?

K: I'm surprised that I know this much. I went to work,

well, prior to that I had bought an automobile, believe it or not, a Ford, which a friend of mine--I had acquired a number of friends--this fellow's name was Mike Onifery and he worked for the Ford Company, Ford retail, the Ford Agency. He didn't talk me into it, I wanted a car. Going steady with a girl and I was working at the steel mill. And I just don't know how I promoted it. I don't know whether I had any money in my pocket or not. But the going rate for a Ford Coupe in those days--no self starters, you had to get out and crank. Self started hadn't come into fashion yet; they were talking about them. Windshield wipers, you had to wipe. You'd reach your arm out or get out in front of the car and move the windshield wiper up and down. We made a couple trips to Cleveland in the rain and I took along a couple of passengers so they would help keep the windshield, so we could view it. I don't know how I acquired that, but it was a Ford, a brand new Ford, but I did pay for it. I worked at the Ash-tabula Steel Mill. I can't quite remember just what I did do there.

D: How long did you work in the steel mill?

K: I worked in the steel mill for a couple of years.

D: Did you come back to Youngstown after that?

K: Yes, that was after that.

D: What occupation did you take up when you came back to Youngstown?

K: Well, having no trade or education of any--that is, an academic education of any kind, having left school in approximately the fourth grade, when I came back here I got a job with Krogers. I applied for a job and I got a job with Kroger Grocery and Baking Company. Became a student manager for the shortest period of time that they possibly ever had a student manager, about two weeks. And the supervisor, either through desperation or recognizing my ability after a couple of weeks as a student manager, put me in charge of a store at 1906 Market Street.

Then we moved into a house on Glenhaven Avenue, a short two blocks from where I worked at the store at 1906 Market Street, which was right near the corner of Warren Avenue and Market Street, caddy-corner from South

High School. And worked there for approximately a year and then was promoted to a supervisory capacity by the Kroger Grocery and Baking Company and the position which I held for approximately ten years. And should I say--I got fired.

D: Sure, be honest.

K: (Laughter) I didn't get fired from very many jobs. That's probably the only one. I didn't have many jobs that I worked at.

D: Why did you get fired?

K: I worked for the Kroger Grocery and Baking Company as a supervisor for approximately ten years, slightly more, became one of their top supervision personnel. Had my picture in the Kroger Bulletin on at least two occasions with short items on supervision, store supervision. Supervised approximately at one time, as many as twenty stores.

D: How big was Kroger at this time?

K: Kroger Company at this time, the Kroger was quite a big concern at that time.

D: Individual stores weren't like they are today though?

K: No, they were small stores. They weren't supermarkets like they are today. They were, you would call them small stores, not papa and mama stores. They carried a complete line of groceries, meats, fruits and vegetables and so forth, but they weren't supermarkets as they're known today.

And one of the largest stores I can remember being in my territory part of the time, although I had a couple different territories. I would build one and they would give me another one to build up. I can remember the one in Warren, Ohio on Main Street in Warren, it was the biggest store that they had in those days, which would be equivalent to double the size of an ordinary store, a regular size store. I supervised territory and what we called the south territory, besides city territories that I supervised. The South Country, we called it at that time, would be Salem, Lisbon, East Palestine, a store in each one of those towns, Newton Falls. I terminated my employment with the Kroger Company while I had that particular territory there.

K:

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D: Is that the time that you went into your own business then?

K: No, the reason for my termination of employment, let it be strictly understood, was a superintendent who had just lately been promoted over me as a supervisor, who had been a supervisor the same time as me. And he was chosen through the Cleveland office, politics, to become the superintendent, which I was in line for, of the Youngstown division, the Youngstown group of stores.

D: After you left Krogers, what did you do then, Ben?

K: Well, I left the Kroger Grocery and Baking Company and naturally, was looking around for an opportunity that would benefit myself. And things were, to say the least, a little bit rugged in those days. Jobs were unavailable, not in terms that we use today, but strictly unavailable.

I have two brothers-in-law who found themselves in a similar position being let out of the shoe business. They had been shoe clerks working in shoe stores. Morris Faber was one brother-in-law, worked for a shoe store, Lepold's on Federal Street until about the same time that I parted company with Kroger, he parted company with Lepolds; for the same reason, conditions were such that employment was at a minimum. Where the boss could get along without, he got along without. Where a corporate enterprise like I was associated with found that they could do without, elimination was the key word of the day.

And the other brother-in-law, George Cohen, was a long time shoe salesman for Abe Brody and the same condition prevailed with Brody. So, the two of them got together and decided that as long as work was unavailable, they couldn't starve, and, strange as it may seem, it would be easier to starve or fail going into business. The chances were better that way than what it would be to try to get a job. The situation was such, and economic conditions that they considered a store room on East Federal Street near where George Cohen worked for the Brody people. He was what was know as a shady personality salesman and figured that he could pull enough by standing out in front of the store. If he would open a store, he could pull enough of Abe's trade going into Abe's store to get them started into his store.

Believe it or not, that was done in those days, stand out in front of your store. Even Abe Brody used to do that. Start greeting his regular trade and see that they didn't wander off into some other store. Shoes at three to five dollars a crack, good ones.

So, they got together and attempted to raise enough money to open the store and they talked to this Brown Shoe salesman, whom George knew from the Brody Company. And Brody didn't sell the Brown Shoes. So he said, "Yes that would be a good spot to open it," but they'd have to have a \$500.00 order. I think it was \$300.00 or \$500.00 in order to get them into business, minimum stock. He told them they'd have to have about that much.

So, this store room, second door from the Brody Company and next door to the Army and Navy Store, used to be a part of the Army and Navy Store, but things were so bad that they had moved all their stock into this one store, which then was next to the corner of Walnut Street and Federal Street. And they had some chairs suitable for seating people in and a couple of thin carpets and shelving in the store, so all they really needed to get going in those days was just the small amount of stock from the Brown Shoe Company.

They couldn't scrape together \$500.00 so the salesman said he would talk to the Brown Shoe Company and see if he could get them to ship in \$500.00 worth of shoes and would take \$300.00 and ship him in \$500.00 worth of shoes and get him started, providing every week that he would show up there and get his hands on some money to ease off the big debt.

So, they opened the shoe store, the Buster Brown Shoe Store, no not the Buster Brown Shoe Store, the People's Shoe Store. And they were looking around for a sucker to get money off of, to borrow some money so they could stay in business.

And I had just left the Kroger Company and was looking around for something and had been looking for three or four months and funds run out and things look pretty bleak, but I did have an asset. I had an asset that could be turned into cash. And this was the bonus that the government gave to the war veterans. They had granted them a bonus and my bonus came to \$1,540.00. And I had a bonus certificate, I think it was in the shape of two certificates, \$725.00 each, which I could turn in

for approximately \$1,450. So, I told them I'd put the money into the business if I would go in as a partner into the business, an equal partner. Made the mistake of not drawing up any papers. Of course, in those days that wasn't really a big thing anyhow and they were brothers-in-law. So, I put in the \$1,450 and that got the shoe store off with a good size stock. Paid off their \$200 or \$300 debt that they owed the Brown Shoe Company, and stocked up the store and I was in the shoe business.

The business didn't grow the way it should have grown; and they were sharpies, two St. Louis boys. They come from St. Louis, big town stuff; they knew all the tricks. They came down to Youngstown from St. Louis. They had relatives in Youngstown. And they married into my family, but that has nothing to do with survival. It's dog eat dog when you get down to the conditions that existed in those days. So, they started to make it tough for me. So, to make a long story short, instead of going through the turmoil of fighting in the family, I walked out of the business, which actually was my business. As I said, they only had \$300 in it plus the debts of the shoe company, which my money had paid for and my \$1,400 had bought stock for. I walked out of the shoe store high and dry.

D: You went into the grocery business at this time then?

K: Shortly after that time things were extra bleak and we were down to bean sandwiches. A can of beans and made sandwiches out of them to eat. We couldn't keep the furnace going. We burned up a lot of the supports from the cellar. We lived in an ice house. The house still stands on the corner of Gibson Street and Florida Avenue which we lived in. Had a fireplace and we kept warm by keeping the fireplace going with wood that we could pick up and some wood that we tore from the cellar of the house we lived in and from the garage.

And one year, my wife's relatives, all fine people, none finer, Swedish people from Ashtabula, back in those days, one of the cousins drove down to West Virginia and trucked us back a small ton and a half of coal, which helped us through one winter by putting coal in the fireplace and burning it with some wood. I think my wife's mother gave us the money to pay him for the load of coal, which was a ton and a half. I think it was seven dollars or six dollars.

D: How did you get into the grocery business?

K: Well, I'm trying to think how the hell I did get in it, (Laughter) how I fanegeled that. We had a neighbor on the corner, we lived on the corner of--right near Wilson High School.

Incidentally, before I forget, we used to rent our garage-- which it was a garage, a two car garage--to kids riding bicycles from what have you, streets further south than Florida Avenue, to school in the morning. There was four or five of them, used to bicycle into Wilson School. I don't know whether it was a high school in them days or not. And we used to charge them two cents a day to keep the bicycles in our garage. And we had, oh possibly four or five of them. And you'd be surprised how that ten cents would help us skin over to the grocery store and buy ten cents worth of cheese or a loaf of bread with a few other pennies that we had,

D: Was it at that time, you were still working in the shoe business at that point?

K: Out of work.

D: You were out of work at that point?

K: Yes, out of work for quite a while there. And things got bad. Things were bad, not as I know them today with relief and sub and you name it, fifteen different things I could name you that, food tickets and so forth and so, on that, people today, have access to. In those days, it was have it or starve. So, we had a friend in the neighborhood whose husband was a--I forget the name of these people--whose husband was a furniture salesman for a furniture store. Don't make any mistake, that was a ten to twelve dollar a week deal there, a furniture salesman.

D: When was this? Can you pin a date down?

K: Can't pin it down.

D: Was it in the 1930's would you say?

K: I can't pin it down unless I run across some papers,

D: This is during Depression times?

K: Yes.



D: Okay, well it was the 1930's then we'll say.

K: This was during the Depression times. And they knew a woman that owned a store. A lady by the name of Schwartz, Della Schwartz. Her and her husband had gotten a divorce just about that time and incidentally, he married again, shortly after that. That was one of the causes for the divorce. He married a Shiska, a gentile girl and moved out into Poland and opened a little grocery store in Poland. I've often wanted to spot that place out in Poland, but what the hell, it's always slipped my mind.

And she owned this store, was running this store and she met up with a cousin of hers from Miami, Florida. I think it was Miami. And he was a jeweler. He had a jewelry store. What kind of a jewelry store it could be in Miami, Florida I wouldn't know. It couldn't have been much, but it had a bigger appeal, I guarantee you, than running a grocery store on Shady Run Road. (Laughter)

These people, I forget their name, my gosh, I can't remember their name. He with the boy, one of the boys became an insurance salesman in those days, too. I can't think of their name. But she, knowing that I had been with Kroger in the grocery business, had been talking, naturally with Mrs. Schwartz and trying to help Mrs. Schwartz out to stick somebody with Mrs. Schwartz's store, shoulder the store off, start a promotion.

What a big deal that would be for me to take it over, having some experience in it. And it interested me. What wouldn't. Somebody would have said, "There's a stock of bananas behind that building downtown, go get them and peddle them." I would have run, tripped, fallen over, run to get them. So, I became interested, Ester and I, my wife and I, rather than starve to death. So, just how I got the possession of \$1,000, I don't know, but it seems to me that there was a state bonus, came through about that time.

D: A veteran's bonus?

K: A veteran's bonus. How much it was, I wouldn't know, but it seems to me that was it. The Federal bonus went to my two shyster in-laws, who put me on the street flat and it seems to me that the state bonus--I can't think of what it was \$1,000 or \$500 or something under that--but came due about that time, was granted, and I was able to use that

money, that is, we went down and we looked at that place.

She took us upstairs. This is worth noting about. Up on Shady Run Road, up on the second floor and she sat us down and sent down in the store for balogna sandwiches. But, that was a treat for us. That was a sumptuous meal. And we were on the point of being conned into buying, taking over a grocery store. Buying the property, not renting a store, but buying the property with two other houses on it. Get this, this is fantastic you understand. And here we were just so filled up with eating balogna sandwiches and a cup of coffee, and while we were eating them, a rain came up and the roof started to leak. (Laughter) This happened later on, too. We had a guy later, a Greek, operates the Central Candy Company; met up with Donna.

D: That's your daughter?

K: Yes, daughter from Florida. He was taking her out at that time and he happened to be in onè day and we were sitting--this was after I'd remodeled--we were sitting at the bar and the same roof leaked. This was some years later, you see, quite a few years later. We always had trouble with that. And that's another reason why I was so anxious to get out of that God damn store after 35 years. (Laughter)

D: Now, once you got into the grocery business . . .

K: Now, wait a minute, let me get some pleasure out of this balogna sandwich. The people that were going into business, buying two houses and a third place to live in, you understand, and eating balogna sandwiches, which was out of our thoughts at the time. So, we told her we'd take it, if she would take, whatever it was I got. And I just forget whether it was \$1,000 or \$800 or something like that. And she was so tickled. She was eager to get her hands on that little bit of money because these stores didn't mean nothing and she had a golden opportunity. A man, a new man that she was going to marry, and a jewelry store in Miami. This was her . . . ooh boy, she was really flying! I thought we were flying, you understand. She was really flying to get out of there. I don't mean maybe. (Laughter)

See, a conglomeration of events, see, that certain some-

thing that flies over people. Don't ever call it luck, it isn't. And it possibly isn't your brains either. A certain something passes over people, and I mean this, this is in all sincerity, and a certain something passes over people at certain times and the world opens in front of them, opportunities of the world or visa versa.

Well anyhow, we told her we'd take it. I gave her what we had. I just forget what it was. I can't remember exactly, although there's records someplace up there of the price that we paid for the house next to the store and the house below that. There was two houses and the store on this here lot, shaped like that, see. Shady Run and then around the corner, Campbell Street and down on Campbell Street to the empty lot in back there, which a nephew of one of the people that I sold those houses to, owned that lot or the guy that lived down below that owned that lot. We didn't own that lot at that time. That comes a little later on.

So, we gave her the money and we went down to the Dollar Bank and told the Dollar Bank that we had a chance to buy this piece of land and property with a store on it and we wanted to borrow the difference, which was either \$1,700 or \$1,800, I forget which; the balance due on it, or \$2,700, I don't know what it was. The figures, I don't have. I was able to manage it. This was all with my money. Money that I had had my fingers into at some point or another.

So, she took us to her lawyer. This wasn't a transaction like my shoe store deal without legal proceedings, where I could protect myself and she wanted to protect herself and she wanted to be fair with us so we wouldn't come and say, "Well, the roof leaks, what are you going to do about it?"

But incidentally, when the roof did leak there, well, I'll digress here now. Just let's leave it go at that. So, we went down. He's gone now, the name is Friedman. There's a picture of a grandson in the paper the other day, an attorney coming back to town from Cleveland, joining a law firm here, that was a grandson of the partner of this Friedman. He was in an office on the public square. And I remember going down there and signing the papers for Mr. Friedman. And he was tickled to death, too. Those were different days than now, that I might walk out on the deal.

So, we came into possession of the business and the properties. And went down to the bank and borrowed the money and paid Mrs. Schwartz off and signed the papers. And then when we went next door and told the people there that they'd pay us the rent now, and both of them decided to move out. I don't know what the rent was, fifteen dollars or eighteen dollars a month for the houses. They had found a cheaper place to live in, but we did re-rent them and then sold them to the people. Just one moved out, and we sold.

Well anyhow, we took the property over, one of the tenants moved out. We got another tenant and then we dealt, bickered with these people. We wanted to unload. All we wanted was the store. We had the property replatted. John Cantwell took care of that for us. He got us a surveyor. Charged us \$25.00, I think, at that time.

D: Who was John Cantwell?

K: A real estate man, insurance and real estate.

D: Is he the one that you mentioned previously?

K: Yes, that lived on the corner of Arlington and Belmont Avenue. He was in real estates and he didn't have anything to do with selling us the property. See, we done that independently with a real estate man, but he was a friend of mine, you understand, from knowing him, see. And from WPA days, which we don't have in here, he was on WPA.

The mighty had fallen during the Depression and in some interesting facets of my life that you don't know; he had fallen and he had been a big, like I told you, a big man, higher class, fallen into hard times, the same as me just on the point of going on relief.

I was in this office supervising, there, John Cantwell he had got a job, too, so he wouldn't have to go on relief. And I got a job, too, through Isadore Fuer on the W.P.A. from the Treasury Department. Had the charge of the payrolls of the W.P.A. workers and I used to get the payrolls every two weeks, the checks and go out, go around to the various jobs and very often you'd see me lots of times say, "Well, I helped plant those trees." Well, I just used to be the paymaster there, but if I would say anything, it was done. See, I was the so called big shot.

The fact is, I had worked for a year, had the store for a year and still held this other job for almost a year until they finally got wise to me and said, "Hey, listen, I'm sorry, you got a good fix there, but you'd better quit and let somebody else have this job." But then I went in with the store. See, Esther run the store in the meantime.

D: Oh, you had this W.P.A. job at the same time you were running the store?

K: Yes, for a year. Well anyhow, where did I leave off at?

D: You were saying that you had taken over running the store.

K: Yes, taken over running the store. We wanted to unload these two properties. So, we didn't have any trouble with the first one. We sold the first property next to the store for \$1,800. Then we took that money and went right down to the Dollar Bank and paid it on what we owed the Dollar Bank. They gave us a loan to pay off Mrs. Schwartz. I still can't remember the exact figures of what we paid her. And this, all in a matter of less than a year. If we were smart, we would have hung on, but we didn't, and those days were different.

The reason for that was that we wanted to get this thing paid off. We didn't know what income we'd get from the store, whether we could make it. So, then we put the pressure on this other fellow and he moved out and another guy moved in and we got after him and he bought the place, too. I just forget what it was, but anyhow, the first sum, we took down to the bank and put on the loan we got from the bank. And a few months later, seven or eight months later, we took the balance down and paid off the loan. And here we were property owners.

D: Free and clear.

K: Free and clear. Property owners. In fact, there was, down at the Dollar Bank, they looked at me and they said, "Mr. Kaster, this is the first time we ever had anything like that." (Laughter) Paid off a mortgage like that so quickly. He said, "I'm sorry that you're doing this, it's costing me money. After all, we're making money on this." They made enough on me. I had some money in the Dollar Bank when the banks went broke and the money was lost. I thought I'd lost it all, but we did get some of it back.

D: How did you get it back?

K: Well, the government then went behind the banks and gave the banks money in which to open up and the banks, it was optional to us while this was in the works whether we'd go to the bank and take three quarters of what was in the bank or wait until the government had passed the law and pay us off in full, some deal like that. And I grabbed the first money I could. I think I got about \$700 or \$800 back from a little over \$1,000 that I had in the Dollar Bank.

Well, anyhow, we paid off and we owned the property. And business was coming along and the lot next door wasn't up for sale, but we went after it and bought the lot in back of the store to protect the property. We didn't need it like a hole in the head, but in those days, it was the idea, well, what if somebody moves in and opens a banana stand in back of your store there? That's the reason we had that lot there. So, we went into business and thereby hangs the tale of a real hard headed and imaginative and take-a-chance promotion that took place.

I was a promoter, believe me; me. Of course, Esther went along with me and anything I undertook. But those stores around there were all hanging on, drooping, dying off. Another reason why Mrs. Schwartz wanted to rid of it, things were bad. And I started right in with hand bills. Cut prices below cost and I mean below cost. That's why my eyes got bad, sitting up nights for the layouts. Laying out the hand bills, the big page-size hand bills. Then, hiring kids for 50¢ each, poor kids, to pass them out in the neighborhood. That was a big deal, too.

Sitting up there and figure, and figuring out how to get the merchandise into the store that I was going to give away. And giving it away, not making enough money to know whether we were going to pay the heat and the lights and so forth, and so on; and the roof broke loose again. Well anyhow, with real imagination. I'm sorry I didn't save a lot of those hand bills and a lot of gut and con work and figure was so bad that wholesalers, the big Tamarkin Company used to come and kiss my hand to get the business.

I never got too far behind them in paying the bills, although we'd run bills of a couple thousand dollars sometimes before we'd catch up on another block busting ad that would produce results, but we done it and gave credit, which everybody was cutting off poor people. They were on re-

lief and going on relief and worse. We'd headline the ad: CREDIT AT KASTER'S, PAY DAY TO PAY DAY, CREDIT AT KASTER'S. We took everybody on. We didn't do any investigation or look up their background or anything. We got hooked for plenty, but we had enough turnover, enough fluidity in money coming in, rolling in from giving stuff away to wholesalers back to Kaster what was left to hurry down to pay the Ohio Edison before they come up and shut off the lights and so forth. Yet, we managed to do it. And got along, always in debt.

Esther was a spender. She used to spend money as fast as it would come in and she'd have, just like your wife, bills here, bills there. And at last, I made up my mind one day, this is soundest advice I can give to anybody right to this day, credit cards (he spits) credit in the store (he spits). This is today, this isn't then, see, I was in charge. I hated to do it because it meant getting on a pay-as-you-go basis for my home needs. And she was building up into society, the Veteran's affairs and all the parties we were giving and one thing and another and credit came in handy. You had everything coming to you because we were owners, good payers,

Livingston's, Strouss, and Hirschbergs, you name it, and those were the stores in those days. They weren't cheapies, believe it or not, credit in them stores. I used to go into Livingston's, which was the high echelon. Livingston would come put his arm around Mrs. Kaster's shoulder. He come up and pat Mr. Kaster, "Doesn't she look beautiful in that?" They were slick salesmen.

So, I seen we weren't getting no place. We were doing a little business, enough to keep in debt--get that expression--in the best circles. To keep in debt, getting no place, strictly no place, except so called big shots,

So I said, "This has got to stop." I said, "No more Livingston's, no more Strouss's" I walked down to Livingston's, "How much do we owe you Mr. Livingston?" "A cashier over there will take care of you," Walked over there and \$120, and \$128; I paid off my bill. "I'm sorry, but we're going to go on a cash basis now." That is double protection,

Of course, my word was good enough with Esther. "I meant business, that was it." She could shed tears, but that's no more. She had as much charge of the money as me. Down to Strouss, "How much do we owe here?" "\$85," paid it off and all of them that way. And there must have been

ten, home accounts for various things, furniture, this that and the other thing. Paid them all off and from then on it was cash, strictly cash operation.

END OF INTERVIEW