

Interviewee: Nat Labell

Interviewer: Natalie Mapou

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Temple Emanuel

Nat, where were you born?

NL: I was born in Philadelphia on August 6, 1915. That was a long time ago.

Where did your ancestors come from?

NL: Russia. My mother came from the Ukraine, and my father came from that part of Russia that was once under the lords and ladies of Poland and then the Czar got it, and it went back and forth.

When did they come to the United States?

NL: I know for sure that my mother came in 1894. My father probably came around the same time. They met in Philadelphia and married.

What brought you and your family to Greensboro and when?

NL: I came alone—unmarried at the time. I came in 1946. I represented a couple of confectionary companies. I was a salesman traveling Virginia and the Carolinas, and I selected Greensboro as my home base. One of the facts, other than it was so beautifully centrally located for my territory, was my first view of Greensboro. In 1939, I was coming in from Winston-Salem just about in April and the cherry blossoms on West Market were in full bloom and I said to my partner that this was the kind of town I would like to live in if I lived outside of New York. I came to do a two- or three-week stint here as a promotional man for a confectionary company and Fleer's double bubble.

When did you move?

NL: It became my permanent home in 1946 when the Tootsie Roll company appointed me as a permanent representative for Virginia and North Carolina. Before that, my partner and I traveled all over the country. We spent a week or two or three all over from Seattle, Washington, to Georgia. I was a candy man, and I made a living at it.

Did you work with other Jews? Did you experience anti-Semitism?

NL: I met no anti-Semitism at all anywhere in the country. Greensboro was a remarkable city in regard to that, and we credit the early Jewish families who lived here

long before I came—like the Cones, the Sternbergers, the Tannenbaums. They were the roots of the Jewish community. There were others, but they were most prominent. I know from my Christian friends from all the years that I have been here that the Sternberger family and others associated with Cone Mills were loved by their workers. There might have been some anti-Semitism from some of the people, but overall it was nothing.

Were there other Jews doing what you were doing at work?

NL: One of the companies that I represented before I went with Fleers, when they sent a two-man team out—and they sent fourteen teams out—they always sent one Jew with a Gentile boy and all of my partners for the four years we did promotional work were Gentile. There was no sweat—there was nothing. One of them became my best friend. One of the boys was Roman Catholic, another was Protestant. We got along beautifully.

There were no experiences where you were treated differently?

NL: Not at all.

How did you meet your wife? What about children?

NL: In 1946 about October, I came off the road and went up to New York where I hadn't been for quite a while. When I got up there to stay with my sister and brother-in-law, I had already established residence in Greensboro. They said they were going to someone's house on Saturday and that they wanted me to meet a girl. This couple had an apartment in Greenwich Village—my sister lived on the upper west side. We walked into the apartment, there was a quick introduction, and this broad they had me to meet we were hugging and kissing in front of everybody. Helen and I were married on January 5, 1947. She was anxious to get married, and I was anxious to get married. She was a New York girl, and I told her we were going to live in Greensboro, North Carolina, and she said great. We came down and joined Temple Emanuel immediately, and she got involved that young Jewish women do in the Temple. I was on the road and came back Friday night and left Monday morning.

On March 28, 1949, my first boy was born—his name is Lyn. My second child came thirteen months later, and his name is David. Two and one-half years later, we had a daughter named Dorothy. Lyn lives in Hamilton Lakes here in Greensboro. My second son lives in Fairfax, Virginia near Washington. My daughter lives in Charlotte. They are all married, and are all very happy. I have one grandchild from Lyn.

I could go back to the troubles of my original family. My father died when I was five. My mother was a widow with three children, and we were probably the poorest family on the street in the South Bronx. None of us got an education beyond high school, and my oldest sister didn't finish high school. She quit at fourteen when she get working papers. She worked as a stenographer for about \$14 a week.

An important part of my very young life is that my youngest sister and I from 1925 to 1929—I was ten and she was seven—we got into third- or fourth-grade vaudeville. An aunt who thought we were beautiful children thought that if she paid for

dancing lessons and that sort of thing that we could help mother. So between my youngest sister and me and my oldest sister, we eked out a living. We didn't make much money in show business. We did vaudeville, banquets, Bar Mitzvahs, and we danced and had a comedy skit. I think we were cute. When I reached fourteen, we couldn't do it any more. We didn't have the talent, and we weren't dreamers about the business.

From 1929 to 1932, after school I sold papers in the New York subway which made me \$2 or \$3 dollars a night. It was rough. I quit high school for a \$12/week job, which I stayed with for about three years. After about a year on that job at a big retail furniture chain, they cut everybody's salary. But Mr. Roosevelt was elected in 1932, and almost immediately put through the NRA (National Recovery Administration) and according to the law they moved us up to the minimum wage. Salary jumped from \$10 to \$14.50/week. My younger sister went on and finished high school, but as soon as she graduated she went into show business as a chorus girl and traveled with road companies. Red Skelton starred in one of the shows she was in.

Where did you and your family live in Greensboro?

NL: In 1946, I came to get a room in January. The hotels were full. I used to stay at the old O'Henry Hotel or the King Cotton Hotel. I knew the managers because I stayed there many times. The manager of the King Cotton told me he get me a room in the country at a lovely place. He told me it was \$8/night, and I was used to spending \$5.50 or \$6. He told me to get on High Point Rd. all the way down to Sedgefield and turn left when you see a sign for Sedgefield Inn. When I rolled up to that big circular driveway, I thought this is too rich for my blood. I took a room there and stayed there a full year. The wine steward knew me and always gave me the same wine. I felt like a big shot.

After Helen and I got married in 1947, we rented a room at a rooming house called Shady Lawn on West Market Street. After that, we moved into the old ORD barracks on Bessemer which they offered to ex-GIs for \$25/month. One day Ruth Rypins, the Rabbi's wife and Mrs. Sidney Stern came to greet us and before they came in they said it was a shame that the kids had to live in these. But they were surprised at how well my wife decorated the barracks. We lived there for eighteen months.

Were there other Jewish families in the barracks.

NL: There were no other Jews in these barracks. I didn't suffer much anti-Semitism ever. Except maybe where we lived in the Bronx, the Polish kids tried to beat us up. Once a guy across the street told us to fight back if they threatened us. That's the only incident.

Where did you live after the barracks?

NL: We moved into Latham Park apartments near Wendover. We lived there for six years. Lots of Jews lived there, but it wasn't a Jewish neighborhood.

What about the Temple?

NL: I liked Rabbi Rypins very much. The Reform congregation invited the Conservative Jews who wouldn't join the Reform congregation to use Temple Emanuel assembly room downstairs for Sabbath and holidays while we were upstairs. They would import a Rabbi. I'm proud of that.

Jewish position in Greensboro.

NL: We were lucky we had the Cones, Sternbergers, Tannenbaums, Benjamins who made things very good for the Jews in Greensboro. I have breakfast every morning with non-Jews—except Sunday—and a couple of them grew up in the Cone Mill village. They are always talking about how good they had it, even though they were low-income people. Their rents were about \$5/week, the Cones built their churches, they had swimming pools, a YMCA. These people loved working at Cone Mills.

Another thing, there was a Jewish man from a family named Sussman who had a grocery store in south Greensboro. He was winding up his business when I first came to Greensboro. When he had to close, the community around his store—which was black—asked the city council to name the cross street Sussman Street. He was good to the community credit-wise and made sure people had food if they needed it. When I came to town, there was no Cone Boulevard or Benjamin Parkway.

This is a good town for Jewish people.

Did you and your family participate in activities at Temple Emanuel?

NL: I for one season was invited by the mayor Carson Bains to join the Junior Chamber of Commerce, but I couldn't stay because I couldn't commit time. My wife grew up in a Reform congregation in Flushing, Queens. My family couldn't join a congregation because we couldn't give a nickel to the Synagogue. I was Bar Mitzvahed, but they were not like they are now.

Did you become a member of a country club?

NL: I could have easily at Starmount because Benjamin owned it. I know there were Jews were members of Greensboro Country Club when I first came here, but they were wealthy Jews like the Cones, Tannenbaums, Sternbergers, Falks. Those were people who grew up in the south, and their approaches were different from those of the gangs of us who came down from the north after WWII—and we took over.

How do you think the northern Jews are different from the southern Jews

NL: The northern Jews grew up in places that were more anti-Semitic than the south ever was, strange as that may seem. I've got lots of local friends who are not Jewish. There was probably more anti-Semitism in Russia than there was here.

Where did you learn Yiddish?

NL: I learned it from my mother. My mother also sent my sister and I to a Yiddish school. My mother could not read or write Yiddish.

Did you speak Yiddish when you came to Greensboro?

NL: I had one friend at the Synagogue that I would speak Yiddish with.

Were you always a salesman?

NL: I got out of the candy business in 1950, and in 1951 I got into the women's dress business. I didn't know things were changing in the industry and that sportswear was going to take over the dress business. I would travel during the week and come back on Friday. In the womenswear business, I could spend more time at home. I was in the business for thirty years. My whole living was as a traveling salesman.

After ten years, I got into a sportswear line associated with Jonathan Logan. I should have gotten into sportswear earlier.

Did you have any connections to the mills here?

NL: Companies that made the garments bought from the mills here, but I had nothing to do with that.

When did you buy your first house?

NL: In 1953, we bought this house for \$11, 600.00. I had to borrow \$300 for half the downpayment.

Do you remember the formation of Temple Emanuel? Or Beth David?

NL: Temple Emanuel was formed way before I got here. There was no Beth David. I saw the Temple really growing. At the same time, Beth David was growing. I think the Temple has a slight edge in population.

Do you recall who the prominent Jews were back in the 1950s and 60s?

NL: Ben Cone was mayor of Greensboro at one time. There were lawyers. The Jews were always good contributors to the charities.

Do you remember any of the Jewish organizations?

NL: I was a member of B'nai Brith but not very active. I don't think my wife was a member of Hadassah. In those years, we couldn't afford the dues.

Do you remember conversations about the Holocaust after the war?

NL: I don't remember much discussion about this. We didn't know much about it until after the war. Some thought that the creation of Israel was a good thing and some did not. The papers were not anti-Israel.

The general attitude of most people is that if you are Jewish, you are going to make it. I know a bunch of people in this town who started as poor Jews and had the same struggles as I did, and most of them did well.

Were you treated differently from anybody else?

NL: No. You have to remember that the economy here was based on Cone Mills. We have one of the best hospitals in Moses Cone and Winston-Salem has Brenner Children's Hospital which is funded by a Jewish family. I never came across much anti-Semitism or anything that disturbed me much.

Anything else you would like to add about life in Greensboro?

NL: I love Greensboro.

END OF INTERVIEW