



Michael Pizitz

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Interviewer: Michelle Little

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Project: Birmingham Central Business District 2022

0:00:00

Michelle Little: This is Michelle Little interviewing Michael Pizitz at his office in Birmingham, Alabama for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District, and today is February 3rd of 2022. My goodness.

Michael Pizitz: You got it. Got it.

Michelle Little: To start out with I'm not going to ask all of the background information on you like I normally do 'cause I found a wonderful oral history interview you and your brother did in 2012.

Michael Pizitz: I bet that was for Atlanta.

Michelle Little: Right, right. So there is great documentation of--

Michael Pizitz: So everyone can go find all these other interviews.

Michelle Little: Yes. Yeah. It's wonderful documents of your whole family history and your grandfather coming here. It was a great interview.

Michael Pizitz: They recorded it right in this room.

Michelle Little: In this room! Oh, my goodness.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So all that is out there, and I don't want to duplicate all the hard work that y'all already did, but if you could tell me a little bit just about-- you don't have to tell me how old you are on the record but just--

0:01:03

Michael Pizitz: I'm old.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: I'm old. I'm younger than my older brother and we all three work here. All three brothers work here.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Younger than your older brother. I like that.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah.

Michelle Little: But just a general sense if you can tell me just when you grew up in Birmingham, where you went to school, that sort of thing.

Michael Pizitz: My whole family, all children but one, three out of four children, were born in Birmingham. One was born in Minneapolis. [redacted]

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The other three children were all born in Birmingham. Three of my children live in Birmingham. One child lives in Atlanta. The grandchildren-- well, let me go further. [redacted] Grandchildren, I've got eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, and the eight grandchildren<sup>1</sup>-- let me just think-- I've got to be sure I'm right-- five live in Birmingham.

Michelle Little: Wow.

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Michael Pizitz: Going back a little bit on our family history, we are in the sixth generation in our business and that's unheard of. The average private business doesn't stay together over three generations and we're now in our sixth generation. My two great-grandchildren both live in Birmingham and their mother works for us so three brothers work here, and one granddaughter works here.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Michael Pizitz: The great-grandchildren are 1-1/2 and 6-1/2.

Michelle Little: Oh, wow. That's wonderful.

Michael Pizitz: But it is unusual that six generations of business can be in Birmingham.

Michelle Little: Absolutely.

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<sup>1</sup> Correction: nine grandchildren.

Michael Pizitz: My father was born here. My mother was born in New York City. I was just trying to think what to tell you.

0:03:31

I lost my train of thought. But anyway, my father was born here, mother was born in New York City. My brothers and I were all born in Birmingham.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: That's pretty much where the family stands. I'll just tell you since you're interviewing me, I went to Ramsay High School in Birmingham. I went to Mountain Brook Grammar School, then I went to Ramsay High School, and then I went to Harvard University. And one of the few compliments my first wife ever gave me was a backhanded compliment that I was the most unlikely Harvard man she'd ever known.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: And that wasn't a compliment, but it was a compliment. [Laughter] I'll never forget that.

Michelle Little: Oh, that's funny.

Michael Pizitz: But that basically is the history of the family. I came to work here immediately after Harvard.

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My older brother went to Harvard Business School. He came to work here right after Harvard Business School. And my younger brother went to-- my two brothers both went to Washington and Lee University and my older brother I said went to business school then came here. My younger brother went to work for Rich's in Atlanta, which is now Macy's. And he worked there for I think a year and a half and then came over here. So we're all in retail and we're all in retail for-- I've been here since 1955, so it's sixty-six years. And my older brother has been here about sixty-eight years and my younger brother somewhat less than that.

0:05:27

Michelle Little: Wow.

Michael Pizitz: But that's really the history of the family. I'll mention one other thing. My grandfather was born in Russia. He moved to this country-- you'll have to find it in the book. [Laughter] He settled in a little town in Georgia called Swainsboro and then his wife, who I don't think I ever knew, said that Swainsboro was too small for him, he was too good a businessman. And he moved from Swainsboro to Birmingham and opened a small store-- this is in the book-- opened a small store on 1st Avenue North. This store, and I won't be exactly right on the time, but this store was started-- he was on 1st Avenue North for quite a few years, started this building in about 1925.

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You'll find that in there. And this building opened in about 1928 and it was a very bad time 'cause it was right before the recession. It's amazing we lived through the recession we opened so close to it. That's basically the history. My father passed away about thirty-something years ago. My mother passed away about the same time.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: They were both smokers and they both died of lung cancer, so don't smoke. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Right. I never will.

Michael Pizitz: Okay. Go ahead.

Michelle Little: Well, how big of a presence was the store in your life growing up?

Michael Pizitz: That's a good question.

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I started working in the store when I was about twelve years old. I worked in the toy stockroom sixth floor downtown putting together broken toys which I'm sure I didn't do a good job with--

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: -- and other things. But I worked there every summer until I went to college as far as I can remember. And I worked in personnel-- first I said when I was illegally working, I was working in the toy stockroom, and I don't remember where else I worked. Later

on after graduating college I went into personnel and then the man that ran the basement left after about twenty or thirty years, went to another store.

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And my father put me running the basement probably ten or fifteen years and it was great experience 'cause you can be a real merchant in the basement. Things aren't pre-priced like they are most other places, so I thought it was great experience and great learning because it wasn't a lot of brand names, it wasn't pre-priced, you did your own thing. We had about five merchandise managers. I ran the basement. Someone else ran children's and lingerie. Somebody else ran home furnishings. Somebody else ran apparel. And I think there was one more. I think we had five merchandise managers, all of which ran a section of the store.

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And they had buyers reporting to them and the merchandise manager would go to New York primarily. Today they go to different places 'cause the market in New York is not as big as it used to be. But they'd go to New York, I'd go to New York with my buyers probably four or five times a year, and the other merchandise managers would go with their buyers. And so we had a general merchandise manager, a man named Ted Levite, who all of the merchandise managers reported to, so five people reported to him and he ran the merchandising of the store. And many years later when he retired-- I don't think he died when he was working for us; I think he retired-- I took his job as general merchandise manager and then I had these merchants reporting to me.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: So the structure was about five areas of the store have merchandise managers and they got buyers reporting to the merchandise managers.

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Then the merchandise manager reported to the general merchandise manager. Before me it was a man named Ted Levite. And I'll tell you a funny story in a second. I don't know if it's funny. But he was named Ted Levite. The Jewish Community Center in Birmingham is named after him. He gave the Jewish Community Center something over a million dollars, and this was thirty years ago. It was a lot of money thirty years ago. And he never made over about sixty-five thousand with us. Now, how'd he give over a million dollars to the-- it's called the Levite Jewish Community Center on Montclair Road.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: But how did he do it? He was like Warren Buffet. He never sold a stock. He buys stock and he'd keep it for thirty or forty years and he got lucky that the market didn't go up every year, but it went up enough that I was blown away-- my whole family was-- found out that he had over a million dollars to give to charity.

0:11:32

Michelle Little: Wow!

Michael Pizitz: It just didn't make any sense 'cause I think maybe he made sixty-five or seventy thousand at his peak. But it was unusual that he had accumulated that money 'cause he basically never sold a stock. My older brother and I sell stocks by the hour now. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: But he did the smart thing. Warren Buffet almost never sells, and he's been slightly successful so I can't argue with Mr. Levite's success. But I mention that just 'cause we had no clue that he could give that much money to a charitable organization.

Michelle Little: Incredible!

Michael Pizitz: Yeah, it really was.

Michelle Little: So was there ever any doubt that this was your career path?

Michael Pizitz: Good question. There was never any doubt for my brother, me, or my younger brother.

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We knew when we went to college that we were coming into this business. I was very grade oriented in college and I shouldn't have been 'cause I had a job awaiting me, but I've not always been grade oriented, but I took a lot of courses at Harvard I shouldn't have taken because they didn't relate to business. And it didn't make any difference. I made good grades at Harvard. I didn't make great grades, but I made very good grades, and it didn't make any difference. But I took some courses because I thought they were easy and I should've been taking statistics would

be one. I don't remember if there was a course on retail management or not but there were courses that were some related to the business but a lot of them not related to any business. I took a course named art history, and don't ask me why. I don't remember.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: I found it interesting, but I don't know why I took it.

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I'm not an art historian. But yes, all of us knew we were going into the business. I went in right after college. My older brother went right after business school. My younger brother went through a training program at Rich's Atlanta. My father got him in there. He was friendly with the chairman of Rich's, and they just did my father a favor by getting him trained. That was one of the best stores in the country back in, like, 1960. Not as good since they sold out to Macy's. Look at Brookwood Macy's. [redacted] [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Oh, my gosh. [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: Go ahead. Let me have her bring in that paper and get this other one.

Michelle Little: Oh, sure. Yeah. Yeah. All right. I'll pause this.

Michael Pizitz: Okay. [Pause]

Michelle Little: So you came back to work full time after Harvard. And can you just describe a typical day for you?

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And I'm sure every day was different but . . .

Michael Pizitz: It was, but I started in the personnel office, and I was dealing with people, some hiring, and we had a personnel manager that was over me at that time, I'm sure. But I didn't do that long because I think within less than two years I went to the basement as merchandise manager. And a typical day there was maybe chaotic.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Sure.

Michael Pizitz: The basement you ran a lot of sales, unlike the upstairs where you didn't run many sales. Today everyone's running sales. But after leaving the personnel office and going to the basement I had to learn merchandising 'cause I really had never done it. I had a mind for merchandising 'cause I was raised that way. We'd come home for dinner from the time we were 5 or 6 years old and all we heard about was department store.

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That was the life of the whole family. So I had to learn to deal with the buyers that we had there, and they were all there when I took over the basement. Some of them left. One or two retired. And that was the life every day thinking about merchandising and running sales and going to New York several times a year. I figured out one time and I don't know what the number was, but I've probably spent about three years of my life in New York, and I've never been there over

seven days. But a lot of trips for-- and this is all in there-- we sold out to McRae's Department Store in 1986 and I had been in the store then thirty-one years.

0:16:32

[Sound of door opening.] Thank you, Leigh [sp].

Leigh: Yes, sir.

Michael Pizitz: All right. Take a quick look and see if that looks right to you. [Pause to review signed release forms and life history form.]

Michelle Little: Okay. Yes, sir. This looks good.

Michael Pizitz: Okay. But a typical day was dealing with the buyers that worked for me and tried to be on the floor a lot with customers. I didn't do any direct selling although I'm sure sometimes I did selling, but that wasn't my responsibility. There were only two basement stores in Birmingham, Loveman's, who's been out of business a long time. I don't remember if you remember them or not, but they were a block away from us.

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We sold out in [19]86 and they went out of business-- they were our big competitor back then. After they went out of business Parisian became our big competitor. Not the basement part of it but overall, 'cause we both had stores all over the state of Alabama. They had a couple of stores out of Alabama. We did not. But the typical day was meeting with the buyers, talk about what kind of promotions we were going to run, tried to be on the floor a lot talking to salespeople. All

of the things that you can't be. You can't be in an office somewhere removed from the floor.

You've got to be involved in the floor in the retail business. Now today not so much. Back then you definitely did.

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'Cause today these big chains like Nordstrom or Macy's or Dillard's they've got forty, fifty, sixty, seventy stores, so they're in a corporate office somewhere. Dillard's is in Little Rock, Arkansas. Nordstrom is in Seattle. So those people don't go out to the stores very often I'll assure you.

When they got sixty stores they can't go to many stores. But back when we did it, we had nine stores. We tried to get to each one probably four, five, six times a year. And I'm sure I never did that many. Supposed to but didn't do it. But it was all about merchandising. It was about buying merchandise and meeting with the buyers to decide prices we're going to have, decide what kind of promotion we're going to have to promote this merchandise, and that was the total nature of the business.

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Tried to be on the floor a lot with salespeople and customers. When I was general merchandise manager later on, I would try to visit the branch stores once a month. I'm sure I never did that either, but they were all in Alabama. We had no stores out of Alabama.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: Furthest away we were was, I think, Huntsville. We were not in Mobile. We were in every other big city. But it was just the nature of what we did, and again you asked a good question, we'd been talking about this since we were six years old. My father would come home from business, and he'd talk about what he did. He'd talk about the retail business. I'm sure I did this with my children too.

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And my children, the three that lived in Birmingham-- originally only two lived in Birmingham for a long time and they always worked for the store. I had one daughter in Annapolis, Maryland. She moved back to Birmingham, and she worked for the store for a few years. And my other daughter-- I'm trying to think where she worked, but the other daughter worked at Gus Mayer. She was a buyer at Gus Mayer, and she retired a few years ago. So it's all in retail, the whole family. The one grandchild works in the corporate office there for our cookie business. You know about our cookie business?

Michelle Little: I read about that in the interview, yeah.

0:21:24

Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: We've got fifty cookie stores, give or take.

Michelle Little: Oh, man.

Michael Pizitz: We're the largest chocolate chip cookie chain in the country. I deal with Gus Mayer. I don't deal much with the cookies. My two other brothers deal with the cookie business. I eat 'em but I don't deal with 'em.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah. That's the good way to do it, yeah.

Michael Pizitz: But everyone-- I'm trying to see if there's anyone-- son-in-laws haven't been in the retail business but all the children-- let me just think. All the children-- I'm trying to think of all the grandchildren. I think all the grandchildren have all been in the business at one time or another.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Michael Pizitz: Two of them are retired now. They work part time a little down here, but they're basically retired.

Michelle Little: So at dinner growing up y'all would talk about things that happened in the store that day?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah.

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Talk about what happened at the store that day and I'm sure we asked a lot of questions. And I told you since the time all of us were 12 or 13 we were doing something in the store. We weren't on the sales floor. We were doing something in the store that whole time. But dinner conversation usually involved talking about what we did in the store that day. Retail is easy to

talk about. My father wasn't a doctor. We wouldn't have been talking about that. He wasn't a lawyer. Might've been talking a little bit about that.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: But retail everyone talks about it.

Michelle Little: And how many employees did you-all have, say, maybe in [19]50s and [19]60s?

Michael Pizitz: At Pizitz Department Store-- I don't know the answer to that question 'cause it's been a long time.

Michelle Little: Sure.

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Michael Pizitz: But at our peak when we only had the one store downtown, I would guess we had three- or four-hundred employees in the downtown store back then. We had a lot of employees.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Michael Pizitz: We had our own credit department. We had our own merchandising people there. I'm guessing three-hundred-and-something people. Today, Gus Mayer, between-- we have two Gus Mayer stores, Birmingham and Nashville, and we've got about ninety employees, about sixty in Birmingham, maybe sixty-five in Birmingham, twenty-five in

Nashville. And in the cookie company we've got a lot of part-time people, and no one wants to work anymore. But we've got a manager in every store and an assistant manager, but it is-- you read about people not wanting to work and there's not a restaurant in Birmingham you won't see a sign outside that we're looking for help.

Michelle Little: Closed for the day or-- yeah.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. We've had several days we had to close some of the cookie stores.

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We have a problem at Gus Mayer but not like that. We've never had to close but we did-- this January we started closing at five instead of six 'cause we were a little thin and that way we could cover the floor more.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: Cookies, I don't know how many. I'd guess in cookies between full and part time fifty stores, fifty-five stores, probably five-hundred people full and part time. But most of our cookie stores are out of state. There are not many in Alabama.

Michelle Little: Oh, okay.

Michael Pizitz: Our strongest state is Louisiana. My younger brother who is involved in cookies more than I am said everyone in Louisiana is fat 'cause they all like to eat cookies.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: But we went into the ice cream cookie stores about four or five years ago. We've got one now in Cahaba Village. You know where that is? By Whole Foods.

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Michelle Little: Yes, sir.

Michael Pizitz: We've got one there we opened about two or three years ago. In Louisiana I think we've got the largest cookie store in New Orleans in the country. The whole chain, not ours, but the whole chain. And we've also got I believe-- I believe we've got the number one and number two or one and three ice cream cookie stores combination; we sell cookies, and we sell ice cream. And all of our big stores happen to be in Louisiana. It's unusual but Baton Rouge and New Orleans are the biggest markets for us, not in Alabama, although we got some good stores in Alabama. Got some bad stores in Alabama, too.

Michelle Little: And there's a little dog joining the interview. [Laughter. A small dog walked into the conference room where the interview is taking place.]

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. My nephew's dog.

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Michelle Little: So what's the name of the cookie store?

Michael Pizitz: The cookie stores are called Great American.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: It's a chain. We're a franchise. And the ice cream stores are called Great American Cookies and Cream. It's ice cream with cookies.

Michelle Little: Yep, it's winning combination. [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. And the ice cream stores, none are in malls. Cookie stores are mainly in malls, but we've closed about ten cookie stores as malls have gone downhill.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: We've opened ice cream stores and closed cookie stores 'cause the ice cream stores none of them are in malls.

Michelle Little: I see. Okay.

Michael Pizitz: Cahaba Village would be an example. That's across the street from Whole Foods there.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: And that's about an average store for us. Again, the best two or three are all in Louisiana.

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah.

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This is a little off topic, but I wonder about the trend with malls declining somewhat. I don't know why.

Michael Pizitz: Well, there are a lot of reasons. One reason the malls are declining is every mall that was ever built was built with two, three, or four department stores. If you go to Riverchase Galleria there was Pizitz, there was Macy's, there was Parisian, that's three, there was Sears and Penney's.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: And as stores got in trouble they started closing. They started closing there. The Penney's closed some time ago. I don't know if Sears has closed there or not. I think they are.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: Parisian became Belk and they're still open.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: Macy's is still open there. Macy's closed in Brookwood.

Michelle Little: Yep.

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Michael Pizitz: But as the department store business in the centers declined it hurt the centers and these department stores were closed and dark and it was harder to get other stores to come into the center. For instance, Brookwood was once the best center in Birmingham. There's no question about it. We had a very good store there. Rich's, Macy's, they had a store there doing

between forty-five and fifty million, and that's a big department store for Birmingham, Alabama. And that declined. And as Belk closed that whole end of Brookwood has been dark for two or three years now. And also people would prefer to shop in lifestyle centers like The Summit where you're outside, you park, you move your car rather than an enclosed mall.

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And the rent structure in the enclosed mall was much higher for the stores because you got to pay for all the air conditioning for the whole mall. There's no air conditioning except in the individual stores but the whole huge mall has to be air conditioned. Very expensive.

Michelle Little: Oh.

Michael Pizitz: And it's just that the malls have gone down. There's still some great malls in the country but there's not a great mall in the city of Birmingham. Riverchase is okay but they had three shootings there in about three years and it's never been the same. They got some good stores there and they got some bad stores there. But the decline of the malls has been-- rents are too high because you've got all those other costs to pay for.

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Just think what a utility bill would be for Riverchase, which is probably a million-and-a-half square feet. Utilities have got to be huge. Air conditioning has got to be huge. Heating in the winter. And there's definitely a decline of the malls and that's why we have not closed one cookie store that was not in a mall. We've closed about ten and I don't even know where most of them

are. I don't know where a lot of our cookie stores are, but we've closed at least ten cookie stores because as the mall declined our business went down and it just wasn't profitable anymore.

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah. I had not thought about all that, the heating and cooling for the inside of the mall versus--

Michael Pizitz: And escalators if it's a two-story mall.

Michelle Little: -- and yeah, all that maintenance.

Michael Pizitz: The costs are much, much greater. Twenty-five years ago, twenty years ago it didn't make any difference. Brookwood was a great mall. Riverchase was a great mall. The other malls in Birmingham closed.

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The Western Hills Mall, Fairfield; Roebuck. Roebuck wasn't a mall, but it was very successful back then, and a lot of these things have gone down. The only mall left in Birmingham is Riverchase.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: Brookwood is going to totally close in the next sixty days, ninety days.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: When we went there with Gus Mayer which was in about-- you'll have to read in the book. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Yeah, it'll be in the book.

Michael Pizitz: Probably about [19]67. We went to Nashville probably ten years later. But when we went there in about [19]67 the whole mall was full. There weren't any vacancies.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Well, even in the [19]90s when I was in college at Samford Brookwood was bustling.

Michael Pizitz: Absolutely. And Riverchase was too.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: No question about it.

0:32:25

But times change and there has not been an enclosed mall built in the United States in the last two years. Think about that.

Michelle Little: Oh, that's fascinating!

Michael Pizitz: In the whole country there hasn't been one in two years built.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Michael Pizitz: I think the last one was in California but I'm not sure I'm right on that.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Michael Pizitz: But you may never see another mall. In fact, my guess is there'll never be another mall in this country.

Michelle Little: That's incredible.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah, it really is. They were popping up ten or twenty a year all over the country.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: And there's still some great malls. There's some great malls in New Jersey. There's some great malls in California. There's a mall in New Orleans that's doing terrific. That's where our number one cookie store is, and that mall is doing very well. I assume its location and a lack of competition from other malls. I don't really know.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: We've got a cookie store there in Lakeside Mall.

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We've got a cookie store that before the pandemic year did a million-four-hundred-thousand dollars and we sell cookie cakes at thirty dollars, but our average sale is about eight dollars, and we did almost a million-and-a-half dollars there.

Michelle Little: Oh, man.

Michael Pizitz: So that's a great mall. That's a great mall.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And then you have to wonder if the consumer likes The Summit style setup why didn't we just do that first instead of building all these enclosed malls?

Michael Pizitz: 'Cause that's all that was being built was malls.

Michelle Little: That was just what--

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. The Eastwood mall, I think, was the first air-conditioned mall in the south. You don't remember Eastwood Mall but it's where Walmart is.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: And I think it was the first air-conditioned mall in the entire Southeast and that mall was totally full for a long time.

0:34:26

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: Totally full. We were there, Parisian was there. I'm trying to think who else. A lot of local stores, New Ideal, which used to be downtown.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: I think New Ideal was there. But you couldn't get in there. You couldn't get a store there 'cause it was so busy and everything was being leased. I'm going back in the [19]60s and [19]70s. But malls back then were hot. And there basically weren't any real lifestyle

centers. There were strip centers everywhere, where you may have ten stores, two or three fast food restaurants, but there weren't any lifestyle centers as such, such as The Summit.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: And I'll tell you this, the lifestyle centers now are having problems.

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And the pandemic caused part of it, but The Summit which Bayer Properties owns never had a vacancy and they've got vacancies now all the time. Not a huge number. I'm guessing they're 90 percent leased but last week Brooks Brothers announced they were closing. Another big-- I can't think of the name of it. It's near Brooks, a women's specialty store. I know the name of it, and I can't think of it. They announced they were closing.

Michelle Little: Oh.

Michael Pizitz: And there are a lot of stores that have closed in The Summit. You never heard of that five years ago.

Michelle Little: I know.

Michael Pizitz: But it's on account of retail has gone down with the pandemic and everything else.

Michelle Little: Right. That Sur la Table that was down at the lower level, they closed during the pandemic.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. Yeah. There are quite a few stores that have closed there.

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Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: You used to have a Bruno's Supermarket there.

Michelle Little: Right!

Michael Pizitz: But that's been a long time.

Michelle Little: I had forgotten about that. Where REI is now.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah, exactly. That's been a long time.

Michelle Little: A long time.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah, they've been gone a long time. But even the strip centers today are not full. They're basically 85, 90-something-percent leased but they're not 100 like they used to be.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: There used to be no vacancies at Summit. It's just part of the times.

Michelle Little: Okay. We'll get back to your-- I've always been fascinated by retail history like that so I'm sorry I chased that rabbit. So getting back to your building, I'm looking at this

wonderful picture of y'all's building right behind you. So I'd really like to kind of paint a picture for listeners of this interview in later days.

0:37:18

Can you kind of talk about, like, what entrance did you go in every day and what were the different floors? Like, where the food court is now what was right there?

Michael Pizitz: The first floor was always-- they had a lot of problems with the food court there incidentally. They've had a lot of turnover.

Michelle Little: Oh, right. The current day food court.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. Coming and going.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: The first floor was always high-traffic departments, not high price. For instance, we always had ladies' accessories there. We had a men's store on the first floor, but it was a separate building connected to it. Ladies' handbags were there. Our low-price sportswear was on that floor when you first come in from 19th Street.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: The low-price sportswear department was there. That was the biggest sportswear department we had but it was right there on that floor.

0:38:22

The second floor was all children's, boys', girls'. We had toys there at one time and it moved up to the sixth floor, I think. The third floor was all women's apparel, coats, suits, dresses, better sportswear. We had a parking deck and the parking deck emptied right into the women's apparel 'cause it should be the most profitable part of the store 'cause women like to spend money.

Michelle Little: They do. [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: The fourth floor was linens and draperies. At one time we carried pictures and mirrors. No store in the country carries them anymore. I'm trying to think what else was on the fourth floor. Draperies, linens, sheets, towels, everything else.

0:39:25

And there were a few other departments that I can't remember. The fifth floor was all furniture. We had a big furniture business and the whole floor was furniture on the fifth floor. And the sixth floor-- toys moved up to the sixth floor and the sixth floor was toys. I don't remember what else was on the sixth floor. The seventh floor was non-selling. We had offices up there and things. But we had six floors plus the basement. Now, the basement carried everything. Didn't have things like furniture or appliances but they had linens and drapes and menswear and womenswear and lingerie. Basically every department was upstairs except what we called hardlines which would be furniture and appliances, things like that.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: Oh, the sixth floor was mainly housewares, small appliances, kitchen stuff. That was mainly on the sixth floor.

0:40:22

Michelle Little: Okay. And so the basement was sort of a separate--

Michael Pizitz: The basement was separate. It was run separately. We did our own advertising in the basement. And forever it was called Pizitz Bargain Basement. If we had it today it wouldn't be called bargain basement. It's got a bad connotation today. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Oh.

Michael Pizitz: But it was always called Pizitz Bargain Basement. And it was its own store basically. The whole basement was merchandise except we did have a drug department down there, toiletries and soaps. We had no prescription department there but carried Tide detergent and all this other stuff like that down there.

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

Michael Pizitz: We had a shoe repair department in the basement but everything else was merchandise, men's, women's, children's, and home furnishings.

0:41:26

But it was kind of like its own store. And everything we carried there was upstairs somewhere except for that drug department, it wasn't upstairs.

Michelle Little: Okay. And how did you get to the basement, like, if you entered on 19th or . . . ?

Michael Pizitz: The employees all entered on 2nd Avenue. That was our employee entrance. And we had two staircases from outside that go directly to the basement, and they got to still be there. I know the one on 19th Street is and I think the other one's got to be there too. We had two staircases, but most people just walked into the outside entrance. And we had an escalator there. We had the first escalators in Birmingham over one floor. We eventually had escalators going all the way to the sixth floor.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: And most people who went to the basement came in off the street, got the escalator down and the escalator up.

Michelle Little: Okay.

0:42:23

So where were the escalators located?

Michael Pizitz: They were right in the middle of the floor. And when they did the Pizitz Building-- there are no escalators there anymore.

Michelle Little: No.

Michael Pizitz: Bayer Properties took out the escalators and they put in an atrium with light coming down from the top floor.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: That's where the escalators were, and they were taken out, so you got light coming in all the way.

Michelle Little: So almost maybe where, like, the bar is in the food court, like, that central . . . ?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. That's about where the escalators were located, about.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: Real close to where the escalators were located.

Michelle Little: All right. So really y'all carried anything you needed it sounds like?

Michael Pizitz: We carried basically everything. At one time we carried washers and dryers.

0:43:22

We had a very big furniture floor, big furniture business. We had a warehouse on 1st Avenue South, 45th Street, 1st Avenue South. I don't know how I remember that. And twice a year we'd run warehouse sales there and we would take furniture and appliances that we wanted to mark down 'cause they weren't selling, and we'd have a one-day warehouse sale there and people could

come to the warehouse and buy things. It wasn't set up for that, but it was easy enough to do.

We'd put salespeople over there and it worked. It worked.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Wow. Now, what about maintaining and keeping a building of this size up? The escalators, the . . .

Michael Pizitz: Well, when my grandfather built the building around 1925, and I'll be within three years on that, when he built it, it was an all-cement structure.

0:44:21

The outside a lot of it was-- not sandstone. Whatever that stuff is. But it was built very, very substantially, very substantially. I'll tell you an interesting story that I've heard it so many times I know it's true. In about 1929 at the height of the recession, my father was in the store then, but my grandfather was still running the store in [19]29. My father had only been out of college about five years. He got a call from the First National Bank of Birmingham where we did our banking forever and there where the John Hand branch is on 1st Avenue North. He got a call from the president of the bank. I don't remember if it was General Persons. I don't remember who it was, but he got a call.

0:45:21

They said, "Mr. Louis--" Louis Pizitz-- "Mr. Louis, we'd like to see you." So he said, "I'll be over there in . . ." whatever. And it's a block from our store, so it's one block from 19th Street to 20th on that corner. And he goes over there and goes in the president and chairman of the bank and

said, "Mr. Pizitz, we're going to have to call your loan." My grandfather-- during the recession, the steel mills were shut down. They weren't running then in [19]28 or [19]29. A lot of the teachers weren't working. A lot of the teachers were out of jobs. And my grandfather used to give what was called script. And script was IOUs. It wasn't steel mills; it was coal mines were shut. Coalminers and teachers were out of work. He'd give them script.

0:46:23

I don't how much he gave them. Obviously too much. But you'd come and they'd want to buy something for forty dollars, and they couldn't pay for it, and they would write out an IOU. And he had a safe full of IOUs. And the bank told him, "You can't take those. They're never gonna be any good." I don't know what percentage were good but a large percentage of were good after the recession. But the chairman of the bank said, "Mr. Pizitz, we're going to have to call your loan." And he said, "We don't have the money to pay it off. We took all this script. It's gonna be good. When the recession is over the coalminers will be back at work and they're gonna pay us," which they did. I don't know whether they paid 80 or 90 percent. I have no idea.

0:47:11

And my grandfather reached in his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, probably fifteen keys to every outside door in the store, put them on the chairman's desk, walked out of his office, and said, "Mr. Persons--" I think that's who it was, but whoever it was--"Mr. Persons, the bank now owns the department store 'cause we don't have the money to pay off the loan so you own the department store." My grandfather-- I've heard this from my father twenty times [Laughter]-- my

grandfather got up and walked out of his office, got to the door to 1st Avenue and the chairman of the bank came running over after him and said, "Mr. Pizitz, come back. We don't want to be in the department store business."

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: The store had only been open two or three years, and had he said we're calling your loan we'd have been out of business. My father said there's no way in the world we could've survived. We didn't have the money. It's like during the height of the pandemic we had several stores closed for a month at least a year ago, maybe a month and a half, and we did business with First National Bank which is now Regions.

0:48:27

We did business since 1915. We had to be one of their five or ten oldest accounts in the country. And when the pandemic came and we had a lot of cookie stores close, Gus Mayer stores were closed for not a long time, maybe thirty days, and we could not make our regular payments which we'd made for a hundred years to the bank, and Regions they treated us like we'd been a customer for two years, not a hundred-and-fifteen years. And we had to work out a financing plan with them and they upped their interest rate with us. We paid everything off. And in January we closed our account and went to ServisFirst. We'd been there a hundred-and-fifteen years, but they didn't care. All they knew is if you can't pay your loan, we don't want your business anymore.

0:49:25

Made no sense to me. Made no sense. They knew the pandemic would be over and it's just like a recession. The pandemic didn't last-- I mean, it's still there but it's very rare we close a store. The only reason we close a store is help. We don't close a store because of business. But they met with us. My nephew is the financial officer here. They met with him, and they said we've got to work out a financing plan with you. And our interest rate went from 3.25 or 3-- we had a very low interest rate-- to 5 or 6 percent. And our business started picking up and got much better, but they didn't care. They wanted us to pay it off. We met with three banks, and we decided on ServisFirst, one 'cause we know the chairman there, we know some of the board members, and also they're local.

0:50:23

The other two banks were out of town, but they were big banks. And now we're with ServisFirst and got a great relationship.

Michelle Little: Wow. That's wild that they, after over a hundred years . . .

Michael Pizitz: I can't imagine they had many-- a handful of accounts that had been with them that long.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: I know it went back to around 1915 before the downtown store was even built.

Michelle Little: Almost a hundred years later, the depression in the [19]20s and then y'all had to deal with the pandemic in the 2020s.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. The world war, the pandemic, and everything else. But today we've got a much easier business than the department store. The department store business is not easy anymore. It's just not easy. The cookie stores are an easy business but it's not quite as good as it was. We're making our numbers but back before the pandemic business went up every year, every year and it's a very profitable business.

0:51:23

And Gus Mayer, which is not an easy business-- have you ever been to Gus Mayer?

Michelle Little: Oh, I love Gus Mayer.

Michael Pizitz: Good.

Michelle Little: I love their shoe department a little too much. [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: We've got an excellent shoe department, no question. But Gus Mayer is not an easy business, but we've done very well there. Our business had never been better. There are only, I'm gonna guess, ten to twenty stores in the whole United States like Gus Mayer that are fairly sizable specialty stores that are still in business. I don't mean the little stores that are four- or five-thousand feet like Etc... in Mountain Brook or Village Sportswear. [Sounds of thunder] Hmm, it doesn't look too good out there.

Michelle Little: Yeah. There's the storm.

Michael Pizitz: But there are really only ten or twenty stores in the country like Gus Mayer, and our success, I think-- well, I know what our success is. We got the best people of any store in Birmingham. Belk is self-service. Macy's was self-service before they went out of business there.

0:52:26

I imagine they're going be self-service at Galleria. But we have always staffed very heavy. Some of our salespeople make a lot of money. You wouldn't imagine how much a salesperson selling shoes or dresses or whatever can make just as a salesperson. But it's one, we got great people, and two, we don't have a lot of competition 'cause there's no big store like that in Birmingham. There's none in Atlanta. There's no store like Gus Mayer in Atlanta, believe it or not. There's one in Little Rock, there's one in Jackson-- not Gus Mayer but similar, there's one in Jackson, Mississippi, there's one in Little Rock, there's one somewhere in Ohio. I don't know them all but there are probably fifteen stores like us in the country.

Michelle Little: Yeah. It's a special place for sure.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. And if you don't have people, you go out of business. You've got to have good people there.

0:53:27

Michelle Little: And so what were some of the ways when you were still downtown, what were some of the ways you saw department store business change in the decades that you were working? I know that's a big question.

Michael Pizitz: Well, it is, but it was obvious that downtown started to decline as it did every-- almost every downtown in the country. I'm just trying to think who, but New York City maybe hadn't declined. But Neiman Marcus opened a store right outside of basically downtown. Two years they closed. That's unbelievable because tens of millions of dollars they spent on that store. It's in Hudson Yards. I never saw the store. But the downtowns all over the country started to decline and it was obvious our customers wanted to shop in the suburbs where they lived.

0:54:25

They no longer wanted to drive downtown and park and have that hassle. And I don't think it was a crime problem but there's a perception of crime downtown. The Galleria has had more crime than downtown, but there's a perception that downtown there's crime. But people just don't want to go down there and park unless they're at an office. Are there any large stores downtown open? I don't think so. There used to be, before your time, it was Burger-Phillips, there was Blach's, there was New Ideal, there was Porter's, there was Henry Porter, there was Loveman's, Pizitz, Parisian. There were about eight or ten big stores. Every one of them are gone downtown. There's not one of them left downtown.

0:55:26

That was the same thing with the suburbs. Blach's, Parisian, Pizitz, don't remember about New Ideal. Burger-Phillips went to Mountain Brook. Almost all these stores went somewhere in the state. The only ones that went out of state was Parisian, and we went all over the state of Alabama. We did not go out of state. But it was an era-- e-r-a not e-r-r-o-r-- there was an era back in about-- probably in the early [19]60s where stores decided they had to go to the suburbs where people lived. They weren't going get those people in Mountain Brook to drive downtown and shop. Some do but not many. People that work downtown may go shop in the stores.

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But there's not one store that I can think of of any size downtown. I just named about ten stores that are all out of business. It was just like the malls are giving way to lifestyle centers, downtown gave way to malls. It's just a change in environment. And when I went in the business in the [19]50s and my brother, I think we had a store in Bessemer, but we had no other branch stores. And Bessemer eventually closed 'cause it was a fairly low-end economic area. It's much better today. But we had a store there which eventually closed and then we started going to Roebuck and Five Points West and Eastwood Mall and Galleria, Summit, and then we went to three or four out of town stores.

0:57:22

But the only one that has branch stores today that were originally in downtown were Parisian, which is now Belk, and our stores are now Belk. We sold out to McRae's in Jackson, Mississippi

and they sold out to Belk. And Parisian sold out to some chain I think in Tennessee, in the Midwest, and then they eventually sold out to Belk. It's the evolution of what's changed in retail.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So y'all added a parking deck at one point?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. We added a parking deck. We had to 'cause there wasn't much parking down there. We added a parking deck, and it certainly helped the business. We put an entrance directly from the parking deck into the store. We had a walkway between the parking deck and the store which still exists. It's the entryway to the Pizitz Building.

0:58:23

And on the walkway when you got to the thing, we were in the bakery business back then and we put our bakery goods on that walkway so people going home they'd see that bakery, they'd buy something to take home.

Michelle Little: Oh!

Michael Pizitz: So it did fairly well. We at one time had quite a few bakery stores. Almost all of our stores had a bakery. And also, we opened some free-standing bakeries, and I don't know how many we ever-- we may have had twelve or fourteen at one time.

Michelle Little: Oh, I never knew that.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah.

Michelle Little: What years was . . . ?

Michael Pizitz: I'm going to guess it was the [19]70s.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: Guess it was the [19]70s that we opened-- I can't remember where the freestanding stores were. There was one out 280. I don't even remember where it was. But I think every one of our stores that were open at that time, Eastwood, Riverchase, Summit never had a bakery 'cause it came on much later.

0:59:29

Roebuck had a bakery at one time. But we had quite a few bakeries. It was a good business back then. We had a Swiss baker named Curt Hertrick [sp]. I remember that name. And he was very talented 'cause he was a Swiss baker; he wasn't some American baker.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: He eventually left and eventually we got out of the bakery business.

Michelle Little: Okay. So was the bakery attached to-- 'cause there was a little restaurant in The Pizitz, as well, right?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. We had a restaurant on the balcony.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: We had a beauty salon on the balcony. And then across from it or next to it we had a-- we called it The Pizitz Tea Room. It was lunch. We weren't open at night 'cause the store wasn't open at night.

1:00:21

And we had a restaurant there. And at one time we had a restaurant on the main floor, which was mainly sandwiches and salads, things like that. I have no clue when we closed that.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: I just remember we had it at one time.

Michelle Little: Okay. And what floor was the balcony on that would've had . . . ?

Michael Pizitz: I'd be between the first and second floor.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: The balcony wrapped all around the second floor. You can see it today. You can see the balcony there today. They're trying to do some workstations there and things like that, but the balcony went from one end to the other. We had offices there. We had a bookstore there at one time, we had the restaurant there, and we had a beauty salon there.

Michelle Little: Oh, my gosh. It just sounds incredible. I wish I could go back in time and see it.

Michael Pizitz: [Laughter] Yeah. It ain't gonna happen.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Okay.

Michael Pizitz: You're not gonna ever do enough business in a beauty salon downtown to make it work.

1:01:27

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: But back then it was a big business, going back to the [19]50s and [19]60s, you didn't have all these beauty salons all over Birmingham.

Michelle Little: Right. Okay. So you guys decide-- [weather alarm] oh, that's a weather alarm it sounds like. Tornado warning.

Michael Pizitz: Yep.

Michelle Little: Okay. I think we better pause here. [Pause recording to review weather alert and see where the tornado is tracking.] Okay. Let me see. I've lost my train of thought after the alarms.

Michael Pizitz: The department stores and the big specialty stores in downtown Birmingham at one time were the center of life. That's where people all shopped. Eastwood Mall came onboard in the probably [19]50s but none of the other malls were built back then. And the center of life was downtown.

1:02:21

You're not from Birmingham originally, right?

Michelle Little: No. I've just been here since 1998. Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. I named them, we had six or eight specialty stores, Blach's and Burger's and Porter and Henry Porter and Mark Linx [sp]-- think of all of them-- Parisian, which was small then. Obviously got very big. But all these specialty-- everyone shopped downtown. It was the center of life.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And can you remember, what were some other-- you had mentioned some other department stores but, like, restaurants and just other businesses that were on 19th and 2nd?

Michael Pizitz: Loveman's who was our competitor and one block away, it's where the McWane is now, Loveman's had a full restaurant there, full department store. They were our big competitor. The had a basement like we did.

1:03:22

There were also restaurants at-- there was a Woolworth downtown, there was a Kress downtown, there was a Newberry downtown. These are chains. I don't know if Kress is still around in the country or not. I really don't.

Michelle Little: I don't know.

Michael Pizitz: But Kress and Woolworth-- Woolworth I think probably is still around-- they had restaurants on their first floor of all their downtown stores.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: And it was just the center of life. That's where people went to shop, they went to movies. You had a few suburban movie places but most of them were downtown. I got a good memory for long term. I can't remember what I did yesterday.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: But we had the Alabama Theatre, we had the Lyric Theatre, we had the Empire, we had the Strand, the Ritz. There were about six large movie theaters all within about a two-block area downtown.

1:04:26

And that's where people went to the movies. Homewood had a theater and there may have been one or two other ones, but they were just small neighborhood theaters. But people who went to the theater back then in the [19]50s and [19]60s all went downtown to movies.

Michelle Little: And would you normally eat your lunch at the store every day or would you go--

Michael Pizitz: Almost every day.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: My father would eat there six days a week. Never ate anywhere else.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: He'd go to the Tea Room every day. And we'd go out some, but I'd say three or four days every week you'd eat there in the Tea Room. Just easy, cheap, convenient.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: So there wasn't any reason not to.

Michelle Little: Right. It's right there.

Michael Pizitz: Yep.

Michelle Little: Did you have another favorite place nearby that you would go to?

Michael Pizitz: Probably John's. John's is still there. I don't know if it's open or closed now. It was closed last time I saw it.

Michelle Little: I think they're open every-- maybe for lunch I think they're open.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. Yeah. I'm not sure. They might be.

1:05:24

But John's was a family-owned business. The family started with a P. I can't remember what it was. But it's been sold out since then, but it was a family-owned business, and everybody used to like to go to John's downtown.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: It was only two blocks from the store.

Michelle Little: Right. All right. So your family sold in [19]86.

Michael Pizitz: Sold in [19]86. Rich's came to Birmingham-- Rich's now Macy's-- Rich's came to Birmingham in the beginning of [19]86 and we were worried that this huge store from Atlanta, one of the biggest stores in the South, we thought they would be very difficult competition and we hired Morgan Stanley to market the business. And they marketed it, and nothing came of it.

1:06:26

Did not sell or anything. In the spring of [19]86 McRae's from Jackson had-- we were in the same buying group in New York. We knew about each other. I knew most of their buyers and they knew our people and so forth. In the spring they did not have any interest in buying us. They were about the same size we were, a little bigger, not much, headquartered in Jackson, Mississippi. And in the fall, we got a call from two other stores. One of them was a store out of Louisiana that's now bankrupt, and the other was from Rich's, now Macy's.

1:07:19

And I don't think they had any real interest in buying us, I think they wanted to just know what we were doing, how much business we were doing and everything else. And the store in Louisiana, we were much bigger than they were. They couldn't buy us. And McRae's came back, and we started negotiating with them in fall of [19]86 and we sold out on December 30th. And the tax laws changed. Taxes went from 20 percent in [19]86 to 28 percent, and that was a big

number and we decided we have to get a deal done in [19]86 or we weren't going to do it, 'cause it was 8 percent of the sale price.

Michelle Little: Oh, okay.

Michael Pizitz: It was a lot more taxes, I'll put it that way.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: And then we sold out to McRae's. They closed the downtown store and the downtown store had definitely gone downhill during that period. They closed the downtown store. We kept our offices there, my brothers and myself. No one else could keep their office there.

1:08:20

But we kept our office in the store. They closed it sometime in [19]87. They didn't keep it open very long. They were smart to do it. And we eventually moved into this building 'cause McRae's, once they closed the store and got rid of everything, they didn't want us walking around in their building. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Oh.

Michael Pizitz: I don't know how long we stayed there. Less than a year, I think.

Michelle Little: So even after they bought it and sold it y'all were still going in there to go to your offices once it was emptied out?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. I think it was a case of a few months. I don't remember.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: That's thirty-five years ago. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Right. Right. [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: But we kept them for a while and then they announced that they were closing down the building. And we owned the building, our family owned the building.

1:09:16

And this was [19]87 when it closed, and we sold the building to Bayer Properties. They wanted to do what they've done there with the apartments and food court and so forth. We sold it to them in I think about 2004. They were going to make it a office building and they had a deal with a law firm-- I think it was a law firm-- to take a lot of space in there and that fell through. And they sat on the building from-- and don't write these numbers down 'cause I don't remember-- but from about [20]04 when they bought it to probably 2013 or [20]12 when they started working on this concept. They got a lot of government money, put a lot into it. [redacted]

1:10:23

The food court has not been good. I didn't know it at the time but the reason in Birmingham, Alabama they don't do a night business. People don't go downtown to eat much at night in Birmingham. And Atlanta has got a big food court and I think it does very well. New York's got

a-- bigger cities they can do it in. I think they're busy at lunch, but they do very little dinner business.

Michelle Little: Right.

Michael Pizitz: So I don't think that part has worked. The apartments have basically been full. I'd say the apartments have been 90-percent-plus full, but I have no idea of they're making money there or not. I'm talking about Bayer.

Michelle Little: Right. Right. So your family owned it-- almost another two decades y'all owned the building?

Michael Pizitz: Yep. We owned the building from the time he started, like, 1925 until we sold it to them about 2004.

1:11:25

Michelle Little: So during that time, after [19]87 when you moved out for the [19]90s, did y'all go check in on the building or what did you think might become of it at that point?

Michael Pizitz: Well, they announced they were going to do apartments there, but they sat on the building for about-- and it was closed-- they sat on the building for close to ten years before they did anything. They started working on the apartments and the food court I'm guessing about 2012, 2013, something like that. And until then you really couldn't go in the building. They had some vagrants downtown that would break in there and sleep, things like that. But once they decided what they were going to do they got it under control and locked it up.

1:12:20

I used to go to the food court quite a bit-- not quite a bit but often-- and I've been there two or three times in the last year.

Michelle Little: Do you remember the first time you came to see the building after they had renovated it?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. I had a granddaughter in Atlanta, and she was over here visiting, and she was about 20 then. Was she still in college? I don't know if she was in college or not. About to get out of college. But I called one of the people with Bayer and I said, "Could we see one of the apartments?" I remember taking her up there and she said, "I'll take it right now!"

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: She said, "It's better than what I can get in Atlanta."

Michelle Little: Right. Right.

Michael Pizitz: But yeah, I visited that fairly early on but most of the units had been rented by that.

1:13:23

I wanted to visit my office, but I couldn't. There were people in there.

Michelle Little: Oh. [Laughter]

Michael Pizitz: My office was on the sixth floor facing 19th Street, and I was in there for probably-- after I moved out of the basement, I guess I was probably in that office twenty years or so. But someone was renting it, so I never got to see it. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Oh, no! [Laughter] So I guess kind of to wrap up, what does it mean to you and your family that your grandfather built this-- this is a big presence downtown, this beautiful building.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah.

Michelle Little: And it's still there.

Michael Pizitz: I think our grandfather was brilliant, a brilliant merchant. He came over here from Poland, now part of Russia, and he came through Ellis Island in New York.

1:14:24

And then he had some relative down in Swainsboro, Georgia and he moved there. And this is long before I was around. But my grandfather used to, in Swainsboro, Georgia-- when he came to Birmingham, too-- he used to peddle merchandise house to house. He would go from house to house and sell goods. I don't know where he bought it or anything, but he'd sell goods house to house. And he did that for years. I don't know how long. But then after that he opened a store on 1st Avenue.

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah. There's some great photographs behind you.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. I'll tell you, I'll show you two more I got in my office before you leave on your way out.

Michelle Little: Okay.

1:15:20

Michael Pizitz: The downtown store, very interestingly, the store was built in two sections. It wasn't built all at once.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: It was built from right here that way.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: And this was added. And you can see it right here. There's half the building. See it?

Michelle Little: Oh, I do! Yes. Okay.

Michael Pizitz: And the other half, that's the corner of 2nd Avenue and 19th Street right there.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: So why he did it that way I don't know. You wouldn't do that today. You'd do it floor by floor. But they built that part, then they built this part, and then they connected the floors together.

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

Michael Pizitz: And one of the floors is not exactly even. You got to walk up a little incline or down, I don't remember, 'cause when they connected-- I think it was on, like, the fourth floor, they weren't exactly even. You didn't know it, but you were going up or down slightly.

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

Michael Pizitz: But unusual the way he built the store.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Michael Pizitz: With this right there, that right there is this over here right here.

1:16:24

Michelle Little: Okay. Oh, that picture helps a lot.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Maybe I can take a photograph of those two pictures.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah, you can take pictures. I got another one or two in the office I want to show you.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I'd heard that it was built in two parts like that, but I couldn't quite picture it until-- this explains it.

Michael Pizitz: I didn't know it for a long time after it was done.

Michelle Little: So I guess he went ahead and bought that whole lot?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. He bought the whole thing back in the probably very early [19]20s. Bought the whole thing probably in the early [19]20s. Let me just see something. I don't know if this was the 1st Avenue store or eventually Pizitz. I don't know.

1:17:23

Michelle Little: I guess he was able to get the same builder to do the second part.

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. I think that's part of the new building there, 'cause originally when he opened up after he quit peddling goods door to door after that he opened a store on 1st Avenue downtown about a block or block and half from where the current store is.

Michelle Little: Okay. And was that when it was still called the Dry Goods?

Michael Pizitz: Yeah. Probably called Pizitz Dry Goods then, yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Michael Pizitz: I don't know where dry goods comes from but you don't hear that term today.

Michelle Little: Right. Right. You don't. You don't. It almost sounds like flour and--

Michael Pizitz: You can take pictures here and then I'll show you a couple pictures I got in my office you can take too.

Michelle Little: Okay. All right. Well, that's all the questions I have.

Michael Pizitz: All right. If you got any follow up call me on the phone or come by either one.

Michelle Little: Okay. Well, I'll go ahead and stop . . .

1:18:18

[End]