

# Temple Israel Archives

## Interview of Bob Levy

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BL: My family first came to Memphis, it was in the 1850's, the three Halley? brothers - Abraham, Meyer and Solomon, came to Memphis, from Prussia. And, they all went in the dry goods business. Solomon founded Oak Hall in 1859, the stores downtown, until 1970 and the family - Solomon's son, Henry Halley and Dave Halley took over the business. Solomon died in 1890. Henry Halley had a son, Sol Halley, who was my grandfather and my brother Bill's grandfather, also had another brother Henry Halley, Jr. The business itself has gone, Sal Halley had one child, a daughter, Bill and I's mother, so it skipped a generation, so Bill and I are now fifth generation descendants from Solomon Halley.

BL: What I do know, all went into the dry goods business, one of, my great great grandfather, Solomon's brother's son started Fillet (?) Halley, so they all went into clothing, to a great degree. Henry Halley built a large house, I remember hearing stories about it downtown at, on Poplar Avenue, what is now Danny Thomas Boulevard where Pop Tunes Record Store is, they had a huge house on that corner. And, they would seem to take in various relatives at some point in time, who were down and out, or whatever.

BL: Oak Hall would have served the clientele who really wanted better clothing. In fact, a question often asked is how did Oak Hall get its name, Oak Hall and we really don't know, other than our speculations or that if anyone reads anything, you know, Hawthorn's House and the Seven Gables, on page three, it mentions a man whose dress is from Oak Hall. And, Oak Hall was, in Boston, Massachusetts, was the first ready to wear men store, founded in the 1840's. And, we've seen evidence that there was an Oak Hall in Paduka, Kentucky, one in St. Louis, in the mid 1860's. So, possibly it was a case

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of people knew of the Boston store, was of such renown, that they just decided we'll call the store Oak Hall and evidently that's where my great great grandfather got the name, Oak Hall, as best as we can discern.

BL: Pretty much people that wanted better clothing, wanted the finer things. There always had been five and dime stores and you know, just as today, you get discount men's clothiers, their products are a little lesser quality, and the same thing back then, you could get lesser quality goods, but the idea was if you pay a little bit more, you get a little bit more, and that's the same today, 140 years later almost.

BL: This is probably one of the most interesting things that we have, all the different artifacts we have in the store. It's called, "Beat Yesterday", which in retailing, you always try to beat the figures that you had, of the same day, one year before. And, this particular book, "Beat Yesterday", is from January 1, 1885 to December 31, 1907. And, the interesting thing about it, not only do you have ...

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

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BL: One of the most interesting artifacts we have in the store, is a book called, "Beat Yesterday", which is dated from January 1, 1885 to December 31, 1907. And, in retailing, what beat yesterday means, is your our object is, every year whatever sales figures you have on a certain day, you want to, the next year, increase those figures. And, it's it's just, "Beat Yesterday" becomes just a name for the, the record-keeping. And, this particular book, it's so fascinating, it is one of the oldest things we have, but

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on, as you list in this book, it's got each page as a month, and down the left side, you have each day, and on the right side ...

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

BL: When you open up this book what you see is, on the left side, you have, on the top you have each month. On the left side, you have the days, and then on the right side, you have the daily sales for that day. And, what makes this book so interesting is not only does it show sales figures for the business, but it combines not only American history, but to a degree, it's got Jewish history, because of these twenty-two years from 1885 to 1907, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are listed in the book, whenever they fell. Also, you have historical facts. For example, in 1898, it's got listed when the U.S. Battleship Maine was blown up in Havana Harbor. You have presidents coming to Memphis, President Benjamin Harrison, when he came, Theodore Roosevelt when he came. You have events back then that weren't on movies. And, what people tended to want to do, they would go to the, at this time, it was Barnum Circus or Barnum & Bailey Circus, and then the separate circuits was the Ringling Brothers Circus. Another fun thing, other than horse races, which are listed, you got Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West traveling show. And, interesting enough, he was quite a dresser - people don't realize this. They think of him as being in his fringed jackets. If you ever see any pictures of him, he is quite a dresser, he dresses for the nine's, and in November, November 3rd of 1900, Buffalo Bill came in. They would put his name in the book. Also, he came in, in 1897. So, whenever the Wild West traveling show, would come to town, he would stop in. And, there have been a number of famous people over the years who have stopped in, and shopped at Oak Hall.



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BL: We try to - we have a few pictures. The people may not be considered quite as famous, although Milton Berle came in, in 1936, so he got to be friends with my grandfather, there's an interesting story behind that.

BL: Through the years, famous people other than Buffalo Bill had been in the store. Among them, a funny story is Milton Berle. We had this old picture of my grandfather and Milton Berle and two other people, we didn't know who they were, and just wondered, you know, you know where had this come, what were the details behind it, and we found out, we dug around and found in someone's attic this same picture that we had framed, and an article. And, it was Milton Berle had come to town, his mother had passed away, I think in 1937, and he stopped in, to see my grandfather Sol Halley, and his brother Henry Halley, Jr. And, the details were that how they became friends is in the 1920's during the vaudeville era. Milton Berle had been in town, playing the old Orpheum Theater and he didn't have any money. And, he didn't know what to do and they said go down to Oak Hall and meet the Halley's. And, and sure enough, they did give him some money and he remembered it and he would come, when he came to town, he he remembered them, and interesting enough, probably about eight years ago, I was out in Los Angeles eating with my wife, and my then eight year old son, Jim and we were at Spago, and we noticed Milton Berle was eating at a table. And, I walked over to him, he was very elderly at this time, he probably was 89 years old, walked up to him, and said, Mr. Berle you don't know me, but does the name Oak Hall, in Memphis ring a bell. And, a twinkle came into his eye and he said, I remember the Halley Brothers and Oak Hall. And, I stood there and he started talking, and it even got to the point where I kind of felt a little embarrassed because he kept going on and on, and I kept feeling like I

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was intruding, but you could see that a memory really had been kindled there. So, that was a, quite an interesting story.

BL: I'm not really that sure on all the various things they were doing, other than being involved in Temple Israel.

BL: My family was involved with Temple Israel to a great degree. I'm not as familiar as much about the Halley side of the family, with Temple Israel, as I am my mother's side ...

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

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BL: I'm not really that sure about my mother's side of the family, the Halley's involvement in Temple Israel, other than I know they were members, as I am about my father's side of the family, Dr. Louis Levy was my grandfather on the other side, and he was President of Temple Israel, and was famous for founding the Memphis Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat Hospital, in 1926, which you go by there today, it's now the Regional Forensic Center or the City Morgue.

5.58

BL: Back in the, in the 1800's, late 1800's, in the Pinch District, which became really the, the Jewish merchant area, Oak Hall on main Street was, right down Main Street, not that far from the Pinch, so basically I think a lot of people you know, would travel from the Pinch, to wherever the, you know various stores would be, and then and back again.

BL: Generally, changes in Memphis over the years, they don't really fall so much along ethnic lines, between Jewish people and what people like to wear. It's more of a, it's

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fashion, in general. As you go through in the 1950's and 1960's, the more traditional clothing, you'll find that things are just evolved and continue to evolve, and the Jewish people in general, who like clothes, tended to want the, the highest quality. There are there are certain Jewish people, who really where price may be the over-riding factor and, and it just, you always have that dichotomy, not Jewish or not Jewish - it's it's just kind of people, people in general.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

BL: My family over the years has been very involved in a lot of civic endeavors. My grandfather, I mentioned Dr. Louis Levy, was a great philanthropist, just supporting all sorts of causes, from the Memphis Symphony and just donating a number of prints he collected to the Memphis Brooks Museum, to the Halley side of the family, who also has been involved very much in charity. My grandfather always use to tell my brother and I, you need to, you can't just take from a community, you have to give back. And, probably the the biggest thing that has come from that, is a feeling that's been ingrained in us, in that my brother Bill started the Oak Hall Run for St. Jude in 1978, and it's something we feel very strongly about, and it's a, a run that we have every year. The 22nd Run For St. Jude will be coming up, in 1999, and over the years we've raised for St. Jude about, a little over \$1.6 million. So, that is what really is the area that we feel like, we can best give back to the community, from which we take from.

BL: That is the main thing that we - it's it's our, our main charity. Again, we get any number of charity's, wanting donations for whatever events and we always you know, tend to, to want to, help whether you know, Christian, Jewish, you know, whatever the

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the occasion is, we just feel that's important to, to give the community, with gift certificates and then whatever people tend to ask of us.

BL: I did marry a Memphian.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

BL: It would almost be somewhat getting involved in, in some of the things that the Bell's family possibly, some of the series, you know, they have concert series, things like that. And, getting involved in Memphis Jewish Community Center, you know that things that the various temples, Temple Israel, in particular.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

BL: Solomon Halley founded Oak Hall in 1859, down on Main Street. And, many of the artifacts we have at the store, a lot of the framed photographs, we have of the stores that evolves. There's a shot of the store from the late 1800's, late 1880's actually ...

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

BL: [The store downtown founded in 1859. It went through a number of changes, as time went on. Originally, it was a, a smaller three-story building, more of a skinny building. It went through a number of remodeling's, the 1880's. There was one, it was a, a rather large remodeling right after World War I. There was a big Armistice parade, that went downtown, right by the store, and not long after that, the store remodeled and



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took over two floors, above Woolworth's, which was right next door to him, and became like quite a large store, at the time. And, remodeling's would go on, through the war years and in the late 1950's, was the last remodeling. We opened up a store, as Memphis moved to the east, which away from the river, as as a lot of cities have done. We opened up a second store, a more suburban store, in 1966. And, as the downtown store closed in 1970, that store became our, our main store from 1966 to 1996, and then we moved again, after thirty years there, at <sup>Poplar &</sup> ~~Pop Warner~~ Perkins, the old court area, out here to Poplar and Ridgeway, in the Regalia Center. J

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BL: Our customer base over the years has always been people who really appreciate quality ...

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

BL: Our customer base over the years has always been people who appreciate quality of clothing, even going back, as you see some of the artifacts we have on our wall, you can buy, there's one receipt that's got a suit for \$7 and another suit for \$350, and yet, it's the same idea now. You can still buy a suit for \$2000, you can buy a suit, another for \$1,000, another for \$500. And, the success of the store has always been, not so much as attracting, just people like quality, you need to have a range of quality, so we would attract you know, not just you know, the Protestant, or you know, Jewish customers. It's a whole range, where you could offer the best or you could offer things not quite as good, but still quality. And, and that's been a key note over the years, as being able to offer quality, to any range of, of life styles and pocketbooks, as as it is.



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BL: Well, the receipts we have on the wall, for example, there's one from Schloss Brothers, in Baltimore. They were a top coat manufacturer and so, we would buy merchandise from a lot of the, manufacturers were on the east coast, and that brings about, I guess back then, the way we had to buy merchandise is the, the owners of the store, Henry Halley and Dave Halley, at the time they were the second generation owners, they were noted in the book I mentioned, "Beat Yesterday", is always noted, whenever they left for New York, on the train. And, the train, the trip to New York, would probably take about two weeks and they would buy from all the various manufacturers up there, and then take the train back to Memphis. So, they would get all their goods booked and then come back home, and they would do that, usually two times a year, for the major seasons.

BL: No, the goods would always be shipped. Whenever any buyers went up to New York, goods always be shipped, and and still today. It's just, we don't take trains, we fly to New York. And so, not a lot has changed.

BL: Everything we, would tend to get, were for the most part, during the the early days, would be from the east coast. It didn't really use many goods around the mid-south area, unless there was a particular manufacturer or something that sprung that, you know, would be something that would be popular.

BL: Today things are bought from around the world. Italy, it's gotten to be a major source of quality fashions. We buy a lot of things from the United States, but it's not just concentrated on the east coast, as it used to be, way in the past. It's it's from around the

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United States. Then there are west coast, from the south, from the east, Italy, Canada.

Goods from literally ...

[END SIDE A -- BEGIN SIDE B]

BL: It, the population of Memphis has changed over the years. We very much, I remember when I was younger, it seemed like people in Memphis, just lived in Memphis. And, we didn't really have a lot of people coming from out of town. These days, with a lot of the ...

[END OF TAPE]

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