

As hoped, we were immediately embraced into holidays and engagements with all of our loved ones. Patrick and Patricia had recently purchased a timeshare at Playboy's new Resort &



Country Club at Great Gorge. Aunt Tess also held a share, and a string of unique vacations ensued. It's odd now to think of Playboy Bunnies being family-friendly fare (particularly in the Reagan era) but somehow it all seemed normal. In stark contrast, Amish farmers were the scenery for our summer vacations as we usually followed the Granowskis to the Historic Stroudsburg Inn, (always anticipating the Dutch smorgasbord at Hershey Farm)!

And our weekend dinners out extended traditions that had been started in the '50s and interrupted for 17 years!



(Patrick, Patricia, Barbara, Stuart, Marlene, Ria & Nick)

Jack Eschmann and Ray Mullen had been part of my childhood gang on Linden Boulevard in St. Albans since the first grade!



Here, Ray and I were picking up dates for a prom in 1950.



While we'd never lost touch over the years, this rare summit in Metuchen felt like a great circle had been closed. Seeing old friends like these, after so much time away, reminded us that we'd been on a journey. If ever there were two guys who could hold a yardstick to my circumstances and deem how likely, or unlikely, they were – given where we all started – it was Jack and Ray. (Of course, Nick was in that same gang, but he'd been on the journey with me.) I miss all of those guys.

Lillian Stringer had been an early childhood friend of Ria's, living two doors down from her grandmother in South Ozone Park. Later they became best friends all over again in high



school. Lil and Charlie came up from Knoxville for a great visit.

And we all settled into our new lives on Clarendon Court. Pk got an afterschool job at Neve Shalom, the synagogue down the block, and joined the Honors Program. While Edward painted address markers on curbs for \$2 a pop and joined the C.Y.O. (so that he could also meet the Catholic girls). Most importantly, Pk and Edward met lifelong best friends, Mitchann LoBue and Scott Hirshon. It was all falling into place. And every morning I delighted in my walk to the station, and from Penn to Georgia's offices on Fifth Avenue.



Once I arrived in New York and became privy to their sales records, it was obvious to me that Georgia Textile Corporation was slowly wandering down (what I called) the graveyard path. The alarming bit was that the others around me hadn't seen it.

Many of Georgia's biggest successes over the previous forty years had been with wholesalers. This was becoming a smaller piece of the pie as the era of the mammoth discount retailers began putting one specialty store after another out of business.

My attitude was, we must sell Target, Kmart, Walmart, and Sears to survive. I was looking for the buyers with automatic reordering systems. See, the 1980s was the real advent of the computer-driven inventory management system, where every purchase at the register triggered an automatic re-order. That was the business I wanted!

I knew that I needed to quickly replicate in the United States what I had done in Canada. That is, simply focus!

I had already learned to steer clear of the mom-and-pop stores. (The husband would tell you one thing and then his wife would contradict him, “Morty, don’t get 13 of the lavender! Get 7!”)

Over time, I had even narrowed some major accounts out of my view if the margins weren’t there. The Canadian Military Trade Show comes to mind. Nick and I had gone up to Ottawa a few times to show our wares – this was for the PX Stores on all the military bases. And they were buying in decent quantities, but I arrived at the philosophical position that it just wasn’t worth my effort. There was a real opportunity cost to splintering my focus. And I became quite puritanical about this belief and approach.

I streamlined my activities wherever I could. Like when Lawtex had wanted me to hand in monthly reports. I told them, “My sales figures are my monthly reports. I don’t write reports.”

I had watched the evolution of the wholesale and retail markets since the late ‘50s with Eatons, and then later selling for myself. All the factors that were driving the prices ever downward would result in a seismic shift in retail as significant as the dawn of the department store! More than ever, volume – predictable volume – was the only way forward. Georgia would need to manage its survival in view of these unstoppable mega-trends!

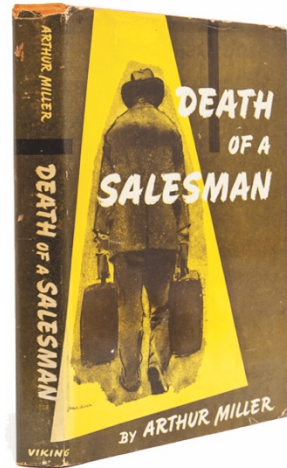
Bill Watson was a very fine gentleman. I thought this from the first to the last, but he was on the way out. He wasn’t trying to predict the future. At this point, he was making the decisions that he had to. He was in his box and – all day long – he hoped that no one would come along to disturb it.

Anyway, it was more of Ben Weinreb’s problem. As National Sales Manager, he had a league of men crisscrossing the country trying to sell to an ever-thinning crop of customers. It was a thankless role!

I was inheriting Joe Scanlon's job, V.P. of National Accounts. Not long after I arrived, Joe took me out on a sales trip through the southern states so I could learn the territory he was covering and meet some of his accounts. It's a fond memory.

Joe was like Willy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The sort of great American archetype which I had met many times over in my career. We called them "roadrunners."

He liked to get in his car from his home in Rosedale, Long Island, and head out south. He had his usual routes and his favorite roadside motels. And just like Willy Loman, Joe was "well-liked."



Joe had been showing Georgia's goods around long before it even had its own sales division. Punching in at Wilson & Bradbury down on Worth Street, just one of a hundred agencies representing southern mills to wholesalers. And for the last 25 years, against all hope, Joe had stopped in to see S.S. Kresge. For this, his final visit, he brought me. (S.S. Kresge was the parent company to the swiftly emergent Kmart.)

They knew Joe was retiring. Their Vice President over all soft goods took us out to dinner and brought his wife. He said to me about Joe, "What this man has is tenacity! We could never give him a lot, but he never stopped coming." Joe also impressed on me the huge potential of a particular buyer, Mary LaRue. She wasn't even buying our categories at the time, but Joe foretold that one day she'd be running the whole show. He always made certain that Mary LaRue came out for the dinners and drinks, and he beseeched me to do the same. It was easy; Mary was great fun and soon became one of my favorite buyers.

For these warm introductions, I credit Joe for what the Kmart account ultimately became.

But the most important thing that happened on this road trip was Joe's "come to Jesus" moment. When he gave me his blessing for what I was almost certainly going to do anyway. In a moment of clarity about the writing on the wall, he said, "If I were you, I'd give all these smaller accounts away to the salesmen in the territories. Keep maybe three. Most of them will be out of business soon anyway."

Here was a man wrapping up his own life's work. It wasn't sad. It only would have been sad had he not seen it.

In another profound changing of the guard, Tommy Brown Sr. died that August, just six months after I'd started. I had a great deal of respect for Mr. Brown. He knew his business from the ground up, having managed every single process at one point or another. During the mill's peak in the 1950s, he had his workers decked out in crisp, matching uniforms. But he was also tough. One time at the Hotel McAlpin in New York City, he settled an argument with a partner by pulling a knife! For all the time I knew him, his attention had been on getting Tommy Jr. "ready."

And he was. But behind the whole operation in Calhoun was CFO and Treasurer, Jim Jackson – Tommy's right-hand man. Efficient, loyal, and stalwart, Jim managed their multi-faceted business which included real estate holdings, the mills, and an industrial laundry service called Brown Laundry. From Jim, data and answers were at the ready! When I needed new computers to synch with Kmart's inventory system, Jim made that happen. He became a valuable partner and a middle ground between the sweet, slow pace of Calhoun and the rat-a-tat-tat of Manhattan.

We held Joe's retirement party at the Windows on the World.

Two years later, Bill retired too. Tommy didn't make it up for either function since he didn't fly. "But I could drive all the way to China," he'd say. Bill was afraid of heights too. So, we held his retirement party on the ground at the 21 Club on 52nd Street.



Next to me is Tom McDarby who had assisted the Browns in creating their own sales organization in 1969, by leading Joe Scanlon and others over from Wilson & Bradbury.

Next to him is Tommy Brown's mother, Willie Hamilton Boston Brown who, along with Tommy's father, co-founded Georgia Textiles in 1938. They had more than a little help from Willie's father, Dr. John H. Boston, who'd been somewhat of a pioneer in the tufted bedspread industry.

In fact, Willie and Tommy Brown Sr. both started out folding chenille bedspreads at Willie's father's mill (the Mount Alto Bedspread Company).



(Willie's wedding to Tommy Brown Sr. in 1930.)

(Chenille is the French word for caterpillar. It describes the raised yarn ends which protrude at right angles from the sheet.)

Actually, just a bit of history on the tufted industry might be illuminating to better understand this place where I'd ended up (and was now betting everything). It's a very American story.

It all gets traced back to one woman, Catherine Whitener, who dreamed of making a bedspread like the one (she thought she'd seen) in her cousin's home. This was 1895 and the first chenille bedspread was born. Demand was immediate and a whole cottage industry grew up around it!

Patterns were stamped out onto sheets in "spread houses" and then "haulers" would deliver the sheets and yarn to thousands of rural homesteads across northwestern Georgia.



(Here, a family of tufters sew piecework as their hauler brings more yarn.)

The haulers would return to collect all the finished pieces then shrink them in a hot water wash to lock-in the tufts, prior to display.

All up and down The Dixie Highway, from Calhoun to Dalton, chenilles for sale would wave from clotheslines on both sides of the road. (Peacock designs were the most popular, by far.) So, tourists, driving through to Florida, would stop all along "Peacock Alley" to buy this uniquely American folk craft.



But the 1920s saw a bust in cotton prices due to overproduction, man-made fabrics, and the boll weevil. This depressed market required investments in new equipment & production techniques to lower costs – a proposition which only the very well-off could afford. Willie's father, a doctor, founded Mount Alto in 1920.



By the '30s, they'd started using hand-held, needle-punch guns to do the tufting. In this photo, rows of women thread colored yarns through large embroidery hoops with their "needle-punchers."

A steady stream of new patents for tufting tools such as the large yarn, multi-needle sewing machine began in 1936.

Willie & Tommy Sr. gave birth to Tommy Jr. in 1937 and the following year, Dr. Boston helped them create Georgia Textile Corp. with the building of this: a first among modern textile mills!

Georgia very soon expanded, adding bath rugs & area rugs.



Later innovations were focused on handling wider materials, which led to the modern carpet industry. By 1980, 85 percent of all carpets sold in the United States, and 45 percent worldwide, were made within 60 miles of Dalton and Calhoun.

When I would first tell people about Calhoun, Georgia, they'd always say, "Where?" Like it was in the middle of nowhere. But quite the contrary, Georgia Textiles, true to their slogan ("In the Heart of the Tufted Industry") was in the middle of everything!

In the '40s, the Department of Commerce created a Bureau of Standards to regulate safety and practices for this gigantic new industry. Willie's father served on that committee where he met co-member, Leon Furey, the New York-based salesman who had founded Wilson & Bradbury. And it all comes full circle!

At that time, there were ninety mills like Georgia in the region. By the 1980s, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Merger, acquisition, and shrinking demand fueled the quickening pace of an historic consolidation which I could see and feel all around me.

After Bill retired, I knew we needed JC Penney to survive. The only problem was, they were extremely principled people and hadn't wanted to switch suppliers even for Bill Watson (who had been a Penney buyer before coming to Georgia). In all that time they'd only ever offered him an "optional listing" on one bedspread! Being an optimist, I took this as a small sign that breaking the account was possible.

Their rugs assistant told me, "Ed, we only need two suppliers. Right now, we have three, so we don't want to start with you as a fourth." I assured her that I understood, "But if we bring out something new, I'd like to show it to you. Just so you know what we're up to." At least once a month, I'd go up to the JC Penney Building on Sixth Avenue and have coffee or lunch with one of them. Most of the time, I wouldn't even discuss business.

Finally, they offered us a test! They wanted to see how fast we could turn around a bedspread using straight-line tufting with their label on it. Product plus packaging, to their specs, at scale. How fast?

Well, we passed that round. Next, we received a trial order when one of their three suppliers suddenly shuttered their mill. (A key instance of the industry consolidation working in our favor.) Georgia quickly rolled out a variation on the bedspread they'd been selling, and we replaced them! Without pushing (but with laser-like focus) we broke the account.

They say the working definition of luck is "preparation meeting opportunity." That's certainly been my experience – most times.

Still, there had to be more to luck than just that. I'd be foolish not to have given it some thought. I mean, in my case. A life where nothing had been promised and little was expected had continued to fill me with gratitude every day as I reached my 50th year and more importantly, our 25th Wedding Anniversary.



Patricia and Patrick threw us a wonderful surprise party! Everyone was there!



Gerry and Joan Croteau came from Massachusetts. Cliff and Avie flew down from Toronto with Cliff's mother, Dorothy. Nick and Marlene, naturally. Aunts and Uncles, cousins and friends, from every corner of our lives were there. I don't know when I've seen Ria more moved.



We were celebrating more than a date or the passing of time. Ours was a true partnership.



We allowed each other to play to our strengths.

Neither of us ever got in the way of a small decision the other needed to make, and we made all of the big decisions together.

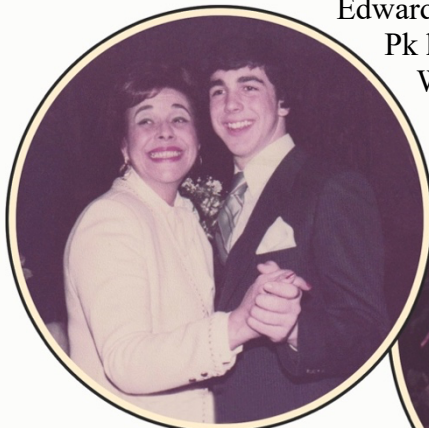


We'd been there and back, and along the way raised a family.

Edward was almost 17.

Pk had just turned 19.

We were so proud of them.



Not because of any one thing they'd done, or were going to do, but simply because it was clear to us that they were decent, honest, and kind to others.



Two months later, Pk and Edward graduated from Metuchen High School together (due to Edward having skipped a grade earlier).

Pk was among the tops spots in her class and likely would have had her pick of schools but they both decided to attend Rutgers. It was eight miles down the road and they already felt as if they were “away.”

They could live in the dorms yet still be home on a whim or a weekend. Perfect.



It was a state school which offered diversity in subjects and other students –

and at very reasonable tuition rates. A good thing since Ria and I were paying for all of it out of present earnings. We got lucky again, that a resource of this kind would be just one stop away.

It also meant that Edward could bring his new rock band home to rehearse in our basement. Ria would always succeed in enticing the boys to stay for dinner by announcing that she had a lamb roasting.

(The Queues: Mike, Ed, Benny & Scott Hirshon.)

