

Interview with Lionel Spector
for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society
(Participants: Harvey Buchalter interviews Lionel Spector)

October 10, 2018

Harvey: So, we're going to start, we're going to do three things today.

Lionel: Okay.

Harvey: We're going to talk about your mom. We're going to talk about your dad and then we're going to talk about you and the business and everything, okay? This is what I have, and a lot of this is from the article about Kate Spector. I'll leave this here. So, this is the interview with Lionel Spector on October 10, 2018.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: And we're going to just start with Kate Spector. So she was born in Chicago, 1907. Her parents were from Russia and Kate lived there in Chicago for 30 years. He was in the garment trade, and he was a presser. And insofar as her involvement in the Jewish life, they went to shul on the holidays, in a small shul in the neighborhood. And the article says she went to a union shul, but my guess is that what she went to was an Arbeiter Ring or a Workman's Circle school. Do you have any recollection of that?

Lionel: No, none at all.

Harvey: And she learned Yiddish.

Lionel: She and my father used to speak Yiddish to each other so that my sister and I wouldn't understand.

Harvey: Oh, that's too bad. I had just the opposite. My parents spoke Yiddish to me and they made sure that I learned it and we spoke Yiddish in the house.

Lionel: Well I remember Perry?

Harvey: Perry, yeah.

Harvey: And so she met Dave, on a blind date before 1927, and they married in 1927. And David was a lawyer, found difficult times in Chicago. This is -- and the article doesn't talk about the time, but I imagine it's during the Depression.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: And they decided to move out west, which was a really gutsy thing to do, to just pick up and in fact, the article says, it was great. This might have been a quote, but I don't know: "A courageous thing to do because nobody left home in those days."

Lionel: What I was told and what little I remember, they left Chicago and ended up in Scottsbluff, Nebraska.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: And my father and from there, we lived also in Casper, Wyoming.

Harvey: That's not in the article.

Lionel: And my father sold penny candy in Casper. He would go to a store with a box. I was told this, with a box of 100 candies.

Harvey: Yeah?

Lionel: And they were a penny apiece, and he'd come back --

Harvey: This is Casper, Wyoming?

Lionel: Casper, yeah. And he'd make a deal with the storekeeper: you keep 50 cents, I keep 50 cents. And I loved that because I had plenty of penny candy. I was a little kid. And then, out of Scottsbluff he sold cereal.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I wasn't too keen on that.

Harvey: Well the article has it that they went to Denver also and Dave sold clothes for May Company.

Lionel: My mother said we moved here from Scottsbluff.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: But I think we moved here from Denver. I think we went from Scottsbluff to Denver.

Harvey: Okay.

Lionel: And then Denver to here.

Harvey: Correction.

Lionel: That's my recollection of the story.

Harvey: Okay. We're going to go -- yeah.

Lionel: But in any event, we ended up in Albuquerque.

Harvey: Yeah. And then it says, in Denver, he met a man, goes on the road as a salesman, met a man who makes signs, and he decided that this was going to be his profession.

Lionel: I asked my father one time, how he got in the sign business.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he said that he was in Denver, and he saw a fellow building a tavern/saloon, and he went in and the fellow did not have a sign.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And my father said, he used his legal background and he wrote up a contract. He drew a sign out that said, "bar" or "tavern," or something. And took a wild guess on how much it ought to cost, and drew up a contract in longhand, had the guy sign it, and a down payment. And this was in Depression days.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he said, he went to, found out who was the leading neon sign company in town, and walked in to a fellow named John Chamberlain. And John and his wife became lifelong friends of my folks.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he said, "Here's a contract and a down payment check and the sketch. And if you give me a job, I'll give you this." So that was how he got into the sign business.

Harvey: Without any knowledge of --

Lionel: None.

Harvey: -- signs or anything like that?

Lionel: No, he just said that he was intrigued by neon. Then he came down here with --

Harvey: Yeah that's what I have -- well she said, they moved to Scottsbluff and then Albuquerque, but you said Denver?

Lionel: Well, I think it was Denver.

Harvey: We'll, you're going to be featured as half of a talk that I'm going to be giving for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society in November at the conference. The title of the conference is Challenges and Accomplishments. What it is, it's going to be -- we've already covered a lot of the pioneer Jews, you know, the earliest Jews that came here and they've done a whole lot of stuff on the Conversos you know, the Spanish and the crypto-Jews and all of that. And so, what we're going to be doing is I'm going to be giving a talk about your family as, featuring, you know, in this very unusual kind of thing that you've done which is become the biggest sign company in the state, which is quite an accomplishment.

Lionel: Well, I don't have it with me, but you may be interested in a gal that you probably know. You know Ellen Babcock?

Harvey: No.

Lionel: From the university, she's a professor of sculpture.

Harvey: Yeah?

Lionel: In the fine arts.

Harvey: Okay. Yeah.

Lionel: Ellen wrote a book called *The Zeon File*.

Harvey: Oh.

Lionel: And I don't have a copy here, I can get it and bring it to --

Harvey: Yeah. Yeah, I'd like to see that.

Lionel: I'll bring it down. If you can get me a phone number, I'll call you and I'll leave it up.

Harvey: Okay.

Lionel: I don't work but a half day.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: So give me a phone number.

Harvey: 247-2602.

Lionel: 247-2602. All right. I will call you and I will leave it at the front in an envelope.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And when you're through looking at it, just drop it back.

Harvey: Oh sure. I'll return it. Yeah. I was going to tell you that I also interviewed Charlie Kahn, which is another really unique thing for a nice Jewish boy to go into.

Lionel: Oh yeah. In the ranching business.

Harvey: Well, cattle dealing. He was never in the ranching business. He was in the cattle dealing business.

Lionel: Oh, okay.

Harvey: Yeah, so that's another. You know, these really strange, not strange but unique and exotic, I'd say.

Lionel: Well, it's different than dry goods.

Harvey: Very different. Dry goods. You know, being a professional, like a dentist or something. Yeah, you don't find -- and you two guys are the only ones who are, that I'm able to, that I found, that really have these interesting --

Lionel: Different.

Harvey: Different backgrounds.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: You know?

Lionel: Yeah, and Charlie used to -- well, when Bobbie and I sat in the same row in the synagogue as you and Perry.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Charlie and his wife --

Harvey: Janet, yeah.

Lionel: Are across the aisle.

Harvey: Right across the aisle, right. You know, she's -- it's very sad that she has passed away. So Kate describes Albuquerque as a small, closely knit Jewish community and that's in Albuquerque when they got here, they met Abe and Louis Ravel.

Lionel: Mm-hm.

Harvey: And then they joined B'nai Israel from that connection.

Lionel: Yeah, there's --

Harvey: Then they had -- they didn't have a shul then. That was before 1940.

Lionel: We got here --

Harvey: That's when the first shul was built.

Lionel: My mother told me that we got to Albuquerque on Valentine's Day, 1939.

Harvey: 1939. Arrive. Yeah, it's not in the article. But, you know.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: Okay. And they met at the Sunshine Theater?

Lionel: Above the Sunshine Theatre.

Harvey: Above the Sunshine Theatre, right.

Lionel: There was, I guess, a set of rooms or a social hall.

Harvey: Yeah, right.

Lionel: And that's where I went to pray when I started.

Harvey: That's interesting. That's not in the article either. They had Friday night dinners and they -- what she says, Kate says -- is that they didn't have anywhere to take the garbage, so they took the garbage home with them and threw it away from the house. That was a nice little remembrance of this.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: And this was very small type of -- how many people do you remember, going and being there?

Lionel: Here?

Harvey: Yeah, in the Sunshine Theatre, and you know, on a service.

Lionel: Well, I kind of put down some of the old timers' names that I remember.

Harvey: Oh, good. Good. Yeah.

Lionel: We used to have, I don't know what they're called now, but there was such a thing as being a Central Avenue merchant.

Harvey: Yes.

Lionel: That had a certain aura.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: A mystique.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And we had Cooks.

Harvey: Yep.

Lionel: Sporting goods.

Harvey: Yep.

Lionel: And there was Maisel's Indian.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: American Furniture, I think, used to have an office on Central Avenue.

Harvey: Yep.

Lionel: Meyer and Meyer, the men's store.

Harvey: Yep.

Lionel: And of course, Payless Drug Store.

Harvey: Cohen's --

Lionel: Abe Cohen

Harvey: Abe Cohen, yep.

Lionel: Yeah. And I think Morris Downen had a stationary store, office supply store, I think, on Central.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And of course, Magidson's restaurant came after the war,

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: And Kilroy's.

Harvey: What was Kilroy's?

Lionel: Huh?

Harvey: Kilroy's.

Lionel: Dave Cooper which morphed into Western Warehouse.

Harvey: That's right. I knew that.

Lionel: Now, Dave, I don't think Dave had Kilroy's. I think Kilroy was Katz, was Dave Katz, but Dave had a surplus store.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: As far as I know, it was the first army surplus store, and he opened, it was between First and Second.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: On the north side of Central. Because I worked for him when I was in high school. So that was -- that would have been '45, '46, because Dave was in the Air Corps.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: But then Si Goldman had Simon's.

Harvey: Yeah, we're going to cover Simon's because I've done a lot of research already, with Barbara.

Lionel: Oh yeah.

Harvey: Yeah, I've done the family history pretty much.

Lionel: Yeah, and she was --

Harvey: I've presented a paper about it a few times already, so yeah.

Lionel: Is that right?

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Ben and Ida Marcus had a store downtown.

Harvey: Yep. And?

Lionel: And on South First Street, we had two pawn shops, Jack Webbick and Dave and, not Dave, Dora Specter and her husband, Joe.

Harvey: I thought --

Lionel: No.

Harvey: But that's not your family. That's a different family.

Lionel: No, that's different.

Harvey: Yeah, and I couldn't find any, I asked a bunch of people about them and nobody had any information.

Lionel: They had a son named Melbourne who worked for the State Department. And he must have been a real smart guy in school because the teachers there, Albuquerque High, when I was there, remembered Melbourne. They said, "Was he your brother?" I said, "No."

Harvey: Yeah, they had a hardware store on First Street, I believe.

Lionel: No, they had a pawn shop.

Harvey: Oh, it was a pawn shop?

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: Okay. All right.

Lionel: They had a pawn shop.

Harvey: Okay.

Lionel: Hardware store. The only one I knew with the hardware store was Dave Klein.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he had two kids, Marcia and Dick, who I think Marcia married Herb Cohen, who worked as a pharmacist for Abe.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: And Marcia and Herbert both died.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I think Dick died earlier.

Harvey: Mm-hm.

Lionel: Dick became a naval officer.

Harvey: Oh, okay.

Lionel: And he was, made a career out of that.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: But there was --

Harvey: Wasn't there also the Navajo store? Horwitz? Navajo jewelry? Horwtiz?
Does that ring a bell at all?

Lionel: No.

Harvey: And was Freed's there already?

Lionel: Well, Freeds was down on North First Street, as I remember.

Harvey: Yeah, that's right.

Lionel: And then they fairly recently, within the last 40 years, opened the place on
Central.

Harvey: Yeah. Place on Central, yep.

Lionel: But I think originally they were on --

Harvey: They were on First.

Lionel: -- they were on North First.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I think there were two brothers.

Harvey: Two brothers, yeah.

Lionel: And one was called The Walker.

Harvey: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And they both wore those Borsalino hats, remember?

Lionel: And he used to walk everywhere.

Harvey: Everywhere. Yeah, and that's right. And I used to go to Freed's to buy tchotchkes and stuff.

Lionel: And of course Sam Shallot (phonetic) was in town. He was one of the early ones.

Harvey: Right, right, right.

Lionel: And Sam, when I go by, I think of him. He had this house out on North 4th Street.

Harvey: That's right -- it became --

Lionel: With a copper roof.

Harvey: -- became a barbecue joint.

Lionel: And now it's the Powdrell's family --

Harvey: Yeah?

Lionel: And I remembered the house and if Sam Shalit knew they were cooking pork in that house, he'd turn over in his grave.

Harvey: He'd turn over, yeah. Yeah.

Lionel: Anyway.

Harvey: It was all the way out on 4th. Yeah, I -- remember it was pretty far out.

Harvey: Where did you live?

Lionel: Well, when we first got to Albuquerque, we lived across the street in a motel that's not there anymore.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: It's called the King's Rest.

Harvey: Oh yeah, yeah.

Lionel: And then we had a little house that my father rented, at 412 N. Solano.

Harvey: Oh yeah.

Lionel: And there was nothing --

Harvey: That's right. That's where -- my wife lived on Solano when her family came to Albuquerque in the '50s.

Lionel: Is that right?

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Well, there was nothing in between us and the mountains.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And Aliso used to come up about three blocks north of Central.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And let's see, we lived there and then we went, got real uptown. From there, we moved to 3412 Campus.

Harvey: Oh, by the university?

Lionel: Which is, you know where Campus and Monte Vista come together?

Harvey: Yeah, yeah, yeah, right around there.

Lionel: Right up there.

Harvey: By the school?

Lionel: Huh?

Harvey: By Monte Vista School?

Lionel: Yeah. I went to Monte Vista.

Harvey: And where did you go after? What junior high school did you go to?

Lionel: Jefferson.

Harvey: That's where my kids went.

Lionel: And then the old Albuquerque High.

Harvey: Old Albuquerque -- yeah, right.

Lionel: And from there, I think I was at UNM for about three semesters.

Harvey: Yeah?

Lionel: And I wasn't ready for them and they weren't ready for me. And Korea came along, and I went in the Air Force for four years.

Harvey: Really?

Lionel: I enlisted in the Air Force. In January of '51.

Harvey: I didn't know that.

Lionel: And I served for four years to the day.

Harvey: To 1955?

Lionel: Got out in January of '55. Served overseas for about 16 months, Japan and Korea. And when I left the Air Force, I looked at a map. I didn't want to come back here. I wanted to go to school.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I'd never been to Florida, and Florida was a long ways off.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: So Uncle Sam didn't care where I went. I got the GI Bill.

Harvey: Right. GI Bill, yeah.

Lionel: And let's see. I applied to Rollins College, University of Florida and Miami.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And Rollins sent me a brochure back, the Presbyterian School, mandatory vespers and chapel.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I said, "No." University of Florida took one look at my not-so-great grades and said, "Don't call us, we'll call you."

Harvey: Really? Yeah.

Lionel: And the University of Miami said, "Come on down."

Harvey: Yeah. You know, at that time, I remember it wasn't that selective a school. If you don't mind my saying so.

Lionel: Yeah. So anyway, I went down there. It took me two years to get the degree and when I first got there, I hadn't been there long and I met Bobbi.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And the rest is history.

Harvey: The rest is history. Yep.

Lionel: We got married Christmas Eve, 1955. And people say, "What'd you get married on Christmas Eve for?" And I say, "Jewish people don't have much to do on Christmas Eve."

Harvey: That's right. Either get married or go to a Chinese restaurant.

Lionel: Yeah. Of course, her folks and family thought she was coming out to the frontier.

Harvey: Yeah, sure. So you came back here after that?

Lionel: Yeah. I graduated in February of '57.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And we came back here, and I've been here ever since.

Harvey: Right. Yeah. So I'm going to go back to Dave for a minute.

Lionel: Okay.

Harvey: He goes into the sign business. Did he actually start Zeon Signs?

Lionel: No, no. You'll get some background out of that book that I'll leave for you.

Harvey: Okay.

Lionel: But he came down here. If I don't run out of voice, as a salesman.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: For electrical products, for Zeon Signs, and Wilbur Jones was already here.

Harvey: Mm-hm.

Lionel: And Dave sold, and Wilbur put stuff up.

Harvey: How old was Zeon Signs when Dave started to work for them?

Lionel: I don't know.

Harvey: Yeah? Okay. Was it a long-established company?

Lionel: No. no. No, and then see he came in '39, and they gradually built the business, and then there was a third guy, Al Smith, and Al was a tube-bender, glass blower.

Harvey: Oh, yeah.

Lionel: December 7 came, and Dave went into the Air Corps. Not, I don't know exact date, but it wasn't long.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Which was, I guess, fortuitous because you couldn't get materials anyway because of the war.

Harvey: Yeah, yeah.

Lionel: So the business closed down. Wilbur, I think, went to work for the state of New Mexico as an electrical inspector.

Harvey: Okay. Yeah.

Lionel: After the war, the three of them got together and they decided to reopen the business.

Harvey: Yeah?

Lionel: And a couple years later, they made a deal with the company in Denver, to buy the office, you know, in this territory.

Harvey: Yeah. So this was, hm. Zeon was then headquartered in Denver at the time?

Lionel: Well, it's a long story.

Harvey: Yeah, kind of don't go into too much detail.

Lionel: They worked for the company in Denver.

Harvey: Yeah, okay.

Lionel: Then they purchased this office.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Which included New Mexico.

Harvey: So essentially they took over selling signs, making signs and selling them in New Mexico?

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: Okay. So this is after the war? Okay, he becomes -- Dave becomes one of three partners?

Lionel: Well, yes. And then they took in some outside stockholders.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Which, they were all, with the exception of the gal that worked for them, Jewish businessmen that my father was friendly with.

Harvey: Oh.

Lionel: And they came up with some capital which they needed and in later years, they bought the shares, he and Wilbur. Al Smith disappeared.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: They ended up, my father and Wilbur and they bought the shares back. Wilbur had a son, Jimmy, who is six months older than I am.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: He ran the shop. Well, he was over in the shop with Willie. And Jim is now retired, and lives in California. But Dave ran the front end. Wilbur ran the back end. It was a good partnership.

Harvey: The business end. He ran the business end of it, right?

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: Yeah. So, the article, and this is, it said at one time, nearly all the electrical signs were made by Zeon?

Lionel: We had a large portion.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: There was some local competition.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: But we had, we did the larger portion of it.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: Okay. So I'm going to talk a little bit about Kate. When she became president of the Sisterhood at B'Nai and of Hadassah?

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: And this is interesting. In the article, it says she took Braille classes.

Lionel: Uh-huh.

Harvey: For schools and transcribed Braille, you know, for schools and blind kids.

Lionel: Yeah, she was certified, I guess, the Library of Congress.

Harvey: Yeah, they say that too.

Lionel: And well, it was odd when Dave went into the service, of course those were \$21/month days for enlisted people.

Harvey: Yeah. Yeah.

Lionel: And she had to get a job and she had told me this story, that she went out to Kirkland Field. They were reactivating Kirkland Field, and somehow whether it was in the paper or anyway, she got a lead that they had this secretarial opening out there, and she knew shorthand and typing from her days -- she was a clerk in a law office in Chicago. So.

Harvey: Yeah. Yeah. Just very interesting little side note there.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: When I saw that, I said hmm.

Lionel: Well, she said she went out there to apply for a job and there was a room full of women out there, also applying and for some reason, they called her name first.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: It was first on the list, and she said that you went in a room and there was a Captain there, and he says, "I hate this job. Can you type?" Yes. "Can you take shorthand?" Yes. "You're hired."

Harvey: That's great.

Lionel: And that's how it happened.

Harvey: That's how it happens a lot.

Lionel: And she, I think, I have an idea it was Colonel Offutt.

Harvey: Mm-hm.

Lionel: Who they named the air force base in Omaha, after.

Harvey: Oh really?

Lionel: After, but anyway.

Harvey: So he -- Dave dies unexpectedly, 1969.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: And then, I'm going to move on a little bit here. I have a fact here, which is Dave and Kate were responsible for making the land available for the Shalom house, for the --

Lionel: He was instrumental. He knew John Sims, Jr.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Whose family owned --

Harvey: They owned all that land, yeah.

Lionel: And property, all the way from the valley to the mountains.

Harvey: Right, right.

Lionel: And so he was instrumental in talking John Sims into selling the community ten acres, I believe it is.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And the price that sticks in my head is \$75,000 for ten acres. Yeah, I don't think you could buy an acre for \$75,000 today.

Harvey: No, no, no, no. Not even a lot, maybe. Much less 10 acres.

Lionel: But I remember, I think I donated 75 or 100 to the cause, which is --

Harvey: That's all the same land where the JCC sits as well.

Lionel: Yeah. That whole campus, if you want to call it that.

Harvey: Yeah, that whole campus, right. Okay, that's very important, because that's real New Mexico Jewish history, right there. So, okay.

Lionel: But I saw in the paper that a guy, I guess he used to be Jewish, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics. Nordhaus.

Harvey: The family used to be -- he, his mother actually was not Jewish, as I recall the story. And he really didn't know very much about it, but this is what's

Lionel: Well, see, the one I did business or, when I say, I, the company, did business with Bob Nordhaus.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Bob was the president. They had a supermarket chain. They bought the old Barber's supermarket and renamed it Foodway.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And Bob, of course, had the ski run, and the Sandia Heights Realty.

Harvey: Right. Yeah.

Lionel: Alvarado Realty, Sandia Heights. I became friendly with Ben Abruzzo, who used to work for Bob.

Harvey: Yeah. right, right. Right.

- Lionel: But Ben and I were closer in age, but we did Foodway Signs all over the state.

Lionel: Bob decided to build a shopping center. at the corner of San Pedro and Lomas, Fair Plaza.

Harvey: Yeah. That's where Smith's is.

Lionel: Yeah. Well, they sold Foodway to Smith's.

Harvey: To Smith's, right.

Lionel: I had an idea for a sign and I came back, and I drew it out, and it was like a carousel. And had a guy, Ralph Johnson, work for us, and Ralph built a little model of it with a clock motor in it, and it ran.

Harvey: Oh wow.

Lionel: And I went, the architect for the shopping center was Max Flatow.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I took the model to Max and I told him, I said, "Here is what I got in mind." He picked up the phone. He called Nordhaus. He said, "Bob, Lionel Specter is in the office with a model sign. You're buying it."

Harvey: That's what happens.

Lionel: He said, that's for you. And I remember, I think it was \$9,200.

Harvey: That's a lot of money.

Lionel: It was. And I went down, Bob had an office in the Sim's building.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Downtown. And I went with my model and I showed him.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he fell in love with it.

Harvey: Well, this is good because I want to talk a little bit about the signs. Some of the iconic signs that Zeon designed and built. Can you name some of them? Did you -- did they -- you did Simon's?

Lionel: Yeah, we did Simon's.

Harvey: The Bucking Bronco?

Lionel: Yeah. I did Simon's.

Harvey: The KiMo.

Lionel: We recently, within the last few years, redid the KiMo.

Harvey: Redid the KiMo, yeah. Which, what other signs are still --?

Lionel: I'm trying to remember some of the --

Harvey: The early signs that still might be -- El Vado?

Lionel: Well, we didn't -- I don't know if we did El Vado or not, but we did Premier and the Zuni motel up on Central.

Harvey: Mm-hm. Yeah. You know, because Zeon, you know, the neon, you know, Albuquerque has the reputation of the neon.

Lionel: Well, years ago, we had a lot of neon downtown.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And Clyde Tingley -- Clyde was --

Harvey: -- the mayor, yeah.

Lionel: Ex-officio mayor and governor of the state at one time. The story was that Clyde was standing on top of the overpass, at Central Avenue and 1st Street or something.

Harvey: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lionel: And he looked down, you know, he was very proud of --

Harvey: What about the Sunshine, well the Sunshine would have preceded -- the Sunshine Theater?

Lionel: No, that was there. We did a big sign downtown that's not there anymore for public service. We didn't do the one they have on the building now.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: But we had -- it used to be a big revolving sign on top of First National Bank Building. And we did it; it's long gone.

Harvey: Yeah. Yeah.

Lionel: Did the time and temperature units at Albuquerque National.

Harvey: Now, when you say you did it, did you do the designing of the signs?

Lionel: No, no. There are a few signs that I designed. I was mostly in the office.

Harvey: Yeah, did your dad do any of the designing?

Lionel: Very few. When we did them, it was by accident.

Harvey: Okay.

Lionel: But one reason that he was successful is, well, more than one reason. He was intelligent. And he was hard working.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: But he believed in the value of a sign for business.

Harvey: Oh yeah, sure.

Lionel: And there were -- we used to lease a lot of signs. We don't anymore. But -- because the company has changed hands many times. But we used to practically, I would say, 70-80% of our business was leasing.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And my dad used to go -- he'd -- his bench marker if you will, he'd go to a motel and we'd talk to the motel about a sign.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And we'd start talking about a lease. Now he devised some formula. He said, "You ought to spend as much as one night full occupancy is," so if they were getting in those days, \$12/room and they had 30 rooms, you ought to spend \$360/month.

Harvey: Oh, I see what you're saying, right.

Lionel: He, one time, he told a guy, he said, "I'll put this up and if it doesn't increase your business, you got it for free."

Harvey: Yeah, well, that makes sense, yeah.

Lionel: You got to believe --

Harvey: He was a daring guy. He was moving out here, you know. And starting from scratch.

Lionel: You know, those people, they didn't know that they were adventurous. I think they knew they had to put something on the table and they did whatever they had to do.

Harvey: Yeah, but it seems to me that they would have gone to a place with a larger Jewish community or a place where, you know, they would have, more, be able to make more contacts, but they didn't. They came to a place with a population that at that time, 35,000 people.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: And so that's the interesting thing, that they did that. Simon Goldman did the same thing. Walter Cohen from Payless did the same thing. A bunch of them.

Lionel: The Bromberg family.

Harvey: Well, they came out here because of illness.

Lionel: The Ravels yeah, the Ravels, started selling chicken feed in the south valley.

Lionel: You know, I belonged to a breakfast group that I've been for over 50 years.

Harvey: Yeah? Oh, yeah.

Lionel: And we used to have a guy named Jim Ellis in our group. Jim worked for AT&T and eventually went to work for a real estate company. But Jim was talking. One day, he says, "I've got a lot of admiration for you guys in business, because you put yourself on the line," blah blah blah.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he says, "How do you do that?" I said, "Jim, I don't know. I mean, you just, you do it. You know?" I remember when, oh we were -- we -- contemporaneously, with my father's death, we were in the midst of selling the company to a Denver outfit, which we went through and did it. The Denver outfit sold to a Phoenix outfit. I stayed on with them. After a while, the people in the Phoenix outfit got a hold of me and I was running the place. Wilbur had disappeared, and they said, "Do you want to buy it back?" It just didn't fit with their operations.

So I had to go to Phoenix after a year, year and a half. We were -- we had all these leases, and as they came due, we would renew them and pay the Phoenix outfit a percentage of what we renewed them for.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And somebody made them an offer and I told them, I said, "I can't let them go. Whatever it is, I'll give you the same." And I didn't have it yet. I remember it was like \$230,000, and I didn't have anywhere near that amount.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I called Bob Tripp, who was president of the Albuquerque National at the time. And I told Bob, I said, "I need the money." He said, "All right." I said, "My mother will guarantee it if need be."

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he said, "We'll loan it to you." And I told him the circumstances and he said, "You go to Phoenix, make the best deal you can, write them a check. And when you get back, we'll sit down, figure it out how you're going to repay." Of course, those days are gone forever. You can't talk to a banker like that anymore.

Harvey: Oh no, you can't do that, yeah.

Lionel: And we worked it out, in order to, you know, it was repay and it was one or two points above prime. And that was in the days when prime went up to 18 percent.

Harvey: I remember. That was when I bought my house.

Lionel: And oh boy, you just did it. You know? You just --

Harvey: Eighteen percent.

Lionel: But you were right. Those pioneers, if you would.

Harvey: Yeah. I'm not even talking about the early ones that came out here on the covered wagon and just plopped in the middle of Albuquerque and says, "What am I going to do?"

Lionel: Well, my father said, "He decided to leave Chicago. My mother was a steno in a law office."

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: He said my mother was making more money than he was, and he had a law degree.

Harvey: Yeah. Yeah, well that --

Lionel: And he decided it was --

Harvey: Sometimes that's true too, but I just, I find it so fascinating that you know, you go through a lot of the old families like yours and others, who came to Albuquerque and just opened up a business. You know, Herman Block?

Lionel: Oh sure. Block and the Blaugrunds.

Harvey: Blaugrund's family had El Paso.

Lionel: Because I -- 1948, I went to Brandeis Camp in California.

Harvey: Yeah?

Lionel: And I met Stan Blaugrund. Harvey: Well, guess what? My grandson goes to the Brandeis School in California.

Lionel: Is that right?

Harvey: Yeah, it's in San Rafael.

Lionel: Well I met Shlomo Bardin, who was very influential in Brandeis, out there.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And Max Helfman, who was doing music at that time.

Harvey: Yep. Yeah.

Lionel: I was so lucky, I lived here in Albuquerque, when it was just growing, and I got to meet so many people here. When I say I knew him, some of them, I just shook hands with. And, but I met the people who built Albuquerque.

Harvey: Oh yeah, it was after the war is when things boomed.

Lionel: Well, when I came back here, I moved back here in 1957.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: When I got through with school.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: And oh, I was -- I got to meet Bob Tripp, and Ed Jory with Albuquerque National, and Cato Carlson Sr., at First National, and --

Harvey: Domenici, Bob Domenici?

Lionel: Well, I went to - when I was in school playing ball, Domenici was at St. Mary's.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I was at Albuquerque High. Well, the town was small enough, everybody knew all the kids that were in athletics, we all knew each other.

Harvey: Sure. Yep.

Lionel: And we played against each other.

Harvey: I was friends with him.

Lionel: So I knew Pete and oh, I just --just amazing, the people that I got to meet.

Harvey: You have very good recall of -- you have excellent recall.

Lionel: Well, I can't tell you what I had for lunch yesterday.

Harvey: I can't do that either.

Lionel: But if it was 50 years ago, I'm all right.

Harvey: I'm getting to that point too, I know what you mean.

Lionel: No, I was just very lucky that I got to meet these people before corporations started running everything.

Harvey: Yeah. Yeah. That personal -- everything was a handshake, a little handshake, yeah.

Lionel: Our oldest boy was killed in California.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I was, this little area with two offices, was built on, but I had an office on the other corner. And I called my wife one morning, just on a hunch. I hadn't

heard from her for a day or two, and she was out in California. We used to rent an apartment in Laguna Beach.

Harvey: Oh.

Lionel: Every year, we'd rent a floor in this three floor building.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And my wife used to take the kids out. I'd drive them out and I'd fly home. And then at the end of the month, I'd fly out and drive them home.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: The kids used to ask friends of theirs to go with them. So just for the heck of it, I called her up one morning and it happened to be the morning that Danny got hit by a car. That, I don't know why, but anyway. I was sitting there, and I said, "Well, I'll catch the next plane out." And I had to call the airport and make a reservation on a plane and get on the -- Albuquerque National used to have a branch bank, down four blocks down. And I called up and I talked to the manager and I said, "I got to get to California. And I don't have -- you know, any money in my pocket."

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: "And I don't have time to come to the bank." He sent his secretary up here.

Harvey: Yeah? Try doing that today.

Lionel: No.

Harvey: There's not even a building there anymore, a bank building, you know?

Lionel: Yeah. And the -- but I was saying, it was just, you know, small town attitude.

Harvey: Sure. Sure.

Lionel: And if you said something, we did a lot of business with George Maloof.

Harvey: Oh yeah.

Lionel: He used to own First National Bank.

Harvey: Yeah, right.

Lionel: And we did their signs.

Harvey: Oh.

Lionel: And it was, so much of it was a handshake business, you know.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Like I say, I was fortunate I grew up here in my, and I still got two daughters who live here.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And our son is in California, lives out there.

Harvey: Yeah. Where in California does he live?

Lionel: Newport Beach.

Harvey: Oh it's nice there.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: I'm going to talk a little bit more about the sign business. So, I have here this quote, this left from your, this is actually from your website. "Oldest and largest full sign company in New Mexico." That's right. Anything else you

can tell me about, you know, amplify that a little bit? Is there anything you can say?

Lionel: Now we're -- like I say, we've gone through a bunch of changes in ownership.

Harvey: Yeah. That's neither here nor there, really.

Lionel: Yeah. And --

Harvey: So you guys built the business here?

Lionel: Huh?

Harvey: It was you guys, it was the Specters that built the business?

Lionel: Well, I always --

Harvey: With others, but?

Lionel: Yeah. It was, and my kids, they really weren't interested in it.

Harvey: Well, yeah, there's nothing new about that.

Lionel: Well --

Harvey: That's the way it works.

Lionel: -- it was funny. I had Gary who is our -- Gary just had a birthday this week. I think he's 54.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: This is the little one. Those two pictures are Gary when he was a bodybuilder in college.

Harvey: Whoa. Yeah.

Lionel: And he didn't evince any interest in coming to work here.

Harvey: Yeah, well.

Lionel: And I never pushed him because my dad pushed me, and it's a long story.

well, that's good. He's happy doing it.

Lionel: Well, you got to be young.

Lionel: Anyway.

Harvey: Let me -- what percentage are neon signs right now that you guys do? What percentage of the business is neon signs?

Lionel: Very small.

Harvey: Very small? Hm.

Lionel: Most illumination today is LEDs.

Harvey: Yeah, that's what I thought.

Lionel: Yeah. It kind of morphed. It went from neon, well, originally, illuminated signs were incandescent bulbs.

Harvey: Right, right, right.

Lionel: Then neon.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Then from neon, plastic illuminated by fluorescent lamps, was a big deal.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And then, from fluorescent lamps to LEDs.

Harvey: Yeah, I still like neon. You can't beat it.

Lionel: Well, we did some work for a guy that you probably knew. You know Art Sussman?

Harvey: Sure. I used to show in his gallery. That was -- when he opened up, I was one of the artists there.

Lionel: Yeah, well, Art had this idea that we did a neon log. Did you ever see it?

Harvey: Yeah, yeah, yep.

Lionel: And we got one of our paintings.

Harvey: Yeah, I saw.

Lionel: On the wall up there.

Harvey: Yeah, yep.

Lionel: He gave to -- we had a glass blower, Jerry Peleteir who worked with Art on the flames for this log. And Art had this idea, oh, we're going to sell this to all of these rich Texans.

Harvey: He was an imaginative guy. Yeah, yeah.

Lionel: And I said, "Art, you get an offer, don't turn it down!" Yeah, he lived just a couple blocks from us.

Harvey: Yeah, Santa Susana, yeah.

Lionel: And, oh once or twice, we had to pick he and Judy up to go to some Jewish affair they wanted to go to.

Harvey: Which leads me to community involvement, in the Jewish community. make occasional Friday night services.

Harvey: But anyway, okay, so let me ask you one more question here to the end.

Lionel: Sure.

Harvey: About anti-Semitism, did you ever encounter any antisemitism here in your business in Albuquerque? Everybody's saying no. That's a great thing about, I'm not getting anything. Nobody's saying yes, the people I've interviewed and everything.

Lionel: I never ran into any overt anti-Semitism until I was in the service.

Harvey: Yeah, but that's, you know, not here, that was.

Lionel: But not here, no.

Harvey: Yeah. That's -- I ask that question because I'm sort of putting together this theory that it just, that wasn't anything here. People just, you know, everybody was the same. Everybody was trying to just --

Lionel: Well, nobody wore their religion on their sleeve.

Harvey: Exactly. Very few did.

Lionel: When I was a kid, I remember the stores on Central Avenue, you know, the Jewish-owned stores, they were closed up, first day of Rosh Hashanah, and on Yom Kippur, they used to close.

Harvey: Yeah. Oh sure, I remember that too. I remember hearing that Ace Auto, Joe Berg, Harold Berg? Ace Auto, remember Ace Auto? The Berg family?

Lionel: Oh, sure, sure. Harold Berg.

Harvey: Yeah, I remember they were -- they had a sign in their window and it says, "Closed for Yom Kippur." And Yom, they spelled Y-u-m.

Lionel: Well.

Harvey: Got a kick out of that.

Lionel: No, it was closed for a religious holiday.

Harvey: Yeah, not so much anymore. Well, how many Jewish stores are there? There's a handful.

Lionel: Oh today?

Harvey: Yeah, there are just --

Lionel: Are there any?

Harvey: Yeah, there are a few. There's Bobrick's -- the family still owns the jewelry store.

Lionel: You've got Maisel?

Harvey: Maisel is -- Skip is not --

Lionel: Well, sort of Jewish.

Harvey: Mm, not really, no.

Lionel: I'm trying to think. We don't have any jewelry stores that I know of.

Harvey: Well, actually there was Mark Diamond's, and he passed away, but she runs the business.

Lionel: Well, and then on San Mateo, Krueger.

Harvey: Krueger, yeah. I don't know if that's still in the family or not. Maybe it is.

Lionel: I thought maybe the kid was running that.

Harvey: I don't know.

Lionel: But I don't know.

Harvey: I remember I had the girl in my Hebrew school class when I was teaching Sunday school there, but I mean that's it.

Lionel: Yeah.

Harvey: I mean, if you had to name ten, you couldn't do it.

Lionel: No.

Harvey: Maybe you can name five or six, but you know, that's crazy. They used to have so many businesses just right in downtown.

Lionel: Oh yeah.

Harvey: Not to mention, you know, where it went on to Kurt's Camera and Nob Hill and the Heights and everything, but not anymore.

Lionel: Well, part of it is the old-timers all died off.

Harvey: And well, the kids didn't want to be in the business.

Lionel: Kids wanted to be lawyers and doctors.

Harvey: Professionals, yeah. Orthodontists.

Lionel: You don't want to get your hands dirty.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And I guess it's just the way of the world.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: Plus the corporations.

Harvey: Oh, yeah.

Lionel: We used to do a tremendous amount of business, motels.

Harvey: Sure.

Lionel: And then the freeway came through and the Holiday Inns came in, and but we used to do HB and his brother, Horn.

Harvey: Oh yeah, Horn Brothers, yeah. The old gas station.

Lionel: We had the big Tradewinds Motel. We had a big sign up, the Tradewinds.

Harvey: That's still --

Lionel: We had -- and it's gone. You know, Central Avenue is not what it used to be.

Harvey: No, but yeah, it's -- they're trying to bring it back but it's difficult. Oh, another Jewish business. Pollack, the flowers, florist.

Lionel: Oh, well.

Harvey: I was going to interview him too, but I really don't know him at all, so.

Lionel: Oh, Wayne?

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: He's nice -- nice kid.

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And he got a couple of sisters who don't live here anymore.

Harvey: Right.

Lionel: One of them married Mike Rueckhaus (phonetic).

Harvey: Yeah.

Lionel: And one married Jerry, oh, I can't remember Jerry's name. He used to work for him and then he and Patty got married, and I think they live in Phoenix, also.

Harvey: Yeah, yeah.

Lionel: But Wayne is married to Vicki, and they have two daughters. Vicki is from a Hispanic family.

Harvey: Yeah, yeah.

Lionel: And one daughter is Catholic, and one is Jewish.

Harvey: It happens.

Lionel: You know?

Harvey: You know, that's not all that unusual, really. What happens, is you know, in the old pioneer families, almost every one of them is inter-married, and you know, the Jewish side has really become less and less and less.

Harvey: Yeah.

Harvey: Oh, the Bells are Jewish. Lance and Jon, oh yeah. In fact, he belongs to the society and gives really good talks about his family. The family kept every shred of paper.

Lionel: Is that right?

Harvey: They have records going back to everything. And photographs so when he gives a talk, and he's very computer literate, he's able to show all the pictures and weave it into the talk. He's really good.

Harvey: I'm going to have to call this a day, I think. You know, I really want to thank you, Lionel. This is great.

Lionel: Oh well, look. I will give you --

Harvey: Yeah, give me a call about the book.

[end of recording]