



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Leonard Kirsten

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Material contained in brackets [] has been added by editors subsequent to the interview.

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

HOUSE: Today is January 29, 2004. We're here with the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project, and I'm at the home of Mr. Len Kirsten, at his home at 4970 Battery Lane, Bethesda, Maryland, apartment 601. I'm the interviewer; my name is Sharon House. First, Mr. Kirsten, maybe you'll tell us when and why your family first came to the Washington D.C. area.

KIRSTEN: My grandparents on both sides were immigrants from Poland—from Russia and Poland—and they came here around the turn of the century. I think one grandfather, I know, came here to the United States in 1902, I think, and the other, a similar period, and they both, both families, settled in the Washington area. It was very typical of immigrants in those days to already have other relatives who had been here and who helped them along and helped them get established. So they had relatives here, both sides. And I'll talk mostly about my mother's side. My grandfather worked briefly in construction, in New York City, in the first years of the century, and he moved to Washington because there were relatives here, and he owned a little mom and pop grocery store, he and my grandmother ran it, for years, for maybe 40, 50 years. On the other side of the family, my father's family, they came here and after some starts in retail business, they opened a butcher shop, a grocery store which had a big butchered meats section, and it was all kosher, and they catered to the Jewish community, who in those days, the first decade of the century, lived in the area of Seventh Street NW, around O Street, P Street, all around there. And my father, after he was grown, opened up a used furniture store. He had a series of used furniture stores, and they were all in the downtown area, Indiana Avenue NW. And my mother—after they were married, my mother worked as a secretary in a law firm, but after I came along and then later my two sisters, she stayed home and became a homemaker and raised us.

HOUSE: And so you were born in Washington, DC?

KIRSTEN: I was born in Washington, the George Washington Hospital. The old George Washington Hospital.

HOUSE: The one they recently tore down?

KIRSTEN: No, the one before that. (laughs) There was one, on, I think it was H Street, near 14th and H—somewhere there.

HOUSE: I see. When were you born?

KIRSTEN: 1925.

HOUSE: 1925. And what were your first experiences, or first memories of Capitol Hill?

KIRSTEN: I remember Capitol Hill in the early 1960s. I opened up a public relations, a little one-man public relations office, in the little office building on Capital Hill, and my brother-in-law was one of the early developers of Capitol Hill—he's a contractor. He did the first large restoration on Capitol Hill, on First Street NE, directly across from the Library of Congress—the rear entrance of Library of Congress. [he meant to say "Supreme Court," not Library of Congress]

HOUSE: What was his name?

KIRSTEN: Jerry Silverman. And he took three or four rowhouses, retained the exterior, and turned them into apartments, some of them efficiency and some of them regular. And it was a very nice, nice-looking restoration. And it's still there. I think that that was—we're talking about 40 years ago. That was, has since been remodeled again. It's still the same exterior. But it was a popular place for people to live, because it was so—particularly so close to Supreme Court and Congress.

HOUSE: And when was this?

KIRSTEN: This was 1962, 63, something like that.

HOUSE: And so you opened up this PR business because he was up there. I think you told me the other day you also studied...

KIRSTEN: When I was a student at George Washington University, we used to come over and study at the Library of Congress in the old building which is the Jefferson, no, that's the Madison, no, the Jefferson building.

HOUSE: The oldest one now is called the Jefferson building.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, we used to study there. It was quiet and easy to get to on the bus. There were no subways.

HOUSE: And then you also said that you ate on Capitol Hill, you had lunch on Capitol Hill?

KIRSTEN: You mean when I was a student?

HOUSE: Yes, you were telling me the other day...

KIRSTEN: Oh yeah, there was a row of restaurants there. There must have been about six or eight of them, various ethnic kinds and...

HOUSE: Like what? What ethnic groups were there?

KIRSTEN: Well, I remember there was a Greek restaurant, American style restaurant, there was a Chinese restaurant, and...

HOUSE: And this was in the 200 block of Pennsylvania Avenue?

KIRSTEN: That would have been—yes, the 200 block, where the Madison library is now. There was a whole commercial block there. There was a florist, and...

HOUSE: That may have been in the 100 block. Would it have been?

KIRSTEN: Maybe that was the 100 block.

HOUSE: Where the Madison building is now. So, I didn't realize there were ethnic restaurants there then.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, they were—but, you know, nothing fancy about them.

HOUSE: In fact, you had a nickname for them, is that...?

KIRSTEN: Right. They were just—they weren't particularly good restaurants, but the food was cheap and the people used to call it the "Ptomaine Row." {laughter}

HOUSE: So, you went to school, you studied, and then, was this PR business your first business out of school on the Hill?

KIRSTEN: My first job out of school, I was assistant manager of the National Theater, and I did that for about a year. And then I left there and I became a public relations man for a trade association, a brick and tile manufacturers in the Dupont Circle area, and I was there for about nine years. Then I left there, and that's when I came over to, decided to get into the PR business free-lance, on my own, and I was becoming aware of Capitol Hill through my brother-in-law, so I got this office there and then I moved from Northwest. I used to live out on Massachusetts Avenue, and I wanted to be closer to my office and my work, so then I took an apartment on Capitol Hill. In fact, in another development that my brother-in-law had on Massachusetts Avenue NE, and I had an apartment there. It was easy; I could walk to my office.

HOUSE: What was the address of your office? Do you remember? Or the block it was in?

KIRSTEN: I think it was the 500 block. There was a Safeway store there, down the street. I don't quite remember the hundred block. It was around C or D.

HOUSE: It was on Massachusetts?

KIRSTEN: The office? No, the office was on Southeast, on Capitol Hill. Maybe it was on—it might have been Fifth Street. I'm not sure.

HOUSE: Okay. And did you tell me you had two different offices when you were working in PR?

KIRSTEN: No. My first PR office was in that building. Then I went in, a sort of a partner, with a man who had political public relations office, in this building called Capitol Hill Lodge, that my brother-in-law did, on Massachusetts Avenue. There were one or two offices there, and so I went in sort of as a junior partner in that public relations firm. I stayed there for a year or two, and that's when I started becoming very aware of Capitol Hill as a community, and noticing that nobody had a gift shop on the Hill. And in conversations and meeting with people in restaurants and bars, I sort of determined that there was a need for that. There was one gift shop, but it was kind of an old-timey kind of a gift shop that didn't have the kinds of cards and gifts that people on the Hill that I was getting to know—people who worked for Congress and other government offices—and I kept saying, "Gee, its funny you have to go over to Georgetown to get anything interesting as far as a gift shop." So the more I thought about it, the more I came to a conclusion that there was a need for it. I used to do my own market research, which consisted of going up to Pennsylvania Avenue, around Second and Third, around lunch time, and just standing on the corner to see who was going by, going to lunch. People from the Library of Congress, people from the House side—it was a little bit too far from the Senate side--and I started becoming aware of a noticeable number of people, some young, some older, who might very well be customers at a store like mine. So I borrowed some money, my parents signed the note for me, and I got in business.

HOUSE: How old were you when you started this business?

KIRSTEN: Oh, maybe about 40 or so.

HOUSE: And you said you were doing your market research in the same area where you eventually opened your shop. Did that property just become available? Or how did you happen to find that location?

KIRSTEN: Well, things weren't so great on the avenue in those days, and there were would be an empty store here and there, and I noticed that one at 305. I can't remember if it was occupied when I rented it or not, but I got a ten year lease on it. It was easier to find retail space in those days because the newer things on the Hill were just getting started.

HOUSE: So, your work with the Emporium [his gift shop] is one of the main reasons we're having this interview today. So tell us about that business. Tell us some of the unique aspects. What did you sell there? As you said, there was another gift shop, but yours was unique. How was yours unique?

KIRSTEN: It was very attuned to all the new things and trends that were happening in the 60s. I visited, before I opened up, a lot of very contemporary gift shops. There was a wonderful one in Georgetown, and I knew the owner. It was called Three Penny Bit. And they had the latest of everything. I copied a lot of things from them, and we were far enough away from each other that I wasn't considered competition. So he was very helpful in directing me. And I went to New York, and visited kinds of shops in the Village, some on Third Avenue, and looked to see what was trendy—what was up to the last minute, you know. Then started, after I rented the space, then salesmen would call on me, or I would go—I went to New York several times a year—three, four times a year—on buying trips, and going to gift shows, and that's when I found out, you know, that the wide neckties were in vogue, and I had them, and lots of dangly earrings that would could convert right on the spot to—if they had—if they needed pierced ears or if they had screw backs. And all that kind of thing. For a while I carried spices. It was like a sort of a little general store. Then we sold aprons, very contemporary designs. We sold—then posters started to come in. And they were all just black and white in the beginning. And the whole line originally was only about 10 or 12 posters. And then, as these companies got bigger, they had more to offer and I bought more from them, and later there were posters in color. But the original posters were oh, pictures of Charlie Chaplin, Theda Bara, Greta Garbo, some sports figures, and sometimes they got a little political. We had a Marlon Brando poster in a scene from a movie in which he rode a motorcycle, and this company had taken off Marlon Brando's head and put Bobby Kennedy's on there. {laughs} So there was Bobby Kennedy riding this big motorcycle. And that was a very popular poster.

HOUSE: How did you display your posters?

KIRSTEN: We started by just stapling them to the walls. The shop was small but then we ran out of space, so I started just stapling them to the ceiling. People'd just have to stand and look up to see where the posters were. And then there were some smaller ones which I think were in a rack, and you could slip the panels of the rack and see them, and take them out.

HOUSE: Did you have other political items that you sold?

KIRSTEN: Yeah. And I also started selling buttons. Buttons were a big craze, with all kinds of wording on them. Some of them were a little on the rough side. Now when you go into a shop you can find buttons that say anything in the world that you want, but I sort of made a decision about the buttons. There were a lot of fun buttons, but if they were too racy I kept them in a separate little cigar box underneath the counter, which made them even more intriguing to the customers.

HOUSE: Do you know what any of those were now?

KIRSTEN: Oh, gosh. I can't—well then I started having a lot of political buttons. A lot of anti-LBJ buttons, and anti-war buttons, and the peace sign. I had a lot of things with the peace symbol on them. Towels, boxes, neckties, anything like that. And, I'm trying to think—you were asking me...?

HOUSE: You mentioned the other day about a watch that you sold.

KIRSTEN: Oh, right. I was the first one in town that had the Spiro Agnew watch. It looked like a Mickey Mouse watch, but it was Spiro Agnew, and his hands were pointed to the times of day.

HOUSE: Was that pretty popular?

KIRSTEN: Yes, they were very popular. And I could only get a certain amount of them every week, so I used to have a waiting list for people who wanted to buy them. And I had some congressional offices who were Republicans, but who wanted the watch. And they would send—sometimes maybe even for their Congressman—and they would send somebody else over and they would tell me confidentially who it was for. And I once got a call from Ethel Kennedy. She bought a Spiro Agnew watch.

HOUSE: Well, who all were your customers? You mentioned some Congressional offices.

KIRSTEN: There were people who worked on the Hill and lived on the Hill, or maybe they worked somewhere else downtown, but they lived on the Hill, because particularly the young people were discovering that, in those days, the rent was cheap and you could get a townhouse for a small amount. Or the townhouses had been turned into apartments, or young folks would be sharing—sharing an apartment or sharing a townhouse. They were my customers, and I got to know them pretty well. And they were—the Capitol Hill community was fairly small then. It would extend over to the Northeast side as well, and all my customers, most of them, were people who were within walking distance.

HOUSE: Mostly young people?

KIRSTEN: Not necessarily. They were sort of 20s type folks—20s, 30s. But then there were people 40s and 50s, and even older than that. People who, some of them, who had lived on the Hill before it got trendy or fashionable, and stayed and liked the things that I had. So it was a wide swath. And also, there was a noticeable amount of students from various universities in town; GW, Georgetown, a whole group of them would take over one townhouse, you know.

HOUSE: You mentioned earlier that you had entertainment in the shop occasionally. Can you tell us about that?

KIRSTEN: Yeah, that started...I wanted to do something special about Valentine's Day, so I knew some of the young singers on the Hill. Some of them were folk singers, and so I arranged, for a week or so

before Valentine's Day, to just put a guy on a stool playing guitar and singing songs while people shopped for Valentine's. We had a lot of interesting things that would make nice Valentine gifts—little scented soaps and things like that—and it proved very popular, so I decided to do that every Saturday. He would come in for a couple of hours. And a lot of my customers, we were busiest on Saturdays, and we were open on Sundays, too, later on.

HOUSE: So you were open seven days a week?

KIRSTEN: Yes. And so people liked it. So I had one guy and then another guy used to just play guitar and sing. And the customers liked that. Some people just came in to listen, but maybe they came in and bought something as well.

HOUSE: Where did you find these singers?

KIRSTEN: They were just people that I knew on the Hill 'cause I lived on the Hill by then, I moved to—I had an apartment over a liquor store further down the block, and I was single then. I was divorced for some time then, and so I patronized the bars and restaurants on the Hill. And that's Mr. Henry's and Hawk and Dove and places like that. And I got to know a lot of people. And my shop was sort of a little meeting place too. So it was easy to find, when I wanted somebody who sang, to ask about it.

HOUSE: Was it successful right away? You said you signed a ten year lease, so I guess you were...

KIRSTEN: I was very optimistic! {laughing}

HOUSE: You were hopeful, yeah.

KIRSTEN: It caught on. Got better as it went along. It got better as more people moved on to the Hill. That was ironic—some of my really good customers—I had some upscale things too, among the little novelty things—I had imported ceramic casseroles, and stainless steel things. I had kitchen gadgets, and so, sometimes what would happen is, that, say a couple that had been coming into the shop for a couple of years, came in and said, "Oh, we wanted you to be the first to know we just bought a house on the Hill." So I said, "Oh, that's great. I'm glad to hear it." And then I said to myself, "These people are going to have mortgage payments, and not going to have such a disposable income anymore." (laughs) So I'll see less of them. But they came around.

HOUSE: Tell us what some of the other businesses on that 300 block—you were in the 300 block, right?

KIRSTEN: 300 block

HOUSE: What were some of the other businesses in that block at the time?

KIRSTEN: There was a business there on the corner of Third and Pennsylvania Avenue that was Morton's Drugstore, or Morton's Pharmacy, and it had been there long before I was there. There was my store. There was a restaurant that was called originally AV Restaurant. It was a Greek-style restaurant.

HOUSE: AV or A and K?

KIRSTEN: No, the original one was AV.

HOUSE: Like the one on New York Avenue.

KIRSTEN: Oh, wait a minute. That was—wait, I'll tell you in a moment. A and K.

HOUSE: A and K.

KIRSTEN: Right. And that was—the person who was 'K' had gone from that business, but the person who was the 'A' was a man named Angelo, a Greek immigrant, who ran a very good sandwich shop. And he would have some Greek specialties as well. But that's who was there when I first moved there. Then, two young brothers took it over and it became—they took over the restaurant and it kept the same name—and they expanded their Greek specialties and were very successful at it. Then further down the block there was a Lustre cleaners, a dry-cleaning store. There was a very nice shop called Extemporania, a women's wear shop. A very knowledgeable woman, very stylish woman who ran it. And she bought the dresses and coats and things that she sold from some very contemporary designers, and at good prices too; beamed to the people on the Hill. That was an awfully nice shop. And then there was a funeral parlor there, and I can't think of the name of it, but it was on that block. And then further down was a shop that predated me by several years. It was called Antiques on the Hill. It was run by a woman who was a legend on the Hill named Libby Sangster.

HOUSE: Was that the same woman that went over near Eastern Market—across from Eastern Market?

KIRSTEN: Later she moved to Eastern Market because the owner of her building, from whom she was renting, wanted the space to start a—his son and a partner opened up a pub there. And further down the block was a very nice grocery store called Roland's, and the corner was an Esso station.

HOUSE: So did that become the Hawk and Dove?

KIRSTEN: Yes. The Hawk and Dove.

HOUSE: That's where the antique store was.

KIRSTEN: And then just before the end of the block was a place called the Tune Inn, which was a kind of hillbilly redneck bar...

HOUSE: Still is.

KIRSTEN: ...that predated everybody and it stayed there. And sometimes the new people from the Hill would go in a little bit, and mix with the old redneck types. They got along fairly well.

HOUSE: Do you have any fun stories you'd like to share with us about some of these businesses? You were friendly with some of the owners of these other Capitol Hill businesses, right?

KIRSTEN: Right. The thing was that because the business community was very small on the Hill, to start with, and it stayed that way for a while, everybody—and none of us were in competition—there wasn't another gift shop or there wasn't another antique shop—maybe there might have been one more, but... so everybody sort of hung out together, and we would meet in the evenings in the restaurants and bars or just visit with each other during the day. And everybody was sort of looking out for everybody else. Everybody wanted everybody else to succeed so that the Hill would succeed. And in the same way the relations with the real estate people were very strong.

HOUSE: Is that mainly just that couple blocks there along Pennsylvania Avenue, or more broadly?

KIRSTEN: No, it extended. It went down, eventually, down on Eighth Street, Barracks Row, and that was a few years later than that. And then up on Seventh Street, there was a block just before Eastern Market that was small shops. There was a men's wear shop. There was a—maybe little furniture stores or clothing stores that—they'd come and go. And that was up in the 600 block.

HOUSE: Do you have any examples of how the businesses supported each other?

KIRSTEN: Well, we always spoke very positively of each other, and then there started to be a Capitol Hill newspaper, called the Hill Rag, that everybody read, and that was very supportive of the business community, because they wanted us to advertise in it anyway, and because it helped tell everybody what was going on. And a lot of the merchants involved themselves in community activities. I was particularly close with Friendship House, a settlement house on D street. I was on the board of directors for ten years or more.

HOUSE: How did you get involved with Friendship House?

KIRSTEN: Well, some of the people who were on the board were customers of mine, and they used to have an annual street fair called Market Day. They blocked off Eighth street—Seventh Street—in front of the Eastern Market, and people would put up stalls and sell things, and I got involved with them. People like Barbara Held was a real estate lady—she was on the board. And then I got on the board as well, and I used to every year run their bake sale. We got people to contribute baked goods. My mother,

everybody—and we sold them and it was part of the fundraising money we made for Market Day. And that was another thing that pulled people together. The Eastern Market was important place for people to see each other and talk about what was going on. It was the first time I had, even though I was born and raised in Washington—as an adult I had a real sense of community. I would see people in stores, or at the bank, or by the churches, or in the drugstore, and we knew each other, sometimes by name. And there was a lot of interchange like that. The library was important then. This was all before the subway, too.

HOUSE: Were there common challenges that the merchants faced? Was crime a frequent concern, for example?

KIRSTEN: Not close in. There would sometimes be incidents here or there. I would have some minor shoplifting situations, but we had a—people in the—police in the Fifth District were very good. There was a wonderful group of young officers who were sort of 20s and 30s, both white and black, who were attuned to the neighborhood and kept an eye on things. There were things that happened, but you felt comfortable with these officers. They would come into your store, or hang around. The younger ones, off duty, they would stop in the bars and just chit chat with people. They knew everybody, knew a lot of people by name, and they knew who some of the bad characters were, too, around the neighborhood, and kept an eye on them as well. Later on, when I had the deli, after I had the gift shop for ten years, up in the 600 block, there would occasionally be some problems. We were held up once, I think, but you always felt that the cops kept a pretty good eye on what was going on.

HOUSE: But you felt threatened, or did you and the other businesses feel threatened in the riots in connection with the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968?

KIRSTEN: It was a scary time, but it was bearable. We closed—I think for a day or two we closed after the riots came. We kept our shops closed. But then, because there was a military curfew in town, too, and I remember they had Marines come in and were patrolling our block, with guns, and, but nothing much happened there. There were a couple of close calls, and my shop wasn't hurt. After that I had boards made for my windows that could be put up in case there was a problem.

HOUSE: Did you ever have to use them? Or did you ever use them?

KIRSTEN: I used them once or twice.

HOUSE: On what occasion, do you remember?

KIRSTEN: When there was sort of a threat of a riot coming, but there was no damage in the 300 block, or even in the 600 block, but I remember there was a restaurant/bar, Mr. Henry's, their windows were boarded up, and you were very aware of it and it was a little scary, 'cause if you looked over the horizon

toward Seventh Street NW, you could see the sky red with flames that first night when it was burning. And I stayed—at that time I was living over one of the stores on Pennsylvania Avenue, so I didn't stay there for a couple of nights and I would just go over every morning to see if my store was still there, and it was, and then we opened up again, and the businesses opened up, there was—you know, some tension—but life went on.

HOUSE: And you were living in the 400 block of Pennsylvania then, did you say? Over one of the liquor stores?

KIRSTEN: In the 300 block.

HOUSE: Oh, you were living in that same block.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, over a liquor store, yeah.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

HOUSE: You had the Emporium gift shop from 1965-75 for ten years, right?

KIRSTEN: Right.

HOUSE: And then after that, what happened? What business did you have?

KIRSTEN: Well, my lease was up there, and so I looked around for another location, and I found one in the 600 block. A place that was then vacant but had been a gift shop. And so I moved my gift shop up there.

HOUSE: Do you remember the name of that address—I mean, remember the address of that one?

KIRSTEN: Yeah, that was 653 Pennsylvania Avenue.

HOUSE: Did you keep the same name of the business?

KIRSTEN: Yeah. I decided because they knew me from the Emporium gift shop, I thought maybe I could transfer that name, so I called it the Emporium Deli. And that maybe helped.

HOUSE: So you had more than a gift shop then. You didn't have food in the first place, right?

KIRSTEN: Oh, oh, when I first moved up there it was a gift shop. And I only operated for a year or less and it was a problem, being just a couple of blocks away. The Library of Congress crowd didn't come over so easily at lunch hour, and I lost a lot of that lunch hour business. And they weren't going to go all

the way up to the 600 block because the subway had not been put in yet. It was maybe starting to be—starting to dig there—and so there wasn't enough volume in the new gift shop although it was big and spacious and nice, it wasn't—I couldn't count on just the weekend business or people stopping on their way home. So I decided that I had to do something else, and I started thinking about some kind of a food store. And I was pretty friendly with Roland Pelletier, who owned Roland's Grocery Store, in the 300 block, which was [in the same block as] my old shop. And I approached him with the idea of—and I had always been interested in food anyway, food handling—and so I approached him with the idea that we'd open up a deli. A really fine deli that would cater to the new people on the Hill. And he liked the idea, and he had a lot of experience in food and groceries, and between the two of us we opened—we closed down the gift shop and opened up the deli, and it was a very fine deli. And we made sandwiches, and at the time we were trying to sell gourmet foods. There were all kinds of sauces and jams and interesting crackers and good breads and very fine bagels, and things like that.

HOUSE: Now was that before the Capitol Hill Wine and Cheese Shop?

KIRSTEN: Yes. They came soon after, and they were, in a way, competitors. But we could handle them. And then later Roland—it got to be too difficult for him, running his store down in the 300 block and then running up and being my partner in 600 block, and so he decided he wanted out. And I found someone to buy his half share in the business, and that someone was my brother-in-law, who has always been interested in food. He was the guy who was also the contractor and the...

HOUSE: Gene Silverman?

KIRSTEN: ...developer. Jerry Silverman. So he became my partner, and we changed some things around, and we started—we put in some chairs. We got rid of the— oh, we also sold beer and wine in the original Emporium Deli, but we got rid of the gourmet foods and things, and we put in some chairs and tables, and we expanded the sandwich menus there, and people could either carry out or pick up their sandwiches and go over and eat at the tables. And we had a lot of nice things. We had excellent fried chicken and french fries, we had these—it was a fryer, but it was like a pressure cooker—so it cooked the chicken very quickly and made it crisp. Then we put in pizzas, got pizza ovens and made our own pizzas from scratch, and then we expanded the grill. We had a lot of good hot sandwiches, steak and cheese, and when we decided to put in steak and cheese, the one place that had the best steak and cheese that we knew about was in Philadelphia, down south Philly area—I think it was south Philly. So I went up there and spent a day just touring the steak and cheese shops, or a couple of very well-known ones, and just sitting there and memorizing everything they did and how they did it, and then we came back and we experimented around, and we made a perfect copy of that Philadelphia steak and cheese, and for a while, for several months, we even bought the rolls from Philadelphia. They used to come down by one of the

express companies. So it was a perfect replica of the Philadelphia steak and cheese, and it was very popular.

HOUSE: I bet it was.

KIRSTEN: Then later we dealt with some local bakeries as well. And we had homemade soups, and we made everything from scratch.

HOUSE: And did you have the gift shop as well—or is this just strictly...

KIRSTEN: No. The gift shop was—yeah, we closed the gift shop after about a year or less. And we made—everything was made from scratch. Every day we made 30 pounds of tuna fish salad, 30 pounds of egg salad, and 30 pounds of chicken salad.

HOUSE: Well, who was your clientele at this business?

KIRSTEN: The same folks that I knew from the gift shop, and there were more and more people were moving into the Hill. And they found us, and then they would come up at lunch hour—we did a very busy lunch hour. They would come over from US Capitol, policemen from the US Capitol would send over. And we took phone orders, so we had it all ready for them. And they would come over, the local police, and just local people, local merchants, and then in the evening, early evening, people would stop by on their way home if they didn't want to cook. We had some excellent Italian sub sandwiches, too.

HOUSE: What were your hours at that place? Do you remember?

KIRSTEN: (laughs) They were back breaking. (laughs) We opened up about 7:30 or 8 o'clock in the morning.

HOUSE: Did you have breakfast, too? You said bagels...

KIRSTEN: Yes, no we had breakfast too. Very nice breakfast—eggs and ham and bacon and things like that. And we were open 'til, most of the time, 'til about nine o'clock at night. We once tried to be open real late, thinking we'd be the only one in town, but it was a little too dicey that late at night for people to stroll over, or if they drove over it'd be a little bit hard to find parking spaces. So we cut it back. We stayed open until about eight or nine o'clock at night.

HOUSE: And how many days a week were you open?

KIRSTEN: Seven days a week.

HOUSE: Wow.

KIRSTEN: And by then, we had—we also—we bought the building...

HOUSE: Who was your—you said, you and your partner—did you both work there full time?

KIRSTEN: No. I had a manager working for me, and my brother-in-law, who was main partner later on, he would stop in from time to time and give me input and ideas, but he had his construction business going, so I was the representative of both of us in the shop.

HOUSE: So you were on site most of the time.

KIRSTEN: Yeah. We had four apartments upstairs, which we rented out, and I lived in one of them. So I was there more than I wanted to sometimes.

HOUSE: How were those apartments up above over those places?

KIRSTEN: They were nice. Because it was an old building. I think when we moved in the building was about—maybe by then 75 years old. And there were four apartments, very high ceilings, very nice. We remodeled them completely, gutted them out, put in new kitchens—and they were very roomy and very comfortable, and they were very convenient. It was two flights up. We had two apartments on the second floor and two on the third.

HOUSE: Where they one bedrooms?

KIRSTEN: Yeah, they were one bedrooms, and the—I had the one on the second floor, and my living room looked out over Pennsylvania Avenue, and I could, in fact when I moved to Bethesda, the first couple of nights I slept here, I said, “My God, its so quiet! I’m not used to it.” Because I was on a direct route from Fifth precinct answering emergency calls out on Pennsylvania Avenue, there were sirens and cars going by and sometimes police helicopters flying over, looking for somebody. And I was used to that sound of the city. (laughs) Took a while to get used to it out here.

HOUSE: Yes. So when did you—how long did you have that business?

KIRSTEN: I had that business for eight years.

HOUSE: So, 75 to 83, or something like that, probably.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, something like that. I thought maybe I had made a note of the date but maybe I didn’t.

HOUSE: Are there any...

KIRSTEN: Did you want to talk about some of the businessmen...?

HOUSE: Yeah, I was going to ask you if there were any stories you wanted to tell about some of the business—other businessmen or other businesses on the Hill.

KIRSTEN: We all, again, even when the Hill expanded a little bit and the subway was opened. We all—we had a nice business community there. Everybody wanted everything to succeed. Some of them were newer entrepreneurs like myself, and of course the real estate people were a very important part of the community and the growth in the community, and they were—and people from the bank, from National Capital Bank, the Didden family [spells it]—and they took a great interest in the Hill and what was going on. The two sons of George Didden the senior, an older man who later retired, his two sons would come down—would walk down Pennsylvania Avenue to my deli sometimes to get sandwiches and get lunch, just as—they liked the sandwiches, but as a display of community. There were businessmen like Stewart Long, who with his partner Michael Lang, opened up the Hawk and Dove bar, and there was, I mentioned Roland Pelletier, and the businessmen, particularly the real estate people, they were the ones who kept things moving. They had an organization called C H A M P S, Capitol Hill Area Merchants—I can't—it was an association of businessmen on the Hill. Kind of like a local Kiwanis or something. And they participated in community activities. They aired community problems. They were a very strong presence.

HOUSE: And you were part of that? You participated...

KIRSTEN: Yeah, I was a member of that.

HOUSE: Where did you meet? Do you remember anything like that?

KIRSTEN: I think we met sometimes in real estate offices. I think maybe sometimes we met, had monthly meetings, in the bank, one of the banks—probably National Capital Bank. I participated in their projects. I was so wrapped up in the deli itself that I couldn't give as much time to it as I liked, but I did... And there were other institutions in the neighborhood that we were involved in. The Folger Shakespearean Theatre.

HOUSE: How were you involved with them?

KIRSTEN: I was one of the supporters. I don't think we had officers, but we had a support group that helped raise funds for the theater, encouraged people to go there. I know all the businesses would have posters and information, and I was a subscriber there and attended all their events. I even—I remember once they did a Russian play, and they were looking for a samovar, because it was a Chekhov play, so I loaned them this samovar that my grandmother had brought over (laughing) from Poland on a trip back in 1935. And it was on the stage, and I had credit in the program for it. But the merchants and people on the

Hill were very interested in supporting the theater, and it worked out very nicely. I remember once my mother made a lot of things—some things that I sold in my store. When I had the deli, she made brownies and five pounds of real Jewish style chopped liver every week, which we sold, and—but when I had the gift shop, she made some aprons that we sold, and some paper flowers that were very good. And I got a phone call once, when I had the gift shop, from the Folger. They were stuck. They were ready to do a production, and they were short a seamstress. She ran—she was ill or something like that, and they asked me did I know anyone who might come and start sewing costumes right away. So I said, “Sure! My mother!” So I got my mother down there, and she sewed some of these big Victorian costumes for two or three days running, and she did it at no charge. She didn’t want them to pay to do it. So we’re all very involved; it kept overlapping. Trying to think what else... We had good connections with the religious community. There was the Catholic church, an Episcopal church, two Catholic churches as a matter of fact, and I would support them in various ways when they had bazaars or things like that. I knew who those ministers were and they knew me, and that was another way that we—everybody got to know everybody in the neighborhood.

Trying to think what else... There was an American Legion, no I think it was Veterans of Foreign Wars. They had a clubhouse there in Southeast, that preceded any of us who had ever been there.

HOUSE: It’s still there.

KIRSTEN: It’s still there? Good. We used to go there. I remember once we had a big Halloween party there, a costume party, and that was kind of fun. The guys who came into the VFW were these good ol’ boys, veterans, you know, and they mixed well with the new type folks, you know. And that would happen in some of the bars, although it was mostly the new type bars, like Mr. Henry’s, where the newer type people were, but neighborhood types would go in there too. It was just, the whole thing was a very strong sense of community. You knew who the barber was, and he knew your name. Oh, and one place I forgot to mention in the 300 block. It was a real Hill institution called Sherrill’s Bakery. And it was there for years. It was there before I was even there. There was a man named Sam Revitz and his wife, Lola. It was a great old-time—it looked like a 1940s movie set. And they had these wonderful old waitresses who called you ‘honey’. And they baked marvelous cakes and pastries, and it was a landmark there. In fact, there was a man did a film, a documentary film on Sherrill’s.

HOUSE: I’ve seen it. It’s very nice.

KIRSTEN: Have you seen that film?

HOUSE: Yeah. They were selling it for a while.

KIRSTEN: Oh, is that right?

HOUSE: In the store, in the restaurant.

KIRSTEN: He got—he didn't tell them—he got a job there and worked there six months as an employee just to get the feel of the place. And then he approached this Lola and said that he—she was a real character. She was something. She lived way out in Silver Spring somewhere, drove in every day. Then she had an accident and she couldn't drive anymore—she used to take the bus. She had to take two different busses. And there was a restaurant in that same block called Mike Palm's [spells it]. This man and his—several of his children—worked for him. It was near the Trover Shop, the bookstore. That was a real neighborhood place that was there even before I opened my gift shop. I think we talked about the market, and that was another—Eastern Market was another place...

HOUSE: Right.

KIRSTEN: ...that was a great leveler and a great meeting place.

HOUSE: You told me a story the other day on the phone about when Mr. Henry's was being opened or founded, that the real estate people called everybody...

KIRSTEN: Oh yeah, I got a—Henry couldn't afford—he bought this restaurant called the 601 Club.

HOUSE: This is Henry Yaffe.

KIRSTEN: Henry Yaffe, yeah. And it was a sort of a country western redneck kind of a bar, and he wanted to turn it into a Victorian pub kind of place. But he couldn't afford to close up for several months to do it. And he knew a lot about remodeling and antiques and things like that. So what he did was just continue—begin the remodeling and kept the restaurant open, and little by little, month after month, one month after another, the new people on the Hill would start coming in there, but the old redneck kind of guys who hung out there still hung out there, too. And originally he had a little band, it was a little hillbilly band that played—country western band—that played there. And that continued also. And Henry gradually was putting in everything new, and there was one old guy who came in there all the time, who, after several months, noticed new paneling, old time posters on the wall, light fixtures, things like that, and it suddenly dawned on him that this place was changing from this country western bar to this Victorian pub. And he stood one day and surveyed the place, and he turned to Henry and said, "Henry, you ruined the goddamned place." {laughter} Oh, and I guess I forgot the part I was going to tell you, was that when Barbara Held heard that Henry had bought the place, when he first bought it, before any of the renovation was going on, she said, "Henry just bought the 601 bar, and we're all going over tonight. Call up everybody you know and spend some money over there and get some beer and drinks so that he'll

have a good first day there. And so we did, and it was packed, and we had a great time. Place was full of people, and we were all very happy about it. We found out the next day that under the terms of the purchase, the proceeds from that night went to the original owner, and Henry's money didn't start coming in until the next day. (laughs) I'm trying to think if—you know, part of that business community was starting to grow over on Eighth Street, down by Barracks Row, right across from Marine Barracks. That's another thing—the Marines were a presence on Capital Hill. That's part of this big melting pot that we had. I had—when I had the gift shop and then later when I had the deli, I had some of the Marines off duty working for me. Cashier, sandwich man—when I had the gift shop they would work behind the counter or do merchandising and stock shelves.

HOUSE: That must have been a comparison, because you also had a lot of people with long hair working there.

KIRSTEN: Yeah. That was always funny. The kids with the long hair, and then the short-hair Marines would be there on Saturday or Sunday, or sometimes even... And we all got to know each other, you know. There were the Marine band concerts were down at the Barracks. I used to go to those sometimes, and at least once a day you'd see these big, physically strong Marines out for their morning run. God knows how many miles they ran. And they would run up Pennsylvania Avenue by my store, and then maybe go all the way down to the mall, and then all the way back up again, doing their exercises.

HOUSE: Were their major changes on the Hill during the time you spent there? I guess you were there about 18 years, in business anyways, right?

KIRSTEN: Yeah, maybe about 20 years altogether.

HOUSE: Yeah, right, cause you had the PR business before.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, they—there were lots of changes. Just things like—well, the coming of the subway, which was—you know, changed everything, and it hastened the arrival of more upscale, new type shops. But we lost the Woolworth—the Kresge—there was a Kresge's Five and Dime that was wonderful, and eventually they moved out of there. There were two movie houses there on the Hill, too. There was one on my side of the street, in the 600 block, and there was one across the street.

HOUSE: Were those both operating while you were there?

KIRSTEN: Yes. But—and they would show sort of second run movies that had played all over town elsewhere. Television was coming in, and that didn't help them either. And the theater across the street, they rebuilt that part of the 600 block, but they kept the marquis over the sidewalk, has kind of a art-deco look to it, but it's all office and retail stores in there. Improvements came along. When Ladybird

Johnson's beautification program came in and was all over Washington, from Sixth Street down to Third or Second, there was a wide median strip, and through her influence, they installed some beautiful magnolia trees that bloomed every spring—and just lovely. I don't know if they're still there or not. But that was all part of her beautification program. It really made a lot of difference. Made us feel good.

HOUSE: I didn't realize she was involved in that.

KIRSTEN: Yeah. In fact, I wrote her a letter once and thanked her for it, and she wrote me back a nice letter back again.

HOUSE: So, when and why did you leave the Hill?

KIRSTEN: Well, I decided—the deli was open about eight years. It was—even with help that I had—and I always had about four or five people there and a manager—it was starting to get to me physically, too. I was on my feet all day long, and because I was conscientious I was there every day, and a lot of the time, and it just seemed time to go on and do something else. And so my partner and I both decided it was time to change. Plus, there were more food stores and sandwich shops opening on the hill, on Eighth Street, and that was diluting a little bit of our business. We probably still could have stayed open, but we just got to a point where we decided to close it out. And I got out of there, and I had another whole career after that. I went to work for Smithsonian retail. I was a retail manager at American History and Renwick Gallery and Air and Space. I did that for about, maybe ten years.

HOUSE: Were you still living on the Hill then?

KIRSTEN: No. By then I was living out here in Bethesda. That's right, yeah. I worked a couple of the little retail jobs just for less than a year, before I decided to investigate the Smithsonian. I was very pleased working there. I would sometimes see some of my Capitol Hill customers come into American History, you know, and we'd greet each other and hug and glad to see each other.

HOUSE: Well, anything else you want to add?

KIRSTEN: No, I can't. . . I think I told you about most of the different strands of this. Yup. I think that's about it, yeah.

HOUSE: Okay, well, thank you very much.

KIRSTEN: Alright.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

END OF INTERVIEW