



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with John Weintraub and Ed Copenhaver

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

DEUTSCH: I'm sitting with John Weintraub and Ed Copenhaver at my house on March 19, 2002.

[testing the voices on the tape]

Ed why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about how you and John met in college.

COPENHAVER: Well, it was very easy. We both ended up going to the same fraternity, the Phi Kappa Sigma fraternity at the University of Virginia. We were freshmen... didn't know John until we all pledged, I think was the routine and then we met John. The majority of the people in that fraternity were from Richmond, Virginia. There were only a limited few that were not from Richmond. John was one of them.

WEINTRAUB: There was an older guy from Baltimore too. I remember, Hobart Folks...

COPENHAVER: Is that right? Is he from Baltimore? I didn't know that.

So anyway, it was nice to see someone other than the rich Richmond crowd. [Ed: It is possible that Ed repeated the first syllable of Richmond rather than referring to the crowd from Richmond as being rich.] I got to know John. So that's how we got to know each other. The first year at the University of Virginia.

DEUTSCH: And you were friends? You were roommates?

COPENHAVER: Actually not until the second year. I believe that's... yep. John and I shared a room at the fraternity house our second year. First year students have to live in the dorms. Second year they can live.... Our fraternity you live in the fraternity house the second year. I think that was it. You had to live there. Obviously we got to know each other well.

DEUTSCH: And what happened after college? Did you go your separate ways?

COPENHAVER: Well, actually, John graduated a year before I did because I didn't start in engineering but ended up in engineering. Engineering is a five year program. So John was already out and then I got out and had about three or four months before I—this was of course at the height of the Vietnam conflict—so usually within ten days of your graduation you got a letter from your government inviting you to join. I had applied for Naval ROTC and was accepted, so consequently I had a period of three or four months before I went in. I think I saw John once or twice in Norfolk or something. I don't remember whether it was before the service... it must have been before the service... might have been after I got sent to the Navy. Do you remember? You were stationed.....

WEINTRAUB: Well I was stationed.... I had a similar career path. Had to get in the service—I wound up in the Coast Guard.

DEUTSCH: What year was it you graduated?

WEINTRAUB: I graduated in '65. June '65 and then I had about six months before I could get into something and it turned out to be the Coast Guard ROTC in Yorktown. And then I went... I might have seen Ed that year because I was around Yorktown, Virginia, the Norfolk area. Actually, the Norfolk area.

COPENHAVER: I was visiting you on your vessel in Norfolk.

WEINTRAUB: It had to have been the Cherokee.

COPENHAVER: Exactly.

DEUTSCH: So you're in the Coast Guard. You're in the Navy.

COPENHAVER: I don't remember what my status was.

DEUTSCH: So then did you go to Vietnam, either or both of you?

COPENHAVER: Both of us.

WEINTRAUB: Yes. I was there my last year in the Coast Guard. We got put under the Navy. For my final year I was sent to Vietnam on a patrol boat. Executive Officer on board the patrol boat. That was after two years of sea duty. I had been on a search and rescue ship in the Norfolk area and then I was on a Reserve training ship for a year in Korea. And then they transferred me to an 82 foot patrol boat in Vietnam for my last year.

DEUTSCH: How was that?

WEINTRAUB: It was interesting. Very interesting. We would patrol. I was mostly at sea all the time. We'd come in for a day or two to fuel and food. Our job was just to patrol the coast, stop junks, inspect the papers. We did some work with the SEALS. We did some SEAL operations. Got shot at a few times.

DEUTSCH: No heavy duty combat.

WEINTRAUB: Not heavy duty, no. Fortunately. But it was kind of interesting.

DEUTSCH: How about you, Ed?

COPENHAVER: I went into the Navy and went into the amphibious Navy. I actually requested duty in Vietnam. I didn't have to, but they were going to send you anyway.

DEUTSCH: ...amphibious. Amphibious I know is land and sea...

COPENHAVER: Amphibious is probably obsolete now, but it's used for putting troops on the shore when you make an attack on a beach. Like D-Day and all that. I was on what's called an LST which stands for, some people call it Large Slow Target. It's Landing Ship Tank. We were designed to carry tanks into the beach, open up the bow doors and...

DEUTSCH: So what LST stands for was not Large Slow Target...

COPENHAVER: Landing Ship Tank. We were to bring tanks into the beach. They certainly weren't used for that in Vietnam. Long since. We were used for shuttling cargo up and down the coast. Primarily... actually the first chore was ammunition.

DEUTSCH: So were you guys in Vietnam at the same time?

WEINTRAUB: I don't think so. I think I must have... Might have been. I was there from '68 to '69 from about May or June '68 to '69.

COPENHAVER: I know I was there for one Christmas. I don't remember the days because the ship served the tour of duty like... and so our ship would stand a six months tour of duty in Vietnam and then we'd come back. And we'd be back for a year before we'd go back. I served two tours.

WEINTRAUB: Oh is that right? You went over there twice. I didn't know that. I don't think I saw you over there.

COPENHAVER: No. It's a big country. We wouldn't know if... I did pass one Freddy brother in the middle of the ocean... Jeb Miller...

WEINTRAUB: Did you?

COPENHAVER: Somebody sent me a signal.

WEINTRAUB: I passed him too. He was on a bouy tender.

COPENHAVER: He must have signalled everybody. You don't see people when you're over there. You're working.

DEUTSCH: So—you come back—what happened then?

COPENHAVER: I don't know. John, what did you do?

WEINTRAUB: Let's see. I got back. I'm originally from Baltimore. I grew up in Baltimore and when I came back in around '69, there wasn't a whole lot going on in Baltimore. They didn't have Harbor Place. Very blue collar town.

DEUTSCH: Baltimore has changed a lot.

WEINTRAUB: It has. So I went looking to... I hung around for a few months, then came to Washington and got a job with National Cash Register in sales of accounting machines, accounting equipment. I did that for about four and a half years. I did run into Ed. I was living on East Capitol Street.

DEUTSCH: You were?

WEINTRAUB: Yes.

DEUTSCH: In one of those boarding houses?

WEINTRAUB: No. I was at 709 East Capitol Street. Basement apartment. I lived there. That's when Ed came into town when he got out of the service. Then, toward the end of my career at NCR I started going to business school, taking night courses at George Washington University. Ed was doing that also for an engineering degree. I was going for an MBA. They force you to take all these prerequisites, so that went on for years and years. I finally quit and went full time for one year. That's when I hooked up with Ed to look and see if we could buy a business as a side project.

DEUTSCH: Side project?

WEINTRAUB: We were in academia so we could meet... I think we met a couple of times in conference rooms.

COPENHAVER: Very regular on the weekends. Our weekend activities.

WEINTRAUB: Actually we did some research on various businesses and...

DEUTSCH: Were you living on the Hill then?

COPENHAVER: No, I lived in Virginia. I lived at River House apartments right across from the Pentagon. Close, but not here.

DEUTSCH: So you're talking about a business and talking about all different kinds of businesses and trying to decide which business...

COPENHAVER: Whatever looked good. Who ever had the most appealing offer. Awful lot of offers were ridiculous and no value. We looked at a lot of printing companies. Printing is big in DC. We went

down to the wire with one or two of them. Fortunately, we got involved with a gentleman from SCORE, Service Career Of Retired Executives, who worked with the small business association. As we were getting close to one—he had been a printer—and he advised us that it looked like we were buying a pig in a poke.

DEUTSCH: That the business you were buying didn't look good?

COPENHAVER: Exactly. Thanks to his advice we backed off and kept looking.

DEUTSCH: Frager's was an existing business?

WEINTRAUB: I think I had a neighbor on East Capitol, retired guy, who mentioned, why don't you go down and see the Fragers. They're always interested in selling. Old George and Julius would constantly tell every customer that walked in, You want to buy this business? And they offered it to everybody. I don't know how many people after we got into...

DEUTSCH: These are the sons of the founder?

WEINTRAUB: Sons of the founder. Yes. George and Julius Frager. They constantly were trying to sell it. So a neighbor said why don't you go down and talked to them. So we went and talked to them and looked around... weren't too impressed.

COPENHAVER: Dirty. Dimly lit.

WEINTRAUB: I talked to George Frager. Then after spending maybe a year just looking at other businesses, we said, *you* might have said, let's go back to Frager's.

COPENHAVER: I think it was Fran [John's wife] who raised the issue.

WEINTRAUB: Why don't you go back to Frager's...

COPENHAVER: After you graduated...

WEINTRAUB: I guess I had graduated. That was in '75 and...

COPENHAVER: I still had one semester to go.

WEINTRAUB: She said, why don't you go back and look and Frager's again. And we walked in and old George took a little note off his... I remember him pulling this off a counter... yeah, you guys were here a year ago. He couldn't pronounce our names. Dopenhagger and Weintroff—something like that. Yeah, I remember you guys. So they were really ripe for selling.

DEUTSCH: Now, at that time there was that big hardware store where Pardoe's is.

WEINTRAUB: That was Grand Hardware.

DEUTSCH: That's where I used to go. I didn't go to Frager's. I went right there. It was huge.

WEINTRAUB: He's still in business. He's in Brookland. He moved it to Brookland. Howard Politzer.

COPENHAVER: Would Howard have been the owner then?

WEINTRAUB: He actually got in the business the same time we did—might have been a year later or a year earlier. I think it was about the same time we did.

DEUTSCH: Ok then. About '75 you buy Frager's...

WEINTRAUB: We bought August '75. August 5th I think.

DEUTSCH: How did that feel?

WEINTRAUB: It was... it was good.

DEUTSCH: Did either of you know much about the hardware business?

WEINTRAUB: No. Me the least.

COPENHAVER: I knew the stuff simply because I was working construction at the time. I was working for a large construction firm for five or six years.

DEUTSCH: So you knew...

COPENHAVER: Dome of the terminology and the use of the tools and things like that I was more familiar with.

DEUTSCH: So what do you do if you suddenly run a hardware store?

COPENHAVER: Ask a customer. That's really the best way to learn.

WEINTRAUB: George was really good. He stayed with us—eventually ten years. But he was obligated to stay for thirty days. That was part of the contract. Teach us the business in thirty days. Julius Frager, his brother, he just walked out. Eventually he had a heart attack...

COPENHAVER: Week before the settlement...

WEINTRAUB: He survived but he never came back in the store again. And old George took us under his wing and worked for us for a year. Actually worked a year...

COPENHAVER: He was only obligated to work thirty days—at the end of thirty days he kept coming in the store. Every day, George would walk in and keep working. We didn't say a word. After about a year...

DEUTSCH: At least there was one who knew what...

COPENHAVER: That's right. After about a year, George wanted some money. He finally said you gotta start paying me. We said okay.

WEINTRAUB: He did the window and screen work. Actually did a lot of hard work. So he stayed with us for ten years.

COPENHAVER: The reason he kept coming in was that he had a girlfriend. She lived elsewhere in DC. This gave him an opportunity to be away from home.

WEINTRAUB: I didn't—well I heard him talking on the phone...

DEUTSCH: How did it go? Was it pretty smooth sailing, to use a nautical term?

COPENHAVER: I thought so. I didn't think we had too many problems at first.

WEINTRAUB: We thought we'd get the place squared away in six months. But it just—we were able to grow the business and as the business kept growing we faced new problems and challenges. It was always a success from the start. The other thing was, they had never taken inventory for twenty years or so. One of the terms of the agreement was "as is. You're buying this store as is. We don't want any..."

DEUTSCH: We don't know anything else we've got...

WEINTRAUB: We're not taking inventory. We're not guessing how much is here. You're buying it as is. He let us work there for thirty days. That was another thing. I forgot about that.

COPENHAVER: We came to work...

WEINTRAUB: We said, well, if you're not going to tell us anything about the company, what you have... They'd let us have access to financial statements but they didn't know what inventory they had and we kept scurrying around trying to figure out what they had for inventory. There was no way other than to count it... so we finally negotiated the right to count the inventory. The day before settlement, I think it was.

COPENHAVER: I think that was another thing that George said... you'd be crazy to buy it without taking an inventory. You don't know what you're buying. And he said, you just can't do it. So we said okay. George, we want to do an inventory.

DEUTSCH: Did you make changes right away?

COPENHAVER: What was amazing is that when we did an inventory, we were cranking out the numbers, we finished counting about as best we could about six or seven at night. Then we had to go home and do all the extensions and additions to figure out how much we had. You write down six hammers at \$7.99, two saws—then you have to take all those numbers and extend them and add them up. We were cranking away on these numbers and about three o'clock in the morning we realized we were half way through and we already had more inventory than the purchase price of the business. It became a no-brainer at that point. We all slept well.

DEUTSCH: Were there any big problems?

WEINTRAUB: No. It was a thriving business. They had, over the years, attempted to keep the business down because they didn't want any headaches. People wanted accounts—had to have accounts—they said no, no more accounts.

COPENHAVER: They had “wall” accounts.

WEINTRAUB: If somebody insisted that he couldn't operate they would stick a piece of paper with a charge up on the wall.

DEUTSCH: They were really not interested in expanding and growing.

COPENHAVER: They were just trying to shut it down.

WEINTRAUB: They didn't want any headaches or additional business. We started trying to expand the business. We didn't make any major changes really initially, just trying to learn the business.

DEUTSCH: What are the major changes that you've seen?

COPENHAVER: One of the major changes is that a lot of the products change. When we first got in there there was no plastic pipe. Everything was either copper or galvanized steel or black pipe. Today every fitting in copper and galvanized steel has been duplicated in PVC and yet another one, CPVC, for hot water systems. So the number of products started growing. Plastic has permeated the plumbing world. So for everything you have in metal you have a comparable one in plastic now. Your inventory breadth just doubled right there.

DEUTSCH: I guess we could have an interesting discussion of plastic versus metal but I...

COPENHAVER: I don't think there's a right answer either. Both work. But that's an example of the things that began changing. Without us, even, doing anything.

DEUTSCH: How did changes in the community impact on you? Obviously there was a lot of building and renovation going on and that was then and is now. Were there other changes?

WEINTRAUB: I think just the overall fact that the neighborhood continued to get better, to expand.

COPENHAVER: We had a boom period there for a while when we were selling fifty pound boxes of nails. We haven't done that in a long time.

WEINTRAUB: There was a period when we were doing a lot of contractor business.

DEUTSCH: Early '80's?

WEINTRAUB: When you had a lot of renovators, small contractors who were buying homes and fixing them up. So, yes, we've always had a good mix. We've had contractors, commercial businesses like the government, a lot of apartment house owners, people like the Cymrots for example.

COPENHAVER: Or, the Navy Yard. Some of the marinas down on the Anacostia.

DEUTSCH: All the plants and stuff, was that there to begin with or was that an extension that you...

WEINTRAUB: That was a slow, gradual expansion from just a few annuals on some carts that we put out until the carts got bigger and bigger and were unmanageable, we couldn't fit them inside and then we just took over parking. So it was a gradual increase.

DEUTSCH: And the rental, that was a...

COPENHAVER: That was when we bought the building next door a couple of years ago. That was John's brilliant insight.

DEUTSCH: I, unfortunately, have had cause to go over there to rent the thing that vacuums up water—I would be happier never having experienced that. I guess the tool rental is a big business.

WEINTRAUB: It's growing. It just grows every year. We have a karaoke machine, a bubble machine, fake flames, smoke machine if you're ever going to have a wild party...

DEUTSCH: So you have a party-planning department.

WEINTRAUB: Party planning. Tables, chairs.

DEUTSCH: For rent?

WEINTRAUB: For rent. Weddings. Arches.

COPENHAVER: Tents.

DEUTSCH: Tents?

COPENHAVER: Outside heaters in case the temperature drops.

DEUTSCH: Oh my gosh.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah. West Wing [TV show] orders every once in a while a bunch of heaters and propane if they're doing some filming outside. That's been growing.

DEUTSCH: In that you don't really have any competition. There's nobody else around who has all that.

WEINTRAUB: Not right on Capitol Hill, but they're certainly all over the city and the area. The market is already being served. Ridgewells and all these catering companies, they have tables, chairs, glasses.

DEUTSCH: You have glasses and stuff like that?

WEINTRAUB: That's the next thing. We're going to have to get into that. When people want tables and chairs...

COPENHAVER: We're already in that...

WEINTRAUB: Did we? I know Jay was trying to get...

COPENHAVER: Marguerita ordered both red and white wine glasses or something. Champagne glasses.

WEINTRAUB: But we rent a lot of tools too. All kinds. Rototillers. Garden, what else

COPENHAVER: Yeah, gardening is big in the spring. The rototillers and the turf tools to aerate the soil.

WEINTRAUB: Stump removers, then of course all the plumbing stuff, snakes, chain saws it goes on and on.

DEUTSCH: So that's really a big part of the business.

WEINTRAUB: Not in terms of sales. It's not.

DEUTSCH: In a way, I guess, it's a major outlay to get all that stuff...

COPENHAVER: To buy the stuff. But once you buy it, it's steady.

WEINTRAUB: It complements the business. Because if people don't have a heavy-duty drill, let's say they have a regular 3/8 drill and they're trying to drill into pre-stressed concrete or something. They don't want to buy a couple hundred dollar drill.

DEUTSCH: Now I know that Frager's is considered a good neighbor and a community-friendly business; was that ever a decision that you made or was that just sort of the natural outgrowth of who you guys are?

WEINTRAUB: I think it's a natural outgrowth. I don't think—you know you can't live in the community very long without getting somewhat involved.

COPENHAVER: Watkins [School] wasn't going to let us sit there and put all those gardens in without talking to us. And borrowing a wheelbarrow every now and then and whatever else they needed.

DEUTSCH: Yes. I guess you've been quite involved in that whole garden thing.

COPENHAVER: Well, it's quite a garden. Somebody's done an awful lot of work over there.

DEUTSCH: Some of the parents... And what else. I know you sponsor a baseball team.

WEINTRAUB: We contribute to auctions. St. Peter's. Try to put ads in the various publications.

COPENHAVER: We try to limit it to those that are in the neighborhood. So we don't get—you do get a lot of calls. Hardware stores got things that everybody needs. We do try to limit it to what we consider the neighborhood so we don't get dragged too far afield. Occasionally do—but that's all right.

WEINTRAUB: And it's usually people—most of the people we donate to also buy from us. So we feel like we owe them something. St. Peter's has an account and Watkins and the Watkins PTA, I don't know what it's under now.

COPENHAVER: School without Walls.

DEUTSCH: And then you also hire a lot of kids from the neighborhood.

WEINTRAUB: We do, yeah.

COPENHAVER: That's a benefit for us.

WEINTRAUB: We don't look upon that as doing...

COPENHAVER: Finding capable young people is fantastic. They're very quick learning. They can just jump right and go to work—most of them without any, hardly any, training. We train them.

DEUTSCH: That is one of the things that's a really valuable thing for the community.

WEINTRAUB: I think it's mutual. It's very valuable to us.

DEUTSCH: You grew up in Charlottesville. Would you call that a small town?

COPENHAVER: Well it was when I was growing up it was only 40,000 people in Charlottesville. I think it's much, much larger than that now. You knew an awful lot of people. You couldn't get in too much trouble because someone knew your parents. It was always a case of that.

DEUTSCH: What did your parents do?

COPENHAVER: My father was a lawyer. Of course, mother was just a housewife. That was pretty much it. We lived in a small university community. It was a nice place to grow up.

DEUTSCH: How about you John? What kind of community did you grow up in?

WEINTRAUB: It was suburban Baltimore, not too far out in the suburbs but... It was near Towson. Loch Raven Village actually. To be exact. My mother and father were divorced so I was raised by my mother. I've got a brother and a sister, older brother and sister. And then they sent me into downtown Baltimore to school, because it was a technical high school, Baltimore Polytechnic. I still have a lot of friends from high school that I see, from Baltimore.

DEUTSCH: So you didn't have quite that small-town feeling where you lived.

WEINTRAUB: No, not so much. The little community, Loch Raven Village had a nice little community. I would say most of my friends came from high school.

DEUTSCH: Once you've found it, it's hard to imagine not living in a community where you have that. I know when people come to see me and well take a walk together or do something, they'll say gosh do you know everyone? Well, I don't know everyone but I know a lot of people. It's a nice feeling. Of course, you guys, you do know everyone.

COPENHAVER: Well, I can remember when I first came to Washington, I lived in an apartment house and I felt like you had to say hello to everybody. I finally realized my neighbors in the apartment house just didn't really want me saying hello to them. I felt like geeze I was imposing on them. A few of them didn't mind. You'd make friends with a few of them. But a lot of people were a lot more reticent.

DEUTSCH: Ed, tell me a little bit about the Fragers.

COPENHAVER: OK. Well, we didn't know Jules that well because he had the heart attack right before we took over, but George of course stayed with us for ten years. George knew an awful lot of people in the neighborhood. He was good to the people in the neighborhood and most people in the neighborhood liked him, felt like he was a good merchant, I would say. He taught us a lot of the history of the area, most of it fairly colorful—I wouldn't want to repeat it...

DEUTSCH: Any of it you can repeat?

COPENHAVER: We got to know the story behind the—what's the restaurant behind—it's gone now...

DEUTSCH: Mary's Blue Room?

COPENHAVER: No, this was—we got to know the family...

DEUTSCH: Sherrill's?

COPENHAVER: Not Sherrills. On 11th Street. It was a barber shop at one time...

WEINTRAUB: Oh, Johnny Aquillino's and I forget—it's no longer there. Janet Crowder has the spot.

COPENHAVER: Mr. Aquillino Senior delivered milk. But at the same time he managed to run numbers on the side. And that was how he got enough money to finally open...

WEINTRAUB: Coolbreezes. That was the name of the restaurant.

COPENHAVER: ...open the restaurant. Now this is strictly from George so let me qualify my source. But anyway, that was one of the good stories we learned. Every day George would tell you something about some of the neighbors.

DEUTSCH: Did George—had he grown up in the neighborhood? Did they live here as well?

COPENHAVER: I don't think he was born on Capitol Hill. I think he was born in Southwest, but I think they grew up there on Capitol Hill. He started working in the hardware store when it first opened. I think he was like—he was just a teenager.

DEUTSCH: What year did it open?

COPENHAVER: 1920.

WEINTRAUB: Their father was a cabinetmaker at the Navy Yard. And got laid off.

COPENHAVER: Fritz Frager.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah. Fritz or Frank. He was an immigrant. Russian immigrant?

COPENHAVER: Correct.

WEINTRAUB: Worked at the Navy Yard as a cabinet maker, got laid off after World War I. And he was the only happy guy about being laid off because he had decided he was going to open his own business. And he had worked for a wealthy person who lent him the money to start Frager's.

COPENHAVER: Actually, that business is still around. It was Wiegand Lumber. Mr. Wiegand. And I believe Wiegand Lumber is still in Alexandria, Virginia.

DEUTSCH: Was it at your location when he first opened it or was there another location first?

WEINTRAUB: I think that was the original location. They've had two other locations, one time there were two other stores. One by Stanton Park, I think they had one. And then they had one across the bridge in Ben Robinson's Feed Store before they took it over...

DEUTSCH: Was it across the bridge in Anacostia?

WEINTRAUB: In Anacostia, right across, what is the bridge across...

COPENHAVER: Rochambeau?

WEINTRAUB: Over Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge, whatever bridge that is.

DEUTSCH: Then they closed the two branches?

WEINTRAUB: Well, I don't know what happened at Stanton Park. I do know the one that was Robinson's store went bankrupt as George and Julius each had one son each and they all came into the business. And then George and Eddie Frager went to Robinson's.

COPENHAVER: Eddie was George's son...

WEINTRAUB: ...for about ten years. And they came back in the business. And then the sons went off and did other things. And that's why the Fragers didn't really have anybody to leave...

COPENHAVER: The reason Robinsons failed, according to George, is that they redesigned the highway over there and when they redesigned it there was no easy access to the building and they cut their business off.

DEUTSCH: Robinsons was a...

COPENHAVER: It was actually a food—back then you had probably a lot of animals and so then you were more rural and so it was more of like a farm supply store and hardware. And I'm sure over the years they dropped more and more of the feed and picked up more and more of the hardware. I remember them talking about they sold pigeon feed, and I don't know—a lot of unusual stuff that we don't think of selling today.

WEINTRAUB: Horseshoes.

DEUTSCH: So the Fragers were really an established family and had a lot of connections with people in the community.

COPENHAVER: Oh, absolutely. Well, they were well known. And I think Mr. Frager was a very friendly outgoing affable sort of guy and he didn't get upset when you owed him a few bucks. It didn't break his heart. He kept right on going. It used to drive George crazy, according to George. His father would lend anybody a...

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

[TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

COPENHAVER: Basically, George was not a good student. And evidently he was not doing well in high school. Maybe he dropped out, I don't know the full story. But his family sent him to Strayer to study—I guess it was called business then—and George said that for a while the family was paying but he wasn't going and when they found out they got quite upset with him.

DEUTSCH: But it sounds like he did pretty well without...

COPENHAVER: Yeah. He was a very likeable person. A very friendly person. Also a great golfer. He'd become quite the golfer over the years.

WEINTRAUB: East Potomac Park was his hangout. And he would hustle. He called himself a two dollar hustler. He had this bowed out leg in his later years, so he didn't look like much and yet he could really hit the golf ball and he was a pretty accurate putter. So apparently he would suck a lot of people in and...

DEUTSCH: What had happened to Frager's during the riots? Did it get...

COPENHAVER: They weren't affected.

DEUTSCH: I guess it went down 11th? 8th Street?

COPENHAVER: I wasn't here then so I don't know.

WEINTRAUB: I came just after the riots and I'd been away for a year so I really didn't know much about it. How it affected Washington. I mean, the store, obviously was not affected at all. That's one of the things about Washington. You get this influx of people coming in and—I remember I had no negative associations when I moved to Capitol Hill... about the riots...

COPENHAVER: I can remember people talking about it when we first got in the business. Oh, that's over where they had the riots. Did the riots affect you? I didn't know anything about. What riots? I was

over the other side of the world while you guys were rioting. I was fighting a war—what were you doing? So, no, it had no affect at all.

DEUTSCH: Now you've lived in the neighborhood all this time and obviously like it and felt it was a good place to raise your kids...

WEINTRAUB: Yeah, it's always—you know, I didn't want to commute. That was one thing. We certainly looked at other opportunities along the way, when it came time for schooling, but we decided to stay. We did, of course, have to send the kids to private schools.

DEUTSCH: I know they went to Field.

WEINTRAUB: Well we did it all. We did St. Peter's. We did Annunciation over off Massachusetts Avenue [NW] and then Capitol Hill Day School. Jeannie wound up at Holton Arms for about five or six years.

DEUTSCH: Holton Arms to Field. That's a bit of a switch.

WEINTRAUB: It is.

DEUTSCH: Probably one she liked.

WEINTRAUB: That was a long haul. And then back to Field. Fran was there. The neighborhood has been very supportive. We—it's always been a vital neighborhood, strong economically. Compared to other associates in the business that we see at hardware shows that have a lot of ups and downs. We seem to just have a growing economy all the time. Our business is always grown, every year.

DEUTSCH: You've never had a down year?

WEINTRAUB: We've never had any—we've had flat sales when certain things happened...

COPENHAVER: '89 we had a fairly big Savings and Loan debacle and all the real estate sort of tumbled for a while. We were flat but we didn't really go down.

WEINTRAUB: We've always had something that keeps us alive. Might be contractors. Then it's homeowners. We've always tried to do something different to maintain the business, or add more services. Business mirrors the community and the fact that it's always been a vital, growing community. Now the census says that the numbers of people are actually declining in our trading area, but their per capita income is rising pretty substantially. That was the last—we're a member of True Value which is a cooperative which allows us to buy products competitively and make...

DEUTSCH: Cooperative? Is that like a national...

WEINTRAUB: It's a national cooperative. And they will frequently, if we request, have a management consultant come and do a study of the business and they'll do some census data. That was the last census data. I think the numbers of people were declining, but the per capita income is going up.

DEUTSCH: Ed, are you living on the Hill now?

COPENHAVER: Absolutely. I live on 14th Street. And I've been there for roughly twenty years. So I'm a part of the neighborhood.

DEUTSCH: You're a part of the neighborhood.

COPENHAVER: Yeah. Better known as Capitol East. I think a lot of people refer to that section. Jim Meyers is the one I believe created that phrase.

DEUTSCH: And you've enjoyed being here?

COPENHAVER: Oh, absolutely. It's a nice neighborhood, particularly 14th Street. Everybody is pretty friendly. Works well together. Of course we've been fortunate to have our man Will Hill at one end of it. He's sort of a mover and a shaker, keeps everybody jumping, won't let us be lazy. Tries to keep the neighborhood cleaned up, and things of that ilk. He's out constantly badgering—I shouldn't say badgering—encouraging people...

DEUTSCH: Encouraging people to do better. Tell me a little bit about your staff. I feel some of your staff has been there a long time.

COPENHAVER: Well, Carl Rigdon and Marlin Jones. Marlin Jones lives on Kentucky Avenue, I think it's the 200 block, but it may be the 100 block. And he's been there probably as long as anybody else. I think he's in there over ten years. Carl Rigdon would be the second behind him. He's our senior citizen. I forgotten whether he's 76 or 77 now, but he's been there probably as long as anybody else. I can tell by—I think of their employee number and of course we assign them as they come along. Who else do we have in the low digits?

DEUTSCH: How many employees do you have?

WEINTRAUB: Close to forty. About half part-time. We try to keep consistency. But it's probably the average—a long term employee for us might be about six, five to seven years or so. When we first bought the business we kept all the employees. We probably kept some of them too long. As we grew, they weren't able to keep up.

COPENHAVER: We did tend to outgrow people. Some people's skills just couldn't—I mean we've been lucky, extremely lucky in our growth. Thanks to the neighborhood. Some of the people were not able to grow as much as we'd have liked them to. Others have. Others kept up.

DEUTSCH: And I imagine the article in the Hill Rag that there's continuing education...

COPENHAVER: Well, True Service had some programs where you can send employees for one day training in plumbing or one day training in electrical. They recently had one in sales. I don't think we got anybody—it happened when there were a couple of people out of work so we couldn't pull anybody out. True Service has been recently good about trying to have seminars to train people. But of course the best training is right there at the store, being immersed in what's going on. If you're interested and pay attention it doesn't take long to pick up what you need to know to get the job done. I mean, nobody has a problem asking questions and nobody objects to your asking questions. What we do object to is when you don't do something that's blatantly obvious you should do, or something to that effect. The best training is there at the store. Can't beat that.

WEINTRAUB: And the managers, we go to buying shows twice a year. And usually it's just the managers. And there are seminars there.

DEUTSCH: Buying shows where they talk about new products?

WEINTRAUB: New products and reps from all the manufacturers. There might be 500 to 1000 vendors there. And that's usually in a major city, twice a year, that we go to. And we buy a lot of our seasonal goods there. And see new products and go to seminars and find out what's going on in the industry. That's twice a year.

COPENHAVER: The biggest threat is the big boxes.

DEUTSCH: The big boxes?

COPENHAVER: That's the term for the Home Depots, and the Lowes, and the Targets, and the KMarts. They're the retail giants that try to subdue all us.

DEUTSCH: Are there any around here that are particularly encroaching on your turf?

COPENHAVER: We've got them coming. They're going to be on Brentwood Road. They did have a Kmart coming, but of course, Kmart backed out. But Home Depot is going to be at Brentwood Road. I assume they'll try to get another large retailer to fill in for Kmart. I think Giant is going to have a large store there. So there'll be a sort of a destination area that you can go to and get your groceries and your hardware and your whatever else you need, housewares. The concept is... So that may have some impact

on us. We're not in the same market, I don't think. We're more of a—when your toilet doesn't work you don't go to Kmart or Home Depot. You come to Frager's. And the guy you call may come get the parts from us. He doesn't want to try half way across town to get a \$10 part or a \$20 part. Now if it's a \$500 part, he may...

DEUTSCH: Now you talked about new products, you talked about the plastic piping, but you also carry a lot of other stuff like sleds and Christmas ornaments and stuff like that.

WEINTRAUB: We did try to do a little bigger Christmas this year. So we got some... One of our guys was in the gift industry before and so yes, we tried to get more into Christmas last year. We sell Christmas trees. We just try to find out what the neighborhood is buying and supply it as best we can.

DEUTSCH: I know you don't have flagpoles because mine broke...

WEINTRAUB: Flags were difficult. Nobody could get flags this year. We had a tough time on that. But, yeah, we try to stick to the basics, plumbing, electrical, garden, paint, a little bit of lumber, hardware, basic hardware.

COPENHAVER: Actually the Christmas—I don't know whether you saw the Christmas tent this year, we had—we had one of our employees, and another joined, but they picked up the ball and ran. They actually did an outstanding job. In the past, Christmas had sort of been a little bit of an afterthought for us. It got squeezed in between the end of the year and the new year. And this gentleman decided, he said, you know, there's been a need for a good Christmas market here and he came up with the concept, developed it and brought in all the products. He had a fairly large tent put in the parking lot and a heater put in the tent. Then he went to this market in Atlanta, Georgia. He and this young lady Amity Jean. The fellow that did it was Steve Butler. He and Amity went to Atlanta and bought all the merchandise and had it shipped here. Starting in November they put the tent up and they filled it with all the Christmas. So we actually, this year, Christmas was not an afterthought. It became a major part of our...

DEUTSCH: And did it do well?

COPENHAVER: It did. It did. It was the first year. Frequently things like that, your first year or two, it takes a while before the neighborhood becomes fully aware of it. But I think it did well. Of course, we'd always like to see more.

DEUTSCH: I'll be there next year.

COPENHAVER: Being your basic greedy merchants we always want more. But it did. It did well. We're obviously going to continue to do it. If we have the manpower and the people that have the drive

and the energy to make it happen. It takes a lot of work. We were very fortunate to have to people that were able to get it done.

DEUTSCH: It sounds as if you're willing to let people...

COPENHAVER: Well, if you've got the right people it's easy to do. If you know they're competent and hard working then it's a no-brainer. You just get out of the way and let them at it. We have been very fortunate. A lot of good people at Frager's. Our manager, Nick Cablonis, he actually had his own hardware store before he came to Frager's so he's got a lot of hardware experience. That's hard to find. We've been very lucky. We hope it will keep up.

DEUTSCH: Are you looking forward to the dinner? [Community Achievement Awards dinner]

COPENHAVER: Oh, absolutely. That'll be a lot of fun.

WEINTRAUB: Not the speech so much. The people, the food, the drinks.

COPENHAVER: It should be an enjoyable event, I think. Very pleasant. As always...

DEUTSCH: Tell me about breaking the gender barrier at Frager's. It used to be all male.

WEINTRAUB: It did. And it wasn't by design. More or less we thought women are not going to want to...

COPENHAVER: Kate Redmand.

WEINTRAUB: Yes, Kate Redmand. We just never thought that any women would like to work at a dirty old hardware store. Of course now we know that the demographics are such that more women buy hardware than men.

COPENHAVER: There's a lot of heavy lifting in a hardware store.

WEINTRAUB: Heavy lifting. The store was a lot dirtier. Smoke inside. George would put cigarettes on the floor. You smoke, put cigarettes on the floor. I smoke cigars. The place is really dirty. Anyway, Mr. Redmand—Paul Redmand—he suggested that maybe his daughter might like to work there. I think your opening statement was, can she lift eighty pounds.

COPENHAVER: Well, that was the case.

DEUTSCH: What year was that? Early '70's? Late '70's?

COPENHAVER: Well, that's tough to call. Kate's been out of college, she went to college, went to graduate school, she's now, she had some sort of fellowship in Europe for a while, now is back working in West Virginia for Dupont. So, putting all that together...

WEINTRAUB: I would think it had to be the '80's. Wouldn't you think...? We were a little behind.

DEUTSCH: So you you decided to take a chance on a female?

COPENHAVER: Well, she wanted to work for us so we said, OK Kate can you lift eighty pounds? And she said, I don't know, let's go try it. So grabs an eighty pound bag of Sakrete and slings it just as good as anybody in the store and I said, you're hired. You're on. She was just a fantastic worker. She knew the store inside out. I don't remember that she even had a department did she?

WEINTRAUB: She was working tools. She counted all the drill bits. Nobody ever wanted to... she undertook projects that nobody could do because it was just too overwhelming, like count the number of drill bits we had. We had all these loose drill bits. I remember she said, do you realize you have about 237 1/16th of an inch drill bits. Because they're so tiny, you know, that would just take up a little tiny space. I said, no, really? Yeah. She counted every one of them.

COPENHAVER: But she was just a great worker. And she got along great with the customers. And she was very knowledgeable and of course today she is a very accomplished person. You wouldn't realize that she started her life in a hardware store—maybe you would, I don't know, has a PhD in chemistry, with education beyond that and now working for Dupont in a research laboratory. Just a great person, very capable, very hard working.

DEUTSCH: So after that did you find that you had a lot of women who wanted to work in a hardware store?

COPENHAVER: I'd say we're half women now, almost.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah, we've got an awful lot of women. Back then we never even approached them or were not sensitive to them but now, I mean, we take whoever comes along who wants to work.

COPENHAVER: There is always the lifting issue. We do have a lot of trucks to unload. Yesterday the fork truck broke down and I had to get everybody out there and unload the truck and the women don't pick up the biggest boxes but they line up just like everybody else. Haul stuff in. So it works pretty well. Lot of good people. The Barbara Devers. Of course, now we have Amity Jeans. Kim Williams. I can go down the list of all the...

DEUTSCH: I had the machine off when you told about Lucy Pfeiffer and starting the garden—just recount that a little bit.

COPENHAVER: OK. Maybe John remembers it better than I do.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah, I remember our former manager used to run the garden department. And he was expanding it and he suddenly quit and we were left without any expertise, really, in the garden. And Lucy had been working all through high school and college and she picked up the ball and began managing the department. Buying the goods for the spring and fall. Coming down when she could at breaks—school breaks—and taking some time off, I think, to come down.

COPENHAVER: She really seemed to enjoy it, to get into it. Really amazing.

WEINTRAUB: And then she worked for us when she graduated from college for a year. Then went—now she's managing the most successful Smith & Hawkins store in downtown New York City, Soho.

COPENHAVER: Actually she's retired from there, I believe.

WEINTRAUB: Really? She no longer—what's she doing? I mean that's got to be within only a month or two. Yeah, she was managing the Soho Store and I figure it was number one in sales, at least before 9/11.

DEUTSCH: So her experience with you guys really led to her future career.

COPENHAVER: Well you'd have to ask her that. I don't think I want to go that far. She did write, she was an English major at, where did she go to school, I forgot...

WEINTRAUB: Boston College.

COPENHAVER: Boston College. And she wrote, she won the short story contest one year for the school and she wrote a short story which I'd love to have, I probably still have it somewhere, about being at Frager's Hardware one day when a man came in and got in an altercation and I don't remember...

WEINTRAUB: I think it was a shoplifting story.

COPENHAVER: Somebody had to hit him with a sledgehammer to get him to drop a knife. But it was a well-written story and she won the short story contest. And it was all just a story about her day at Frager's Hardware.

WEINTRAUB: The hardware industry was one of the last retail industries to get on the bandwagon with clean, modern, well-lit stores.

DEUTSCH: Why do you think that was?

COPENHAVER: I think the industry itself is very slow to change. I mean, a hammer is a hammer is a hammer. Same hammer a hundred years ago as it is today. There's no a lot of change in the basic hardware.

DEUTSCH: That's true.

COPENHAVER: And so, it's an industry that's just so conservative that it's practically going backwards. That's a valid analysis.

WEINTRAUB: Once you got some of the big chains in, Hechinger's around here and then Home Depot, Lowes...

COPENHAVER: They brought modern retailing to the hardware industry.

WEINTRAUB: Well they did. Plus the hardware industry realized they had to be more like the grocery industry. You had to have nice shelving, and products, and well lit. Clean and stocked. All these retail concepts of having the merchandise fronted and...

DEUTSCH: What does that mean, John?

WEINTRAUB: Brought up forward so you can see what it is. So it's not in the back. When we first got in the business we never had to do any of that. No one ever told us, so the store wasn't that way. We didn't have any modern shelving either. Had the old fashioned shelves.

COPENHAVER: Actually had the shelves that George Frager built in probably 1930 up until, what, ten years ago, whenever the current manager Nick Calanos—I guess it wasn't ten years ago, eight years ago—revamped it. Well Joe did some of it. But, yeah, we were still using wooden gondolas.

WEINTRAUB: So the hardware industry has gotten more up-to-date. And we're able to keep up with that through our cooperative, True Value.

COPENHAVER: And of course we got into the computer age. We couldn't run it now without a computer. Too many items to take care of. On the computer you've got 45,000 different items. How do you know which one you're out of stock of when it's time to order, well you don't.

DEUTSCH: So you do your inventory on the computer?

COPENHAVER: Right. Perpetual inventory system. Not perfect, but it works.

DEUTSCH: Was that hard, going over to computers?

COPENHAVER: I would say so. Hard and expensive. And it took a long time. People wouldn't change, including myself. I didn't want to change abruptly. We started with, I can remember putting one point of sales station next to the cash register at one point and then we built that other counter, Joe built that. We put in one or two registers and then we went to three registers. And we had all the problems of every item has to have an item number. Everything is done by numbers in computers and nobody had used numbers before so now we had to learn how to do that. And how do you number everything. And—yeah, it was a very slow, painful transition. And, of course, all this time you're wasting manpower trying to reinvent the wheel. But, I think now we've sort of gotten over that hump. And today everything is done by UPC Code...

DEUTSCH: UPC Code?

COPENHAVER: That's the bar code on the product. So we don't have as many problems with identifying merchandise. You just bring it up to the counter, scan it and bingo it's sold. Much simpler than it was even ten years ago when we had to put a five or six digit number on everything and then when you get to the register they have to key in that five or six digit number. Particularly painful when you have a lot of plumbing fittings that you can't write a number on.

DEUTSCH: So everything has this UPC Code now.

COPENHAVER: Pretty much everything today has the UPC Code, correct.

WEINTRAUB: But again, we're one of the last kind of industries that many things don't have it, like plumbing fittings, or some of the obscure plumbing fittings, and, of course loose screws and nails. We sell a lot of things that we sell one or two of instead of in packages and so the stuff doesn't have UPC codes on it. So you can't scan it.

COPENHAVER: And if you don't use the UPC code we don't collect the sales history so we don't know to reorder it again. So if it runs out we don't know it. So it is important now to us to use the codes when you sell something, so that it keeps the system working so we don't need fifty people just counting all day long, to figure out what we have and don't have.

DEUTSCH: Either of you do any renovation jobs or is being around it all day enough?

COPENHAVER: For me that was enough.

WEINTRAUB: We did a couple of houses. We used to live on 7th Street, 28-7th Street, NE, two blocks down. We renovated that house. We still own it. Then we moved to 4th Street, renovated that one. So we've done two houses on the Hill.

DEUTSCH: So you were able to enrich your job experiences in personal...

WEINTRAUB: Yes, did some of the work ourselves and had contractors do the rest, major things.

DEUTSCH: Thank you. John just remembered an anecdote, something that happened at Frager's.

WEINTRAUB: Yes. It was probably early '80's and all of a sudden these women came in. About four or five women in colorful costumes, in dresses, and began grabbing customers and our sales help and saying "Can you show me"—physically taking them—"some tapes, and can you show me some hardware?" and physically grabbing them. And George Frager did his window and screenwork in the back of the store and all of a sudden yells up, "Gypsies, get them out of here." And these people would come in the store as a store and steal merchandise and then run out the door and hop in a car as a group and sped off. And we were all puzzled and eventually figured out what's going on and told them to get out of the store. They all left.

DEUTSCH: But he was used to it?

WEINTRAUB: He had seen it happen before and ...

COPENHAVER: I was sort of spell-bound by the whole thing. I don't think I ever reacted til it was all over. What's going on here—I don't know.

WEINTRAUB: I mean these costumes. And they were actually dressed kind of...

COPENHAVER: Brightly colored.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah, brightly colored.

COPENHAVER: Long dresses.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah.

COPENHAVER: I sort of remember long dresses.

WEINTRAUB: Mostly women.

COPENHAVER: Maybe hats or things over their heads.

WEINTRAUB: Yeah. Then I talked to George's nephew who owns a store in Waldorf and he said—that was on Route 301—and he said, yeah they've come in here several times before. It was kind of unusual.

COPENHAVER: We had a lot of good stories, well I don't know if they were good, but—dealing with people with people who are on the other side of the crime issue, but, one guy we took him upstairs to interview him, on the second floor of Frager's and normally what we do is to have the police come...

DEUTSCH: You mean if there's a shoplifting...

COPENHAVER: Yeah. And we had him the second floor. And I think he must have been high on drugs because he all of a sudden decided he was going to take a running leap and dive through the second floor window. Which he did. He dove through it. And he came down and of course the glass cut him across the stomach, but that wasn't enough. He rolled over, dropped to the roof over the display windows...

WEINTRAUB: That's what saved him, I think, from harm.

COPENHAVER: And got himself up, jumped down on the sidewalk and ran away. And nobody ever saw him again. Trail of blood going down the sidewalk.

DEUTSCH: I suppose shoplifting is always a...

COPENHAVER: Always an issue. Always an issue.

DEUTSCH: And you sell so many little teeny things.

COPENHAVER: It's a grown man's toy store. It's a constant temptation to people. Part of life. Part of the reality of being in the big city. Even the little cities.

END OF INTERVIEW