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## **Interview no. 808**

Alfred Ratner

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Alfred Ratner  
INTERVIEWER: Morris Pittle  
PROJECT: World War II  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 16, 1993  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
TAPE NO: 808  
TRANSCRIPT NO: 808  
TRANSCRIBER: Morris Pittle

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Local businessman; owner of childrens' clothing stores including Jack and Jill's; founder of Southwest Beauty College; national President of Beauty Schools of America; federal commissioner for accreditation of beauty schools.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recollects working experiences with various El Paso department stores including The White House, Myron's, and Franklin's; discusses activities of the Office of Price Administration (OPA); Italian POW's interned at Fort Bliss; rationing; business climate in El Paso during the War.

Length of Interview: 50 minutes Length of Transcript 11 pages

P: Please tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your background.

R: Very quickly I was born in Chicago Illinois in 1913 which means I will be 80 years old next month. I came to El Paso in 1935. The depression years in the mid west were pretty horrible. I came here in 1935 because I had a brother working here in one of the local department stores and there was nothing for me back in Chicago and besides, I was too cold. My brother was an asthmatic and he came here for his health and had a job (and that's all I was looking for in those days) so I came down to El Paso and he put me to work. I came in November and I got a job in a department (The White House, which is no longer in existence). I got a job right away at \$12.50 a week but \$12.50 a week went a long way because I lived at the Hilton Hotel at that time and things were very affordable in El Paso. I stayed here through the Christmas season, which I thought was going to be a temporary job and after Christmas The White House offered me a permanent position and so I stayed, and here I am today some 58 years later.

P: So you were working at The White House, what was your actual position with them?

R: I started in the White House, believe it or not, they started me as a floor walker in the children's floor. A floor walker in the old days was a guy with a white carnation who used to greet people as they came up the elevator and turned them over to a sales person and that's the way it was done in the old days. Today you can't even find a sales person. My favorite talk really is the lack of service in department stores. I use Dillard's as a bad example. So anyway, then they promoted me to floor manager and I wound up as a buyer and manager after about three years. I was learning Spanish all the time I was there only not in classroom work, but just speaking to customers and all that and even then is now why the customer coming up from Mexico is a very important person to the store. In fact, in those days both The Popular and The White House would have somebody meeting the train as it came up from Mexico. So anyway, after that I was taken away by a chain sore called Franklin's, which is still open today under that name and they offered me twenty one dollars a week by that time I was making \$19.50 at The White House, they offered me \$21.00 and that dollar and a half a week would pay for a couple of dinners believe it or not, cause we could get a fillet mignon dinner for \$.75. So, anyway, I went to work there as assistant manager of this Franklin store and there I was made a supervisor of several stores. By that time I guess I was about 23 or 24.

P: Which is about what year now? Uh...let's see...ah I met my wife in 1939 and got married in 1940...so I guess about that time was 1937. I stayed with them a couple of years...and I married in El Paso, a girl who was a third generation El Pasoan. Her family came here for the railroads and they transferred me to Louisiana and then they transferred me to Amarillo where I took my bride. We stayed there one year and they brought me back to El Paso for just a few months and then they sent me to Laredo, TX because of, by that time, my ability to speak Spanish. So anyway, by that time we thought, the heck with this noise, we loved El Paso too much. This was her home, besides we wanted to start a family and working for a chain like that where they kept moving you around, there was no opportunity to lay any ground work for a career or a family or anything. My wife was a school teacher when I married. She taught special education (blind children). We came back to El Paso, I went back to work at Franklin's as an assistant manager for two months and then they promoted me to manager again and then, I think, it was around '42 maybe '43 when the army turned me down for physical reasons, which we don't have to go in to, and I knew I wasn't going to go in the service. We decided that was the time for me to go in business. We saved a few dollars and so I opened up a small store. At that time there was no infant's and children's exclusive shops in El Paso. El Paso was just a small community then, you have to remember. I came in '35 and it was about 80,000...by '42...when the war broke out and all that it may have been 150,000 but we had 45 or 50,000 troops here. So I opened a little hole in the wall's door and called it Jack and Jill's...and...had after about a year...and then more wars took the space...and I opened this store on the plaza on Mill Street facing the plaza and called that one Totstotery. You know that was the most unusual store because I put a children's barber shop in it and things like that...and...at that time the community stopped around Copia Street so I opened this store at Five Points. Also so I had those two and when the war was over in '45, I think, things became a little bit more difficult because at that time Kresky, which was the fore runner of K- Mart, I think...it still...no Kres...Kresky is still there and all the other stores went into the children's business. And then exclusive children's shopping became more and more difficult and I kept it going for a few years to the 50's and finally found out it was no longer profitable and I was spinning my wheels and not taking enough out of it so I closed it up. I had a few dollars saved and I didn't know what to go in to, I was only in my forties, too young to retire, didn't have enough money to retire...and by that time my kids were in school. We had two and then one joined us eight years later...and I was looking for something. My brother who had been in El Paso when he was discharged from the service moved to Phoenix and worked in a department store there and then went out to California and opened his own business which was not too successful...and he got a job with wholesale beauty supply

company and part of this territory was going to Las Vegas. At that time Las Vegas only had three hotels so he was going back and fourth to Las Vegas maybe twice a month and then once a week and then stayin three or four days so he decided to open up a little beauty suply store in Las Vegas. This turned out to be the largest distributor of Clairol hair products with all those show girls there and so I went to visit him after I had closed the shops. And he said I should be going in the beauty business. I came back to El Paso and I looked around. I wasn't interested in anything that had mark downs or credit, I had been burned out on that. And then one day a young man came to me with an idea. He was an instructor in the local beauty schools and he said hwe wanted to open a beauty school and he heard that I had a brother in the business, so anyway, I put him in my car and we drove all through Texas and we visited beauty schools and I took pictures of this and that and checked with the state board, came back to El Paso and did some reports on the two local schools and found out that they were not being run in a business like manner. I took a chance at that time we could do it for very little money. In Five Points we found a building that the state commission okayed and we opened up the Southwest Beauty College. It was his experience and my financing and my marketing ability. I never did ever take the course myself, but three years later I was the state president of the beauty schools in Texas and severn years later I was the national president of beauty schools of America. The reason being that I was an administrator and the other schools were being run by hair dressers. I don't put hair dressers down but they are just no business people. So that was it and about three years later Uncle Sam picked me up and I became a commissioner for the creditation of schools and I spent two years in doing that in Wahington. School was till going so we spent about a week out of every month in Wahington. I sold my schools in 1983...and so...here I am a retired man soon to be eighty.

P: Let's go back to about the time when the wars break out in late 1941.

R: When the war broke out I was managing one of the Franklin Corporations stores in town that is still opened called Myron's. It is on San Antonio Street in the same block with the Penney's store. We would run at that time maybe \$250-300 thousand a year which in those dollars was big money. I put a children's department into that store I wanted the experience so I ran Myron's for about a year got my experience about children's wear and infant's wear through them. They had the buying offices in New York and got some experience then I rented the space I told you about. Well, the big boss in New York heard I had rented that space and wanted to know what was going on so my resignation wsa premature before I really wanted to do it but nevertheless, that's when I went to business in about '42 and the war was still going on.

P: Would you say that the war changed the business climate here in El Paso?

R: The war changed the climate but for this reason. There was something called the OPA (Office of Price Administration) You would not believe the red tape. In other words, we were not allowed to take a higher mark up. Now mark up you understand. We were not allowed to take a higher markup than we did pre-war. In other words anytime we bought anything we had to give the OPA, the local office, a copy of the invoice, how much we paid for it, and how much we would mark it for sale. And they would come by a check, not periodically but every once in a while specially if there was a complaint. And the complaint did not have to come from the costumers, the competitors kept unanimous.

P: So this was standard for all businesses?

R: Yes the OPA and all essential things had price control on it.

P: When was this created?

R: The OPA was even before I went to business. It was one of The first acts of the war. I would say... '41, the OPA came into existence and they had a district office right here in El Paso, so your hands were tied but in those days anything you bought could be sold. I had this little store, I think it was maybe twelve feet wide by forty feet deep around 500 square feet and the year we opened it we did a hundred thousand dollars. Now a hundred thousand dollars was three hundred and Thirty three dollars a day in those dollars, because little kids dresses were \$1.98 or \$2.98...a good one...a good one was maybe \$5.00 so it was fantastic that enabled me to make enough to open up the second store called Totstotery, the largest store which we put quite a bit of money in to but that's the way that worked. In those days salaries...well when I came to El Paso in '35 the sales girls were making \$4.50-\$6.00 a week...remember I was a floor man making \$12.50. In'42 we were already having to pay more. In El Paso we were very fortunate because we did not have the war industries that were in competition for our personnel and still we needed Spanish speaking people too, but everybody then who worked in stores were bilingual. El Paso today many of them are not bilingual they are monolingual. Infact my wife was very upset...last week we went out to Cielo Vista Mall, my wife went into the Walgreens store there, I was with her, we shopped and she bought three or four little things. She came to the cash register at the check out and there was a hispanic gentleman there who spoke nothing but spanish to her. Now my wife knows spanish very well, she was raised in spanish language, and she was very upset because she would answer him in English and...

P: This was in Cielo Vista?

**R:** This is in Cielo Vista Mall in the Walgreen's store. But in this day in age it was surprising in a store like Walgreen's. If it had been in south El Paso.

**P:** I could see it the other way around but this is kind of surprising to me.

**R:** I'm sure the gentleman did not mean anything by it because everybody else in the store was hispanic, it seemed. Remember we are an eighty percent. In '35 when I came here I think it was about 60/40, 60% anglo and I stayed here because I liked the community and the two cultures. I still go to Juarez, still speak as much Spanish. In my travels around the world I was able to get a long famously.

**P:** It helps a lot doesn't it?

**R:** Oh my, yes.

**P:** Did rationing laws take any effect on your business?

**R:** Remember this, I was in what was called stocked goods. I was always in ladies ready to order a children's wear. There was no rationing. There was rationing of certain types of cloth to the manufacturers but everybody was working, everybody had money and everything sold eventually. Now there was rationing of shoes and we were allowed so many coupons a year if you had children and they outgrew them and if you took the kids old shoes up to the rationing board they might give you another coupon or two. But the shoes were rationed and when I was buying shoes...baby shoes...even soft baby shoes was still rationed, so what happened was that people started knitting their own baby booties and I had lots of women bringing me their booties that they were knitting at home and I was paying them \$.75-\$1.00 a pair and selling them but only the shoes were rationed. Clothing was not rationed but some things were hard to find. Very quickly, rubber panties for babies, waterproof pants, almost impossible to find. Whenever you found many they were like diamonds. Diapers were almost impossible so we were buying diaper cloth and selling it by the yard and people were making up their own diapers and this is before the paper diapers. Though the Curity Diaper Company did come out with paper diapers as bulky as hell and nobody bought it.

**P:** You said that everybody had jobs and everybody had money, sounds like quite a change coming from the depression just a few years back. Would you say this is a gradual change or would you say that the war brought this on?

**R:** You have to recognize what happened in Fort Bliss. Fort Bliss was at that time exactly what it is today but the city kind of stopped at Copia. Remember the first shopping center was out

there at Loretto which is at Chelmont and that was way out of town. Very few people flew in those days but if you did fly it was a trip out to the airport where it is now. El Paso was small but then Fort Bliss became an induction center and we had boys here from all over the country, I can't tell you how many were there because it is still a secret but there were thousands and thousands because they had tents out there, they had these huts that were kind of mounted up and all up and down Dyer street which suddenly blossomed. There were more restaurants and honky tonks along Dyer Street. They are still there but there were a heck of a lot more and that was way out of town so the minute it brought in all those people from Fort Bliss and anybody who could hold a hammer could go to work out at Fort Bliss as a carpenter. Forget unions, if there was anybody who could do anything. People who were not working all day in the depression years were suddenly making \$25.00 to \$30.00 a day which was fantastic money...fantastic. Remember it was \$14.00 to \$16.00 week for service people. If you wanted a hair cut it was \$.75. If you tipped the guy a dime he was thankful, but then all of a sudden it changed and that expanded El Paso's labor market and so we had people coming here and at that time the Juarez people would come over too, as they are today, some legal and some undocumented and they were working here because workers were needed.

**P:** So Fort Bliss had a lot to do with it?

**R:** Of course, I think at one time the Fort Bliss population was the size of El Paso's population. We had them coming and going. The Fort Bliss people asked us to open our homes to these people and I remember we had an empty bedroom, we were living in Sunset Heights at the time, had an empty bedroom and we rented it out to two young lieutenants so that they would not have to be on post. They were awfully nice guys and I don't mind telling you there were more marriages in El Paso then and they have been ever since because these boys came down here and they were lonesome and most of the marriages worked out well.

**P:** You mentioned the labor unions and that a lot of them were just completely disregarded. Can you elaborate a little more?

**R:** In those days we had a labor consult. I'm looking in my mind at the guy who is running the show here and anyway every politician who wanted to run for office had to go to him. The labor vote was not that big but in those days every vote was very important because we still had a poll tax and people had to pay for the privilege of voting. It wasn't until '66 that The Supreme Court outlawed the poll tax which gave everybody the opportunity to vote. But anyway, the labor unions were very anxious to have check offs as you know, you probably know the story about Farah Manufacturing who offered to have the union come in and having an election and the union refused to have an election. They just wanted to make everybody join and

check off. But anyway, there wasn't any problem with labor those days because everybody had a job. Those who were unionized the electricians, the plumbers, the carpenters, except the carpenters just went out to the post and tried to get everybody to join the union because they had programs and insurance and things like that. There were no problems those days and they are no big problem today in my mind.

P: But it was all supportive of the war?

R: They were all supportive of the war, yes.

P: Can you think of anything that was contradictive to the war for any type of business? I mean you had mentioned that the regulations, was there a lot of trying to get around that?

R: Oh yeah...yeah...you always will have...uh...the hustlers, the sharp shooters. As I told you about Dyer Street. Now Texas was still a dry stated at that time and I was young. Everybody used to go to Juarez because there was no problem. We had two night clubs over there that had floor shows that were good Mexican acts and you could get out with a date of \$5.00 or \$6.00. The boys out at Fort Bliss for many months, maybe even for years. Juarez was off limits to them because Juarez had a red light district. Now El Paso had a red light district for a while until the city...no...no it was the army...uh...put them off limits which killed our red light districts so the boys started going across the river and I don't want to tell you what the price was but it was ridiculous. The army posted that off limits which means that if the boys wanted any recreation they had to be on this side. As I told you Dyer Street became the street of honky tonks and wherever there is fast money and soldiers there are certain types of hustlers, male and female and if you think there are shootings and stabbings now, back then the MP's were very busy. Now remember to in those days Biggs Field was and Airport space and Biggs Field also had there own compliments and that was where it is today. I think we had some bombings there, I'm not sure. But anyway, we had a few protesters. You may not know it but we had a prisoner war camp and Italian and a German and to show you how lose things were, if you became friendly with certain people in Fort Bliss every once in a while we could have a wonderful Italian meal and party at home and they would bring out some Italian prisoners of war who would do the cooking and serving. Of course you would pay them and they just loved to come out and these boys from Italy were wonderful. Remember this that the italian language and the Spanish language are so similar it didn't take these guys ten minutes and you could go by their prisoner of war camp and all there was there was a wire fence and there were all the little Hispanic girls on one side of the fence and the italian workers on the other and some marriages came out of those too.

P: Did a lot of them stay?

**R:** Well those that didn't stay got shipped back and some came back. Lots of Germans came back. Lots of our girls went to Germany and married the boys there. I did some interpreting work for the OSS and I did a few other things. At Christmas time we would go down to the Army/Navy YMCA which was down town in San Francisco Street and we would grab packages and mailing them for the guys and things like that. The interesting thing is that went the draft first came out, when we had to register for the draft in 1940, I was Amarillo managing those stores for the company, I registered for the draft and then they sent me back to El Paso and I never knew where I ranked and I had to tell them where I was. But I found out several years later that I had the next to the last ranking in Amarillo and not only that but if you Amarillo they had some many enlistments that I don't think they ever drafted anybody. Patriotism was at a high level then. My wife's two brothers went in, my older brother went in and was an engineer and the navy took him right quick. Business was confined to just the downtown area. Overland Street was there then...ah...El Paso Street was there, not as big as it is today. We still have that Horseshoe you know. The Popular and The White House were the only two stores downtown, however, we did have a J.C. Penney and we had a Woolworth's and a Kress and there was a Newberry's.

**P:** Are you saying it was confined, is that just the way it happened to be or was that due to any type of reason?

**R:** No, this is the way El Paso grew up. The department store I worked in started in Juarez and then came over here. It was started by a German man.

**P:** Did he have any problems when the war broke down?

**R:** He had passed away and his two nephews were running it. There was no problem. We did not have a big german population. We had some Japanese farmers in the valley and they were not bothered. In fact they brought produce to your home. We also had east Indians. Many of them are still here. They farming up the alley. The big thing that hit El Paso was Hitler against Jews because what happened then is that America took some but could not take them all so what happened to people from Eastern Europe and Germany all fled to South America and Mexico. They had quite a contingent coming up through from wherever in to Juarez hoping to get in to the states. Now, of course, there are families heres that brought over their families. The Schwartz family brought in quite a few from Czechoslovakia and sponsored them and I guess if you sponsored them there wasn't that problem. Because at that time we still had two Jewish Congregations in El Paso, The Temple and The Synagogue and they had several organizations that were helping the Jewish people who got as far as Juarez trying to help them come across or trying to help them while they were there and so the German/Jewish situation was, I think, very difficult.

Ant then when...this was even before Pearl Harbor and then when Pearl Harbor came is when we declared war and that is what brought the war to El Paso. The one thing about El Paso is that there was never any prejudice, there was never any bigotry, it has developed. Remember I grew up in Chicago in a middle class family. I never had a lot but we never missed any meals but nevertheless because I was Jewish I got beat up a couple of times in school and then I came to El Paso and never had any problems. The establishment here was Christian, Catholic. The Catholic church was very strong but never any bigotry. The two big stores downtown were owned by Jewish people, though The White House owners did not practice Judaism but it was excepted. Business during those war years was good. Well the grocery business was tough because everything needed food stamps for the meat specially but if you needed anything you went to Juarez. Gasoline rationing, you took your car over to Juarez and had it filled up.

**P:** There was no regulation in Juarez as far as you know?

**R:** None at all. We could get European mines over there and European Whiskey.

**P:** So then with the increase in money here, I guess the standard of living and quality life just must of been great.

**R:** Well the quality of life ofcourse there was no building going on. The town expanded due to the people who came in the service and retail stores. Living conditions were a little rough because where you are sitting right now we used to come horseback riding and shooting rabbits. The westside stopped at the Mesita. I could show you homes that were the edge of town right down on Mesa and Stanton.

**P:** We get to the end of the war, how would you say the business climb was affected by that as much as it was changed by the beginning of the war, once the war is over and people are coming back?

**R:** When the war was over there were several materials and things we could not get, like blue jeans. We could not get blue jeans. We were using corderoids. We could not get the denim fabric but the big expansion, the minute the war was over, everybody went to the electrical appliance business. Remember there were no, what we called white goods, there were no new refrigerators made, no new washers, no electrical appliances of any kind because anything was in the war era. I will never forget somehow or other I managed to get 25 tricycles. As they were delivering them to my shops coming off the truck, people gathered round and those twenty five tricycles were sold out before I could even get a price tag on them because there was a hunger for them and I can't tell you what the birth rate was after the war, there was not much else to do. But anyway, there were two hardware companies in town and anything

electrical sold. This was the first generation of things. The first refrigerators had the motors on top and everything sold. People had money, people had jobs. Things had to change because certain jobs were eliminated. An example I'll give you is Farah Manufacturing Co., at that time it was in San Francisco St. and they were making fall uniforms during the war and the minute the war was over they went into blue jeans so their business expanded because now they could get the cloths. There was an off set, some people were hurt because of the change of priorities.

**P:** You said El Paso is not a heavy war industry?

**R:** We were not into heavy industry at all. We were a transportation method. We had the Souther Pacific Railroad which was one of only two that went from the East Coast to the West Coast and so our railroad bridge was heavily guarded at all times with machine gun replacements. We would go out there and take cokes to the soldiers on a hot day and coffee on a cold day. There were not that many trucks or freeways at the time but we did have Highway 80 which begins somewhere back east and went all the way to California. It was heavily traveled and it was just a two lane highway. We had lots of little tourist courts along Alameda which was Highway 80 and we still had our Mexican trade coming up here and the retail business was still good because anything that was off set by a shortage did very well. And then of course our whole sale distributors were doing very well because after all the people in the communities all around Las Cruces, which at that time was about 20,000 people and Silver City would come here to get what they needed. Those were small towns but you add them all together and our trade area went all the way to Albuquerque because we were much larger than Albuquerque and Phoenix and we had all that as our trade territory. So the whole sale business was very good here. We had soft goods, we had hard goods, we had all sorts of factories. El Paso had too had several places of cigar makers. We had lots of hispanics sitting at long tables rolling cigars and so there was quite a lot of things going on in El Paso. It was a great place for young single men.

**P:** Anything else you would like to add about business during the war years?

**R:** There were only two banks at the time, The State National and The El Paso National. The State National was owned by the Bassett family and the El Paso National was owned by the...Sam Young was running it. Later on the Southwest National Bank came into being which later became something else and I don't know what it is today.

**P:** Would you say they were revived from the war, I know the banking business had problems during the depression. Would you say the war revived them?

R: They were at one time before I came here, but the reason I know this is because my wife's grandfather had a bank here. There were a lot of small banks in El Paso but the depression years knocked them all out. When I came here the national bank had just gone broke. The first national bank was where the American Furniture store was downtown on the corner of San Antonio and Oregon Street. The building is still there and I think there is still a sign where the American furniture store that used be the bank and there was nothing to do about that because that was the largest bank in El Paso. Somehow or other the The State National and The El Paso National survived and they were the only two banks for many, many years. But you have to remember one important thing during World War II, the Mexican peso was three to one American money. Now of course it is today but that is after a new evaluation and people coming up from Mexico only had to have three pesos to buy a dollar's worth of goods and then it went down to 24 cents and then 12 cents and then 8 cents and so on. But during the war years it was three for one and we were doing business in two moneys and two languages. Also in those days the retail stores downtown were open 68 hours a week. We would open at eight thirty in the morning and close at six at night six days a week. Saturday was always the biggest shopping days. Now those of us on the supervisory or managerial position had to go down on Sundays and incidently Saturday nights we closed at ten o'clock. The state law was that no women could work more than 54 hours a week. A man could work as long as you could get him to come in but 54 hours was the limit as to what the women could work.