

AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY SCHWARTZ

An Oral History Conducted by Carol Schwartz

The Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

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The informant is Stanley Schwartz. The date is March first, 1980. It's 7:30 p.m. We're doing the interview at Stanley Schwartz' house at 545 Griffith Avenue, Las Vegas, Nevada. My name is Carol Schwartz and I'm the collector and I live at 3937 Spencer, Apartment 113, Las Vegas, Nevada. The project is local history project oral interview; it's "Life of a Las Vegas Old-Timer."

What is your name?

My name is Stanley Schwartz.

And how old are you?

I am fifty-three.

What day were you born?

May 13th, 1926.

Where were you born?

Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Where were your parents from?

My father was born in Denver, Colorado, and my mother was born in Cleveland.

What kind of places did you go to and travel when you were younger, or even now?

When I was younger our main activity in traveling was in the summertime to take the train to California to go to Venice, California where we spent the summer.

What was your education like? What's your schooling been?

I attended a high school, a military school in Denver, Colorado, called the Colorado Military School. After the service I went to the University of Southern California and I spent two years there in prelaw.

Did you graduate with a degree?

No.

Is that when you came to Las Vegas?

No. After I left the university, I entered business in Los Angeles. I entered what was called the merchant tailoring business with my, at that time, mother's husband in downtown Los Angeles.

What exactly is the merchant tailor business?

Merchant tailoring is where you present fabrics, which are in three-and-a-half-yard cuts for suits or yard-and-a-half cuts for pants. A customer would come in and he could choose any of the fabrics that he wanted and then we would design or style a suit for him and cut it to his measurements.

What happened to that business?

We went broke.

Oh. [Laughing] Sorry. So what brought you to Las Vegas?

My mother and her at that time husband moved to Las Vegas and about a year later my brother and I came to Las Vegas to visit her. We thought we liked the area, spent a few days here, and found a business location and went into business.

Where was the business location?

We found a store, which was on Main Street and is now across from the Union Plaza, halfway, in the middle of the block, and we subleased from an air-conditioning company.

You subleased that building.

We subleased about six hundred square feet and paid a hundred dollars a month rent in this little store.

Do you recall the dates when you first moved to Las Vegas?

Not really, but it was sometime in 1951.

When you came here that was your goal, then, to establish that business? Or you came here on vacation, but...

Well, my goal was to reestablish myself. I was a very young man. I was twenty-one when I went into business in Los Angeles and I was more or less inexperienced and I didn't have the ability to sustain the business in Los Angeles, but I learned from my experience.

Was there a demand for clothing stores compared to today when you came here?

Yes. I think that if you mean opportunity, I believe that there were a lot of opportunities for businesses when we came into town. Unfortunately, we came into town very undercapitalized. But because the town was a growing town, because it was a dynamic town, I feel that there were real opportunities in the town at that time.

Would you say there were more or less business opportunities in Las Vegas in the fifties as compared to today?

Las Vegas, I think, is a great business area. In terms of a person starting out with limited capital, in the fifties you had more opportunities. First of all, it didn't require the type of capital today. There wasn't the competition of the large chains and department stores. So there were probably more opportunities in the fifties.

What was the business district comprised of back in the 1950s?

Well, basically the main business district comprised of an area from Third and Fremont to Fifth and Fremont. First and Second Street were mainly, as it is today, casinos although they weren't of the size and stature that they are today. Of course, as I indicated previously, our first location was on Main Street. So a customer would have to seek us out.

How did you get those customers to find you?

First we tried to become known by circulating around on the Strip and meeting people and advertising. We advertised in the newspapers. We ran small ads in the newspapers and we found that we could get excellent results on the radio.

What were types of advertising back then? I mean what papers existed and what radio stations, do you recall?

Well, there was The Sun and the Review-Journal, as there is today. There were...I don't recall the number of radio stations, but I do recall that we used KRAM. And it might be of interest that when we ran our ads, the salesman would approach us and ask us if we would like to run a dollar a holler, which means a dollar for thirty seconds, or he had seven for elevens; that was seven spots for eleven dollars.

Was that reasonable back then, do you feel? I mean it sounds reasonable to me, but compared to the dollar back then.

Yes, I feel it was very reasonable and very effective. As a matter of fact, when we ran our first ad on the radio, I think within twenty minutes a customer drove up in front of our store and came in and said he had just heard our radio ad and was interested in the suit that we were advertising.

Now, you're a specialty business. I know you're Big and Tall now. Were you Big and Tall back then?

No. When we first went into business in Las Vegas, we tried to explore a reason for us to exist, a reason for us to be successful. We discovered that the young men's market; that is, I would say the market from eighteen to thirty was not being exploited. We had had experience in Los Angeles in what is known as the one-button roll model. That is a model—and if you're confused about it, you ask me. But that is a suit model where the coat had one button and the back of the

coat had no seam. It was one piece, so it was called a one-piece back. In those days that was a popular model among a small percentage of the population. It was a very ethnic model. It was the type of clothing that I understood and it was not being sold or promoted in Las Vegas. So we expressed the fact that we had this particular type of clothing and we attracted actually a very small percentage of the population but enough to sustain our little business.

How did you attract people, just through advertising, then? I mean did they know the name of the style?

Yes. They understood. When you would advertise a one-button roll, just as today if you advertised a three-piece suit, I think that the customer would understand that he's getting a garment with a vest and, of course, a pair of pants and a coat. But the customers then did understand what a one-button roll was.

How did the styles differ back in the fifties to today?

The garments that we sold had very wide shoulders. The pants had a twenty-six knee—

What's that?

Well, I'll explain it to you. A twenty-six knee and an eighteen bottom. Today a pair of pants has about a twenty-four knee and, perhaps, a twenty bottom or a nineteen bottom. So the silhouette of clothing has dramatically changed and it continues to change.

What about the cost of merchandise back in the fifties compared to today?

Well, we sold a suit in the Fifties, a ready-made suit at forty-nine and fifty-nine dollars. Our markup or mark-on, as you might call it, was different by about ten percent. Today we enjoy a mark-on of ten percent more than we did years ago. It's traditional that that mark-on is enjoyed by most merchants.

So are you saying that you get maybe twenty percent more now than you did?

No. I think we get ten percent more because of the cost and operations and so. Now, today, of course, an average-priced suit is about two hundred and twenty-five to two hundred and fifty dollars as compared to that fifty-nine-dollar suit.

But then it costs more to have that suit made now, right?

Oh, yes.

You indicated your first store was on Main Street. How long were you in that location?

We were in that location about a year and a half. Then we had an opportunity to move to Second Street, about the middle of the block on Second Street. Otto Westlake—

What's Westlake?

Otto Westlake is the name of a man who was a real pioneer in Las Vegas. He built six little stores in the middle of the block on Second Street. Originally, those stores, which are still remaining, were his home. We moved into a store, which was twelve and a half foot front by seventy feet in depth.

What rent did you pay?

We paid three hundred and fifty dollars a month.

Sounds pretty cheap.

Well, in those days it was a very fair rent and I must say that Otto Westlake was a very fair landlord.

Did your business change on Second Street; were you still Schwartz Brothers Clothing?

Yes, we were still Schwartz Brothers Clothing, but our business did change in the sense that now we were in a much larger location and a more traffic location. We were only a half block off the main shopping area and we really thought that we were on our way. So we expanded our

departments of the type of clothing that we carried; that is to say that in our first location on Main Street we carried only suits and sport coats and slacks, but when we got on to Second Street we put in a line of haberdashery.

And what is haberdashery?

Haberdashery consists of sport shirts and dress shirts and ties and all of the different items that men wear, underwear and so on.

Now, how long were you in that building?

We were in that building for five years. Then we moved to Fremont Street.

Before we get to Fremont Street, if that building is still here today, do you know what's down there?

Yes. The type of stores have changed substantially. When we moved into those stores, there was a men's store, ourselves. There was a fine women's store. There was, I think, the union—the telegraph—Western Union. That's what I'm trying to say, Western Union. And a couple of other stores I can't recall. But they were all very nice stores, which attracted a nice class of people.

Unfortunately, today the character of the stores have changed a lot, as has, of course, the character of the entire downtown.

Was the atmosphere and the character of downtown in the fifties was it more high class?

Because I get the feeling down there that it's kind of scummy in a way.

Well, you have to remember, Carol, that in the fifties and going into the sixties that the downtown was the main shopping area in Las Vegas for tourists and locals. In those years where the telephone company is today across from the El Cortez there was Sears. Across from Sears was Penney's. Penney's, I think, is still there. Ronzone's was between Fourth and Fifth and Ronzone's took up most of the block. Where Ronzone's was there is now a Cinema Theater. So Fremont

Street is where everything was happening. There were two or three souvenir shops. But the character of the street was entirely different than it is today because there were substantial businessmen on that street.

Why do you think that the business area—shopping centers, that is, weren't on the Strip?

Well, I don't quite understand the question.

Well, I would imagine that—I would assume that the shopping centers would have been on the Strip.

Well, when we first came into town, the Strip was rather limited. It wasn't like it is today. In the early fifties the Strip consisted of the Frontier Hotel, the El Rancho, the Sahara and the Flamingo and the Desert Inn. There was business on the Strip, but the locals shopped downtown. Now, when the mall was built on Maryland, of course, the character of the downtown changed dramatically as the shopping habits of the locals and the tourists changed and it attracted a lot of people out in the malls. The character of the town changed; that's all.

When was the mall—when the Boulevard, do you remember?

About fifteen years ago.

So now you're back on Fremont Street. I mean we're going to talk about Fremont Street.

You moved after Fourth Street to Fremont Street.

I moved from Second Street to Fremont Street. In fact, it was a very exciting and dramatic thing for us because we moved into a store at 303 Fremont, which is known as a hundred-percent location. We were between what is known as the C.H. Baker Store and the Albert Store. The Albert Store being a medium-price ladies' store. And the C.H. Baker store was a medium to better ladies' shoe store. All of the business activity was between Third and Fifth Street on Fremont, and, of course, our store was in the heart of that area.

So you were in a prime location.

Oh, yes. We were in what they call a hundred-percent location.

Do you recall the year you moved to Fremont Street?

I think it was in November of 1957.

Now, since you were in the hundred-percent prime location, I imagine your rent increased quite a bit.

Yes. When we were on Second Street, as I indicated, our rent was around three hundred and fifty dollars. When we moved on to Fremont Street, we had a base rent of a thousand dollars a month against six percent of the gross sales.

I don't quite follow you. You paid a thousand dollars...

Yes.

...automatically.

What it means is that you guarantee the landlord that you will pay a thousand dollars a month in rent against six percent of the gross sales. Let me give you an instance. We'll say that just for the sake of argument or sake of example that you have sales of fifty thousand dollars for the month.

If you were paying six percent of that, that's three thousand dollars. Now, the guarantee is a thousand dollars, which means that you would have to pay an additional two thousand dollars, of course based on that type of sale.

So that sounds like a lot of money to pay.

Actually, Carol, everything is relative and we were very fortunate that we enjoyed a very nice business there, and so we were always very, very happy that we were able to pay a substantial percentage because of our sales.

How about the size of the store; did that increase?

Oh, yes. The store was twenty feet by ninety feet. Then we had a balcony of about six hundred square feet. So our balcony was actually larger than our first store.

Yeah, you had a lot more room now. So I guess you could have a lot more merchandise.

Yes, we had a lot more merchandise and we were able to expand the type of merchandise that we had so that we could expand the market of customers that we wanted to appeal to.

Were you still getting your regulars in from your other store?

Yes, we have had customers that, as a matter of fact, we still have today. I think the secret of any business is to satisfy the customers that you have so that they will continue to trade with you.

Since your store was larger now, did you have any employees working for you?

Yes. After we got our store on Fremont Street, we employed a tailor. Of course, we did have a tailor on Second Street. And we employed two salesmen, plus my brother and myself.

Do you recall the wage scales?

I think the wage scale was around sixty-five dollars a week for a six-day week.

For both the tailor and—

No. I think the tailor was higher. I think the tailors probably made about a hundred dollars a week.

People that were professional tailors, was that a specialization back then? Was that unique?

Tailors are a dying breed and they always have been since I've been in business. It's more and more difficult as the years go by to get good tailors because, frankly, today people don't want to go through the effort of learning that trade. I feel it's a very difficult trade. I myself am not a tailor, but I have a great deal of respect for anyone that takes up that profession. There is a big need in this country for tailors.

While you were on Fremont Street, were you active in business organizations?

For over twenty-five years our business has been a member of the Chamber of Commerce. While we were on Fremont Street, I was chairman of the Downtown Merchants Association for around three or four years.

Could you explain that, Merchant Association?

Well, the merchants association of the chamber was an arm of the chamber that respected that particular section of the merchants. In my particular case, I was a downtown merchant and I would go to the meetings representing the downtown area. Other merchants who might be in the Charleston area or the Decatur area or what have you represented their areas.

Is that still in existence today?

Oh, yes.

The same division of areas, too?

Yes, I'm sure there is.

I would think there would be a lot more stores in each area.

I'm really not sure, Carol, because I haven't been active for a number of years now. But I'm sure that each area is well represented.

What other business organizations, if any, were you involved in?

I haven't been active in any local business organizations. I've been active in—not active, really, but just a member in clothing organizations, like something called the MRA, which is a national organization, and I'm now active in an organization known as the Big and Tall Association.

What's MRA stand for?

Men's Retail Association.

Has that been in existence since the 1950s?

Oh, yes.

Now, after Fremont Street—how long were you on Fremont Street?

We were on Fremont Street for twenty-two years.

Oh, so you just left there recently.

Our location was vacated about two years ago as the building has been demolished and at the present time a hotel/casino is being built on that site.

So when you left there where did you go?

Well, we had established a location about six years ago in the Maryland Square Shopping Center. Originally, we had taken a small store in the middle of a center and now we have a corner location next to Smith's Food King, which has excellent exposure and good parking, a very effective location.

Did you ever expand to other businesses?

Well, we opened a store called Knight and Squire in November of 1961 directly across the street from our Schwartz Brothers store. Basically, the reason that we took the store was because we felt that we were missing a large share of the merchandising market; that is to say, our Schwartz Brothers store was what I call a branded store; that is, we carried top brands, such as Botany 500, 3G, Eagle, a better type of merchandise. It seemed that the way the market was going that we were missing the young man's market. So when this opportunity came along to open another store, we opened right across the street and put in what was known as a continental store that attracted a younger trade and where we carried higher fashion merchandise. It wasn't really associated with the Schwartz Brothers store.

You and your brother this whole time were working together?

Yes.

Have you had any other business ventures?

Yes, we've had other business ventures. We opened a store called Pants and Plants in the center at Sahara and Maryland in 1967. We opened the first discount—I should say we were the men's and boys' operators in the Wonder World stores, which opened in 1950. We subsequently sold that business about four years later to a large operator of men's and boys' stores throughout the country. We have even been in the popcorn business.

Would you like to go into that?

Because of our relationship with the management of Wonder World, there was an opportunity in the Decatur store to put in a popcorn stand at the entrance of the store. My brother and I went into Los Angeles and did a little research on it and found some resources. We just decided that it would be fun to go into that business. So we opened up a store where we sold popcorn and caramel corn and ices. But we were only in that for about a year and then we sold it.

Incidentally, we have been in the artificial flower business.

Doing what?

Well, here again, in the Wonder World discount store on Decatur there was an opportunity to buy the flower department because the owner of that business had some business problems. So we were offered that department at a very advantageous price. As a matter of fact, we paid twelve hundred dollars for that business and it was a going business. There was a manager that we inherited with the business and two or three very fine, loyal employees. So we bought that little business. It was a very interesting experience. I feel that if a person is a businessperson that he can go into different products because basically the mechanics of business, whether you're selling

clothing, whether you're selling flowers or whether you're selling popcorn, are basically the same.

Do you think that holds true for today and in the 1950s?

Yes. I believe that if you know certain business principles that you can open different types of businesses. Of course, we could have a two-hour discussion whether you would be successful at opening a different business.

Talking about Schwartz Brothers again, when did you specialize in big and tall clothing for men and why did you specialize in that field or area?

Well, it was around 1970 that I decided to change the Schwartz Brothers business, which was a regular-size, branded business, into a specialty store, Big and Tall. There were a couple of reasons. One, I had always been interested in big and tall because I am a big man and know the problems of fitting and finding clothing for a big man. Secondly, Fremont Street was changing. As I indicated before, the shopping malls were opening. The pattern of the locals were changing, the shopping patterns, and people were complaining about coming downtown. They complained about the parking and the convenience. There were always objections. So I felt it was time to make a hard business decision. Within a very short period, I would say about six months, I changed my merchandising completely around and took a stand to completely turn my store into Big and Tall. It's a business that frankly I enjoy very much. I like the type of customer that we attract. We have a wonderful relationship with our customers. We're very happy in that business.

***That's something I'm interested in is the customers of yesterday and the customers of today. How do they differ in their values and attitudes, or do you notice a difference?**

Well, I think that people in one sense have never changed. I feel that people have always been very service oriented. My business experience tells me that price is important, but it's secondary, and that if you can provide the customer with service and good merchandise that you will

continue to build the business and have good business.

Are your customers from, let's say, the 1950s, those that were big and tall, are they still shopping from you today?

Yes. We enjoy seeing the faces, sometimes a little bit older. But they're still continuing to come into our store. Of course, that's one of the real bonuses of being what you might call an old-timer because when an old customer comes in, we have an opportunity to reminisce a little bit and talk about the good old days. Of course, remember, Carol, if I may philosophize for a second, the good old days are today.

Are there any men who have become outstanding successes in Las Vegas that started about the same time you did?

Yes. Two men in particular who were very successful and two men that I admire very much are Al Benedict and Herb Tobman. Al Benedict came to town in the early fifties. As a matter of fact, he was a neighbor of mine. He ran the food and beverage department at the Silver Slipper. He then went into the plumbing business and today serves as chairman of the board of MGM.

Herb Tobman had a secondhand store, secondhand furniture store on Fremont Street. I admire Herb very much because when his building burned down about twenty years ago, he sold beer at Cashman Field during the football games and he was a cab driver; he hustled around until his building was rebuilt and he was able to go back into the furniture business. Now, Herb Tobman today is the president of the Stardust.

There were a lot of young men who came to Las Vegas and Las Vegas really was a land of opportunity for these young men if they were willing to work and to sacrifice and build their businesses.

How do you feel about Las Vegas today? Do you still see it having those same opportunities for young people?

I feel that Las Vegas has a lot of opportunities. I feel that if a person in Las Vegas, if he is a dedicated type of person, if he has a good trade, if he's a willing worker that this town and this country holds a great deal of promise for anyone who is willing to educate themselves and willing to work.

What do you see as Las Vegas' future?

I see a great future for Las Vegas. I feel that Las Vegas, being part of the so-called Sunbelt of the great Southwest, is an area where people are flocking to and will continue to flock to. I think statistics will show that our populations have changed in terms of many retired people coming to Las Vegas. I think that we will see a mix of retired people, a mix of young people. We see some light industry in Las Vegas as evidenced by the Levi distribution center in town and many other small distribution-type businesses. I think that Las Vegas is a healthy community and will continue to be a healthy community. As you know, Carol, in the past there have been periods where there have been slight recessions, but this is a very resilient community with a young spirit and all I can see for Las Vegas is growth and prosperity.

How do you see this growth and prosperity in all of the things that you said [about] the future of Las Vegas affecting your business?

That's a good question, Carol.

Thank you.

Because of the growth of this town, we feel that in our business that we should become much more aggressive than we have, perhaps, and we feel that we're in an expansion mood. We have been studying putting a store on the west side of town in the Decatur area or in the Meadows area

because of the growth of population over there. Of course, we know that there is a new mall being built on the Strip, which we are considering. And so our business ideas are to be forthright and strong and continue to grow with this wonderful city.

Something I forgot to ask you is, what other competition exists for you in town at the moment? What about the competition in the past and the specialized profession you're in?

Well, there are a couple of stores in town who are our competitors. We feel that competition is a very healthy and necessary thing in a free enterprise system. We welcome competition. We feel it makes us sharper. It makes us better. And, of course, in a free enterprise system, it's to the benefit of the consumer to have competition.

Do you think the quality of growth in Las Vegas has changed?

Well, the quality of life has changed, Carol, in the sense that when we came into town you could look outside, you could see the mountains, the air was clear and crisp, and because of the growth and because of the automobiles and the airplane, we are faced with the problems of many and, I suspect, most big cities in the United States of pollution. And that, of course, is very sad because this was just a little western town when we moved in where you were able to walk down the street and recognize many of the people as you passed them on the street with a friendly hello. Today, the character of the town has changed towards more of a metropolitan-type city; that part of it is a little sad. We hate to see the—or I should say I hate to see that element of the early times in Las Vegas that I knew disappear.

I see that our hour is just about up and I'm out of questions and I want to thank you very much for your cooperation. I really had a good time and enjoyed listening to you. I think I learned quite a few things and found out a lot of things that I didn't even know about you and about Las Vegas. That's about all I have to say. Thank you very much.

It's a real pleasure, Carol, and I thank you for the opportunity of the interview.

[End of recorded interview]