

Part 4: A Leap of Faith

During those final months, everybody at Eaton's realized that I would soon be leaving. I suppose it seemed strange or at least a little awkward around the office when colleagues would ask me where I was going, and I still didn't have an answer. Then rather suddenly, I received two solid job offers.

The first was to become President of Jo-Ann Fabrics, which was still a mom-and-pop chain of six stores, but they had just gone public with a goal of expanding to twenty stores within a year or two. The salary was great, and they obviously felt that I was qualified, but I just couldn't see it.

The owners' big vision was to buy up all of the leftover piece goods at 50 cents on the yard. Whereas I felt that 80-90% of the inventory should be fresh goods, straight from the mills. After that, you could sweeten the assortment with closeouts from the garment manufacturers. But all scraps? That wasn't me.

And if I had to be honest, I had no idea which malls or plazas could digest a new fabric store. That wasn't my background at all. If they'd just wanted to grow one location at a time, I likely could have figured that out, but as I said to Ria, "I'd be killing myself, running all over the place, trying to open up ten shops at once." As tempting as it all seemed, I just knew I had to pass.

The next opportunity was with a hosiery firm which had been a very minor supplier to us at Eaton's. They were made in Europe and headquartered in Montreal, but I could remain in Toronto with some fancy VP title. It was a solid product with excellent packaging, and we all liked the people but there was just no room on our racks for any more of it. They wanted to replace L'eggs by Hanes or Burlington as one of our major brands and they wanted to use the influence I had with our buyers to do it.

I knew that wasn't going to happen. And anyway, I would never have placed my own buyers into that sort of loyalty test. I turned down that job too.

Still, the idea of breaking into sales was very alluring. I had been on the buying side for so long that I felt uniquely equipped to understand the priorities which drove a buying decision. And I knew that I could be the sort of rep. I enjoyed working with.

Also, I had seen how well Nick was doing with his tablecloths and how much he enjoyed the work and lifestyle (and money).

The only hitch was that I was not a great candidate for a sales job with a single manufacturer since most firms were looking for someone who could bring their established accounts with them. I didn't have that. Except for Eaton's. I certainly knew people at Sears and Woolworth's, etc. but only as competitors, never as customers.

So, I decided to start my own sales agency:

E.B. McNamee Trading Ltd.

The idea was to focus mainly on department stores north of the border. I always liked the linens & domestics space, so I'd specialize in home textiles: bedspreads, mattress pads, bathmat sets and rubber-backed area rugs. (Everything except for tablecloths since I didn't want to compete with Nick!)

I incorporated the name only to pre-empt any confusion between my US citizenship and my Canadian "residency." The company would often be paid in American dollars even though I would be paid in Canadian currency. Ria too. As our bookkeeper, she would draw a higher salary than me since we wanted to get her vested into the Canadian Social Insurance system. Also, we realized that my expense account could be another very ample form of enjoyed income.

Even though I was still in my chair at Eaton's, I had rented a small, windowless office nearby for \$100 a month. 12 Shuter Street, right across from Massey Hall (a famed concert venue).

I still recall the very first product I went out with. It was a line of satin pillow protectors which Nick had gotten for me. Eaton's gave me a small order on those, I think just to make me feel good. Next, I had a line of quilted comforters called Rose York. I didn't do very well with those either. To be fair, the company was on their way into bankruptcy when I met them. Ultimately, they got there – owing me commission money!

But the first big line I landed – of the sort I was looking for – was called Lawtex. They made quilted bedspreads and rubber-backed bath rugs. I had been friends with Marshall Gilbert, one of their VPs, so they knew me, and I knew them. This was the first hint I had that things were going to work out. I started selling quite a bit of their line to the Eaton's catalogue and so I started showing it around everywhere else.

In making the rounds I stopped in to see a former Eaton's buyer who was now working for Sayvette, a small deep-discount chain owned by Loblaws (a major food retailer). He said, "Ed, what I really need is a cheap chenille bedspread which I can put on the shelves for \$10." This sentence would change my life!

The following Monday I was on a plane to New York City to find one. I went to see an old friend named Gil Peiper who was now the President of Minette Mills. I had known Gil from the days when he was a buyer over at Montgomery Ward.

He said, "Ed, I want to do you a favor. It's not my line you need. But I've got a friend named Bill Watson. We came up together when he was a buyer at J.C. Penney. He's now the President of one of my competitors and he's got some great quality knockoff chenilles. Those are the bedspreads you want."



I got the address and ran right over there. 295 Fifth Avenue, otherwise known as The Textile Building (a place that I'd been in and out of many times over the years). I got off the elevator at the 2nd floor and entered the offices of the Georgia Textile Corporation.

Founded in 1938 by Tommy Brown Sr. and now co-owned and operated with his son, Tommy Brown Jr., Georgia

was viewed within the industry as an old-fashioned mill with extremely nice people, declining sales, and copycat products.

I sat down with Bill Watson the President of their New York-based sales operation and explained my situation. Right away, he picked up the telephone and called Tommy Brown Jr., down in Calhoun, and told him how Gil Peiper had sent over someone who wants to take Georgia into department stores across Canada.

Apparently, Tommy Brown said, "Well shit, if Gil Peiper's recommending him, let's grab him!" And that's how I became the first Canadian sales rep. for the Georgia Textile Corporation. And those chenilles sold by the truckloads to Sears and Simpsons and Woolworth's!



E.B. McNamee Trading Ltd. was on its way!