



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: Goldstein and Co.

Featuring: Richard Levine and Allen Gross in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-71 and 2014-17) and Richard Sparks (former SF Opera box office and subscription manager, 1974-93)

(transcript read time ~ 13 minutes)

SF Opera Archives: Memories Project

The San Francisco Opera Archives has, since 2009, been interviewing leading participants in, or well-placed witnesses to, major events in the development of the San Francisco Opera Association.

In 2009, Ann Farris, former administrative staff, began typing notes as former staff and others shared their experiences with SF Opera and/or its affiliates. In 2013, Richard Sparks, former season ticket manager, joined the Archives volunteer team and has accompanied Farris as they interview former staff, artists and others. Later, they began audio recording interviews. Beginning in 2017, interview questions are included in subsequent Memories, as part of the interview reports. Most recently, Mary Seastrand, Marianne Welmers, Stan Dufford, and Richard Balthazar joined the Archives volunteer team assisting in the editing and electronic organization of these materials.

Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is held by the Archives of the San Francisco Opera Association for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Interview conducted on: 12/16/2019

San Francisco Opera Affiliation: none

Participants: Ann Farris
Richard Sparks
Richard Levin
Allen Gross

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

RICHARD LEVIN [RL]: Hello

ANN FARRIS [AF]: Hi. It's Ann Farris on the line, with...

ALLEN GROSS [AG]: Hey Rick

RL: Hi, Allen. Hello Ann.

AF: And there's one more person here, Richard Sparks, who is my colleague on this project.

RL: That's great. I wish you luck with the project.

AF: Thank you. It's been quite an amazing project.

RL: Yeah, that's terrific. You're doing the whole thing...the whole history of the Opera?

AF: Well, not really. But what we're doing is going after areas that we don't know much about and find that it's very necessary to the company archives. So, yes – it's like Goldstein's. Nobody had the answers for Goldstein's.

RL: Well, Allen had it pretty...maybe 70%. He did pretty well.

But I can fill in a lot of other stuff. I can definitely be some help.

AF: OK, great. Now my first question is shall we start at the beginning of Goldstein's?

RL: Yes. OK, good. So, the Company was established in 1868.

AF: Wow.

RL: I know that because on the stationary in the 1960s it had...it was sort of a little ornate logo and it had "Established 1868" ...

AG: I remember that. I remember that.

RL: Right. And it was Goldstein and Cohen in its initial incarnation. And they were wig makers, at first. Now what I'm not totally confident about, we can go back even before the company was founded, is whether Simon Goldstein was the immigrant or whether he came with his family. The family lore was they crossed in about 1856 to San Francisco by wagon train and the gold rush was sort of already petering out but still lots of people were migrating. And Simon couldn't have been that old at that point. I mean, his oldest child was born in 1883, so if he was an adult in 1856 he would have been in his late forties or early fifties when he had his first child, and close to 60 when my grandfather was born. It's plausible that he came with his family in 1856. I don't know that for sure. But I'm kind of inclined to think yes, because he definitely met his wife in the United States not in Germany. His wife was Irish. Simon Goldstein's wife was a woman named Margaret Moran. So, it was Simon and Maggie. Simon Goldstein and Maggie Moran. Kind of an odd couple.

AG: Hence Dominican for your mom.

RL: That's where the Dominican comes from. My mother went to middle and high school at the Dominican Convent in San Rafael.

RL: It's where the ...it turns out it's even more complicated. My grandfather, Louis Goldstein, son of Simon and Maggie, himself, was raised a Catholic and he only became a Jew when he met this beautiful Jewish woman, my grandmother, Rose Wiseman, and married her. And so, he was psychologically a Catholic and I think that's where my mother...and the Dominican Convent came from.

AG: That fills in a hole.

RL: So either Simon, or Simon's father migrated ...but in any event, Simon founded Goldstein Company in 1868, Goldstein & Cohen, actually. They made wigs and at some point, they branched into costumes. I'm not quite sure when. But certainly, by the 1890's because they were costuming all of vaudeville. San Francisco was still a pretty raucous scene and so there were lots of theaters and lots of theatrical productions and musical revues and things like that. And that became the core business—to costume these theatrical productions in the late 19th century. Later they actually branched into film costuming in the silent movie era and for example costumed D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the highest grossing silent film ever made. It was Goldstein's costumes in that movie. There's a whole sideline I won't take you down unless we have time, about what happened to a Los Angeles branch which was run by my great-uncle, Robert Goldstein, but that's a whole other story.

AG: I found a court document from....

RL: So, then I'd better tell you. Robert Goldstein costumed for D.W. Griffith. He was the older brother... maybe eight years older than Louis, born in 1883. And he set up a Los Angeles office to get into film, I think technically separate from the San Francisco operation. And he costumed *Birth of a Nation* and other silent films. And with the great success of *Birth of a Nation*, which was an epic of the Civil War, he decided to make a movie himself, to produce a movie, that would be an epic silent film on the history of the Revolutionary War. Well, it was ill timed, because it was introduced in May of 1917 just a month after the United States entered into World War I on the side of Britain. And the government decided that this film, which depicted the British as bad guys, was inappropriate. It gets more amazing; the government attempted to censor it. He refused to comply with the censor and, I mean, they were just mounting up the war effort so I can't imagine that the censorship operation was very sophisticated, but basically they said "you can't do this" and he said "well, I'm going to do it" and he released the film in California after a test run in Chicago and he was arrested for espionage and convicted to a ten year prison sentence. (Sounds of amazement.)

The sentence was commuted at the end of the war by Woodrow Wilson to three years service but it kind of ruined his life. He went back to Europe at the end of the war and never got his act together. I didn't know anything about this man when my grandparents were alive, or when my mother was alive. I mean, no one ever told me about him. I didn't know he existed. A researcher actually called me up earlier this year to ask me questions about my Great-Uncle Robert Goldstein and it was completely new to me. There's a lot of literature about it. There's a whole book about him that was

partly a memoir, partly a history that Robert Goldstein wrote years later. It's a very sad story. It's a sideline to what you're doing but there you are.

So anyway, by this point Louis was born in I think 1891, It might have been earlier. I don't think he was that much older than my grandmother who was born in 1896. But then he went into the costume business, and evidently by 1915 when his brother moved down to LA, Louis, presumably age 24, 25, was running the San Francisco operation. Now, the family story is that we started making the costumes for San Francisco Opera right at the beginning.

AF: Ah!

RL: Merola and my grandfather came to know each other, and we were making the costumes right from the start.

AG: That's the story I remember your mother telling me.

RL: I can't prove that and I may be wrong. I went on the internet and tried to search a little bit about this. I found that in your archives you have records but they only go back to 1938. As of 1938 it's clear that every production was costumed by Goldstein's. But what happened between 1922 and 1938 probably is easier to figure out from your archives than from my imagination. I think that ... what we were told is that we got with the Opera Company right from the start. It can't be verified unless you can find some verification.

AF: We'll have to comb the programs and see if there any place that they got credit. [Edit: Goldstein & Co is credited in the San Francisco Opera House programs from the very first performance of the company. In fact, it is credited for costumes and wigs. Wigs disappear from future performances.]

RL: But anyway, I think there was a close relationship between the Opera Company and my Grandparents. By the way, the business was run by Louis until he died in 1950 and then my grandmother Rose, who Allen remembers with fondness. She was a character.

AF: And I remember her too because she was still at it when I was here.

RL: Right, right. So, she ran the company from 1950 to about 1969 or '70 when she had a stroke.

AG: '70

[Edit: AF: I was married to Robert Darling in 1970 and Rose threw a wonderful dinner party for us during the Fall Season. So, I would conjecture that she had the stroke in 1971 for I never remember hearing that she had a stroke. I left the company in August of 1971.]

RL: Yeah, and then my mother took it over briefly and Allen, you knew all about that, you were around, but after my mother ran it for maybe a year, a year-and-a-half, they decided to sell the inventory to the Opera, and liquidate whatever else people bought, so the company closed down in '71 or '72. I learned of the sale from my mother, not the Opera Company.

AG: That was in '72. Because the '71 season I was there in the scene shop and the '72 season I went out to

the carpentry shop and the... January through March of '72 that my...I remember Kathy, I was married to at that point, and she and I used to take the costumes they wanted to get rid of. We would throw them into a van every weekend and go down to the flea market.

RL: But the bulk of the opera costumes were transferred to the Opera Company.

AG: Right, right.

RL: It might have been earlier...it might have been '71, I'm just not sure. And then of course the staff, the key staff who were really knowledgeable about the costumes, went over to become Opera employees. Walter Mahoney became the head of the Opera's costume department. He was the most senior costumer at Goldstein's and he was amazingly knowledgeable about opera. He had an encyclopedic memory. He could just remember the details about everybody's costume. He could tell stories about difficulties with some diva's measurements in 1947 and stuff like that. He was great. He stayed at the Opera company for many years as I understand. And I think John Blauer went with him initially, but he retired sooner and died younger. And then the third guy was the wig man, Ron Lynn. But I don't know how long he stayed there. But initially those three all went over. Others like Marcella Doran, who ran the shop, retired. [Edit: According to the 1972 SF Opera House Program Marcella Doran worked for the Opera for a short time.] So, that was the transfer. In the middle of all this, in the years I remember, I would say from the middle-to late 1950's when I was sort of aware of all of this until the time they transferred the stock over, my grandmother made quite a life for herself. She really enjoyed the relationship. She had this amazing love/hate relationship with Kurt Adler.

AF: She and many others.

RL: They both had tempers and they both...I remember witnessing them screaming and yelling at each other and kissing and making up. They were good friends but they were both very emotional about getting it right and they both had different visions about getting it right. The whole process was fascinating to me because my grandmother had no experience with any of this until 1950 when she was 54 years old and walked into it; it turned out it suited her.

She had a good color sense, I think she always had had a good color sense, and could draw. What was so impressive was her work on new productions. New productions were the most fun. They were the big challenges every season. There would be three or four new productions. The idea of translating what the artist's impression was into what fabrics would communicate this impression, how do you match the colors, and even more important, what textures, what fabrics are going to give the same impression to the viewer that the artist's sketch gives them. My grandmother was really good at that. And I think everybody acknowledged that. She had quite a feel. And, of course she ... everything was on tight budgets, so she was going to – what was the name of the fabric store, Weinstein's? It was something like that.

AG: Britex? And Discount.

RL: We got our buttons from you guys, right, but...

AG: Yeah, buttons, zippers, all the other findings. [Edit: According to the Oxford English Dictionary, findings are "Small articles or tools used to make garments, shoes or jewelry.]

RL: There were a couple of other dry goods stores that sold people fabric and the question was that you had to buy fabric that was durable enough to hold up so the costumes could be used again and again. On the other hand, everybody was cost conscious so it would be interesting to see how she traded off all the considerations: the color right, the texture, and the cost under control. But she did a great job of it. It was kind of wild.

By the way, I had a window into this, more than just the ordinary grandson would, because I spent two summers working there during my high school years. So that would have been around 1961 & 62, maybe – those summers. I just worked in the office and spelled the receptionist when she would take her vacation, and the bookkeeper. I learned double-entry bookkeeping from Hyman Kaidor, who was the bookkeeper. That was actually fun because I learned about accounting. That was my first accounting course. I actually think he was out for one summer for quite a period ... for maybe six weeks. I think he had surgery or something, and I actually handled the accounts for most of that summer. So, I saw what was going on. It was a small place. There were only about 25 employees altogether.

AF: Did you ever think about taking over the business?

RL: Not in the slightest. No. I was sort of disappointed my mother didn't stick with it. Because she had the head for it and, actually, I think if she wanted to she would have done an excellent job. She just didn't want...her husband, my father, had only died three years before that. I think she was still adjusting.

AG: She was interested to do it but that big show that we did, that *Manon*, was really tough on her. The bills would come in and there was nobody at Goldstein's who was able to put the brakes on the designer who was in New York and his assistant. Stuff was coming in and it was always expensive stuff, and she was "where are we going to get the money?" she would say. The cash flow just wasn't there.

RL: Yeah, one of the problems was that so much of the rest of the business had deteriorated by then. In the early sixties, when I had spent a couple of summers there, we were still providing costumes to virtually every opera company west of New York. Not typically complete productions, typically just the leads. The principals, not the chorus costumes. We did all the productions at the Chicago Lyric, at Santa Fe, at...where else?

AF: Dallas?

RL: Yes, yes. Dallas (or was it Fort Worth in those years?). I'm trying to think of other big companies....

AF: San Diego?

RL: I don't know about San Diego.

AG: San Diego was later.

RL: This was the sixties. I'm not sure San Diego was a customer at that point. Cincinnati, that was another one. Six or eight opera companies. By the later sixties, these accounts were beginning to dry up. One by one, these regional companies were all on tight budgets and they were taking their

costuming in-house increasingly. They began to make their own costumes and keep them instead of us holding inventory and renting them out per production.

AF: So, such detail that you've given us. It's quite fascinating. You know the type of person that's not been mentioned is the milliner. Was there a milliner?

AG: Yes, there was. There was.

RL: Yeah. I can't remember the name of the milliner.

For some productions they did wigs. That was more common then than I think it is now. And there definitely were hats. Then there were six or eight seamstresses who were just sewing all the time.

AF: You come from a family that really was starting the costume world of the west for us all. Amazing, very interesting to observe. And to have picked costumes for goodness sake.

RL: It was a completely random thing. I can't imagine that the Goldsteins, whether it was Simon or his parents, when they migrated across country, thought they'd go into the costume business. I imagine they were just looking at opportunities. I don't know what they did between 1856 and 1868. I'm just not sure.

AF: Well, I hope you've been enjoying memory lane.

RL: Yeah, this has been fun to remember. To think about it

AF: All right, well thank you ever so much for your time and for your enthusiasm and for the information. And we will be in touch.

RL: Good luck. Good luck with it, Ann. And Allen, hang up and you can call me.

AG: Alright. Goodbye, Rick. It's great to hear, it's great to connect.

AF: Bye bye.