

## History United: Memory Initiative

**Interview with Ben Rippe (BR)**

**Interviewer: Evelyn Riley (ER)**

**Friday October 25, 2014 at 2:45PM at Rippe's Apparel, Furs, and Shoes, Danville, VA**

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**ER:** My first question is just a clarifying question. I'd like you to state your name and your birthdate, and what you consider to be your occupation?

**BR:** My name is Ben Rippe and I am um born in June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, first day of the Korean War. Two things, I am executive slash in retail business I am also a simple merchant. So pick one or it's probably a combination of both.

**ER:** Yeah, probably a combination. So, have you lived here all your life?

**BR:** Mostly, I had a career in agriculture first and I lived in Middleburg, Virginia and I managed farms for about a year. And then I had a low level faculty position at VPI, Virginia Tech now. After that, I was going to get a master's in agricultural economics and so I was there for a year and did some studies on how to keep small farmers in business. I worked for the Federal Agriculture Extension Service. So except for those years and years away to college, yes, born raised and back. Came back in 1978.

**ER:** What made you come back?

**BR:** I was doing some research for the extension service on my way to Arkansas, maybe, to a land grant college. My father was accidently on the same plane and he was on the way to buying trip, an outerwear buying trip. He happened to be going to Nevada so we sat together. He said "well if you're ever going to come in the business, this is the time because the manager of the store is leaving." So I said let me tie up my research project that I'm doing. About six or eight weeks later, August 1<sup>st</sup>, I think, 1978, I came into the business.

**ER:** Where did you go to school as a child here?

**BR:** George Washington High School that still exists today.

**ER:** Did you enjoy that?

**BR:** Yeah, I enjoyed it as a typical high school student. It had ups and downs.

**ER:** What years did you attend?

**BR:** 1964 to 1968.

**ER:** So right before integration.

**BR:** Larry Campbell's sister was in my class so it was during but it was just beginning. 1964 was the first class. I can't remember how many, not many but they, blacks and whites, were just starting to go together.

**ER:** If you want go ahead and tell me a little bit about the history of the company itself.

**BR:** Ben Rippe started the business and my father tells me in 1907. Ben Rippe was born in New York City. I have his father's citizenships papers, that was in 1867. So when he came from near Krakow Poland, I do not know. I'm guessing late-1850s. The family history goes that he had a cigar store and a tobacco shop where Macy's is now. He had two children. Back then tobacco shops were like old country stores, where twenty thirty years ago you'd sit around and discuss the politics of the day. And supposedly Edgar Allen Poe and Samuel Gompers were clients. Now, I looked this up, and their lives did not overlap but it is possible that Poe came in in the late 40s, 1840s and Gompers would have come in after that. Gompers was in worker relations and in the union movement, when it was really important to America.

[Timestamp 7:27] So anyway, Ben Rippe, this is family lore now, dropped out of school in the fifth grade, became a bookkeeper. He learned bookkeeping and joined the Spanish American War, got shipped out of Norfolk. Maybe was in charge of San Juan Hill but don't know. While he was in Norfolk, he met a woman from Hillsboro, North Carolina. He was Jewish and was looking for a Jewish girl and her name was Ida. He said, "I'm coming back to marry your sister when she grows up." He went to the war and came back and married the sister, Annie. By that time, Ida was already married and she had a store in Rocksboro. Their father had a store Hillsboro and so nearby, triangulation, Danville. It was a boomtown. So in 1907, he and his new bride started the business. It was right across from now where the Golden Leaf Bistro is, there is parking lot there now but it used to be a beautiful brick building called the Penn building. Penn tobacco owned that building. That's where it started. It was dry goods and sundries and buttons and such and cloth and hats. They made hats. Also they would parasols that would just inflate for no good reason. Just for the fun of it. And that's how they got started. Apparently, it was a boomtown with the textiles and tobacco. It was really starting to blossom. They

changed the way they did business in about 1920, plus or minus. They starting carried ready-to-wear because the population was more affluent. They carried ready-wear and that person Ben Rippe was an entrepreneur. He did well doing that and so he had managers. During the depression, well prior to the depression he had other businesses. The main one he had was sort of like an odd lot, value city proposition. He would buy merchandise from people going out of business or distressed merchandise and he would sell it in a store or two he had called Cheap Johns. We don't know how many locations he had. One was on Union Street. I can't remember seeing any literature about it but I have seen, and I have in my possession, older Rippe's ads. So you know organza dresses or silk dresses \$11.99, "Lovely things for reasonable prices," or something like that, "Rippe's". That was from the 20s.

Ben Rippe died in 1937, he had just turned sixty. He got malaria in the Spanish-American War. He had a heart condition so he died from that. My father did not come in the business then he was at a college. He was working for Dan Ripper. At that time his mother was running the business in 37. He went off to the war, Pearl Harbor came. He and Albert Conklin [?], another merchant, enlisted together. After the war, four years later, they came back and so did Albert and they both came into their family businesses. By the way that business is still going too and it's a little older than this business – Conklin Clothing Company. There was a discontinuation for about a year so this is continuous. So my father took it over and he was a student of the business. Things were booming. Again, this was a good industrial town. He built it up and bought this building were in right now.

I'm going to talk about history of location first. So start on Craghead and then moved several times in the 1920s, sort of up the hill. And then where River City Music in the 400 block, the last business was there. Maybe Love Wig is there now but that building was Rippe's. And in 1946, my father went to Richmond and said "Okay, I'm here to renew the lease and in a year from now I want to renew the lease." They said "we have rented it to something new, a chain drug store." And so a year later, they had to move. So he went to his banker, this is banking story, and said "well what are we going to do? You know we have a good business." It's after the war and materials are scarce and real estate is scarce. Downtown Danville was a boomtown, everybody in a twenty or thirty mile radius is coming to downtown Danville. What are we going to do? So, his banker says, "come with me." And this was at American National Bank, where we had been doing business for over 100 years. They walked down that side of the street, the even side, and they walked back this side of the street. When they got right here, ten feet away but in front. it was an alleyway, 20 feet wide alleyway or something. He said, Wales Harrison was the banker, he said "I know who owns that they'll sell it to you. That's where you're going to build your store. It goes back deep. Don't worry about the money will lend it to you." Now, that's not way my banker works now. I get great service but that's not the way banking works right now. So it was more of a hand shake, we

know your character, kind of thing. Anyway they built a beautiful store with a, you'll notice when we go up front. It's got a gorgeous architectural stairway. It was a really custom made fixtures. It was quite nice. Beautiful bent chairs, bent plywood chairs. Even the furniture was made to go along with the building. So then in the mid-60s this building became available and he bought this building and expanded it. Since in the last four years I've done redesign and a up-fitting. And over time, about every five to ten years we'd do something significant. But the basic layout is what he laid out in the mid-60s. We had this oval room here and like a spoke and wheel so that's how this building got here. It's a good story I think. What else would you like to know?

**ER:** You said it had connections to the tobacco industry. Is that what you already mentioned?

**BR:** With tobacco, being the world's best tobacco company because it might not have been the largest. Wilson might have been the largest and South Boston was a big too. This usually got the best prices and volume for dollar poundage; I've heard was the best of all the tobacco markets. And floor cured tobacco was just really a wondrous gold leaf and it made – it was a very successful business. Not like now. It's still a good business but there is few people smoking in America, not more. Also from the early times on, you know people moving from the farms, from a harder life to a better life and getting a job in a mill where they could make a better living. It was almost easier working in the mill than the hard life on the farm. So money turned in the local community and you know the economic turns of the dollar. The community just blossomed through the 1970s.

**ER:** So what you do you think the connection is to the Gibson Girl?

**[Timestamp - 16:16] BR:** Well the Gibson Girl was a lot about style and fashion and this has been a business about style and fashion for all those years. We enter into the mix and make sure it's quality and service and make sure it's value received you know it might not be cheap but you know it's worth what you pay for it, not inflated.

**ER:** So was she an inspiration, sort of, in a way?

**BR:** It's mentioned in the history that he wrote but it's really, to say that it was a major influence I cannot tell you. I know that it was certainly created interest in fashions so, yes, it had to have some influence.

**ER:** So why do you think Rippe's is important to the community?

**BR:** Well, it's a good question, you have to ask the members of the community but what I think is first of all, we get the prize for sticking it out and for doing well. My father before [*unintelligible*] and I especially set it as a goal to give back to the community. So we were particularly interested in education and the arts and we make it a point to be very supportive to the education and the arts including endowing scholarships and that's what we've done. So, plus, we advertise and we draw people from a thirty, forty mile radius. About 80 percent of our business covers that and maybe the other 20 percent is from people who used to live here or who come back. So the region is very important also we have a name that fortunately I think well known within a good thirty forty miles radius. You might not have been inside but you know that it exists in downtown Danville or now they're going to rechristen it the river district, I think. Your organization is part of the river district and that's what's wonderful about the revival. Just like in 1907 when we started down at the tobacco warehouse district so it's coming full circle.

**ER:** Yeah communities get redefined every so often, it's kind of cyclical.

**BR:** Yes, and in terms of fashion and what we do, we keep finding out niches and redefine our self slightly. We're in a room that is full of different types of furs and in my opinion it's the, for example, it's perhaps the best fur value in the country. But we have a different model we hang them we won't have a showroom [*unintelligible*] we take small margins and we turn over a lot of merchandise, which is a different, but we sell more than just furs. People who are just in the fur business it's a slower turn over so they have to get more, they have to get a higher price. And, of course, we also source differently. We go directly to the manufacturers and there is no middle people. So but my point is we redefine ourselves and find new niches, we used to have a big bridal shop upstairs. 13 years ago, I closed that and started a shoe store and that was successful. And then I was able to buy the building next door six years ago and we had a shoe store designer from Durham come up and design this beautiful shoe store because Danville needed one. A little something about consultants, we asked the several consultants we know and all said "it's better to invest your money in something else. The shoe business is a hard business." It is but we learned about it and we felt like Danville needed it and our customers needed another reason to come downtown so we're real glad we did it. And it's grown just about every year and keeps growing. It has been a nice compliment to this business.

**ER:** So the scholarships that you mentioned are those for local high school students going somewhere for college or are they for students going to say Averett or PCC or DCC, local colleges?

**BR:** The latter. The Rippe's Scholarship at Danville Community College is for, that happens to be for a woman from the area, defined pretty broadly, I think it's a thirty mile

radius or so, or it might mention counties, Caswell, Pittsylvania, Henry, and Halifax to go to Danville Community College for a associates degree, progressing onward. At Averett, Averett University, Rippe's scholarship is for any area person, it's preference for the area, someone, the right candidate, and it's up to their discretion and there is not attachment of any particular department.

My father's sister Olga went to Averett. My father lived on College Avenue since he was about seven or eight, just down the street from Averett. Olga majored in music. His sister Miriam went to Averett briefly she ended up graduating from Gulf Port, which is no longer there but it was a two year college.

**ER:** Gulf Port where was that at?

**BR:** Is it Mississippi? Is it Gulf Port, Mississippi that was wiped out in, I think, in Katrina.

**ER:** So how would you say the shop has changed over the years?

**BR:** Well we found different niches. Every year, every season we look for, we don't always achieve, we look for a third new brands. How it's changed over the years... we've been generations before me. I've been a student of the business. I'm passionate about the business so I study it and we have great employees who also study it and they know their customers and we try to find what customers in this area might like. We also might push the envelope and have things they don't like or don't know they like it yet. But you know we have it there for a reason, its being shown in the world or there is just some reason to have it here. We also like value and aesthetics and it has to be worth what it is and have a merit for being here. So we edit the lines a lot, we might say no 900 times and yes 100 to different brands every time we go shopping for our store.

**ER:** And so you get designers worldwide?

**BR:** Well it's a small world now. Yes. They are all over. Some are from Germany, some are from Austria, some are from China, some are from New York, some are from California. More than a few are from Canada and some are made in Canada. Canada is full of good tailor shops and we have some great brands from Canada.

**ER:** You're an international business located right in Danville.

**BR:** Most businesses are.

**ER:** Yeah nowadays. Who would you define as your clientele?

**BR:** Well, the middle- to upper-middle class woman within a thirty-mile radius of Danville, who likes to dress, that doesn't mean likes to dress up, just likes apparel and has an interest in apparel. And we also carry size two to size 24W so I don't know about you but I don't where my small size clothes anymore so the world, the average size is getting a little bigger so manage to, no pun intended, cover everybody well. But we want to make sure they have clothes that wear well with them.

**ER:** Are you finding that the younger generations are still coming in, people are bringing in their daughters to see Rippe's?

**BR:** We also watch for a brand that the mothers and daughters buy the brand. For example, Toms is a relationship brand where you buy a pair and they give a pair to a needy child somewhere in the world and they really do, they've been audited many times. That's a mother and daughter brand. It's been wonderful brand, it's waning a little. You know everything gets saturated a little bit. It's not going away. Uggs is another mother daughter brand. Jack Rogers is a mother daughter brand. Some brands here are mother daughter Joseph [*unintelligible*, timestamp - 25:14], and many others. Then we have what we call Missy clothes. A seventy year old woman might say I know I'm seventy but I don't want look like it, I don't want to dress like it. But I'd say our average clientele is from 35 to 70 and we go lower than that we might have some teenagers and higher than that age, a vigorous 80 year old may shop here. My mother who is 92 and healthy comes in a few times a year and gets a few items. She says "Where do I go?" She doesn't go out that much and she doesn't change sizes so she's got a good wardrobe so she's not our best example of who to attract. We would like to get younger people and we think we will as the river district expands.

**ER:** Are there loyal customers that you have seen coming back over and over again throughout the years?

**BR:** Yes, and families. But you know you always have to have new customers. Every time somebody passes away that's likely to be, and we know them, that could be customer so we always need new customers but surely the customers that have been in before are the ones you want to keep encouraging to come back and they're the ones you want to do as many cartwheels for as you can service wise.

**ER:** So, what would you say your service approach would be then?

**BR:** Well we have service in several ways. Our sales approach is not about closing it's not about pressure, that's what it's not about. It's about interviewing you, find out what life style things or what you need, or what kinds of things you might want and then

connecting the dots from what you told us. And then if you've got some objections or we have different ways you can pay for it or different financing approaches. That's why they pulled me away just a little while ago somebody wanted something that was a little higher than a credit line and we took care of it. So that's one avenue of service so we wait on you but we don't pressure you. If you come in, and your used to typical service environment where "No thank you I'm just looking" we let you have peace for a little while but then we try to get you to tell us, you didn't come here accidentally usually you weren't on your way just walking by, you came here for a reason because we are at the top of the hill and not a lot of retail around us. There's some. So if you come here, typically you meant to come here. "Well looking to get ideas" they say, so we help them and we give a lot of service and that's no extra charge and we don't bump up the price of the clothes. We own the building with relatively low overhead. We don't pay high mall or anybody else prices. And we keep our property up.

The second avenue of service and marketing is where you chose to, what price point do we want to be. Well we don't want to be cheap and we don't want to be extremely designer. We keep pushing the envelope for better merchandise. That means price wise, in addition to quality. But you know there's only certain point your market can bear. So we keep that in mind too. We classify ourselves as upper-moderate better and bridge, that's the jargon for the lines of apparel we're in. And shoes is the same but a little less bridge.

Other service factors. You know there is bundle of services financing packages, whether you want a Rippe's charge or all the credit cards that are out there or whether you want to pay cash or check or you want to lay away for a while, no fees no interest. Liberal return policy, I changed my mind or we send it out and it's not the right size. Lots of policies like that. So these are all in the service package. You want something gift wrapped beautifully, you know, you want it delivered. We deliver it. If somebody can think of something were not doing and provides a service to the customer will be happy to do it.

**ER:** In terms of running the business, for example in advertising, how has that changed?

**BR:** Tremendously.

**ER:** Go ahead and talk about that then.

**BR:** Tremendously. There is so many, the niches are so fractured now. Two hundred channels to get your message out. So you have to pick and choose. We're one store. If we had three stores in you know say we had a store in Greensboro and a store in Roanoke, or a store in Lynchburg. I've looked before. People have offered spaces in Lynchburg and Roanoke but each time we declined. I'm like It's not a cookie cutter. I just like my one

business. So but you can't, TV becomes difficult. So that's, and plus there's one hundred, three hundred TV channels on my cable service. So what else can you do? Well we try to capture everybody's electronic data and we send out informative emails. We even have a feature "What's in the window?" We change out windows weekly and if you're on our email list you see that. Window shopping and didn't leave home. We also keep a presence on Facebook, and maybe that goes to 4,000 people and the emails go to 2,500. Recently we started doing something defining who we are to demographically prospecting customers in Greensboro. Our newspaper offers that service through Yahoo. So it makes an introductory emails and we've gotten good click throughs from that. You can see the language I'm talking about, it used to be all print and no it's print that... are still main source of advertising is the local newspaper which people who are interested in the locality read, they might read it online now but still the online version, if you pay for it, has our ads in it. So that's our number one way we advertise but we advertise in these other manners also. And we do community things and we do fashion shows. We don't do a lot we do them for groups that do charity or one coming up for Chatmoss Country Club in Martinsville coming up next month.

**ER:** I've heard that the downtown area, in general, as kind of slowed. Do you agree with that ?

**BR:** Oh it was worse twenty years ago. I felt like probably was a stand along business, that you really had to want to make a special trip. You weren't, unless you were on your way to the lawyer's office or the post office or a city service, fifteen and ten years ago that was the low point. No there is lots of things to do. You can go buy some wine, or go eat a meal or go have a coffee down the street or go look at some gorgeous antique jewelry up the street. You have your banking business, your city business, all the legal people or most of the legal people are down here. There's just lots of interesting little businesses that are coming to fore. On Craghead too. Great bike shop. Great party center and other things going on. So hopefully now that the street scape, this rejuvenation has come about.

**ER:** I was going to ask you whether you were a fan of that.

**BR:** Well I'm a fan when it's done. And it's almost done. It's been a...different merchants in the different blocks, it wasn't staged exactly as it was supposed to be so it's been some dislocation of business. You might be discouraged from coming into the center of the city. However, that is gone now and the two way traffic, it's been... They're just working on cross walks now. Of October the 26<sup>th</sup>, that should be done sometime in November. So what that's going to be is as the Lewis Mumford, city in history great city planner, says "As the hub of your city goes so goes your city." And I really believe that.

If you go to other downtowns that have a vibrant city center, those towns are usually vibrant. So that's what we hope is going to happen with this enhancement. And it is... it really looks good these three blocks and I think Craghead looks good already and it's going to look better as the more projects go on there, I hear. The new dome of the science center is really interesting and the farmers' market is so successful. The science center is great and all kinds of things in between.

**ER:** And there's the super computer and everything down there too.

**BR:** The super computer and the industries, I was thinking retail and places for people to go but yeah and the industries that are coming.

**ER:** So kind of going along with that, I know some businesses have talked about staying open later to try and get people down here longer have you thought about doing that.

**BR:** We started incrementally. We changed our hours last April and I started staying open until six. Then Saturdays we close at 5:30 in the summers. Right now were going to close at 5. It's not summer now. So we would like to go to 7 and as we get more businesses and more activities downtown we'll probably do that. A working woman, and most women are working women, they get off work at 4 or 5 typically if they work a day shift. If you want to shop you've got to give them some time. So six is the minimum in my opinion. And we start at ten. But yeah were flexible about our hours. Right now were not open on Sundays and we like it that way because we emphasize service and to run people ragged seven days a week doesn't work. In fact we have done it on some holidays and it gets old after a while. But there is retail business to be done on Sundays so it's not a religious issue it's a rest issue. I'm all for expanding hours.

**[Timestamp – 36:50] ER:** How many employees do you have?

**BR:** We have 12. We have had up to 19 but as computers get more efficient and other things. We have now people who... three managers, two area managers and general manager plus me and we all work on the sales floor plus we have really five people that are trained in sales and one person who pays the bills and one person outside the store who does the payroll and a few consultants that help us out with our budgets. So if you count those it's more like 15, 17.

**ER:** So what are some of your favorite memories from working here or when you were little coming in here?

**BR:** Well the first one that just popped to mind was standing on a ladder in front of the store watching the Christmas parade. That was on Saturday mornings and the downtown was just thick with people and every storefront was full of something bustling. Whatever was above the storefront was occupied with something that required a little less traffic. When I was growing up this building were in upstairs was Danny Stoner's Dental Office. Downstairs was some retail but I don't remember what. Anyway so watching the Christmas parade and sort of standing on a ladder. Back then there was a true after Christmas sale. All three kids would come down and help mom and dad markdown the clothes on Christmas afternoon. So that was an interesting thing and helping along from the age of seventh grade. The Hotel Danville over here we would have a fashion show every year over there. And working the elevator and helping set up the fashion show so those are the memories I have, business related. From the age of about 13 to the age of about 19, I worked for a men's clother down the street, Silvermen's. That was a great experience because it was other worldly. And it's good to have experience outside your realm because then you know you're not just getting feedback from your parent. Family businesses are a tough proposition. I don't know if you're aware but third generation there's a 13 percent probability of success. You really have to have a little luck and steer correctly.

**ER:** So where do you see the future of Rippe's going?

**BR:** I see still finding out niches just like we've been doing. We've grown by all measures. We exceeded the business numbers that my dad did. Then since the recession we've been flat. Flat to profits have been down some but you know I see us finding niches. Wherever the next niche is, you know, we'll try it. Sometimes things don't work. We had wonderful plus size business for, tried it for four years, but it never achieved the quite volume we wanted so we just have different departments, you know all our coats we carried plus sizes and our better designer knits and our sportswear jeans but not everything. It just didn't work. So you try some things and they work, try some things and they don't. But you have to try. You know it fashion you experiment.

**ER:** Do you think someone in the family will take it over again?

**BR:** I expect that someone currently in management, or someone who's in retail ten years down the road who's got an acumen for retail might take it over. We own the builds. I own the builds so I'm interested carrying on good use for the buildings and I've got a son who's a freshman in college so I'm planning on going anywhere anytime soon. And he may be interested but if someone in management becomes interested in the future I see that as a possibility. But who knows will see.

**ER:** You said he's doing the history of business, correct?

**BR:** Yes. but I'm not counting on that. You know, if he wants to come back I really would love him to come back but, you know, it's too early to tell.

**ER:** Is he your only son?

**BR:** Yes.

**ER:** What's your family like?

**BR:** I'm single, divorced and his mother and I live about two blocks away from each other. I was married a little later and life so he came along a bit late but he's a fine fellow and my mother's still living. I have a brother who's a classical musician, a well renown. And I have a sister who's happily married and she lives out west. My brother lives in Memphis, as a professor. And I have a cousin who's the family historian. She lives in Virginia Beach, she's about 75. Her mother Olga was my father's favorite sister and Olga can take you if you want some Jewish history, we're Jewish. If you want some Jewish history, Olga would take me into the cemetery. Last time she was here which was probably seven years ago, she died a few months before my dad did actually. But she would go and talk about all the "oh, daddy knew him and brought him to town and he managed so-and-so for daddy, that person had a business doing this and that person was a doctor." Knows everybody buried there. Very interesting, very interesting. And I sometimes lately with my friend Rob Freedman who's a noted photographer and actually had an exhibit up here in August.

**ER:** I think I heard about that.

**BR:** It was really good. He and I went to the reform cemetery, a different Jewish cemetery on Lee Street and looked at old families and some of the 1880s and 1870s families we didn't know in the Jewish section. So we went to Albert Conklin who was still living and he told us who they were. So you can get a lot of oral history and written history and know how to do research just by going to these. I'm sure other people do this different ways.

**ER:** Had these families moved out or they just married and the names got changed?

**[Timestamp - 44:01] BR:** Some families are still here. Kushner family, Conklin family, Newman family. Mrs. Newman is still here. Some of the families are still here. Some of the buildings were built by these families that the families don't exist. I see the Kingoff

building where the Vintages on the Dan is. Kingoff was a strong family here. So not all the families are here. How did this happen? A lot of them the children left and didn't come back. Most of my peers in high school left if they didn't have a reason to come back Danville. So now we're trying to get the children back and the people who left maybe a generation later to come back and some of them are.

**ER:** How would you describe the Jewish community in Danville or the surrounding area?

**BR:** Well the Jewish community in Danville still thrives. Thrives is the wrong word. Still we have a synagogue we have services, we have rabbi who's engaged in our, not full time, rabbi used to come every other week now comes ones a month about. But there are any, you know, major events the rabbi comes. We also have a [*unintelligible*] person who happen to be president of the synagogue. It's an active synagogue, a small community. There's 25 families, 24 families who are members. A family could be like my mother, single head of the household. Or it could be full family.

**ER:** I know when we talked earlier you wanted to share some of your father's memories that you didn't know if anyone had heard before and you wanted to make sure they were passed on.

**BR:** I told you the banking story, and let see. I told you...I'll give you a written history to include it's about five or eight paragraphs that he wrote. Did I give you any hints to remind me of anything that I've forgotten. I'm sure later I'll remember something

**ER:** Did he ever tell you any interesting stories about like crazy customers or anything?

**BR:** Well, yeah. I don't think I'll repeat those though.

**ER:** Oh okay I understand.

**BR:** None of them were ever terrible. I learned a lot from him but also learned on my own. He was interested in the business and he learned on his own and he sort of grew it and I grew it too. So I guess I learned that from him. He was interested in architecture but never actually said it but I've also had an interest in aesthetics and architecture and art but I realized, I was interested in design elements and so every time I go and I do a renovation to this or a store front renovation or shoe store. Oh yeah that's a similarity. He was very charming out-going personality so customers loved him. Some stories about him, he was the third of four children, probably the favorite of his mother. You know, his father died when he was in college. He himself almost died when

he was seventeen. He had a thyroid condition, eighteen, he had surgery and it saved him. He lived to be 92, I think, 92 almost 93. I can't think of anymore stories right this minute. His father. He would tell a few stories about his father, so the founder of the business. You know, he started out fifth grade the founder of the business dropped out school in fifth grade but when you saw him on the street he always had a thick paperback in his pocket. It was usually Shakespeare or something classics. He had beautiful handwriting which I've seen. Gorgeous penmanship. He was, you know, newly wealthy. He had success in several areas. So he had the first radio either in the neighborhood or in town. So people would come over on College Avenue and sit on the porch and listen to the radio. One of his children was musically inclined, my father was some, but Olga played the piano. So he, the baby grand company, whatever the name of company was, came and there was concerts in the house that they would give and people would gather around. Things like that. So he had, my father would go on trips with him to Detroit to buy a new car. These were the times, 20s, I guess the roaring twenties really were. And then that person invested a lot in the Florida land boom and lost his money. So he didn't lose it all but he still had insurance when he passed away but the family was able to carry forward and build up from there.

**[Timestamp – 49:35] ER:** How did the World Wars impact the business, if you know?

**BR:** Oh I think that everybody sacrificed. I think the Depression was tough and then the war was, you know, the [*unintelligible*] were limited, supplies were limited. But his mother still went to New York on buying trips and bought things and there was still business even during the ... The point I learned from this, these stories is whether it's a depression, like we had a recession starting in 2008 or a political calamities, there's still business if you're in business to be done. You just have to do it well and perhaps hunker down a little bit. I think the war was a big dislocation because everybody was gone and everybody was working to keep the war effort going. Raw materials were scarce they were using it for the war effort. It's been described to me when they came back we lived in Dr. Newman's, which is Garrett Law Firm. When I was born we were living there, in the apartment upstairs. There was no houses to buy or even no houses to rent. Everything was scarce. Building materials were slim. But 1951 I think we were able to buy a house then in '58 my father built a house. I actually live near that house now.

**ER:** If you could describe your line of work in three words what would they be?

**BR:** Service would be in there. I might repeat it three times. You know, we're in the service business. We sell a product and the business plan is a little bit odd. You have to anticipate what somebody's going to buy, buy it at a certain price and try to sell it all seasonally. We think of four season a year, we don't turn over completely four times but

in some products we do. So the business model is a little risky, you know, you're taking a chance. That's why everybody doesn't do it but so we're not purely service, there's a product that goes with it. But it's a bundle of services attached to the product. We want to sell customers clothes that wear well. Not just on their body but in their minds too and makes them feel good. That's four words in addition to service and that's what we do.

**ER:** So you mentioned seasons, do you think the colder season kind of around Christmas highest with the fur coats and things like that?

**BR:** That's a really good question. Weather. I apprenticed under my dad and there is a story I want to tell about that. I apprenticed under my dad and he would always say in New York when we were on buying trips, "We never blame it on the weather, we sell coats year round," cause he was a coat merchant. And he would tell a manufacturer if you change the back of that coat a little bit it'll be a better coat. End of the year they would say "That was our best coat on the line, we changed it, thank you." So but it is weather related. You know you sell more coats and furs in cold weather. You sell more sweaters in cold weather. When it's a hot winter you don't sell as many. You don't know in advance so you just take a chance and if you have things you know you mark them down at some point it's cold or at some point somebody buys them. They might be way, way below your cost but that's part of the averaging out. If you want to make sure you got something your size, your color, everything, you really like it, go on and get it because there's not an infinite number in the world and there's probably only one or two in our store of that size and color and style and type. But yes weather is a factor real hot summers, real warm winters ... a cool day in May we might sell furs on layaway for, you know, the coming season. Reason it's so active today and we were worried about setting up in the fur room here... this is like a store in a store by the way, it's one of our niches that we expanded. Rippe's always sold a fur or two but we expanded and inventoried and learned this business real well. It is a three generation business but nobody stocks this level. Yeah the weather does affect and we do have the fall season, if you think about it, lasts longer. You start selling it. You receive it in July or August and it sells through to about mid-February. We want to be clean, no more winter clothes in mid-February. We try to turn over all the furs too and get new styles and fashion changes. There's no traditional mink, there's two or three, two traditional mink coats in this room. We used to have a whole wall full. You know, the mink coat is not the desired thing. It's a light weight little vest or the middle of the room used to be full of 500, 700 suits now it's full of separate knit, that sort of gives with you, whether it's casual or dressy knits. So, you know, things change. And the weather does affect it you don't want to buy a knit, we don't sell a lot of knits in June and July because they're a little, even though they're not all wool, they're a little bit hot and sticky. Christmas. You know, I would say our busy season and we do, our strongest months are, for winter, are August through January. Fall

and winter. And then spring and summer, spring we do well end of February end of May and around Memorial Day it transitions to summer and then there is some time that summer fades into fall and those are the lightest months of the year because t-shirts are not as expensive or similar little tops and capris and simple dresses are not as expensive as, and raincoats are not as expensive as fall clothes. Fall clothes have more, sort of, guts to them.

**ER:** People are willing to pay more.

**BR:** Yes, and well there is more to it. The fabrics more the constructions more. It's more complicated more structured. There's more sleeves.

**ER:** So, I know you mentioned in the beginning, you were known for your hats. How was your hat business?

**BR:** Well, if you...you used to tell a person's fashion, awareness, consciousness, or forwardness or conservativeness by their hat. Then it changed over the years you looked down and generally the shoes are now the fashion statement. So the hat business, we still sell hats and we sell for warmth headbands and not just for warmth they happen to match up with fur or not. But the hat business is... we used to make hats and they would have, you know, literally a bird's nest in them or dried flowers or something like that. They knew how to make them and they had hat blocks, you know for different sizes and had all the materials and that was a skill they learned from good old Aunt Ida. Annie learned it from her sister Ida. Where Ida learned it I don't know.

**ER:** Yeah, you don't know where their family came from.

**BR:** Well, the name was [Allen/Allan/Alan]. Our name was not Rippe [*pronounced Rippy*] it was Rippe [*pronounced Rippa*] from Krakow, Poland. My father did a little genealogy research and saw, I have the census that shows his grandfather and father living in a certain address in 1890 and 1900 in Manhattan. What did you ask me I forgot?

**ER:** About where their family, Ida's family was from.

**BR:** Don't know where they came from. Ida and Annie, sisters, and they had a brother. They were... their dad had a store in Hillsborough. I don't know what kind of store and I don't know the name of it either. The brother ended up in Richmond and I forget what he did. His name was Victor I'm pretty sure. And Ida was the oldest and she was the merchant and she was a student of the business too because she had designer friends. And Annie was just a good worker she had four kids and ran a business.

**ER:** You talked about going to the factories where your father would say fix this coat it will sell better. What age did you start going with him to those?

**BR:** I was seventeen when I first went. Then I lived in Manhattan and worked for. In this business of some size you have a consulting firm that's called a buying office. They actually don't go, unless you tell them to, buy for you in your name but they give you... you might want to shop this line, this line, this line, go look at this, here's something new that's happening, this is trend here so they're like a consulting firm in the fashion business and we've always had one. I've changed who we use over time they go and we've used one for quite a good while over twenty years. I bought this business in January '92 from my parents and my father bought it from his mother and siblings in 1961.

[Timestamp - 59:43] So I went in 1978 in August and I worked in New York for our previous buying office and I worked Jack Braunstein. And I worked there for a couple of months and I lived in Manhattan and I saw where they made things. They were still making better cashmere coats and suits and fur-trim garments and furs in Manhattan. It was industrial city where a lot of people worked in the garment business and, you know, right along Seventh Avenue from 27<sup>th</sup> Street to 40<sup>th</sup> Street, that's the garment district. Now it's less than half the workers probably less than 80% of those workers don't do that kind of work anymore. There's still showrooms there and it's still the fashion capital of the world in my opinion maybe style wise Paris and Milan are also equal. But I still go to Manhattan and 1978's when I started, lived there, and I've been going ever since. I figure I've spent almost three years of my life there. I think New York City is the greatest city in the world. Great place to visit don't think I want to live there.

**ER:** I visited once. Did you ever sell anything locally made, like from Dan River Mill?

**BR:** Yes, we would find, we would actually talk to the merchandiser or one of the sales people or something at Dan River and found out what blouse fabric they were selling to whom and try to buy and try to play that up. Or I worked for Dan River once in '69-'70 and my favorite job was I scheduled cloth and boy did I learn a lot about cloth which really helped me. Helps me now. I was the one who said I'm never going into the family business while I was doing that. But I learned a lot about fabric maybe it was '70, yeah it was about 70. So we did do that and we did play it up if it was a bottom fabric of pants of something we would try to find it.

Other local products maybe we've had some jewelry. We tried some things before.

**ER:** If you could pick a local historical event that had the most impact on you, what do you think you would choose? You can think about it for a second.

**BR:** Well, I mean, I can't say this exact event but being Jewish and not having a color barrier. You know, my skin is Caucasian looking but I was very sensitive about race and I used to take the bus to Norfolk and when I'd get off the bus I'd say "What is the color?" this is a bathroom, couldn't go there you had to go there. You know, I was just very sensitive about that and I thought that that was wrong. I was glad to see integration and just realize it would take generations. Think it's probably done better here than, while there is still problems, sure lot better than it was. So I guess without one event. My father remembers and I remember too when there were demonstrations and my father would try to quietly help. He and some of the Jewish community leaders would quietly try to help and I remember seeing some Rippe's bags on the picket lines that was when boycotting businesses. I don't think, we were not boycotted, you know it was a legitimate boycott and it worked. It got awareness and things changed.

**ER:** So you were twelve or thirteen when Bloody Monday happened.

**BR:** Yeah, exactly, yeah. I don't remember that exactly I only know about it from reading it. I remember seeing it on the news but I do remember the boycott specifically. The boycotts involved picketing and pickets were not necessarily with the posters but I remember some shopping bags. I remember my father, some people, we need some assistance and he assisted.

So being sensitive to that, that was significant time in my life, that change which I was glad to see.

**ER:** This question is little bit out there but if you were to choose and artifact to represent yourself like if it was going to go in a museum, what do you think you would choose? Whether it be a fur coat, a hat, or something entirely different.

**BR:** Oh I don't know some piece of art. But I couldn't tell ya.

**ER:** What kind of art do you like? Modern art? Or classical?

**BR:** I like it all. What a work of art he is. *-laughs-*

**ER:** Do you feel like the Dan River region was a good place to raise your family?

**BR:** Yes, it's a wonderful place to raise a family. It's beautiful, the rolling hills of the piedmont. And it's easy to get around and you're an hour away from a big city

experience if you want to go to Durham or Raleigh. Lots of people got to Greensboro, I don't but you know, I have job that I'm fortunate enough to go to a big city if I want to. And there is plenty of culture there I usually work 13 or 14 hours a day when in Manhattan or I go to Hong Kong to buy furs or we go somewhere else to buy shoes but that's usually a working trip.

**ER:** What's been your favorite place to travel?

**BR:** Well I like to going to Manhattan. It's my favorite city. I like traveling, as the adventure of traveling. The summer for high school graduation present, I took my son on a high school, with the other high school students to a brief sort of Europe, France and England. That was a fun eight day trip. As a good little, not luxury just very down to earth that was a lot of fun, fun seeing England. It's fun to travel you see how other people live and work things out.

**ER:** Are there any other final memories or anything you would like to share?

**BR:** Well, I'm sure I'll think of something but we've probably covered more... Well one little odd thing, I started out in textiles and then I became interested, I've always loved the outdoors, I became interested in agriculture. So when I finally when to Virginia Tech and graduated with a degree in agronomy I managed farms, when back in agriculture economics I thought that's where I was going to end up being. So when my father asked me to come in, it was a little bit like oh that's what I'm supposed to do, so I did. I very much enjoy it but seven years after that, of the family business now, I went back every other weekend to Duke to get an MBA because I thought I'm not getting along very well, I'm not sure this is going to work out. So I did get my MBA and about the time I got my MBA we started getting along and it was wonderful thing and about six years later I did buy the business. But ever since then we got along beautifully and enjoyed each other like good company.

**ER:** Well I'm sure the MBA still helped.

**BR:** Well that and a dollar and half and you have a cup of coffee. Used to be a quarter.

**ER:** Everything is inflation now.

**BR:** I think I remember some principles but it was good confidence builder and it taught how to think about certain business problems which made it more fun.

**ER:** Well I think that's all I have.

**BR:** Well thank you. Pleasure meeting you and good luck with your project and I think your foundation in Karl Stauber leading the foundation has done just a wonderful in Danville and continues to do so. At first when the hospital sold and this foundation started, it was not clear how that was going to be but I think he helped set a picture for what it could be and you know, I think the best is yet to come.

**ER:** Yeah, I think that division for the future of the area is just really vibrant.

**BR:** It really it.

**ER:** I'm excited to see what happens.

**BR:** Me too. So you make sure right after you get your masters you come back.

**ER:** That's the plan.

**BR:** Good.

**ER:** If I find a job, that's the plan.

**BR:** Oh yeah, there's going to be more of those around.

**ER:** Yeah, if you have any old photographs or those ads you were talking about. I don't know if they're digitized images or just.

**BR:** I do. I do. They can be digitized yeah.

**ER:** If you want to send me those that would be great.

**BR:** I would be happy to. We have some good things I have scrapbooks and stuff like that.

**ER:** That would be really cool.

## **SECTION 2 [Began recording again after previously stopping the interview]**

**BR:** They came to America and they wanted to Americanized. They still wanted to be Jewish so they didn't wear the yamakas and they didn't wear the shawls and they prayed and kept their religion but there was reform movement starting in Germany. And they

were ultra modern they would almost shun anything traditional so they built, they started a synagogue, you know where it is on Sutherlin Avenue?

**ER:** Yeah.

**BR:** So that's late 1800s. I think the congregation in 1875, anyway so building down here that used to be Thalheimer's is now the city building. A man named Hermann, a German Jew, built that. And then later the next wave about 1900s people like my mother's parents came over from Eastern Europe and they were very traditional. And they were like ugh these traditional Jews and they speak Russian and they're not you know, the German Jews were so proud of themselves. They had a little, the German Jews who had the wealth stopped supporting the synagogue and so the synagogue was not open for a long time. My father's Bar Mitzvah, at sixteen, 26, 27, 28, 29, 1929, in the orthodox synagogue which was on Wilson Street but they leave one they try dismantle it which they did, they saved the stain glass. Bobby Marshall has a lot of the stain glass. So that congregation was fractured and then came back together and the orthodox community eventually dissolved. Because they wanted to marry and stuff they all went to other cities so now the reform is left. And the problem with reform is that fewer professional people that are Jewish come to Danville, big box retailers is trend so, you know, small merchants don't come. When they get off the boat, the joke was if they weren't a doctor or lawyer they opened a business what else. Or they went and peddled and that's how a lot of these stores got started, that's a whole separate lore in history.

**ER:** Is that touched upon in the article a little bit.

**BR:** No not at all. That's just a whole separate thing. The article is Ben Rippe got to Danville via Norfolk and that's how it started but how did his parents get there. They didn't come through Ellis Island because Ellis Island was 1900s. I don't even know how long, my mother's parents were from about sixty miles apart but they met in Louisville Kentucky and they both came because they had relatives there. So that's how the immigration worked.

**ER:** Yeah we might be able to link the article to online to your interview that way people will be able to have that there as well.

**BR:** I'm sure it's highly linkable but there's some links. Lowenstein just said look at this orthodox and this reform community and what happened during the 20s, 30s, and 40s, that influenced these people. These people just go and do good work in the world. How could that be in my little Danville, Virginia town? It just was.

**ER:** If it's not highly linkable, I'm sure Joyce might let me upload.

**BR:** Oh yeah she will. They will, oh yeah she may even know which one it is and if not Dan Vaden knows because he has got it for me before. He is the creative person at VIR. He's on the website D. Vaden V-A-D-E-N. He used to have Vaden and Associates now Kim Demont bought it just down the street.

**ER:** Alright, well I'll clean up here and then I'll be out of your hair.