

ChristianRussell\_19920429

RICHARD SHARPLESS: [00:00:00] This is an interview with Russell Christian, 2485 Morgan Hill Road, Easton, Pennsylvania. It is April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1992. It is 8:00 in the evening, and the interview is being conducted in Russ's house. Okay, how old are you, Russ?

RUSSELL CHRISTIAN: Fifty-four.

RS: Fifty-four? Okay, you're a native of... ?

RC: Easton, PA.

RS: You've lived here all your life?

RC: Yep.

RS: Went to school here?

RC: Yes.

RS: When did you start working? Where?

RC: Well, when I got out of high school, I worked in a supermarket from 1955 to 1960, and 1960 the supermarket, which was the Best Markets, the one in Easton went out of business, closed down in October of 1960. Also, while I was there in 1960, I started working down at a textile mill in Oxford, New Jersey. [00:01:00] That was interrupted by

two years in the army, so I worked there for a total of six years.

RS: What did you do in the textile mill?

RC: In the textile mill, I was just - I did various jobs. The job that I finished up on was called a finish mixer, which was mixing chemicals that would be flushed into a machine and it would control the texture of the material that was running through the machine -- softness or, you know.

RS: And that's where you learned your --

RC: Yeah, well that's where I -- this was my first brush with the textile business. In 1966, after being there for six years, they laid off people who were there up to eight years, and from that point, we went into a steel mill call Taylor-Wharton in Easton, PA.

RS: Hold on just a minute there. What was the reason for the layoff?

RC: They just had some kind of a slump. Just sort of ran out of work.

RS: How big was that company?

RC: [00:02:00] Well, they ran three shifts and they also had a dyehouse. There was a finishing room and a dyehouse, and I'd have to say that there had to be a total of 200 people probably employed there, maybe more.

RS: It was pretty big?

RC: Pretty big, yeah.

RS: Then you went to Taylor-Wharton?

RC: Then, I went to Taylor-Wharton, and they explained to us when we took the job that it was temporary, would last a year. Well, it lasted about two years at Taylor-Wharton, and then they had put on a second shift, which they never had before, and I was hired to work on that second shift.

RS: And they were manufacturing what?

RC: They were manufacturing gas cylinders. I enjoyed it. I think that was the most pleasing job I had at the time I worked at Taylor-Wharton. [00:03:00] And then, from there, I got into sales. I sold insurance, I sold industrial supplies, and in 1979, I went to work selling sewing room supplies --

RS: Sewing room supplies?

RC: -- to the garment industry, and I was employed there from 1979 to 1992, at which time the company I was employed with went out of business due to a poor economy in the garment industry.

RS: Alright. Now from seventy-nine to '92? Did you work at the same company?

RC: Yes.

RS: What was the name of that company?

RC: A1 Sewing Supply --

RS: A1 Sewing Supply?

RC: -- in Coplay, Pennsylvania.

RS: Coplay? And what did you do there?

RC: Well, what I did is I went around those different sewing factories and sold them parts for their sewing machines, paper for their cutting rooms, various parts that are used in the sewing industry. [00:04:00] And I did that for 13 years.

RS: And where was your market essentially?

RC: My market was in Pennsylvania. I worked as far west as York, Pennsylvania, as far north as Hazelton, Shamokin, Pennsylvania, coal region area, and I never went into Philadelphia, but I bordered Philadelphia, worked out around Perkasie, Quakertown area. That's as far south as I went.

RS: Now, when you started in '79, how many plants or businesses did you service approximately?

RC: Well, in '79 when I started, I know that between -- in one area between Whittier, Pennsylvania and Portland, Pennsylvania there were 95 shops.

RS: [00:05:00] Ninety-five?

RC: Yeah.

RS: That's a small area.

RC: Yeah in a small area called the Slate Belt in Pennsylvania were 95 shops, and at the present time there's 15.

RS: How many women do you think were employed? Can you give me a ballpark number on how many women you think were employed?

RC: I feel that if there were 95 -- I'd say that the average shop would have maybe between -- I'd say approximately 50 women.

RS: So you're talking several thousand women.

RC: Yeah, about 5,000 probably in that time.

RS: In a relatively small area.

RC: That's right, in a small area.

RS: These are sewing shops, right?

RC: Yes.

RS: Okay, and they produce for the New York market?

RC: Right.

RS: Is that what they do?

RC: That's right.

RS: In all kinds of goods?

RC: Yes.

RS: Uh-huh. Okay. And what about the rest of the state? Was there this kind of concentration anywhere else?

RC: [00:06:00] No, that was the most concentrated area because they were small shops that were sort of, like, family-run businesses.

RS: Were they locally owned?

RC: Yeah, they were locally owned.

RS: In other words, this wasn't money from outside setting them up.

RC: No, no, they were locally owned. A lot of the people lived right next door to the factory. They lived right nearby. They lived in the same town the factory was in.

RS: And the people, of course, were all local.

RC: Yeah, they were local. Those factories -- a lot of those businesses were passed down. It was family businesses. A father, grandfather might have started it. It might be three generations of people running those businesses at that point. Also, in the Lehigh Valley area at one time in the Atlantic Apparel Association, which is an association of people who own factories, and what Atlantic Apparel does is they negotiate contracts with unions for these other shops. They went from 400 members to currently, they have about 95.

RS: Oh, today?

RC: [00:07:00] Yeah. In the 13 years that I've been there, I've seen them. They have dropped from 400 to 95. Another problem with the apparel industry is the imports. They feel -- the people I talk to feel the problem is the imports, and then if you're a union shop, you have to tack on a certain percentage of your garment to pay the union, and that runs you into problems when you have to be competitive, and New York really controls the garment industry. Everything is price, and what they're doing now, they're not showing too much allegiance to the union shops, and they're getting it done in non-union shops lots of times.

RS: Were most of the shops you serviced union shops?

RC: Yes, they generally were union shops.

RS: [00:08:00] International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, right? And so, most of the owners or the managers attribute the decline or disappearance of these shops primarily to foreign competition?

RC: Yeah. For example, a hold was put on steel imports. Twenty-five percent. Only twenty-five percent, I could be wrong.

RS: Yeah, that's approximately.

RC: The garment industry has no protection at all. They have no protection at all. I mean, imports, 70% of what you see in the store today is foreign made, so they had no protection like steel does. They're in worse trouble than steel, I think. And another thing is even in this country, you have what they call chop shops in New York in Chinatown where they pay the workers about \$1 an hour.

RS: [00:09:00] Sweatshops.

RC: Sweatshops. And a lot of people - a lot of companies will get their work done there. Wherever they can get it that's cheapest. Wherever they can get it done the cheapest, that's where they get it done. So that's a problem. Another problem is a lot of people were doing what they call home sewing, so in other words, a factory owner will have somebody sew it at their house, set it up with a machine, so they had home sewers doing it, working for a lot less than union wages. So that's a big thing now.

RS: That actually going on out here?

RC: Yeah, that's going on, and it even goes on at some shops that are sort of busy. If they ever get into a run where they can't get their work out quick enough, they'll send some home, to home shop. That's sort of a big thing.



RS: And these are some of the previous owners? Legal shops are now ran as illegal.

RC: [00:10:00] Yeah, that's right. That's right. And it would beat the price, you know?

RS: They pay benefits?

RC: No.

RS: Oh, they're not paying Social Security or anything?

RC: No, that's right. They send the work home to the girls, and then they can do it while they're watching television or whatever they want to do. If they want to do it at midnight, they can do it at any time and they pick it up the next day.

RS: It's like the old craft weaving industry back in the middle ages.

RC: Yeah, so it seems to me like they really have everything going against them. They can't make the garment as cheap as they can make it in Haiti or somewhere like that.

There's no way, and people want to make a profit. At one time, if you bought a garment that was made in Japan, or Haiti, or somewhere like that, it was cheaper in store, but they're not even passing off.

RS: Quality was cheaper, too.

RC: Yeah, the quality was cheaper, and the price was cheaper.

[00:11:00] Now, the quality caught up a little bit. The quality has caught up, but we don't benefit from the break. By the time the consumer gets it, it's just as expensive as if it was made here.

RS: Well, you push out the domestic, then there's no competition.

RC: That's right.

RS: Do you attribute the fact that the associations and the manufacturers weren't able to get the kind of deal steel got, in terms of imports, to the lack of political clout in the industry? Do you think because there were so many small operators versus, you know, like a big steel company, that they have less capability of putting political pressure on?

RC: Yeah, probably. They probably didn't do a very good job of lobbying maybe. They probably didn't have the power to lobby like the steel industry does. I think that has a --

RS: Did any of the people that you talk to say, for example, that politicians didn't listen to them very much, pay a lot of attention to them?

RC: [00:12:00] Yeah. I remember going to some kind of an outing where Ritter was speaking, and this must have been eight years ago maybe, and everybody was sort of upbeat and optimistic. You know, they get upbeat and optimistic, and they think they're going to get help, but it's not coming.

RS: It doesn't matter?

RC: No, it's not coming. I mean, they've been wanting a curb on imports for at least the last 12 or 13 years.

RS: What did Ritter respond at that time?

RC: Well, he said that he was going to do everything he could to try to help. He was aware of the problem, but personally, I can't see that anything was done.

RS: [00:13:00] Do you think the fact that most of the shops were unionized had any impact on the decline of the industry? You mentioned foreign competition as one thing. How about the unionization? In other words, did unions push wages and benefits up so high that this was a factor?

RC: I don't think so, because I don't think they make enough money. I don't think the girls in the factory make enough money because they have stress. They're on piece work. They're under a lot of stress, and I don't think so, no. I don't think they ran it out of sight. I don't think that's the problem.

RS: When you say don't make a lot of money, do you have an idea what an average sewer would make today?

RC: Well, the thing is, an average sewer if she's good and she's on piece work, she might make \$7 or \$8 an hour.

RS: But she'd have to be really good.

RC: Yeah, she'd have to be pretty good, and then she'd have to be making sure that she was getting a full week's work, because they don't always get a full week's work. They might work 20 hours a week.

RS: I see.

RC: [00:14:00] So that's another problem. They send them home, they call them back. When they don't have the work, they just don't work. And I can tell by going in the factories that I used to see a lot of people. I mean, I can go in a parking lot and judge what's going on inside, before I even walk in the door because the people aren't there anymore. There's just not as many girls in the shop.

Another thing is in a lot of areas, there's no young people want to come in. There's no young women that are coming into the business except for Pennsylvania Dutch country. They sort of have a little bit of a different ethics, and I do see a lot of younger women to work with. The girls feel

this way, they go to McDonald's and work whatever hours they want to work and make \$5 and get 40 hours in, and it beats making \$7 an hour and getting 20 hours in, and they're not under the stress at McDonald's.

RS: So the average age now of the workforce that's left is pretty high?

RC: [00:15:00] Yeah, pretty old. Pretty old and it looks like, I don't know how they're going to replace them when these older women leave, and that's true. I'd say, I can't put a finger on what the average age is on a woman in the factory, but I'm guessing it has to be between 45 and 50 on an average I'd have to say.

RS: Is that certain?

RC: Yeah, I think it is.

RS: With quite a bit of years' experience, I'd imagine from what you're telling me. Well, when did you notice the decline begin? You started in '79, and apparently --

RC: A lot of people who are in factories tell me that it started before then, but I didn't really notice it until I was in the business for like three years and I'd say, like, the early -- 81, '82. [00:16:00] I'd say maybe, like, '82.

RS: The recession.

RC: Yeah, and I really started to see it go downhill. It almost seemed like mass closings because I can recall going to Reading. Reading used to be a good area for me to go selling.

RS: Well, that was a major textile manufacturing center.

RC: Yeah, I used to park my car at 9<sup>th</sup> and [Law?] Street where they have all the outlet stores, and every building practically had either a sewing factory in it or a cutting room, and I used to park the car there and just walk around the block, and go up and down the steps, and call on people. I can't do that anymore because there's nobody in that building anymore. Every business that I had in that particular building went out of business. To get back to the Slate Belt area, I used to work a little town called Pen Argyl, Pennsylvania and I used to park the car on Main Street in Pen Argyl and just walk down one side of the street, across the street, and walk up the other side of the street, and make like 10 calls, and there's nobody on Main Street in Pen Argyl anymore. They're all closed.

[00:17:00]

In fact, a couple factories, they haven't even been able to sell the buildings. They're still sitting there, empty. I

see that, especially when I go into a town like Shamokin, Pennsylvania. We used to have shoe factories and shirt factories and everything in one tremendous building up there, and I look at that building, and I see the windows all knocked out and everything. You know, there's nothing in there. They lost their main employer today at Shroyer Dress. It was a big account in Shamokin, and they went out of business. And that was a family-run business from the early 1900s.

RS: I remember.

RC: And they're gone. So, um --

RS: Do you know what happened to all these people, these women, once the factories closed? Where did they go?

RC: Well, a lot of women would bounce from one place to another, even if it gets slow. Even if the factory is still open but they're not making any money, they're not getting any hours in. [00:18:00] They seem to resurface. Of course, a lot of them -- some of them went to work in hospitals and they found other jobs, but you see a lot of bouncing around.

RS: Among the existing shops?

RC: Yeah, and even that dries up, and so then they have to do something else.

RS: Now, you were selling then. You were selling machinery and replacement machinery and equipment and stuff. Most of the -- do you feel these shops were well run, first of all?

Generally speaking.

RC: I'll tell you where I think -- what led to the downfall of a lot of the shops is that they didn't reinvest their money in improvements.

RS: Yeah, that's what I was going to ask next.

RC: Yeah, that's true. That's true. They made money, it was a lucrative business for them for years, and then all of a sudden, like everything else, everybody sort of went by, and they kept running the same machinery. They kept running slow machines. [00:19:00] And then, other guys would buy new machines, and the girls ran faster, had less breakdowns. And yeah, I feel that a lot of it is their own fault.

RS: Were they aware of this or were they just happy to take their profits?

RC: They were happy with the profits they were making. They were happy with having a Cadillac every year. They didn't care.

RS: They didn't look down the --



RC: No, they didn't look down the road at all. No, they didn't look down the road at all.

RS: Was that because of the nature of the business? The idea was kind of fly-by-night type of business or what? You said there were people there for three generations.

RC: They were sort of happy there. They made a lot of money back in the '30s and '40s, when other people were really struggling. They were making money, and they handed it down, and I guess they thought it would never end. Like a lot of things, they thought it would never end. They didn't think there would be a change, and then when the change came, it caught a lot of them by surprise.

[00:20:00] And all of a sudden, the work that they were doing was being taken away from them and given to somebody that could get it out faster, and that led to their downfall too.

RS: Now, the new machinery that was coming in, was that American-made stuff or was that foreign stuff?

RC: That was mainly foreign made. For example, the hot machine that came in, that I picked up on, was Mitsubishi came in with a --

RS: Japanese.

RC: Yeah, and they were quick. They very seldom broke down. People liked them. The girls even liked them. They ran nice. And --

RS: That's true.

RC: Off the top of my head, when you think of sewing machines, you think of Singer because you've seen more Singers than anything else, but what I see in Singers, I don't see any new Singer sewing machines. Very few. I see the old ones that they're still using. When I see new machinery, when I see a guy that buys, like, 15 or 20 new machines, they're usually a Juki which is a Japanese machine or a Mitsubishi.

RS: [00:21:00] So a lot of this machinery was better?

RC: Yeah, more modern.

RS: Was it priced competitive?

RC: I think it was. Because these guys, they're not exactly splurgers. They won't splurge, so the price has to be right too.

RS: That's their reputation.

RC: Yeah, so I think the price was right, and there's not too many American machines that are being sold. It's mostly Japanese at this point.

RS: I think even the American machines, Singers, are mostly abroad now.

RC: That's true, that's right. They're not even making their own machines in the United States anymore.

RS: Did any of the companies you've served move, say, to Puerto Rico or to the Dominican Republic?

RC: Yes. [00:22:00] Well, off the top of my head, I can't think of anything, anyone who left the country, but some of them did move down south like North Carolina, South Carolina.

RS: To get cheap labor.

RC: To get cheap labor. To get the cheaper tax break. It was better for them all the way around. Yeah, they have moved. They have moved to different areas down to the South. Nobody's moving North, they're all moving south, and this industry gets worse the further North, you know. Pennsylvania is bad. If you go up to Massachusetts, it's a little worse. If you go further on, up into Connecticut or there --

RS: There's nothing in those towns.

RC: No, and they used to be strong textile towns, so it gets tougher the further north you go it seems, and each year, it gets a little tougher a little further north.

RS: Did you, yourself, have any real heavy competition? In other words, were there a lot of other people like you, servicing -- ?

RC: [00:23:00] Yeah, it's very competitive. When I first started, it wasn't, but a lot of companies opened up, especially down South, parts, dealers down south, and it's very competitive. And even though the base is shrinking as far as the shops go, the business keeps getting more competitive with more salesmen coming from different companies, so it's very, very competitive.

RS: So there's more people pursuing less -- a smaller market, a shrinking market?

RC: Yes. For example, a lot of companies, there's big sewing supply companies like Universal which is down in Georgia, and there's another company called Dunlap which is out of Tennessee. There's salesmen up North who haven't been able to make enough money because of the poor economy. For example, in Pennsylvania, they've been moving their salesmen into New Jersey.

[00:24:00] There's not much in New Jersey either unless you get close to New York, and they've been getting bad responses in New Jersey because those people don't really

want to buy anything either. I mean, it got really tough because everybody clamps down and they watch every penny that they spend, which they have to do, so you can't go in and get the sales that you used to get, and because of the people closing down, I think in Pennsylvania -- I'm not positive -- but I believe there is, like, 400 shops that have closed down in Pennsylvania --

RS: Wow.

RC: -- I'd say in the last two years. So, these salesmen have to go to other states, and they're finding the same problem as they had in Pennsylvania. It's a very competitive business.

RS: So your company found itself -- This is what happened to you?

RC: Yeah, this is what happened with us. Plus, I think the company that I worked for, they had too much overhead and the owner who originally hired me, he passed away, and when he passed away, that didn't help either because he put his wife in charge, and that was really too much for her to handle. [00:25:00] So, that had a lot to do -- It was a combination of things, but the main thing is there just wasn't enough work out there to sell parts the way you should, the way you'd like to.

RS: And so you said, was it '89 when you left? What time?

RC: Ninety-two.

RS: Ninety-two, okay.

RC: Ninety-one, I'm sorry. Ninety-one. Yeah, '78 to '91, I was there.

RS: Well, what are you doing now?

RC: Well, I sort of jumped out of the pan -- out of the fat into the fire because when she closed down in August, in September, I opened up my own company, and I went right back attempting to call on the same customers I had when she was open, and I'm hooking up with wholesalers.

[00:26:00] And I'm trying to work for myself, so I've been doing that since September the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1991, and I'm having a very tough time, a very tough time.

RS: Because of the situation you've been describing?

RC: Yeah. Just this week, just this week -- it's funny because just this week, I think I spent the first three days of this week having people ask me where they can get work. I mean, everybody I was calling on was looking for work. So, it's just very competitive and, at the same time, there's just not enough out there. I never thought I would see it get this bad, as bad as it got. I always knew that

everything was tough, that nothing was going to come easy, but I thought that I had a pretty good base from the people I've been calling on for the last 13 years, that I thought I would do okay, but it's really been a struggle --

RS: These are people who are reasonably healthy firms?

RC: [00:27:00] Yeah, I would say so but see, when you call on these guys in the garment industry that own the factories, I'd say three quarters of them, three out of four will tell you that they're ready to close down or they don't know how they're going to stay in business.

RS: That's an old refrain.

RC: Yeah, that's an old refrain, right. And they're borrowing money to stay in business. They're not always lying, though. They're not always lying because I've seen a lot of people, I remember one woman in particular that told me one time I walked in, she said she lost \$10,000 last week because she priced out a garment, and then she made a wrong move or something. There was something extra that she didn't look over, and she still had to do it to maintain the customer that she had, and she took a lick, and this happens a lot too.

You can lose and they'll cut you off for 50 cents a dozen. Or if somebody wants to do work for \$20 a dozen,

another guy will do it for \$19.50 a dozen, and he'll get it. [00:28:00] And so, it's really competitive, and it gets to the point, lots of times, where they're trying to steal each other's customers, you know?

RS: Yeah.

RC: Lots of times, I'll walk in and they'll say, "Well, who's so-and-so working for?" I can't give them that information because, lots of times, I don't know it and I don't feel like I should give it to them even if I know because I don't think that they should be getting on the phone to try and take business away from another guy, but that's what it's come to at this point.

RS: And obviously, the people in New York are taking advantage of this.

RC: They're taking advantage because the tougher things go, the tougher they get with their pricing, and a lot of guys, they don't want to lose their girls, so they'll take in something hoping that they'll break even, and lots of times it doesn't work out. They don't break even, but they want to keep their people with them. Some of them have allegiance to those people.

[00:29:00] And then, when you have a non-union versus a union shop, you've got to compete with the non-union



shops lots of times, and non-union shops, they might be 25 percent cheaper than the union shop because they don't have to pay the benefits.

RS: The union, apparently, the ILGWU's really taken it on the chin in the last decade or so.

RC: Yeah, they don't seem to -- they, I think -- from what I've been told, the union picks and chooses on who they want. A union could put you out of business too if they don't give you any leeway and if they stay on you lots of times, some guys will try to farm out. Do so much union work and try to farm out some of the work that they get into a non-union shop just to break even. Sometimes they do that. They're not supposed to do it, but it's done. [00:30:00] Lots of times, a union will look the other way when that happens, and other times, they'll come down on the person, and I've already seen people claiming that they're going out of business because of the union too. Now, I don't know how a union shop, if they turned around and went non-union, how they treat the women. I don't have any idea. I don't know if they try to take everything away from them. I don't know because I've heard them say already -- I remember talking to a guy and he said, "See that woman out there? I've got to pay her \$7, \$8 an hour," and I'm thinking to

myself, "Well, if she's making \$7 or \$8 an hour, she must be earning it," but this guy begrudges it because he has to pay her that much money, see?

RS: Right.

RC: So I can see both ends of it, and I think the women are being exploited, both by, lots of times, the person they're working for and by the union too. I really feel that women are being exploited in the garment industry. [00:31:00] They have very little pension money. When they retire at 65, their paycheck might be \$100 a month after all those years. That's all the pension they have.

RS: And that's a union-run pension?

RC: Yeah, that's a union-run pension, yeah. The union has a big, well -- They never get invited to really any union functions either. I could be wrong on this. It was either the union or Atlantic Apparel had a big place up in the Poconos where --

RS: Unity House.

RC: I think that's it.

RS: The ILGWU fixed that up.

RC: Yeah, and the girls never hardly got invited. The girls never got invited to that place.

RS: They're supposed to get a week free every year. That was the idea.

RC: I really sort of feel sorry for them. [00:32:00] I do feel sorry for the workers, too, and there's a lot of decent guys that are trying to run shops and trying to do the right thing and trying to treat them as human as possible. It's not like it's the old sweatshop theory where they didn't have any air conditioning or anything in the shops. Now, they're trying to, they're treating them a lot better. They got the air conditioning and they cut the work week down to where it used to be 40, they cut it down to, like, 35. They got a 35-hour work week. Anything over 35 hours is time-and-a-half. So it's not like they're not trying to do the right thing, but I don't know.

See, they say another thing that's ruining them is by not having the extra five hours too. A lot of guys, a lot of shops are complaining about that, having a 35-hour work week rather than 40, and that was one of the main things they were negotiating on, on the last contract that they had. [00:33:00] They wanted to up it back to 40 hours and they figured that could be better for them.

RS: [Cause that would be better for them?].

RC: Yeah, but they didn't get it. They didn't get it. So basically, that's about all I can tell you about the garment industry unless you're going to ask me more questions, but I can't think of --

RS: So you've really seen the whole thing go down?

RC: Yeah, I did.

RS: What do people you talk to think should be done about this? What kind of ideas do they come up with, or what kinds of things do they say should be done?

RC: Imports.

RS: So they want to control imports?

RC: Put a hold on imports. Yeah, control imports, and they're really shaking once Mexico, when Mexico gets into the market.

RS: Well, that would be the end of it.

RC: Yeah, that's what they feel.

RS: For example, Farah produces over the border, you know, they cut the stuff, [00:34:00] they sell it down there, and then ship it back.

RC: That's right. See, I really feel like greed has really taken over to the point where -- I was talking to an owner of a factory a couple weeks ago, and I'd mentioned to him, you know, "I think everybody's greedy, and I think they

should have some allegiance to the workers in this country." And he says, "Russ," he says, "for me to exist," he says, "if China wants to sell me thread to run my machines for \$3 a comb and the United States wants to charge me \$5 a comb," he said, "Where do I have to go?" He says, "Where do I have to go?" He says, "I have to buy it for \$3, you know?"

So I can see sort of both sides of it, but I just feel that -- I'll give you an example. Maybe this is a poor example, but I feel if an owner of a factory is making, let's say he's making \$100,000 a year. I'd be very happy making \$100,000 a year. [00:35:00] But it seems to me that if he can have that work done in Haiti and make another \$50,000, or make \$150,000 instead of \$100,000, he'll lay off the 30 or 40 girls and just broker the work out of Haiti if he has to, and open up a little office space. And that sort of -- it rubs me the wrong way, personally it rubs me the wrong way. But I guess that's the American way.

RS: Well, unfortunately, it's not working out (laughter).

RC: It doesn't seem like that enough people are looking out for anyone today.

RS: To what do you attribute that as? You mentioned greed at least three different times. People didn't always talk this way. Sure, business was business, but there was an idea that, you know, well, you should buy American products.

RC: [00:36:00] I think people can't satisfy themselves anymore. They can't satisfy. They can't reach a point where they're sort of satisfied, even though a large percentage of the population is really hurting. The people who are doing well can't seem to satisfy themselves no matter how much money they're making, and there's just not anything, there's not enough trickling down to other people, to the people on the bottom scale.

RS: Let me ask a question I always ask. Do you feel that it's the American worker that's been responsible? There's been a lot of complaints or charges about the American workers being lazy or inefficient and unproductive. I mean, what do you think about the workers in the garment industry?

RC: I heard of that through Mack Trucks where you can only put on so many hoses. The union said you can only put so many hoses on a truck a day, you're working too fast. Slow down. [00:37:00] Blah, blah, blah, but that doesn't affect the garment industry. That doesn't work in the garment

industry. You have to hustle to make your rate.

Otherwise, you get stuck making minimum wage, so you have to -- I don't see that at all. I don't see that at all. I don't see much complacency with girls that are running sewing machines all day long.

RS: So when you go into a shop, you see people working?

RC: Yeah, I see them working. I hear those machines running. And I mean, I'm not there all day. I'm not watching them. I'm sure girls go to the bathroom, maybe they stay a little too long, maybe they gab with each other, but I don't see much complacency there at all. I think they work harder than a lot of steel workers, truthfully. You know, I mean, you can push a broom in a steel industry and make \$60 an hour, and these girls are out there stressed, their eyesight goes. Lots of times, the lighting is poor. Most of them are wearing glasses by now, just sitting on their chairs all day long. They're developing bad backs.

RS: It's very close work.

RC:

[00:38:00] Yeah, it's very close work, and if they goof up, you know, they get it right back. It has to be started. The operation has to be done all over again, and they don't get paid twice either. They don't get paid twice for doing the

same operation, so no, I don't see complacency. I really don't. Not in the garment industry.

RS: You don't blame the American worker, at least in the garment industry.

RC: No, I don't. I definitely don't blame the American worker.

RS: Do any of the people you talk to, or even do you think there should be an effort made by, let's say, government, government prior to this, to cooperation, to revitalize the industry, the textile industry?

RC: Yeah, definitely. I think they have to. They have to. You know, they want to keep raising taxes and everything, but they don't want people working. They're not supplying jobs, but they're increasing everything else that you have to pay if you have a job, so yeah, they have to do something on imports. [00:39:00] They have to restrict imports somehow, definitely.

RS: What kind of effects did you notice in the communities where these factories were located over the years as these places begin to decline? As you walk around these communities, what did you notice about them? Did they change at all in any way?

RC: Yeah, it has, particularly if I go into a small town like up in the Slate Belt, I can't see it, because they're all



rowhomes and neat homes with gardens in the back. Those people are a little different, but if you get into the areas like the coal region area, you see a negative effect. You really see that, you know. They close a factory up there, they don't know where to go. Now, I remember when I got out of Easton High School in 1955 where I could leave my house and walk to look for a job and go to 15 or 20 places within walking distance and find a job.

[00:40:00] And I remember back in the '50s, where if you were unfortunate enough to lose your job or you decided to quit, you had another job within sometimes the same day. You could walk out of one factory and get hired in another. Now, it seems to me -- and I'm sure this is like with other industries -- but I know in the garment industries, like for example, I know mechanics who keep the shop running by fixing the machinery, who have been out of work for a long time, and their shops close, and they're still looking for work. You know, so it causes a lot of duress, and they're lost. The people that lose their jobs in the garment industry are often lost. They don't know what else to do.

RS: Do you know any particular effects it's had on families or any individuals? Anything known to you personally?

RC: It's caused a lot of financial stress, but I don't know of any - it's just made, see, the coal region area is a tough area going in there.

RS: [00:41:00] Well, they went downhill in the '20s.

RC: Yeah. They've seen tough times with that. Their parents might've worked in the mines, their father might have worked in the mines and then lost his job or got the black lung or something, so they're tough people. Very tough people. They struggle and they get along, but they live sort of simple from what I can see. They live simple. You don't see as many new cars in that area. You don't see too many split levels or new homes. They're all older homes, rowhomes, so I think they're used to tough times, sort of almost to the point where they sort of expect something to go wrong. That's what I sense when I talk to mechanics and everything like that, but at the same time, they don't know where to go for a job.

[00:42:00] Another thing is that if you're not in the union or you're a non-union mechanic, I remember a mechanic that I knew very well up there and he was with a company working for them for, like, 20 years. And the mechanic --lots of times, guys that own a factory, they'll take a mechanic off

the floor if they have a mechanical problem, or plumbing problem, or a carpentry problem. They think the guy is a jack of all trades, and so he has to do everything. And I remember, I had a good friend of mine who worked at a place for 20 years, and when he lost his job, which I'd say he's been out of work now for four years, I'd say approximately four years. He was making \$225 a week. That's the most he made after working for the same guy for 20 years, so you figure in 1987 or '88, he's only making \$225 --

RS: A year. A week.

RC: -- a week for being a mechanic, and a mechanic should make a minimum of \$400. A minimum of \$400. So, what I'm saying is that this guy was used to having tough times to begin with, because he wasn't getting paid enough money. They never, I don't know, they don't seem to look at the --  
[00:43:00] the owners of these factories don't look at the value of a mechanic. I don't think he gets judged fairly because, lots of times like I said, he has to be an electrician or plumber to keep the thing, or whatever goes wrong with that shop, he has to keep it running. They expect him. And this is what happened in his case, and understand now after being out of work for four years, he finally went and got a job as a carpenter with his brother

who was building homes. But yeah, I've seen a lot of stress in certain areas when people lost their jobs due to plant closings.

And another thing you see in the coal regions, you know, in the coal regions, a lot of the men, they might have the black lung and they're sick. And their wives are working in these factories, and they're covered under BlueCross and BlueShield or whatever medical coverage they have, and when they lose it, it's like a lot of times I think the woman is the breadwinner in certain areas now.

RS: [00:44:00] That was the case in the coal region after World War II, a lot of cases, yeah.

RC: But they're courageous people, people in coal regions. They really are.

RS: But you have noticed a definite decline in the towns in the physical environments?

RC: Oh yeah, definitely because, like I said, in Shamokin -- I shouldn't pick on Shamokin, Pennsylvania -- but as soon as you go into that town, you see the big factory where they made the shoes and where they made the shirts, and you see all the windows knocked out of it, and you see the stores,

the grocery stores boarded up. So yeah, I think, of course the towns are dying. The towns are dying too.

RS: Of course, Easton is a good case, too. At one time, I understand there were at least 15 sewing shops in Southside alone?

RC: That's right, that's right. Not all sewing shops. There were various industries in Southside, yeah. There were various industries. [00:45:00] There was a rug mill, there was a plastic company, there was a bedspread company, there was a fur factory, there was a dress factory, there was a pretzel factory. There was Easton Metal and Powder.

RS: Metal shops.

RC: There were metal shops, iron shops. There were a lot of industries. Toy factory -- Transogram Toys, probably the biggest toy manufacturer in the world, was in Easton at that time, so I just don't know how --

RS: Usually Martin's here taking pictures all over the place.

RC: Yeah, that's okay. I like it this way anyway.

RS: How about you personally? How did you feel when you saw what was happening to your industry, you obviously must have felt this was going to have an impact on you eventually?

RC: Of course, it has had an impact on me. For some reason, I'm just like everybody else that worked in the factories.

[00:46:00] You can see the writing on the wall, but you still have a false sense of optimism, and that's what I had. I had a false sense of optimism. You always think that things are going to -- and a lot of people today are the same way. I mean, a lot of people in this industry have sort of given up and figure that it's never going to get any better, but a lot of people -- it's like a month-to-month thing, and the guys always say, you know, in January, it'll say, "Well, it's slow now, but we're supposed to pick up in March," and then March rolls around, and they'll say, "Well, it's supposed to get busy. We're supposed to have a busy May." And then, all of a sudden, vacation time will come around which is the first two weeks of July, and maybe they'll get a skirt of work right before vacation time.

But they're always -- where they used to have production-wise, I'd say, where they used to have 12 months of work, they're down to, like, I'd say seven. I'd say seven, the guys that are working. A lot of the guys that

work 12 months a year are working like, seven full months.

[00:47:00] I'm talking about full months.

RS: And these people still have what you call this false sense of optimism?

RC: Yep, because they go from month to month and they keep thinking -- and I mean, I've seen a lot of people who were losing money, losing money, and they went into the bank, and they threw good money out for bad money, and they kept throwing money in it until it was gone because they had optimism. They should have got -- a lot of people have told me that they should have got out earlier. You know, there's a lot of women that own factories too, especially when I get back to the Slate Belt. There's a lot of women.

I had a woman that was about 80 years old and just closed her factory down. I'd say maybe six months ago she closed down, and she used to keep talking. You know, every time I went in there, I couldn't hardly get away from her because she used to keep telling me how bad things are and how she had to go to the bank, and she had to throw \$15,000 in from here and then from there. [00:48:00] I finally started telling her, "Well, look, you're 80 years old and you made some money. You know, why lose it? Close it." But then,

she would say, "Well, what about these girls? What are my girls going to do?" You know?

RS: Uh-huh.

RC: And I would just say, "Well, they're going to have to find something else because, you know, you can't end up broke for all the hours you worked." She used to run around like she was 20 years old, I mean, through the shop and everything. She was a very energetic lady. I sort of miss her, but I went into a place in Pen Argyl one time where the woman was crying because she lost \$10,000 the week before. I mean, she started telling me how bad things were and she started crying in front of me, and I really felt really bad for her. I really feel sorry for these folks.

RS: I'm a little surprised to hear that there were obviously a large number of women running these. How did this come about? How did this happen?

RC: [00:49:00] Well, like I said, I'm thinking about the Slate Belt area, and a lot of the handing of the business down from generation --

RS: So inherited by their husbands?

RC: Yeah, maybe the son didn't want it. In this lady's case, the one in Pen Argyl, the last lady I was talking about, her husband really didn't - he worked in the shop but he



didn't want anything to do with running it, and it was her parents who originally had the shop and she just took it over and tried to run it the best she could.

RS: And so, these women often didn't have enough business experience or accumulative --

RC: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Yep, that's a factor too. Everything is a factor in the garment business, really. Everything. Negotiating price, pricing the garments.

RS: I think there's a kind of public image, and I think I have it, of the garment industry as a sort of fly-by-night, up-down, here today, gone tomorrow, come back next week, type of business. [00:50:00] In other words, it's very unstable I think is the way I would --

RC: I don't like to say that it was a fly-by-night business because a lot of these factories were around for many, many years. If you want to call it an up and down business, it's definitely an up and down business.

RS: All right, let's say up and down, let's say.

RC: Yeah, it's definitely an up and down business. Yeah, it's always been unstable. It's always been feast or famine, I guess you could say, but fly-by-night? No, it's not really fly-by-night.

RS: Okay. Was there any -- there have always been rumors that organized crime was involved in the sewing industry. Did you ever encounter that?

RC: You know, I used to hear rumors about that, especially in the Hazleton area.

RS: Right, exactly. (laughs)

RC: [00:51:00] But, I suppose, I don't think they had -- I really -- there might have been some people that had connections, and those connections kept them busy. But I had an account up in Hazleton. In fact, they converted a supermarket into a factory. They were supposed to have all kind of connections and everything, and they went under, so I don't think it plays a big part. I really don't think that it plays a big part in the garment industry. It might, maybe down in New York or something like that. Maybe getting the garments shipped in and everything like that if they bring them in from another country, there might be a little something going on there, but it just looks to me like a business, because I don't even know if the organized crime would be interested in running a shop with 50 or 60 girls in it, you know?

RS: It's not profitable.

RC: Yeah, so I don't see it, you know? I really -- no, I don't think so. [00:52:00] Not in the manufacturing end.

RS: You talked about the garment industry. Clearly, you've seen other industries, you've seen steel. You've seen metal manufacturers, machinery manufacturers, a lot of them in this area especially. You've seen a lot of industries decline over this last decade.

RC: Yeah, definitely.

RS: What do you think about this, how do you feel about it?

RC: To tell you the truth, I can't believe it. It seems where I go, they close down (laughter). I remember I went to Taylor-Wharton and worked there for two years --

RS: And now that's gone.

RC: -- yeah, and enjoyed it, only to have them, they closed down too. [00:53:00] I just -- it's unbelievable that there's so little industry around, if you can think back and if you can compare it back to the '50s, and that's how far I can go back. Talking about textile industry, there used to be a lot of dyehouses in Phillipsburg, New Jersey as well as Easton, and I remember my father worked in a dyehouse in Phillipsburg, New Jersey and he made pretty good - you know, the money was decent back then. Even if the money wasn't great -- and I'm not saying that you

didn't struggle back in the '50s up to the early '60s and so on -- but you had hope. There always seemed to be hope, and it seemed like a dollar went further. You know, it seems like my dad -- we had five kids, and it seemed like my dad made \$50 or if we had \$40 that we ate that week, you know?

RS: Yeah.

RC: It's just unbelievable. It's unbelievable. The thing that shakes me up the worst is when I see all these factories -- when I take a ride over to Phillipsburg and I see the Sanco Piece Dye Works where the building is, empty now.

[00:54:00] And when I see empty buildings with windows knocked out, you know, I can't rationalize why something's not being manufactured there and people's not working. Maybe it's my -- you know how nostalgic I get. It's probably a combination of being nostalgic and remembering when I used to drive over there sometimes to pick my dad up from work. Or if it's just unbelievable that there's no one working there, that the building is wasting away. You know, I mean, there's history in the buildings too, you know?

RS: Yeah.

RC: And I think that bothers me more than anything. I remember a factory in Phillipsburg on Main Street, and when I used to take walks along the towpath, I used to look across the river and there was a building over there. And on the building was written [Tipidon?] Wood. [00:55:00] I don't even know what they did, but I remember that when I played softball in the industrial league as a kid, we must have had 20 teams from different industries. [Tipidon?] Wood, I remember playing against them. I never remember what they were manufacturing or anything.

And now you can't even -- that's another thing. If I picked up my papers, if I could look back through papers from the '50s and '60s and looked at the industrial leagues that were around and how many teams that were in it, you wouldn't even see -- about the only one that is still around is the Dixie Cup. I mean, they all went by the byway. There was Easton Trousers, I remember. There was [Tipidon?] Wood. There was Warren Foundry, there was Lehigh Foundry. There was Strongwear Pants Company. There were all these industries, I mean, everybody was working like crazy. [00:56:00] And they're all gone, and that's the thing. I grapple with that all the time. I can't

understand why it is, you know? It's just, there's so many people that are out of work, looking for jobs, and all I see is empty buildings all the time. So...

RS: How have your personal circumstances changed over the last decade while this all was going on?

RC: Uh, well...

RS: I mean, I know we're getting in a personal area, but you can answer that as you will, you know.

RC: Right. Well, I know that my paychecks started going downhill in the last few years. My commissions were starting to drop. I was still earning a living, but I could see that --

RS: Getting more precarious?

RC: Yeah, yeah. It was getting shaky. Even the employer I had, I remember I went in a couple years ago and I had to take, like, a \$2,000 pay cut on salary.

RS: [00:57:00] On salary?

RC: Yeah.

RS: And this is because of the business --

RC: Because of the business here. They had the bookkeeper there, the accountant, and everybody, and they showed to me in black and white what was going on, you know?

RS: Uh-huh, how'd you feel about that?

RC: I didn't feel too, I didn't feel too good about it, but I more or less accepted it. You get into a routine, and even if you know you're doing the wrong thing, you wake up in the morning, and you go back out, and you do it again, you know.

RS: Did you think of moving into another industry or going somewhere else at that time?

RC: I did, but to tell you the truth, I was working so hard I never took the time off. Like I worked, for the first six years I was with this company, I never missed a day. I never missed a day of work.

RS: Do you feel you actually ended up working harder as this decline was going on, putting in more hours, putting in more time?

RC: No, I'll tell you, I put in about the same amount of time, but the only thing -- the only problem I might have had was scheduling myself. [00:58:00] I used to work, like, a four-week rotation and so many places closed up that I was working, like, a two-and-a-half-week rotation. Like, in the Slate Belt, I used to spend a week up there, and now I can go up there and do it, like, in a day-and-a-half, so my biggest problem was a scheduling problem, and where guys used to see me every four weeks, they were seeing me every

two or three weeks, and they were saying, "Jeez, weren't you just here?"

RS: "I don't have any orders."

RC: Yeah. You know, "So-and-so was just here, and I didn't think you'd be back this quick," so I had a problem really scheduling my time. There were times when I worked three days. I knew what I was going to do three days out of that week, and then the other two days I was saying, "Well, jeez, where can I go? You know, where the heck can I go, you know, to get some sales?" That was a tough point. Of course, I never went out around Pittsburgh. I didn't cover the whole state of Pennsylvania.

RS: Would it have made a difference?

RC: I don't think it would have. I wasn't really interested in going out that far, to go after business, because it was too costly. [00:59:00] You'd have to stay out there a couple days.

RS: Were you working on commission, or salary-plus?

RC: I was salary-plus, but see, if the numbers didn't add up, the salary -- you know, they weren't happy with the salary, so I had to have numbers at the end of the month to justify even my salary as far as that goes. So, I was happy with doing it. I got myself to the point where, you know, I



liked the people and the biggest thing that I liked were the people that I was dealing with, really. I made a lot of friends throughout that area that I still call on and still try to give me business, but there's just not enough business for me to be successful. There's just not enough business out there, even with them trying to give me business, there's not enough to realize it.

RS: What are you going to do?

RC: And I mean, I'm not just saying it for myself. I'm saying it because all the other salesmen that are in the same racket that I'm in are saying the same thing. [01:00:00] You know, they're trying to give those guys more territory, so if you had Virginia, send you into West Virginia. If you're in Pennsylvania, they'll send you to New Jersey. They're trying to do it that way but it's not working out. It's not working out because it's just not there.

RS: What are you going to do?

RC: What am I going to do?

RS: Yeah.

RC: Other than what I'm doing, I'm licensed to sell insurance. I have a securities license, and I can dabble. Yeah, I can dabble in that. But believe me, after being in business in September -- after being in business for about eight months

by myself which is something I always wanted to do, I have a different outlook now and I'd rather have a paycheck.

RS: Not quite up to the standard [voices overlap].

RC: Yeah, I'd rather work 40 hours for somebody and let them worry about it and pay me the paycheck at the end of the week because I put in a tough day on the road, and then I come home, and lots of time, I'm up till 11:00, 12:00 at night doing paperwork because I don't have a secretary.

[01:01:00] I'm a sole proprietor, and I had to get an 800 number. I had to really give myself a lot more expenses, so it is tough. It's tough, but then again, I'm 54 years old and it's not like anybody was calling me up saying, "Yeah, well, come work for me, you know?" And I figured, well, I might as well do what I've been doing for the last 13 years and try to see if it will be successful or not.

RS: So you didn't leave there with a pension, obviously?

RC: No.

RS: No?

RC: I have my own IRA which I don't throw in as much as I used to. I can't throw in as much as I used to anymore. No, we didn't have a pension.

RS: So there's no question, then, that your own material circumstances become a lot more precarious.

RC: Precarious. It looks like I'm going to have to work until  
I either go senile or I try to --

RS: We try to press on. I mean, we all have to do that.

RC: Yeah. I think if I'm in my seventies and I'm thinking  
clearly, I'll be selling something maybe.

RS: [01:02:00] I work for one of the most -- not affluent --  
but one of the most solid institutions in the United  
States. And we're running deficit for the second year in a  
row, so... (laughs)

RC: Hm, wow.

RS: Okay, thank you. That's good.

RC: I'll tell you, I enjoyed talking to you.

RS: Yeah, oh, I don't know --

END OF AUDIO FILE