

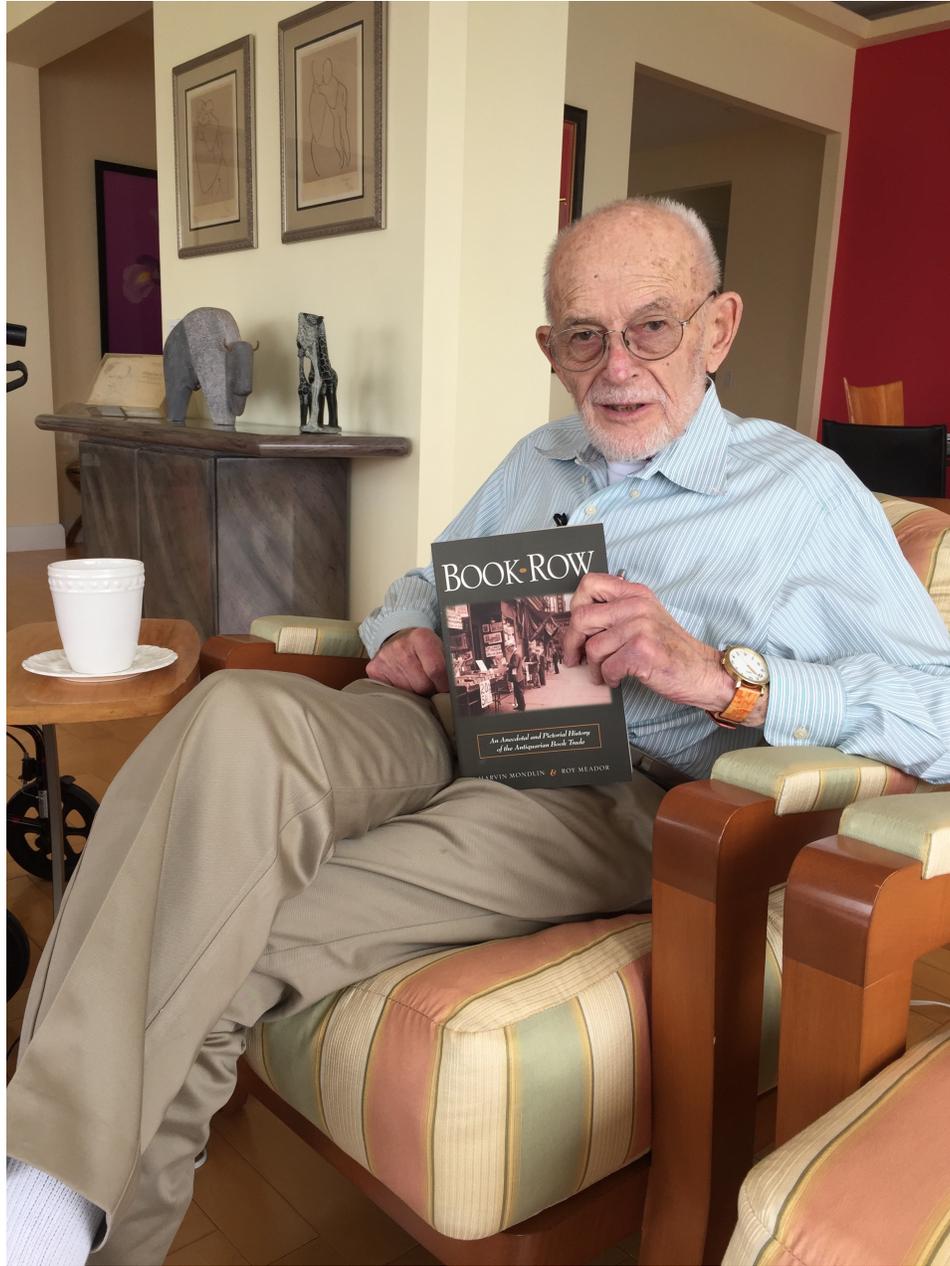
**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview
FRED BASS

By Sarah Dziezic
New York, NY
June 7, 2017

Oral History Interview with Fred Bass, June 7, 2017

Narrator(s)	Fred Bass
Birthyear	1928
Birthplace	New York, NY
Narrator Age	89
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	Bass's home off UN Plaza
Date of Interview	June 7, 2017
Duration of Interview	146 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	.wav 44khz/16bit
Archival File Names	Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory1_Archival.wav [1.07 GB]; Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory2_Archival.wav [478 MB]
MP3 File Name	Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory1_Access.mp3 [122 MB]; Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory2_Access.mp3 [54 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	31 [#1 2017]



Fred Bass, Photo by Sarah Dziezic

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Fred Bass

Sound-bite

“My name is Fred Bass. I’m one of the owners of the Strand Bookstore with my daughter, Nancy... We’ve had a store at Broadway and 12th for at least fifty-six years, or something like that, so we’re always in the Village. I was brought up in the Village”... “I would go with my dad down on Saturdays... I started working for him when I was thirteen years old, stacking books and sweeping the floor, but I was subject to books. It got in my blood, and I haven’t gotten it out yet”... “You came in the store, and the first thing you hit on the side—facing the store, the righthand side—was a buying counter where I bought the books. It was great. I caught the customers coming in there and doing that. I got to meet all the customers and see all the people coming in”... “If somebody came with a collection of chess books, we had a lot of chess books. If somebody came with good history books, fine; good art books, we had them”... “The Village was always an exciting part... There’s a mystery. There still is a mystery about it, about the Village, and there are still artists down there. There are still people down there... who have restored the brownstones and made a good cultural place out of it. They’re enjoying it, and they’re making it a better place for everybody.”

Additional Quotes

“What we did in the city at Book Row of America, Fourth Avenue, was entirely different. I mean, it was rather unique. It was the biggest collection of bookstores around, forty-eight bookstores. It was exciting, you know, when business was good. But it wasn't always good, and we had tough times, and we got through them.” (Bass p. 5)

“Most of the booksellers at that time were very strong, self-centered individuals, who didn't really impart a lot of information. They didn't teach anybody. Out of forty-eight bookstores, only two sons went into the business. They kept their cards close to them. They were afraid of being pushed out by the younger generation.” (Bass p. 5)

“He had great knowledge of books, and he was quite a literate man, so he would constantly get me into these things and tell me why he liked the book, or why he did this or why he, you know. That piqued my interest in things and made me a little more curious. Once you start getting curious in a bookstore, you're kind of lost.” (Bass p. 6)

“My impression was there was a lot of intellectual curiosity going on. People were coming in and asking questions or asking for books one had mentioned the night before at a bar or something like that. It's the same as how it is today, really...” (Bass p. 15)

“One of my favorite stories with him is he got into a fight with a customer, and they were arguing probably for two hours in the store, back and forth. The guy walks out of the store with two shopping bags full of books and says to him, ‘I still think you're wrong,’ and walks out...” (Bass p. 16)

“Oh, we did quite a bit, yeah. He was a generation ahead of me, and he had different tastes than I did, that's all. He used to argue that this stuff would sell better than this other stuff. But at those times, we didn't really have a choice of what we bought. It was only what was offered to us. Now when you open up a bookstore, you call a publisher, pick the books you want, and do those things. In those days in the framework of what we were operating under, no, we couldn't; we could just buy what was available.” (Bass p. 17)

“Part of the exciting thing about growing up was that Village crowd. They were always around, they were always available. As young men, we always thought we'd go down to Greenwich Village and pick up girls and you know, run away with them or do something. They'd be coming down to the Village, hoping to be picked up and find a wealthy guy that would take them all over the place. That was exciting.” (Bass p. 24)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Fred Bass

Fred Bass was born in the Village in 1928, a year after his father opened the first location of the Strand bookstore on what was then called Book Row, a strip on Fourth Avenue that housed nearly fifty bookstores. Fred began to work for his father when he was 13, learning the ins and outs of the used book business, and experiencing the vibrancy of the Village.

Bass continued to work at the Strand through college, while he earned a degree in literature. He was then drafted into the Army, serving for two years and meeting his wife, Patricia. Much preferring the Village and the bookstore to Army life, Bass returned home and resumed working with his father, noting how their generational differences influenced their thoughts—which differed, at times—on certain books or clientele. In 1956, when the store moved off Fourth Avenue to its current location on 12th Street and Broadway, Bass took over the majority of the store's operations.

Because of the Strand's location in the Village, Bass encountered the writers of the Beat Generation, Abstract Expressionist painters, folk singers, jazz musicians, and many other intellectuals who visited the bookstore. Moreover, Bass enjoyed the Village energy and nightlife, and spent times at jazz clubs and bars, particularly in his youth. Over the years, Bass also developed relationships with various authors, and thus has a meaningful private collection of early editions and signed copies.

The Strand has undergone many changes since 1956, notably expanding and adapting to become a Village institution, best-known for its vast inventory, which now also includes new releases, and its prominent book-buying table, staffed by Bass himself for decades. Bass's daughter, Nancy Bass Wyden, began to work with her father at the bookstore in 1986, and helped usher in a variety of changes to streamline and modernize management of the store. In 2005, Bass was able to buy the building that houses the Strand, and to make various physical improvements. While Bass is still involved in the store, Wyden now manages the store.

In the second portion of the interview, Bass reviews some of the early Book Row bookstores, noting the personalities of their owners, and well as the competitive spirit that typified Book Row in its prime. He also speaks about the bookstore's location in the Village, and the changes to the neighborhood that he has witnessed firsthand.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

THANK YOU!

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Today is June 5, 2017, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Fred Bass at his home for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. Would you mind just introducing yourself and your family that's here with us?

Fred Bass: My name is Fred Bass. I'm one of the owners of the Strand Bookstore with my daughter, Nancy [Bass Wyden], who's actually running and operating it. My wife, Pat [Patricia Bass], is here, and she's been with me ever since the Greenwich Village days. We've had a good life, and we've enjoyed ourselves. We've lived in New York City—this last round about twelve years—but we spent thirty-four years up in Pelham, New York. We've always been in the New York neighborhood, and we love New York City. It's great. We've had a store at Broadway and 12th for at least fifty-six years, or something like that, so we're always in the Village. I was brought up in the Village. I think I was born on 17th Street where it used to be a hospital and now is an apartment house. We lived on 15th Street, and then we lived on 8th Street, right off Tompkins Park. So we were in the East Village, too.

Patricia Bass: That's with your parents.

Fred Bass: What?

Patricia Bass: With your parents. With your parents.

Fred Bass: Yes.

Dziedzic: Can you tell me a little bit about, going way back, some of your early memories of where you grew up and what your home was like?

Fred Bass: Unfortunately, my mother died when I was five, and it was in the midst of the Depression. My dad had a tough time, and he put me in foster homes until he could get settled and remarried. Eventually, he took me back, and I'm where I am now. I started working for him when I was thirteen years old, stacking books and sweeping the floor, but I was subject to books. It got in my blood, and I haven't gotten it out yet [laughter], so that's why I'm still doing it.

Dziedzic: Where in the city were you living? I'm kind of interested in the kind of friends that you had and what your school was like?

Fred Bass: As a very young child, it was either 15th Street between First [Avenue] and Second [Avenue], and then we moved up to the Bronx, where I made most of my friends growing up as a preteenager, and that stuck with me for quite a time. Some of those people I still have a little contact with.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Why don't you start with—

Fred Bass: So I'm a New York City boy. That's what it is.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Why don't you start with where you born, in that hospital that's on—

Fred Bass: I did already.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Oh, you did? I'm sorry.

Dziedzic: Where in the Bronx were you?

Fred Bass: Well, the West Bronx, Popham Avenue off University Avenue—175th Street. It's a different neighborhood now. The buildings have been knocked down, other buildings put up. The world has changed quite a bit.

Dziedzic: What was the neighborhood like then?

Patricia Bass: It was mostly—can I just interrupt?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Sure, just go.

Patricia Bass: It was mostly a middle class, I would say a middle class Jewish neighborhood, that mostly families lived there. When I was married, I stayed up there for a year. It was mostly, you know, what you think a Bronx neighborhood would be like.

Nancy Bass Wyden: No trees, right.

Patricia Bass: No trees.

Fred Bass: There were trees up there, yeah.

Patricia Bass: So anyway, I would say probably it would be comparable to some place out in Queens now. Of course, it changed considerably, but there were no gangs or anything like that.

Fred Bass: It was safe to go out in the street. My parents, or my step-parents, didn't think [anything] of letting me go out and play when I was ten, eleven, maybe nine, all by myself, so it was comparatively safe.

Nancy Bass Wyden: What would you play? Stickball?

Fred Bass: Stickball, stoopball, all sorts of games.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Were there cars in the street?

Fred Bass: Yeah, sure.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Would you undo the fire hydrants, like—

Fred Bass: No, we didn't in our neighborhood. They did on the block two blocks away. They'd have the big bonfires on July Fourth. [00:04:55]

Nancy Bass Wyden: On the street?

Fred Bass: On the street. They would pile up a hundred empty boxes and just light them up. The fire department would come and chase everybody away. It was exciting. It was comparatively safe.

Patricia Bass: He was with a group of boys.

Fred Bass: Honey, let me answer the questions.

Patricia Bass: OK.

Fred Bass: Yeah, I mean that's—some of those people that I grew up with I'm still in contact with. We all went to public schools, except one who was a little wealthier. [Side conversation in background] He went to Yale [University] or Harvard [University]. He went to Yale. But we had good educations. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School, which at that time was the largest high school in the world and all boys. So we didn't have to put up with you women all the time.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Did you go to the beach?

Fred Bass: Nancy, let me—let's—

Patricia Bass: Shhh.

Fred Bass: It was, you know, it was a good life.

Dziedzic: Was it typical for a single father to find someone else to take care of his young kids at that time?

Fred Bass: When you had to, you had to; that's it. That was it, yeah. It was tough. It was tough on my father, and it was tough on everybody around me. We had no choice.

Dziedzic: What's the story around his opening the bookstore? What about that do you know?

Fred Bass: He was a young man. He was brought up in Hartford [Connecticut], and he came to New York, and he got a job as a salesman on a place on Fourth Avenue, which was Book Row of America at the time. He hung out at the bookstores, and then he scraped together enough money and books to open up a small bookstore. He did OK for a little while. When the Depression came in, he struggled along. Eventually, we made it. That's it.

Dziedzic: What was he selling before books? What kind of a salesman was he?

Fred Bass: It was sort of clothing, I think, fabric. The building is still standing there, so—I recognize it. But he hung out at the bookstores. That's what it was, really. He seemed to like it.

Dziedzic: It sounds like you were very active when you were young and hanging out with a lot of other kids. What was your relationship with books when you were young? And I guess with school, too—with reading?

Fred Bass: I had a lot of books available, so I had choices and easy to get to. I loved handling them. It sort of stuck with me, and I'm happy I did.

Dziedzic: What were some of the subjects that you were interested in in school and the kinds of things about books that were—?

Fred Bass: Oh, it was just everything that came up. [Side conversation in background] I had great interest in anything science and history, things that were going on, contemporary affairs. I didn't like poetry, that I remember. I did not care for poetry, except the "Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám." That was the only poetry I liked. Otherwise, it was OK. We got through.

Dziedzic: What happened when you were thirteen? How did you start working at the store?

Fred Bass: I would go with my dad down on Saturdays and sweep, put books on the shelves alphabetically. Little by little, learned a lot about how to do things and do them. That was my first contact with books, actually, and then later on a lot of the stuff stuck to me. By the time I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, I was able to do a little more creative work. Let's put it that way. When I got in my twenties and I was drafted into the army, then I married my wife, things changed. I came back. Didn't intend to go into the book business, but stayed around helping my dad for a little while. I was [phonetic: up for it all over again (?)]. It was all in the Village with lots of interesting people coming in and out all the time. [00:10:02]

Dziedzic: What was it like to go to Fourth Avenue from the Bronx. How were those neighborhoods different? What was it like to kind of be on the streets?

Fred Bass: The Bronx was just a residential area. Fourth Avenue was more of a city, an active place. What we did in the city at Book Row of America, Fourth Avenue, was entirely different. I mean, it was rather unique. It was the biggest collection of bookstores around, forty-eight bookstores. It was exciting, you know, when business was good. But it wasn't always good, and we had tough times, and we got through them.

Dziedzic: Were there other kids around that were there, kind of associated with the booksellers there, too, or—

Fred Bass: A couple. Not many. Most of the booksellers at that time were very strong, self-centered individuals, who didn't really impart a lot of information. They didn't teach anybody. Out of forty-eight bookstores, only two sons went into the business. They kept their cards close to them. They were afraid of being pushed out by the younger generation. She didn't get it [laughs, indicates daughter, Nancy].

Dziedzic: I guess I'm curious to know what those opinions were like. How do you think they thought of the younger generation? Why were they worried about them?

Fred Bass: Oh, I don't think we thought about anything. At that age, you're sort of self-interested. You just want to get by and have a good time, and we thought we would conquer the world no matter what.

Dziedzic: I think that's pretty typical of young people, I guess. [laughter] You said you started with some kind of simple tasks at the store, but it seems clear that your father shared a lot of information with you about how to run the store, so what was the—

Fred Bass: He had great knowledge of books, and he was quite a literate man, so he would constantly get me into these things and tell me why he liked the book, or why he did this or why he, you know. That piqued my interest in things and made me a little more curious. Once you start getting curious in a bookstore, you're kind of lost (in knowledge).

Dziedzic: What were some of the things he was most excited about, to share with you?

Fred Bass: I think his Johnson collection, Samuel Johnson. He collected his books, and he was very proud of it

Dziedzic: You mentioned that you got married. Can you tell me a little bit more about the teenage years and how you balanced school and working in the store?

Fred Bass: Well, I used to get a schedule where I got out of school at eight o'clock in the morning and was able to get to the store, generally, about one o'clock in the afternoon and work until closing. So that was it, so long as I could arrange the schedule like that, I was able to work at the store. I did that right through college. Once I had a schedule that was easy, and then there was always Saturdays. In those days, we never stayed open on Sunday. Now greed conquers all, and we stay open seven days a week, thirteen hours a day.

Dziedzic: You mention that you eventually could get a little bit more creative with the tasks that you did. What were some of those, the tasks?

Fred Bass: I was able to do a little selling. People come in and ask for things, and I'd recognize them, be able to find them in the store [loud throat clearing]. Excuse me. That was the main thing, then I started doing a little buying, which was more fun because we had a very small operation. It was generally my dad and myself, occasionally a clerk that we could afford. But my dad was the one with all the knowledge, as far as books were concerned. He wasn't a great businessman, but he was a good book man. [00:14:56]

Dziedzic: And it was all used books, right?

Fred Bass: Yes, all used. In those days—it's different now. We mix them up.

Dziedzic: I saw that paperbacks didn't come into circulation until the late [19]30s, and that surprised me. What was the mix of books at the store when you started working there?

Fred Bass: Mostly hardbacks. Paperbacks were considered junk, really. But now, it's entirely different. Now it's mostly paperbacks, and they're convenient, and they're printed nicely. They look nice, so it's changed the business and made the distribution of knowledge better.

Dziedzic: What sort of books were people bringing in? For instance, all those books on Book Row, how did someone with a stack of books decide who to go to to try to sell their books?

Fred Bass: Well, that was a competition, really. You really had to scrounge for books. It was hard work, too. Now we have it a little better. There's less competition, and we get better books now. And we have better knowledge, so we know what we're doing.

Dziedzic: How would you compete for someone to come into your store and try to sell something?

Fred Bass: Price-wise, that's what it was. I would pay more than the next guy and hopefully sell it for less and make some money in between.

Dziedzic: How did you keep track of how much other people were buying books for? I mean it seems like an interesting competitive environment, so I'm—

Fred Bass: Well, someone came in with a load of books, and I offered \$8 for them and they sold it to the next guy for \$10, that's how I knew. Or if I paid \$10, and he's only offering \$8. You get the feel in between. Then we all had our own customers and our field and our own knowledge and our own tastes.

Dziedzic: The friends that you made in the Bronx, was it typical to have a job, to work as much as you did at that time?

Fred Bass: Yeah, most of us needed to work. A few of us came from slightly wealthier families and didn't have to do that, but I think everybody had a job, practically, when I was growing up—some kind of part-time job doing something.

Dziedzic: Were you getting paid by your father?

Fred Bass: Yes. Not very much. Very stingy.

Dziedzic: What were the customers like? I'm imagining how different those neighborhoods were, so when people came in either to buy books or sell books, what kind of exposure did that give you?

Fred Bass: It was a great intellectual group, very curious, many of them self-educated because they couldn't afford to go to college or school. An exciting group, too. Then we had a lot of customers who became famous later on, but we had no idea who they were. They came in, and they were regulars. It was fun.

Dziedzic: Did you have a question [speaking to Patricia]?

Patricia Bass: I don't. I just said, or perhaps she knows, about why Fourth Avenue developed, as it was, Fourth Avenue was nothing but bookstores.

Dziedzic: Yeah, how did that come about that everybody gravitated to that place?

Fred Bass: The publishers were there. It was a publishing center, printing and publishing down there, and the bookstores just evolved as a tail end of it. That's really how they started there.

Patricia Bass: Want to show her a picture of your dad [crosstalk]—

Fred Bass: We were one of the first booksellers there for many years. It became sort of a tradition, and it was nice. When times were good, it was really good.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Were there forty bookstores? Do you remember any of the stores? There's the old map of the Fourth Avenue there—

Patricia Bass: Show her the picture.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Of grandpa? [crosstalk]

Patricia Bass: In front of his door. That was when it was more successful. [00:19:59]

Nancy Bass Wyden: That was on Fourth Avenue and Broadway.

Fred Bass: Oh, God, they had suits and ties on. [laughter]

Nancy Bass Wyden: You always wore a suit and tie, and Grandpa always wore the vest. You always got dressed up.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And remember this picture, too? This is in Tompkins Square, and you had kind of a train apartment. What's it called? Railroad apartment.

Fred Bass: Railroad apartment.

Nancy Bass Wyden: She died when you were five.

Fred Bass: I already said that already.

Patricia Bass: You know what I think is also interesting—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Do you know what she died from?

Fred Bass: Cancer, most likely.

Nancy Bass Wyden: She had a growth on her back. This is according to Dorothy. She went to a welfare hospital. Was it free medical then?

Patricia Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It was not a good doctor, and they didn't take out all the growth, and it came back really bad, so she left Fred at five and Dorothy was thirteen months old or eighteen months old? Then they were not sure where to put you guys, right Dad?

Patricia Bass: Would you just show her the other picture? This is what was going on in every store—because it doesn't happen now. In every store, I don't care where—you wore something. In other words, you wore a jacket when you were serving the public. It could be a different number of things, but you never just were as casual as the people are now, and I think that's such a sign of the times. Everybody that worked at the store wore little jackets like that. Not just Strand, but various places, they'd have different colors for different things.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think it was a level of professionalism, too—

Patricia Bass: Exactly.

Nancy Bass Wyden: —and a pride in working there.

Patricia Bass: It was entirely different than what we have now, because now you can wear anything practically.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Sneakers and—

Dziedzic: What did the colors represent?

Nancy Bass Wyden: I mean it's a freer time, too, right now than it was before.

Patricia Bass: Oh, absolutely.

Fred Bass: What do you mean, “freer time”?

Nancy Bass Wyden: It was much more structured back then.

Fred Bass: It was much more structured. Freer now, yes. You see the way that my employees look or dress. Can't control it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Then this is a picture of you in Europe. You were stationed in Germany, right? You were in uniform.

Fred Bass: Yep.

Dziedzic: Do you want to talk about that process of traveling away? Did you sign up for the army, or were you—

Fred Bass: I was drafted.

Dziedzic: Where did you go?

Fred Bass: Germany. I spent a year in the states and then a year in Germany. And I didn't reenlist. I would have become an officer if I reenlisted for three years, but—

Nancy Bass Wyden: You were married, you had a baby.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You had the bookstore.

Fred Bass: Oh, not while I was in the army.

Patricia Bass: We didn't have Steven yet.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But you were married.

Patricia Bass: Oh, yeah.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Dziedzic: How did you both meet?

Patricia Bass: We met because I was in Cleveland working. I'm from Wisconsin, but I went to Cleveland to work, and I knew one of his very best friends, who was going to get his PhD in Cleveland, and then as a group, we all came out to New York one weekend. He was my date for the weekend, so that's how we met.

Dziedzic: Then how long after were you—

Patricia Bass: I came in for three days on my vacation in August. I met him in Pittsburgh. We decided to get married, and we got married the following month. Then he went overseas. In those days, you know, you wrote letters. You didn't call. You were allowed one—especially if you were in the army—you were allowed one call a year.

Fred Bass: Well, that's all you could afford.

Patricia Bass: Scheduled.

Fred Bass: Yeah, no, calling from Germany cost like \$17 for three minutes.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Patricia Bass: So we talked to each other once a year. I mean I'm just telling you this because of the differences in how life is now and what it was then. Because of that, it colored your whole

personality. You probably had more patience then, you spent more time doing things like writing letters, so that's the only reason that I'm telling you that. It was a different era.

Dziedzic: And that's how you sustained your relationship while you were gone.

Fred Bass: Yeah, through letters, yeah.

Dziedzic: You said you did not decide to reenlist.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Dziedzic: What were the reasons for that decision? [00:25:02]

Fred Bass: I didn't want to have an army life. I didn't think that was comfortable and exciting. It took over. And as a young man—let's backtrack a little there. Prior to being married, my teenage years, we hung around the Village. It always was an exciting place. There was music there. It was great. I fell in love with Stan Getz, got all his records and stuff, listened to them all the time—Rich Oberto (he's a jazz drummer).

Patricia Bass: There were all the artists down there, too.

Fred Bass: What?

Patricia Bass: Jackson Pollock was down there. I mean all of the art people were down there then, hanging at—what was the name of the bar they all went to?

Fred Bass: I can't remember that.

Dziedzic: The White Horse? Cedar Tavern?

Fred Bass: The Cedar Tavern.

Patricia Bass: Cedar.

Fred Bass: That moved several times, but it was exciting to be with those guys.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And you remember—

Fred Bass: There was a place called Max's Kansas City, which in the early days was entirely different than what it was. Became a jazz place, it became a music place, but before that, it was a hangout. You could go to the bar and talk to anybody there, and it was fun. We would stop in after work and have a drink, and you never knew who you met at the bar.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But you'd have people coming in the bookstore, right? Joan Mitchell, right, would come in? And who's the sculptor that's famous that was in the Village.

Fred Bass: Chaim Gross?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yes.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Characters that came in, and the people were always interesting that came in the store. They were well-read—

Fred Bass: They were a lot a Village—

Nancy Bass Wyden: —they were cultural, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah, but you didn't know who they were at that time, and they weren't important. They became important later on. That's what I was exposed to, and there was a lot of it down there. But this is all prior to getting married and not being able to hit the bars the way I wanted to. She slowed me down [jokingly indicating wife, Patricia]. [laughter]

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think you wanted a home, because you—

Patricia Bass: You mom died very, very young.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Your mom died young and—right?

Patricia Bass: You know, you went to college—

Fred Bass: Let me answer these things, please.

Patricia Bass: I got married at twenty-one.

Fred Bass: Let me answer these things, please.

Patricia Bass: I was just telling her I was twenty-one when I got married. I'm leaving anyway, so you're on your own. [laughter]

Nancy Bass Wyden: Thank God. She was just like all over [spoken sarcastically].

Patricia Bass: Interrupting all the time. [laughter]

Dziedzic: Do you remember any of the conversations or any of the artists that you—from what I understand, the story is that travel are everybody was fighting each other, and everybody was always totally out of control. But maybe if you were there earlier in the evening, you saw something different.

Fred Bass: There was a lot of bantering going around, and these were exciting people. They had brains; they had ideas; they had concepts, their own styles. They were either loving each other or attacking each other. But they were exposed, and some of them were—a lot of them failed. Nothing ever happened to them. They never came out with anything really good. Just sit here and listen, and then afterwards you can—[speaking to wife, Patricia]

Patricia Bass: I know, I have to go.

Nancy Bass Wyden: She wants to go to her luncheon.

Fred Bass: OK, goodbye.

Dziedzic: So these were the abstract expressionists, the painters, that you were—

Fred Bass: The painters and there were poets, and there were a lot of novelists there. [talking in background] [Allen] Ginsberg was a guy who hung around the store quite a bit. I don't remember [Jack] Kerouac, but my employees tell me he was there, and there were a bunch of other people.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Do you ever—Ginsberg? I mean I remember him being in the store.

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah. Later on we knew who he was, but the early part—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Did you ever see Bob Dylan, or—

Fred Bass: Yeah, but he wasn't important at that time to us.

Dziedzic: It was only in retrospect that you realized that that's who he was.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But I think it was exciting later on. Patti Smith was working for us. We had all these characters and poets and artists working and coming in. Now we get the celebrities.

Fred Bass: Which we try and hide, but—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Politicians, yeah.

Dziedzic: You try and hide, you said?

Fred Bass: Well, we want to leave them alone, which is hard to do. Once they come into a store and they're recognized, they don't want to come back. They want some privacy. [00:30:06]

Nancy Bass Wyden: I don't know, now I have a different philosophy. I go up to them, and we ask them to recommend their favorite book. Then we put it all on social media, and I think everybody really appreciates that. Tom Hanks came in, and he's such a—he likes writing and type—anyway. That's my philosophy. They're usually pretty happy.

Dziedzic: Yeah. I remember reading something about that the bookstores in general had a reputation of being snobby, so that if you went into the store as a young person asking about a particular book, you might get a look. And that happens still with certain stores. But were you aware of that reputation? From talking to you now, it doesn't seem like you would be rude or snobby to somebody looking for Rimbaud or whoever. What was the general environment like? For instance, you're saying now that you want people to know what everyone is reading and you want to be welcoming, and the reputation I'm aware of is being very snobby and blocking your doors, and you should already know what you're looking for. What was your impression at the time?

Fred Bass: My impression was there was a lot of intellectual curiosity going on. People were coming in and asking questions or asking for books one had mentioned the night before at a bar or something like that. It's the same as how it is today, really, except we do more of it through social media. It's mentioned more on TV and things like that.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I could see Grandpa, like somebody asking him, you know, “I remember this book, and the cover was red. It had the word ‘blackout’ in it,” and Grandpa—I don’t know. Would he have been cantankerous to the customer—

Fred Bass: Sometimes.

Nancy Bass Wyden: —if he didn’t think they were smart enough?

Fred Bass: No, my dad was pretty caustic with customers. A customer would say to him, “You don’t know what that book is,” and he’d say to them, “Well, I’ve got twenty-five thousand books here, and you can’t remember one. So how can you say these things?” He’d insult more customers. One of my favorite stories with him is he got into a fight with a customer, and they were arguing probably for two hours in the store, back and forth. The guy walks out of the store with two shopping bags full of books and says to him, “I still think you’re wrong,” and walks out. [laughs]

Nancy Bass Wyden: There were no computers in that day, right. You’re remembering everything by—you’re remembering prices in your head and—

Dziedzic: Do you remember what the argument was about between the customer and your father?

Fred Bass: Just nonsense. It was mostly nonsense.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But you used to fight with him, some people said.

Fred Bass: Oh, I fought with him all the time.

Nancy Bass Wyden: What were you fighting about?

Fred Bass: What we were buying, what we were selling, where to place the books, how to handle the customers—how to price the books a good of the time.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Nancy Bass Wyden: You would just write it in pencil. Did anybody ever get an eraser and just change the price?

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah. We had a lot of cheating, no different than today. There were a lot of crooks out there, but we don't talk about that. Most book buyers are very honest.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Where would he want to place books, and where would you want to place books?

Fred Bass: What books when in the window and the front table and things like that. Where the sections should be. He would like to hide the good books in the back of the store. Don't ask me why. He was afraid the dealers would come along and buy all the best books, and he would have nothing to show to his customers, which was kind of silly because we needed the money, and we wanted to sell the books fast.

Dziedzic: Do you remember any times when you maybe disagreed with him about what books you should be buying? For instance, I'm just thinking about in the [19]50s and [19]60s and [19]70s, there was so much material that all of a sudden wasn't illegal to print, or that people were fighting for their right to print, so just in terms of the cultural content or the artistic content, how did you differ in your opinions on those things? [00:35:20]

Fred Bass: Oh, we did quite a bit, yeah. He was a generation ahead of me, and he had different tastes than I did, that's all. He used to argue that this stuff would sell better than this other stuff. But at those times, we didn't really have a choice of what we bought. It was only what was offered to us. Now when you open up a bookstore, you call a publisher, pick the books you want, and do those things. In those days in the framework of what we were operating under, no, we couldn't; we could just buy what was available. If somebody came with a collection of chess books, we had a lot of chess books. If somebody came with good history books, fine; good art books, we had them. I could sell out the art books and not be able to get any more.

Dziedzic: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Were most of these guys on Book Row, were they Jewish?

Fred Bass: High percentage.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Was there any anti-Semitism or were they—

Fred Bass: Always.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah, and if they weren't Jewish, what other ethnicity were they?

Fred Bass: Oh, it could be anything then. It could be anything, but mostly Jewish I would say.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Kind of Jewish intellectuals that were attracted to it.

Dziedzic: Then the neighborhood surrounding is kind of a lot of Italian families, Irish families, the kind of Bohemian, Beatnik kind of crowd, so it seems like the Jewish intellectual center was—were people coming from the Lower East Side?

Fred Bass: They came from everywhere, but mostly the Lower East Side. The ones that lived in the neighborhood within walking distance really were the big customers.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You didn't get international people, right? New York wasn't—

Fred Bass: We got some.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You did?

Fred Bass: We got everything.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Europeans.

Fred Bass: As business got better, we'd ship catalogs and things like that. You develop more customers in a broader sense. You have correspondence with them, and a lot of it's fun. A lot of it's just tedious work.

Dziedzic: Where was your father living at the time that—you said that you and your wife lived with him briefly in the Village. When did you move from the Bronx back to the Village?

Fred Bass: Trying to think now.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Originally, you were in Tompkins Square Park, right? Then you were at the place near St. Mark's—

Fred Bass: Yeah, that's right. I was very young then, yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: That was at the end?

Fred Bass: Yeah, but no. Then I went into the army, and I met my—I literally was in for a year, and then I got married. We got our own apartment.

Dziedzic: Where was that?

Fred Bass: Brooklyn Heights for a year.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It was across from the fire station.

Fred Bass: That's right, yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Because she said that she kept hearing—you know, the sirens would go off in the middle of the night.

Fred Bass: Yeah, it was right next to a fire station there.

Dziedzic: Why did you move to Brooklyn Heights?

Fred Bass: Only place I could get an apartment at. Those days, apartments were very short, so we grabbed whatever we could. It was essentially a one-bedroom apartment, or really a one-room apartment.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And she was working, right, so you both could get some income.

Dziedzic: The environment around the bookstore itself, was it too expensive for you to buy, or was it too much of a rental environment, and you were looking to buy?

Fred Bass: Too expensive. Just couldn't afford it. Prices were cheaper in Brooklyn, same as—well, [laughter] they've changed now, but—

Nancy Bass Wyden: At what point did you guys go into foster care, and Grandpa had to sleep in the cot in the back of the bookstore because money was so tight? [00:39:52]

Fred Bass: Oh, probably when I was eight, nine years old. He got me placed someplace, but he couldn't find a place for himself. He scrounged around, stayed with friends and he slept in the back of the bookstore. That's all. Didn't have any facilities there, but that's where he was. He made do.

Dziedzic: That's just right in the heart of the Depression, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah. Yeah, those were tough times, really tough times.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Where would you go for food? Were there like food halls, or—

Fred Bass: Oh no, there were restaurants around, cafeterias, street vendors.

Dziedzic: “Spaghetti houses,” I think was a thing.

Fred Bass: Not any different than it is now, except there are just more of them now.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Was [phonetic: Lu Ciao's (?)] there?

Fred Bass: Lu Ciao's, that was very expensive.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But was that around during the Depression?

Fred Bass: Yeah, Lu Ciao's was there for the rich.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I mean did it feel horrible to be a poor Jewish boy living in the city?

Fred Bass: Didn't know any different. Thought that was the way it is, that's all.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Or was there pride, pride in the Jewish community?

Fred Bass: Just thought that was it. That's the way it was.

Dziedzic: You mentioned that you lived with step-parents. Were they Jewish, as well?

Fred Bass: Yes.

Dziedzic: I'm just curious if that was—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Your stepmom, or other people? Just your stepmom. Your dad and your stepmom.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But that wasn't until you were older, right?

Fred Bass: Well—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Fifteen?

Fred Bass: Maybe twelve, thirteen. I think I was about fourteen years old when my dad got himself situated and took me back.

Nancy Bass Wyden: So were you like six years in foster care?

Fred Bass: Somewheres like that.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And you—

Fred Bass: I've lost track of that.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Switched a lot of homes.

Fred Bass: No, only three. They were nice people, nice enough. They didn't have any money either, so—

Nancy Bass Wyden: They did this to get your money, right?

Fred Bass: Well, they did it for money, I think, yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You said one time that you had to wait until the other kids ate, and then you'd eat the leftovers or what was remaining?

Fred Bass: I don't remember that story.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You said their family would eat, and then whatever remained you'd take.

Fred Bass: I don't remember that at all. No, that never happened. I don't know.

Dziedzic: The families had other kids, though?

Fred Bass: They had other kids, but that I don't remember. When they had other kids, we ate with the other kids. That's it. It wasn't that way. The one thing I do remember, it was a matter of money. It's hard to explain that. On Saturdays or Sundays, we got a treat. We could either have buttered toast or crumb cake, but not both.

Nancy Bass Wyden: What did you choose?

Fred Bass: I loved them both.

Nancy Bass Wyden: So it was torn.

Fred Bass: It was torn. It was a decision I had to make, whether I wanted buttered toast or crumb cake.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Aunt Dorothy, my dad's sister, remembers—she was a very cute little redhead, and she remembers her foster family taking her around, and she would sing and people would give her pennies for it.

Fred Bass: I don't remember that, but—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Was that a way that the family could get money for her?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: From her? Yeah.

Dziedzic: I think my grandfather made my mom do that, too. [laughter] All too common, unfortunately. When you came back to live with your dad, where had he moved? Where was his apartment?

Fred Bass: We moved to Washington Heights, which is right near the Washington Bridge area on the Bronx side, and that was the first place I recollect. I guess I was fourteen or fifteen years old. Irish neighborhood. No longer a Jewish neighborhood. Didn't know the difference.

[00:44:57]

Dziedzic: What was that transition like, both kind of moving back with your father and moving to a different neighborhood that had a different demographic?

Fred Bass: It was a little challenging, but I didn't particularly feel left out or anything like that. I made friends in the neighborhood and did the same things.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think because family wasn't, you know, totally together, your friends became very important, and they still are today. Is that correct?

Fred Bass: Yep.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Your buddies. That picture where the three of you guys are at the beach—

Dziedzic: Friends that you made in the Bronx?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Dziedzic: So why Washington Heights?

Fred Bass: It was convenient, and you could grab an apartment. In those days, you grabbed whatever you could. You didn't have the choice of saying, "Gee, I want to live here, I want to live there." This apartment became available, the price was right, so you grabbed it.

Dziedzic: How did he hear about it? Was it through—

Fred Bass: Probably friends.

Dziedzic: Well, it surprises me that you say that it was convenient, because it was so far from the bookstore. How did you guys get between—

Fred Bass: Well, we had lived in the neighborhood before—it was right near Popham Avenue, University Avenue. If you were heading south on University Avenue, then you'd run into the Washington—hope I got the name right, Washington Heights.¹

Dziedzic: It's up in the 150s, 160s in the—yeah.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: When you were little, was there Italian food and Chinese food and occasionally Polish food and occasionally you got some treats? Or just didn't even have the money to go to that.

Fred Bass: Chinese food we could occasionally afford. I remember for like sixty-five cents you could get a full Chinese meal: soup, a main course, an egg roll, a spare rib.

Nancy Bass Wyden: This was in the '20s, right?

¹ This area of the Bronx is now called Morris Heights.

Fred Bass: No, I was born in the '20s. Thirties. Yeah. I could get chicken chow mein.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Was Grandpa always reading?

Fred Bass: What do you mean?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Was he reading books a lot?

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah. He devoured a tremendous amount of books.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Did he give you books to read, or read to you? Did he ever read to you?

Fred Bass: That I don't recall.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But he gave you books to look at.

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah, pointed out books I should read. Jack London was a main thing I remember. Then where I grew up, I found the revolutionary work of Jack London, not just the adventure stuff with the—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Did you go to the movies? Was that a special treat?

Fred Bass: Occasionally, yeah. Movies were cheap. You'd get a double feature for ten cents practically. Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Did they sell popcorn and that kind of thing?

Fred Bass: Everything, yeah. Everything we have today, we had then, except it's more expensive today. [laughter]

Dziedzic: Yeah, probably a hundred times more almost.

Fred Bass: Part of the exciting thing about growing up was that Village crowd. They were always around, they were always available. As young men, we always thought we'd go down to Greenwich Village and pick up girls and you know, run away with them or do something. They'd be coming down to the Village, hoping to be picked up and find a wealthy guy that would take them all over the place. That was exciting.

Nancy Bass Wyden: What other stores were around Book Row? I know it is an antique area, but that wasn't until later, right? There were hotels, right. There were some prostitute hotels? What was at Union Square—Bonds was at Union Square, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah, our place where the store is now used to be a clothing store. Everything changes, neighborhoods change. [00:50:02]

Nancy Bass Wyden: But when it was Book Row, in that time, what other stores were around?

Fred Bass: I don't remember. Didn't pay attention to those.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Do you remember going to the main department store there—

Dziedzic: Wanamaker's?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Wanamaker's.

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah. That was very classy, very, very classy.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Did Grandpa ever buy anything there, or it was just too expensive?

Fred Bass: I think it was too expensive. We could go down to Klein's. Do you know Klein's?

Dziedzic: I've read about it.

Fred Bass: Well, it's—

Dziedzic: I've never been there!

Nancy Bass Wyden: That was in Union Square, right?

Fred Bass: That was a precursor of the bargain department store, really.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Was that at Union Square?

Fred Bass: I remember when I got a job and I was making a little more money, I would go to Klein's, and I would get white-on-white shirts, which are really very expensive things, for peanuts.

Dziedzic: What's white-on-white? What's a white-on-white shirt?

Fred Bass: It's a white shirt with white printing on it. It's a silky white finish on it. That was very classy at the time.

Dziedzic: Was that your going-out shirt or your work shirt?

Fred Bass: Going out.

Nancy Bass Wyden: When did the antique stores start coming in?

Fred Bass: I couldn't tell you.

Dziedzic: When did you end up taking over the business from your father?

Fred Bass: I guess when we moved from Fourth Avenue to where we are now.

Nancy Bass Wyden: 1956?

Fred Bass: Yes, somewhere around there. I took over a major part of operating our business. He was still there. He worked 'til the very end, but most of the decisions were made by me, or when they weren't made by me, there was a conflict.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think he liked—he got an apartment on the Upper East Side. He was very proud of that, that he could afford that, and he then started traveling more, like he loved Paris. He loved Europe. Is that correct?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And he started to really, because he was very cultured, he started to appreciate being able to afford that.

Dziedzic: Did he buy books on his travels, too, and bring those back?

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah. We always did. I did 'til the very end. Except that times have changed now with the computers, the computer setups and the internet. I used to take a trip on vacation, stop in a local bookstore, and be able to buy a lot of stuff, but now the local bookstore goes right on the internet and they check every price of every book. So the bargains aren't out there, except for the guys who want wholesale for the stuff, but I always made my trips profitable, and that was a lot of fun, too.

Dziedzic: Did you travel with him?

Fred Bass: Well, not really, because most of the time we needed somebody running the store. We were a small operation, and we kept everything to ourselves.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But you remember when you were young, you would go on book buying trips with him on the subway and go to five-story walk-ups and help him cart the books back.

Fred Bass: Yeah, we'd take them on the subway. We'd bundle them, carry them to the subway, take them down to the store.

Dziedzic: Who were you buying from in these cases?

Fred Bass: Private people. There were a lot of books available out there. All you needed was some money to be able to buy them. Of course, there was a lot of competition, too.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Dziedzic: How did you decide to move the store to Broadway?

Fred Bass: We had no choice. We lost our lease on Fourth Avenue. There's a small apartment house there where it is now. The lease was up, and we couldn't break it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It was that spot that's one south of the post office on Fourth Avenue where the billiard store is. Right there is where the store was. Near Webster Hall.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

[00:55:05]

Dziedzic: Fine, thank you. The space on Broadway is much bigger, right?

Fred Bass: When we first took over Broadway, when I got there, only had the front part of the main floor, couple of thousand square feet. It was much smaller, and over the years, I negotiated to take part of the basement, then another part of the basement, then a third part of the basement, and then some space upstairs. I kept filling it up with books and boxes, and then eventually, I was able to rent the rest of the main floor. The landlord put a deal together for me, and that's where the growth really started.

I had a bigger store, and we remodelled. I didn't do a good job remodelling. I should have put a better staircase into the basement. I should have done a lot of things, but I didn't want to build these out for the landlord, because I only had ten-year leases or twelve-year leases, and I didn't put an air conditioner in because I was spending money on air conditioning that somebody else was going to benefit by. These things all cost a lot of money. Then when I finally bought the building, we were able to do some major renovations. I was able to build it out for myself—ourselves. Yeah, that was the main thing.

About that time, I was taking over everything going on in the store. It was no formal thing; I just did it, that's all. He just stepped back, and I was doing it. Pretty much, I've been doing exactly what he did, too. I'm sitting back, and I'm signing—did you sign checks today?

Nancy Bass Wyden: No, not today.

Fred Bass: Oh, OK, I'll call them.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Do you want him to deliver to you?

Fred Bass: Oh, I think do it on Thursday. We'll do them all at once.

Nancy Bass Wyden: OK.

Dziedzic: When were you able to buy the building?

Fred Bass: Fourteen years ago, fifteen years ago now. Lucky break.

Dziedzic: So you were a renter for forty years or so?

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah. It was very tough. You never know where you're going to be in ten years, so you don't know what—I mean now people work out different formulas. They figure everything in a ten-year basis or a twelve-year basis or a twenty-year basis, but in those days, you just had them do it—

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think it was 2001 that you bought the building.

Fred Bass: 2001? OK. You sure?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Sixteen years ago.

Fred Bass: Sixteen years ago. Yeah, that was a lucky break.

Nancy Bass Wyden: He negotiated the lease at Knickerbocker, and they gave him the Village award.

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah, Knickerbocker was the bar. My landlord, Bill Goldstein, used to hang out at the Knickerbocker Bar and Grill at 9th Street and University [Place]. Do you know the place?

Dziedzic: I've never been there.

Fred Bass: OK. We would meet there every Tuesday. I negotiated two leases at the bar, and I bought the building at the bar, and it was like five minutes of negotiations, and the rest of the night was spent drinking and just having a good time. But there came a point that he wanted to get rid of the building. It was owned by fourteen family members, and he just got fed up with handling it. He got rid of the building, lucky for me—lucky for us. It was a good deal.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Dad, tell the story about your desk, your buying desk. This was the original buying desk. This is a painting that was done of him.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Fred Bass: By a guy by the name of Max Ferguson. He came in and took a photograph, and I just don't recollect him doing it. Then he came, showed up with this painting. He had an art showing, and we went there, and it was the second painting sold, like right away. It went for \$44,000. I said, "Wow, \$44,000 for the painting." The painting of a photograph. [01:00:10]

Nancy Bass Wyden: Well, he painted all the details. But about the buying desk that was in front of the store. You'd walk into the store—do you want me to tell it, or—

Fred Bass: OK, I'll tell it. You came in the store, and the first thing you hit on the side—facing the store, the righthand side—was a buying counter where I bought the books. It was great. I caught the customers coming in there and doing that. I got to meet all the customers and see all the people coming in until this kid came along [referring to daughter, Nancy], and she wanted to move me down to the basement, the buying counter. I said, "No, that's not going to work. I'm not going to work in the damn basement." So we compromised, then she came to me with some

facts and figures, saying that she could put three tables there and display 1000 more books, so I agreed to move to the back of the store.

Nancy Bass Wyden: A million dollars in sales a year.

Fred Bass: What?

Nancy Bass Wyden: A million dollars in sales a year.

Fred Bass: Sales a year, yeah. So they moved me into the back corner, where I am now. I'm quite happy there, but it works. It's more functional as it is now.

Nancy Bass Wyden: But you still have a view of the store, and you just wanted to be front and center and see all the customers. But I thought—it got to the point where you'd come in, and there'd be boxes and boxes. You'd have to turn because you'd be hitting the boxes of books, and it did give a lot of atmosphere, but it was kind of [crosstalk]—

Fred Bass: It made the store look very busy.

Nancy Bass Wyden: His idea, too, was that everybody would know we're selling used books, but I think it got to a point where—

Fred Bass: Well, also, it scared customers away.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah.

Fred Bass: They'd come in, and they'd say, "Oh, it's all crowded up here. I'm not going in to that store. It's too busy." She got me in the back of the store, and that was it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Separate entrance if you wanted to sell books back there.

Dziedzic: How many books are you buying from people on a regular daily basis?

Fred Bass: We never count, really. I can give you some numbers if I start researching. It's a dollar amount.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Just guess. I mean new books and used books, or just—

Dziedzic: Just used books. How many used books are coming across this desk and how many are you deciding to buy?

Fred Bass: Um—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Five thousand?

Fred Bass: A day?

Nancy Bass Wyden: I'm just—

Fred Bass: At least a couple of thousand a day, yeah—of used books.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And then we have rare—

Fred Bass: And the rare books [crosstalk].

Nancy Bass Wyden: —and then we have new, remainders, publishers' overstock.

Fred Bass: Then the art department buys their own stuff, occasionally.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Art books, yeah.

Fred Bass: It's gotten very complicated. It's no longer—

Nancy Bass Wyden: It's definitely more than five thousand, if you include everything.

Fred Bass: A day?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Don't you think? I think so.

Fred Bass: Yeah, you can take the average price of a book and figure out what you sell it for. Of course, what happens is a lot of the books that come in, we don't really buy. You come in with fifty books, I pay for twenty-five of them because they're good books. The other twenty-five are not worth anything, and people just leave them. I put them on the bargain tables outside, so we "recycle" them.

Nancy Bass Wyden: There's also a lot of great books on those bargain outside. We just don't have the shelf room, so we put them out for \$2.

Fred Bass: There are books I sell for \$10, \$15, \$20. If I've got ten copies and I'm not selling it that fast, I don't need a twenty-first copy or eleventh copy, so we put them out on the bargain tables. So it's a treasure hunt.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You've met so many people through the years, like Saul Bellow and Kurt Vonnegut.

Fred Bass: Kurt Vonnegut, Kurt Vonnegut was a friend of mine.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You became very close friends with Fred—

Fred Bass: Fred Gwynne.

Nancy Bass Wyden: He was an actor for The Munsters. You were good friends with Lee Strasberg through the store. Maurice Sendak. [01:05:02]

Fred Bass: Maurice Sendak.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It's been kind of really great, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: George Wills. Even some finance people: Carl Icahn has bought books from you.

Fred Bass: Yeah, we did a couple of libraries. I did one library, and then you did a couple for him.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah. Paul Jenkins, the artist, too came in. Who else do you remember? They'd always talk to you, and they'd always say hello to you. Umberto Eco—

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: —loved you.

Fred Bass: We'd get a tremendous amount of orders coming in all the time.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Tell about Abbie Hoffman.

Fred Bass: Oh.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You had the two stories, right?

Fred Bass: I still have some of the stuff here.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You have all these books that are autographed from—

Fred Bass: Yeah, Abbie Hoffman did a couple of books on The Strand and in one of them he says, “To my favorite rip-off palace.” I forget what the other one said.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It was like—what’s the book called?

Fred Bass: *Steal This Book*.

Nancy Bass Wyden: *Steal This Book*, and he said, “This is my favorite place to steal books.” I mean he was being funny, but—

Dziedzic: I did want to ask—

Nancy Bass Wyden: E.L. Doctorow came in all the time, right?

Fred Bass: Who?

Nancy Bass Wyden: E.L. Doctorow.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: See, to sign copies. Jules Feiffer.

Fred Bass: Yeah, we had a lot of cartoonists come in, a lot of artists.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about a couple things that came across in my research, just to see if you had experience with them. Basically, the organizing that happened amongst the booksellers on Book Row to keep the carts outside and to stay and have that place designated as Book Row, officially. This was the Fourth Avenue Booksellers Association.

Fred Bass: Yes.

Dziedzic: Do you recall that?

Fred Bass: Oh, yeah, yeah. We had quite a battle over that. Sanitation Department wanted to close us down, and I remember finally, some gal showed up, started writing a summons to me. I said, “Great! Fabulous.” I said, “Make the summons as big as you can.” I went over this with her, and she looked at me strangely, like, “You really want a summons?” Usually, they’re arguing against it. “Yeah,” I said, “I’m going to get such great publicity over it. We’ve had these carts out there for fifty years, and you’re finally showing up. This has been a tradition in the bookselling forever and ever. We have documentation on it, and boy, I’d like the publicity on this thing.” The woman backed off. They still give us a hard time about having the stands out there, doing the thing. I do more or less the same thing, and some day, I’m going to get some wise guy out there that’s going to give me the summons. Then I’ll have a problem.

Nancy Bass Wyden: How did it all start, though?

Fred Bass: What?

Nancy Bass Wyden: That you were allowed to use the book carts.

Fred Bass: We never were really allowed. We just did it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Oh, it wasn’t organized for the Fourth Avenue.

Fred Bass: No, no.

Dziedzic: I’d read that they had also wanted to move the shops underground or something like that, too.

Fred Bass: Oh, it was a waste. I was involved in all that. I said, “That’s ridiculous. You’re not going to have any foot traffic there.”

Dziedzic: What was the reasoning?

Fred Bass: Well, they needed space, so they thought they’d make a Book Row—there was some passageway in the subway, so they thought they could make that lively. That wasn’t going to work. They came up with lots of schemes that didn’t make any sense.

Dziedzic: So this would have been the city, right? Or the Department of Sanitation?

Fred Bass: One of the departments. As I started to describe earlier, at this final meeting that we had with [Parks] Commissioner Heckscher, there were about twelve people. Each showed up with the yellow pad, made their notes. It was their day's work, and we went around the table, and everybody said, "Oh, it's such a great idea, but who's going to take responsibility?" The police department wanted to pass the buck to the fire department, sanitation department, back into the arts council. Each one of these was passing the buck, and Heckscher just finally looked up and said, "Oh, it's my park? Let's do it." They said, "OK, fine." And we did it. Five years of meetings. [01:10:15]

Dziedzic: What were you fighting for at that time?

Fred Bass: Wanted to open a park store that we have now on 59th Street—or 60th Street and Fifth Avenue. We still have problems with it, restrictions on it and things like that, but that's what it was. Auchincloss, the wife of the novelist, had this concept of opening up book stalls like along the Seine. She had her own idea and design and stuff and put me through the hoops and had me do a lot of things that were just a waste. She actually had me have my own designer come up with some really great designs for the book stalls, and I made my presentation. She said, "Oh, that's so nice, Mr. Bass." Just flipped them away. She said, "I want you to meet Bill Hamilton. He's my architect," who designs plexiglass book stalls that you could see in, but you saw the backs of the books. We kind of convinced her that's not going to work, but we got it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And it was on the cover of the *New Yorker*.

Fred Bass: Well, they didn't—

Nancy Bass Wyden: The book stalls. They didn't say Strand on it, but it got on the cover of the printed—

Fred Bass: They did, they gave us some publicity.

Nancy Bass Wyden: This was there [indicates photograph] It was like opening day or something.

Fred Bass: No, that was a test thing. That was a test for Central Park.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I thought you had the carts.

Fred Bass: That was it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: We still have those kiosks.

Fred Bass: Those are the successful ones.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Doing a lot of pop-up locations now. We're at Times Square. We do things with Artists & Fleas now. There's a pop-up store at Spring Street. We're doing all the holiday markets that were in Union Square, Bryant Park, Columbus Circle for the holidays. Club Monaco location. We're doing little—

Fred Bass: Little things, you know.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah, we're able to get out of—

Fred Bass: It's hard to get out of a permanent location nowadays. The rents are so high, and you just—

Nancy Bass Wyden: You've got to be careful with people, too. You want to give people health benefits and pay them well, so really—then we're offering books at great prices, so it's—

Fred Bass: Yeah. The business has changed tremendously from the old days when we were just buying and selling used books, that's all. The sidelines, which Nancy is in charge of, it takes about thirty percent of the sales now?

Nancy Bass Wyden: At Christmas it does, yeah.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It's just not a simple bookstore. Everybody's doing it, but you know, we have events. Sometimes twice a day, we have major authors come in or panelists coming in. You're selling books. We put together libraries for people. We're always trying to reinvent ourselves, too, doing whole social media campaigns and curated collections, so it's not just the simple get great books, put it in—although you had to work so hard to even get to that point.

Fred Bass: Yep. But we did it. We got there, and we're where we are now. It's still a struggle. There's always the threat of Amazon coming in with their formula on a bookstore, which may work well, though. Just walk in there, and they'll pull up any book you want and have it to you the next day.

Dziedzic: And they're opening a brick and mortar store in Hudson Yards, right.

Nancy Bass Wyden: They have one in Columbus Circle already.

Fred Bass: Yeah, they're all over the city. So they're going to conquer the world, too.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah, but you know, we're hopefully offering the community and the way we put together books. Go in their store, you don't get the used books. [01:15:08]

Dziedzic: It feels like an international destination a lot like Powell's in Portland. That's what my experience is like when I go there. It's not just a bookstore, but there are so many books, also, so it serves those two purposes. As an outsider, that's kind of my experience of it.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Where are you from?

Dziedzic: I've lived in New York since 2000, but grew up in Pennsylvania farmland. You had a location near the South Street Seaport for a while, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Dziedzic: And in the financial district. What was the story with that branch?

Fred Bass: We were doing OK with it, except suddenly the lease was up, and the landlord wanted four times the rent. The numbers just didn't add up. I just couldn't do it, that's all. I had to close it down.

Dziedzic: When was the store near the seaport?

Fred Bass: Oh, gosh. I can't remember the dates now.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Twenty years ago?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Twenty-five years ago?

Fred Bass: It was good. Everybody liked it. I liked the store. It was nice. It was easy to run.

Nancy Bass Wyden: It was at the seaport. It was on John Street, and when the seaport was first developed by the [phonetic: Reis (?)] Company, then it did very well. Then there was a time where it just went totally downhill. It was like abandoned, the seaport, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And that's when we moved to a huge location on Gold Street. It was a ten-year lease there?

Fred Bass: It was a month-to-month lease.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Maybe it was even thirty years.

Fred Bass: Oh, no. That was a ten-year lease.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Ten-year lease? I remember two leases at John Street and then one lease here. I'm saying it's thirty years [ago] that you were downtown.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And the guy—was it quadrupled the lease? We said, “Keep us in at the same rate until you can find a”—because there was construction going on. They were totally ripping up the street—“Keep us on the same rate until you find a leasee.” They said, “Oh, we don't work that way. You have to get out.” As a business person, I don't understand that mentality.

Fred Bass: They were so backward. They could only close the store. You're going to have an empty store.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Right. They didn't care.

Fred Bass: They didn't care, and it's—

Nancy Bass Wyden: I mean I don't understand all the vacancies that are going on, because that's the same mentality I would have would be just—they must be so rich, they don't care. They must have so much retail—

Dziedzic: It's easier to deal with a building that's empty than to get tenants to leave.

Fred Bass: Yeah, but you can make a deal where they have to leave [crosstalk]. Tom McGuire made a deal with—

Nancy Bass Wyden: —three months' notice.

Fred Bass: Tom made a deal that he would stay there one more year, but if he did stay another year, they'd probably confiscate everything he owned, so he had to get out in a year, you know?

Nancy Bass Wyden: But you still think that's too—they just don't want to be bothered. But meanwhile, it's not great for the neighborhood to have empty stores.

Fred Bass: It's peanuts for them.

Dziedzic: It sounds like a time in the Financial District where developers were getting confident that businesses were coming back and they were maybe dreaming big about who their tenants would be.

Fred Bass: Well, there was a tremendous amount of—

Nancy Bass Wyden: —still happening all over New York and maybe all over the nation in the cities.

Dziedzic: When did you start working with your father, Nancy?

Nancy Bass Wyden: I worked in the summers, and I worked all around the store. I started working when I was sixteen, just all part-time jobs. I always wanted to work there, because I knew my dad and grandpa were so passionate about it. Everybody made a big deal around me. All the teachers wanted to have books from the store, so I knew it was a really special place. I got my MBA [Master of Business Administration] and got a job with Exxon. My dad told me that I had to work someplace else beforehand, and I worked for Exxon for three and a half years. I remember I calling you and asking you if I could work with you. You were a little scared at the

time about this. You said you'd hire me at the same rate that Exxon hired me. I was going to be a manager down in the Reviews section of the basement, and I think you told the managers, and they were not happy about this—because they had things to hide, was ultimately the reason.

[01:20:23]

Fred Bass: They were ripping me off.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah, and they were not particularly nice to me when I started. Maybe it was also—a woman, young woman, and you know, heir-to-be, and they had their own little club dealings down there. Had one manager, named Britton—Burton?²

Fred Bass: —Britton.

Nancy Bass Wyden: —who was kind of a Village character. Do you want to talk about it, or do you want me to?

Fred Bass: Yeah, he had a certain style about him. He was quite a literate, and he's quite a collector. He would surround himself with a lot of authors, and the authors loved him because they'd get him to come into the store, and he'd have all their works—magazine articles, anything like that—he'd get them to sign it. It flattered these people, so he made a tremendous amount of friends doing that. He managed the Review Department down in the basement—or mismanaged, I should say. But he was a star and got a lot of people in. He acted like a star and was arrogant. He was married to this—he was living with and then he married her—this fashion model, [phonetic: Korby (?)]—African American gal who was on the cover of magazines in London all the time and things like that. He was in that show business, so he had that kind of celebrity coming in. It added a certain thing to the store, and it was kind of fun. He was a character.

Finally, Jeannette Watson, the IBM heir, hired him away to open up Books & Co. and had to fire him after two years, but they had a five-year contract. He opened up a great bookstore for her; he just didn't make any money for her, that's all.

Nancy Bass Wyden: And he was wheeling and dealing there.

Fred Bass: He had—

² The correct name is Burt Britton.

Nancy Bass Wyden: He had left by the time I came, but still that model was there.

[PORTION REMOVED]

So they didn't like me being there. But then I bought books. I liked being there. I bought books for the Review Department. They were reviewer's copies. They were complimentary books given out to publishers, so they were new books. They were sold to us, and then we were able to resell them at half-price. Good for the publishers, too, because they got the books out to readers who could recommend them, and good for the public, because they got new books at half-price. And then the people that were selling them got twenty-five percent of the list price for them, so it was really kind of a thing to come to the Strand and get new books at half-price.

Fred Bass: Yes.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You could also get the proofs, which are the uncorrected proofs, or the books before the books came out, at really inexpensive prices. Some of them, if their books became famous, they became collectors' items because there were hardly any of them published.

Then you had me at the main floor, on the main floor. I worked a lot of nights and weekends, and I managed the main floor.

Fred Bass: Then I gave her power. You know how she got power?

Nancy Bass Wyden: I came more and more up in the office, a feeling of—

Fred Bass: I had her hand out some of the Christmas raises and bonuses to the managers, and that gave her power. [laughter] It made a difference. She'd meet with them. I always remember what you said to them, or at least this is the version I got. She'd say to them, "You did a great job for us last year. This is fine. Here's your bonus, here's your raise. Now what are you going to do for us next year?" [01:25:06]

Nancy Bass Wyden: Trying to get them to establish some goals, instead of punch in, punch out—and be invested in the store, too. It was part of—

Fred Bass: Had them write a letter about what they thought their job was and what they could do. So make them think, so that's—

Nancy Bass Wyden: I still like that style of managing where you want people to come up with ideas. You know, that's the fun of the business is that you can implement it. We had an employee on Friday—we have a whole line of things about the environment and lots of great books about the environment, and she said, "Let's make a big sign and do a whole campaign about how we stand with the Paris Accord for the environment." So we did that, and we were able to do it right away. We're not bureaucratic. That's what we believe in, and I'm sure she was happy. It was her idea to do that.

Fred Bass: I get a feeling we are missing part of this thing, here—not enough about the actual Village itself in your interview. Is there anything you want to—

Dziedzic: I did also want to ask about when there was a danger of—when Robert Moses wanted to kind of affect the neighborhood and basically put a highway through Washington Square Park. I was wondering if you were effected by that in any way. That would have been around the late [19]50s.

Fred Bass: No, we resisted it, and it was nonsense. It was just nonsense. Hard to take away park places.

Dziedzic: Yeah, it sounded like the neighborhood really came together around, not just—

Fred Bass: And NYU [New York University] was very powerful.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think, though, the Strand and the Village was so accepting of characters or oddball people or people that were cultural or in their own way, it embraced our employees, our customers—we've always been very accepting of individuals. Did you find that, Daddy, that that was—

Fred Bass: Yep.

Nancy Bass Wyden: I think the Strand and the Village are places where people can feel like they belong and anything goes, and their views are valued.

Fred Bass: One of my favorite stories, when I was doing interviews, a young man would show up. He had a jacket and a tie on, very nice and neat, everything great. And then I hired him, and he'd come in with tie-dye [laughter], with pierced earrings. "Is this the guy I hired?" At that

time, we had a ninety-day probation period—now it's less—on employees. You couldn't fire anybody for—I could fire anybody within ninety days, but on that ninety-first day, they come in just wild. It was very hard to fire anybody after that.

Dziedzic: They knew that they had to appear, to fit into some kind of professionalism. [laughter]

Fred Bass: When you go for an interview with a job, you put on your best, supposedly. But now it's different. These guys, that's what they want to be. That's what the gals want to be. What's the gal we just moved back out of—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Layla?

Fred Bass: Layla, yeah. I mean she's got big tattoos on there.

Nancy Bass Wyden: She's kind of a sweet girl. We're not judging! [laughter]

Fred Bass: Our bookkeeper, which is the best bookkeeper we've ever had, tattoos all over her body. We didn't actually lose her; she just got a bigger job. Not in the book business, but it was just, she was the most capable person I've ever encountered.

Dziedzic: You mentioned that Patti Smith worked briefly— [01:30:00]

Fred Bass: Very briefly. [laughter]

Dziedzic: —for the Strand. When the East Village started to become a destination in they way the Village had been in the [19]70s and [19]80s, did you see that change, going from the beatniks to the hippies to the punks in the East Village. What kinds of signs did you see?

Fred Bass: Again, I knew it was economics and rents. The West Village, which is the Greenwich Village, it became very classy. Everyone wanted to have a place down there, you know. It was—it still is—the place to live. So now, it crept out to the East Village, and it kept creeping out there, and now the East Village has become quite a destination place. People love it. It was pretty crummy.

When the store started getting bigger, and there were problems in the neighborhood and things like that, and I had to hire a security firm. When I say security firm, I mean a guy with a uniform. They wouldn't give me a guy with a gun. No, no guns. People get hurt with guns. It was

part of the deal of getting the security company. Part of the deal was I garaged my car on 9th Street and Third Avenue. There's that little square thing. There was a little garage there, and that was the closest garage, you know, five blocks from the store. The deal was that when I closed the store, the security guard had to take me to my car and stay with me until I got in the car and drove away, because they felt it was too dangerous. That sort of disappeared, and it became rather safe.

I think it's comparatively safe now, although there are still problems. The guy from the Second Avenue Deli was killed and other things, but not the way it was then.

Dziedzic: Yeah, my impression is that the whole city really was—

Fred Bass: Oh, it was not a safe place. You just—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Union Square, remember? That was like, all druggies.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Nancy Bass Wyden: You didn't want to walk through it. That was in the '70s. I don't know what—

Fred Bass: Had the soapbox people. You get up there, and you stand on the soapbox and start speaking. You make speeches. Lots of people, you go up there, and you find four or five speeches. I did it one afternoon. I went up there, and I made a speech. I don't know what I was talking about, but you know, it was usually about the Communist Party, and the capitalists were destroying the country and all that sort of thing. It was kind of fun, but the FBI was taking pictures of us all the time.

Dziedzic: In the bookstore itself?

Fred Bass: They were everywhere. We used to have a Russian bookstore across the street. The FBI would come in there and be photographing people coming in and out. Of course, I didn't argue with them. I didn't care. But they would be looking for spies. You can spot these FBI guys: green coat, jacket, tie. You could spot them a mile away [laughter]. It was really like a uniform, and it was so funny. The way they were dressed just gave them away.

Dziedzic: Was that in the '50s or even later?

Fred Bass: Probably earlier, yeah, '50s. We moved there in 19—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Fifty-six.

Fred Bass: —'56. Yeah, it was probably—I remember my first year there. The good thing about it was these guys always bought a book to cover themselves, you see. They always bought a book.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Patti Smith, she's been a great author, and she comes to the bookstore every chance she can, signs copies for us. She could not be nicer and friendlier, but she worked there for a while. Her sister worked there, and then she said also her sister met her husband at the bookstore. They're still married. **[01:35:00]**

Fred Bass: Bad guy, that guy. He was nasty. Sister was a good worker. Who's the other author?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Mary Gaitskill?

Fred Bass: Oh, Mary Gaitskill. That was very funny. Mary Gaitskill worked for me, did a little time. She was a writer, and she put articles together on the Strand people. Not very flattering. Today, I'd probably consider it flattering, but in those days, it was kind of—

Nancy Bass Wyden: A lot of pill popping, she was saying.

Fred Bass: She was doing this article, and she says, "I'm doing this article on the Strand, and I'd like to talk to you about it," and I said, "Fine, but I haven't got time at the store." So I took her to lunch. At lunch, here's this mousy-looking girl, really mousy-looking, and she goes on how she was up in Canada.

[PORTION REMOVED]

She was just trying to get me riled up there.

Nancy Bass Wyden: Wait, this was somebody else. That was the girl who worked in social science section.

Fred Bass: No, no, that's a different person.

Nancy Bass Wyden: That's another one?

Fred Bass: That's a different one. That's an entirely different story, yeah. Yeah, that was a different one, too. I remember Mary Gaitskill. Suddenly, Mary got a good job, a good novel published. The first one, I can't remember the name of it now. Suddenly, she got a glamorous appearance and was attractive, and now she's very—

Nancy Bass Wyden: Hey, Dad, I think it's 12:30, believe it or not.

Fred Bass: Am I supposed to meet him down there?

Nancy Bass Wyden: Yeah.

Fred Bass: OK.

Dziedzic: All right, well—

Nancy Bass Wyden: I mean I think, just to summarize, it's pretty amazing right now that the type of people we get now from all the early days of struggling—we have James Franco in doing signings all the time and Gloria Steinem last week showed up for an event. We had Bill Clinton in like six months ago. Right, Dad?

Fred Bass: Yep.

Nancy Bass Wyden: People from all over the world come in to the store, and—

Fred Bass: Can you call down there? What should we do, huh?

Nancy Bass Wyden: What else do you want to say? Doug the Pug was like an internet sensation. But, you know, to have that to what's happening right now is really kind of sensational, don't you think?

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Dziedzic: Well, I just would ask you, then, if there's—I think what Nancy said was true. It's really amazing how things have changed, and the store's grown, and I would just ask you if you have any kind of concluding thoughts about either running the Strand or being in the location where it is.

Fred Bass: Well, I think we've established our location, so that's it. That's our destination thing. The rents and dollars amounts, and what we're trying to do is just increase sales to be able to— right now, we are subsidizing the store. Because I own the building, I can get a higher rent than I'm paying. I have to realize that. Is he down there?

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Dziedzic: The story of a lot of New York is that you make it, you're successful, but then the struggle continues in a different form. **[01:39:56]**

Fred Bass: It changes. I mean every week, every month, every year, there's a new challenge. The stories evolve; it's not the business I was in twenty years ago or ten years ago. The reviewers' copies once dominated our business. They no longer do.

Dziedzic: And now you sell new books, too.

Fred Bass: We sell new books, which I didn't think we could make any money doing it, but they figured out a way to do it. It keeps us going. [Side conversation in background] The reviewers' copies, you know, that was it. That's a big thing. It's buried down in the basement, which I'm still sad about—

Dziedzic: All right, well, I just wanted to say thanks, and sorry we had a hectic ending here.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Nancy Bass Wyden: You know, I allowed two hours, so I thought that was—

Fred Bass: Feel free to call me—

Dziedzic: OK.

Fred Bass: —about any questions. We didn't touch really on the Village.

Dziedzic: Let me unattach you, there.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE: Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory1.mp3]

[BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE: Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory2.mp3]

Fred Bass: —was a very good book man, really smart guy. Two guys, Pageant Bookstore, they actually reprinted a number of books and was doing very well, but they would not give up the book business. Schultes was the big store across the street. I got very friendly with a nephew of the original people. We used to go to lunch and do things.

They asked me to head the Fourth Avenue Booksellers Association, and I agree, yeah, I would like to. I said, “But the first thing I want to do is double the budget for advertising,” because we have this unique place here, Fourth Avenue Booksellers Association. They didn’t want to do it, and I kept arguing. We’re not talking about big money or anything like that, and they said, “Places like Schultes will benefit.” I said, “I had a small store across the street from Schultes. When Schultes took in a thousand dollars, I took in a hundred dollars. I was very happy to get those hundred dollar days, you know what I mean. I couldn’t get anything across to them; they wouldn’t do it. I said, “Well, we’re not going to go anywhere with this, because we’ve got to publicize what we’ve got here.” They just were not interested.

Dziedzic: What kind of advertising were you envisioning?

Fred Bass: It was print advertising. At that time it was a lot cheaper, and you could do it. Now I want to put a little ad in the *Times*, and it’s like \$10,000 or something like that. And it disappears. I have no way of knowing where it’s gone or of tracking it.

Dziedzic: What were the publications that you would have taken out ads in at the time?

Fred Bass: [chewing] Most likely the *Times*. There may have been some—*Harper’s*, and one or two magazines, but now I can’t touch them.

Dziedzic: Where did you go after making this proposal that didn’t go anywhere about the advertising?

Fred Bass: I just went back to my business, stayed in my business.

Dziedzic: You decided not to lead.

Fred Bass: No, I decided not to take it. Would be a little too difficult. Oh, God. John [phonetic: Shope (?)], characters there.

Dziedzic: Which store was that?

Fred Bass: It was no store. It was just a customer, the ConEdison executive they put in here. The thing I remember about him was he went to Fire Island, and he—what do they call it? Just camped out there. Built a shack, no electricity. Had a sailing—there's a thing they—a sailing thing, sort of a sailing boat, but it wasn't a full boat. It was—

Dziedzic: It's like a Sunburst or something like that, right? **[00:04:48]**

Fred Bass: Yeah. He got on the island, Fire Island, and he sort of seized this property that ran from the bay to the ocean, built a shack right in between. It was the estate of John Dos Passos that owns this. They came along, and they wanted him to buy it, which he did at a dirt-cheap price. Worth a fortune. But he would never put electricity in or do anything like that. He was a big collector of books. [Pauses] This guy was a character, Jack [phonetic: Pascal (?)]. He had to have an operation, hernia operation, so he shows up to the surgeon, and he pulls up a rare hernia book. He got the surgeon to start collecting books about hernias.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Fred Bass: Yeah.

Dziedzic: I'm trying to think about what decisions you made about what books to buy, and it seems like if you bought any kind of book, it's likely that somebody would come in looking for it. [laughter]

Fred Bass: We didn't have much choice. It was what was offered to us.

Dziedzic: How long did you let books stick around before you moved them out?

Fred Bass: I was very conservative. I did two years. Now it's less than a year.

Dziedzic: Would that mean that you're putting them out on the discount cart, is there another place that you—

Fred Bass: We got rid of them one way or another, but to me, it was like two years, or space available.

Dziedzic: Were there stores on Book Row that were notorious for being especially crowded on the inside?

Fred Bass: Schultes was. They were the big one. Weiser's, an occult bookstore, was. Everybody had their own little gimmick and would do things their own way. Biblo and Tannen [00:09:28], those I remember. They had a deal, which we all envied, for books that came in through the Salvation Army from Long Island, they got first crack at thirty-five cents a book. They were doing very well. [00:10:04]

Dziedzic: Which store was this?

Fred Bass: Biblo and Tannen. [chewing]

Dziedzic: Did you end up with any deals like that along the way?

Fred Bass: No, I didn't make deals. Just Hacker's bookstore, art books. I ended up buying the whole company.

Dziedzic: You acquired all of the stock that they had.

Fred Bass: It was art books, really a great buy.

Dziedzic: When was that?

Fred Bass: Twenty-five years ago, maybe. Seymour Hacker had died, and his widow, who was quite a younger woman, was trying to run the store, and she was just bleeding money, so her lawyer had to liquidate. I had seven days to make up my mind. That's what they gave me when they offered it to me, because they had already a deal with somebody.

Dziedzic: I know the Strand is known now for having the largest collection of art books in the city. Was that the case even before this acquisition?

Fred Bass: We were very big in art, probably before, but it was close. This took us over the top. He had a strange setup. He had a bookstore on 57th Street that was upstairs, and he had a huge warehouse filled with books. I went out there. They told me they had to close it out in a week. Of course I didn't believe them. People always do that to put pressure on you. Then I went out and looked at the books and said, "You know, I really want this deal." So I got my lawyer, and I said,

“Can you close this out in a week for me?” Lawyers never do that. I said, “You just have to close it out in a week, or don’t bother.” I said, “I don’t care if you work on it twenty-four hours. Give them anything they want, but let’s not start having little petty arguments over things.” My lawyer said, “OK, I can do it, but it’s not my standard law practice to do it that way, because I could always try to negotiate a better deal.” But he did, and we go it. It worked out well.

I couldn’t see everything. They had one room, probably the size of that back room there. It was just stacked up with miscellaneous books, a lot of rare books in there. Couldn’t see them. Didn’t even know what was there. I could see the books on the shelves, so it was a real good buy.

Dziedzic: How did you become interested in art?

Fred Bass: It’s a visual thing, really. I really got hooked on Matisse, the later works of Matisse, the cutouts and all that sort of nonsense. I have a number of Matisse lithographs, signed lithographs and a number of signed books. I don’t have any original Matisse artwork here. When they were available, I couldn’t afford them. Some of them, which I could afford now, I wouldn’t want. I have that much capital—a junky Matisse painting for \$2 million, and it’s really a piece of junk, you know?

What really attracted me was the colors. The cutouts were really—[chewing]. He really did a lot of work on this book. I read it a long time ago, so— **[00:15:38]**

Dziedzic: The author was one of your book buyers. Is that right?

Fred Bass: Marvin.

Dziedzic: Marvin Mondlin.

Fred Bass: Yeah, he was a main book buyer at one time, yeah.

Dziedzic: How did he start working for you?

Fred Bass: As a young man. Worked for me for fifty years! Very smart, very knowledgeable of books, rare books, things of that nature. Honest—I hope. At my mature age, I’m beginning to wonder about honesty. That’s how he started. Of course then he got too old. He just couldn’t do it. The only reason the book exists is Roy Meador came along and said to Marvin, “You’re never

going to finish it. I'll finish it for you." Marvin had one more interview to make, another a person to see. It was an endless project for him.

Everybody wore jackets and ties. A lot of them had hats in those days.

Dziedzic: It doesn't seem like your typical Bohemian.

Fred Bass: No, but this is what they wore.

Dziedzic: Those were some of their clients, right?

Fred Bass: Yeah. There's a book by Tomkins called, *Living Well is the Best Revenge*. I don't know if you've run across it. It's a small little book. It's an hour's read. It's about the Murphys, who are not typical Jewish merchants. But the Murphys were married, and I forget if it was her or his parents had the Mark Cross leather store, fancy stuff, which is sort of disappeared now, but they're still around. They decided that they're going to enjoy life now while they're young and not work until later, because they had a little money. They put themselves together—it's a great little story—they went to France, had a couple of kids. They opened up Cap d'Antibes, got the whole Bohemian crowd with them: Léger, and Picasso and everybody were friends of theirs, and they did it on very little money. They had this quite exciting life with the art. He was quite a good artist. He did something like eleven paintings, ten of which are in museums. The eleventh they can't find. But that's what it was. They would go to the beach, all dressed up in all kinds of fancy clothes, and have fancy parties and stuff. They had this fun life. They were friends of Fitzgerald, the whole crowd. [00:20:21]

One day, the owner of Mark Cross, the guy who controlled it, died, so they came back to America, and he became a businessman. Just transformed into a businessman, dropped the whole life from before they left there. Got an estate on Long Island, were ordinary people. In their later life—here, we work hard to get to this place, and they were there. That was the sort of life that was going on there.

I would go back to those days and say—but you didn't realize what was happening, that you had all these contacts with these great people, until it was all over and too late. You'd say, "Oh, God, I knew him." I used to go to the bar at the original Max's Kansas City and say, "Yeah, I spoke to this guy at the bar. He used to hang out there with me." Things like that. And then suddenly you find out he's sort of famous, or he's attained some fame.

The Village was always an exciting part. One time, when we were kids. We were sure we were going to go down to Greenwich Village, we were all going to hang out and make out. The girls were free, and we were free. We brought the new modern society. Most of the time, we were disappointed. [laughter]

Dziedzic: Did you go to the coffee houses, as well?

Fred Bass: I hit the bars more. The bars were more friendly for me, anyhow.

Dziedzic: That was more of a literary scene. It seems like when everybody was in the midst of this, everybody was struggling to be successful in some way: the writers, the artists, even the owners of the bars, the restaurants, all this stuff. It's just interesting to hear you talk about this couple and that transition from being part of the scene and how you make a decision to move out of it, in a sense; or be part of it, but become a kind of proprietor—

Fred Bass: Yep.

Dziedzic: —in a way. Did you struggle over that decision to continue on as the bookseller, or to branch off and to do something more creative and be part of that scene more?

Fred Bass: No. Of course, at that time I was torn with conflict. I started having children. Responsibilities come in. You haven't got the freedom to do that, unless you disregard. I was intent on making a living, too. That was scary, also. You don't know where your next dollar was coming from or where your next meal was coming from. The landlord came and wanted to raise your rent again, you couldn't do it.

Dziedzic: You mentioned that your wife was working when you guys moved to Brooklyn Heights. What was she doing? What kind of work was she doing? [00:25:00]

Fred Bass: She went to work for American Home Products, which was a drug company, and she was an assistant to the buyer, placing orders for material that they needed. That's what she did. She liked the work. Then she got pregnant, so she stopped working. It was a lot more difficult to put things together and go to work in those days. I mean you could do it if you had to.

Dziedzic: She started working during the war?

Fred Bass: Just after the war, yeah. Just after the war. But she had always worked.

Dziedzic: I saw one of the captions in that book said, “How do you keep the store going?” and the answer was, “Our wives work.” Was that ever an issue with the Strand? Did she continue to work, your wife, Pat?

Fred Bass: No, not after the children came. She didn’t. She just quit. She would have been an excellent actress or director, something like that. She was great with the theater. She did a lot of amateur productions and stuff like that, but nothing really professional, but also got plenty of kudos for the amateur stuff that she did, which is a difficult thing to quantify. But she didn’t want to devote the time to it.

Dziedzic: Was it part of the Village scene? The Off- and the Off-Off-Broadway in the Village?

Fred Bass: Yeah, but she really didn’t take to it. Once she had the children, the priorities changed. That’s what it was. [nose blowing]

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about your kids and how it was Nancy that ended up taking over the store.

Fred Bass: Well, my son was very smart, very handsome, very capable, very charming, but he got into this drug high society thing with a group, and eventually, it overtook anything that he was doing. He figured his dad was worth millions of dollars and could support him and should support him. There was always that father-son conflict. She was the only one left; I had two children. Yeah, that’s the reason. He was smart enough to do it, just too unstable. He wasn’t really interested. He’d say, “Come on, Dad, let me come down and work at the store. I could take all your customers out for lunch, so you don’t have to bother with that.” Things like that, he’d say. “I can entertain them.” Yeah, that’s part of the fun job for me. [laughter] Pity, then he died at a comparatively young age. He had a good time, that’s all I can say, for a good part of his life.

Dziedzic: Is this when your family was living in Pelham?

Fred Bass: Yeah. Then it was a different crowd of people up in Pelham at a time. Didn’t have that Village crowd or anything like that. People up in Pelham would say to me, “Hey, you lived

in the Village. Can we meet you on a Saturday night and go out with you, hang out with you?”
“Sure,” I said. “What do you think you’re going to do?” [00:30:07]

Dziedzic: When did you start seeing that the Village was kind of being a draw for tourists or a draw for people on the weekends that don’t live there?

Fred Bass: Well, practically immediately. We knew it was happening. It’s hard to think back on these things, so I’m being very slow in giving answers right here. Pretty much immediately. There was a tourist element to everything that was going on, because a lot of the people you would run into in the Village were just there for a weekend or a week. Then there were the regulars, the steady ones, that came all the time.

Dziedzic: Seems like some of the businesses that started up, they’d grow organically or something. There’d be a dive where people would start to congregate, and then the word would get out. I remember reading something about Jack Kerouac saying, “They think we’re the old creepy guys that are trying to be young and hip, but really, we’re the guys they’re trying to emulate. We’re not part of our own scene that we started anymore.”

Fred Bass: He hit that right on the head, yeah. In fact, our guests that were here, that left yesterday—Tim and Lorraine Finch from England, my best buddy in England. They came over here. Where did they have lunch? Balthazar. They thought it was marvelous. We went to Balthazar twice. I thought the food was terrible, the service was awful. The scene, it was like a bar room scene. There was nothing exciting about it, but to them Balthazar was a tourist place and gotta be seen. I remember a couple of years ago, Lorraine came. Very sweet young girl. “Well, Fred, can we go to some of the restaurants that people go out and hang out at?” I said, “Sure, but you’re not going to recognize them, and they’re not going to recognize us.”

Dziedzic: Everybody that’s there is to see somebody who’s not coming there anymore.

Fred Bass: I said, “They’re all has-been places.” But it still was a very exciting place during the weekend, and there were hangers-on. Different generations came along. I mean I just had a brief part of this. It was a nice touch.

Dziedzic: I think along those lines, did you ever have a sense of knowing about certain things before they were really part of the news, let’s say—like certain things that might have been

really significant where you were kind of in the East Village, Greenwich Village. In particular, I guess I'm thinking of for instance, the AIDS crisis, how that was affecting people in New York City before it was really making national news. Was that something that you felt you experienced first-hand, in a way?

Fred Bass: Yeah. I was losing a lot of employees. At first, we didn't know what was wrong. I remember I had a magnificent doctor, Steinberg. He was just one of these guys that was hands-on and knew. You'd go to him, he'd spot what was wrong and get you to the right people. I talked to him about the AIDS crisis and my store. We didn't know it was quite AIDS. [00:35:00] He says, "We're looking into this and trying to figure it out." They couldn't pinpoint it. I remember one of the guys who did my catalog, a guy by the name of Bill Stone. He got sick, and he went to the hospital. What did he have? Pneumonia. I didn't think anything of it. He'll be back in a couple of days. Nobody dies in hospitals. Suddenly, he died. And then one of my friends in Pelham, his brother died—lived in the Village. Then three or four other people died and couldn't figure out why. It was AIDS. These rare diseases were coming in, and somebody last night pointed out the fact that one of my managers—he had limited money, limited funds, got sick. I went to this guy's brother, and I said, "I think your brother's dying, he doesn't have much money. Can we improve his life for the next couple of months? Could you advance him money against his insurance policy, or something else that he had? He's leaving everything to you." He said, "Nah, I don't think—" Wouldn't give him any money. I thought that was just a rude, terrible thing to do.

Dziedzic: Was there anything else like that, anything else that compared to that?

Fred Bass: The employees were very good to each other. They did take care. I was very proud of the staff. They did take care of each other when somebody got sick, but they didn't quite know what was wrong. Then they started coming in with the AIDS thing, and suspicions of this and that. But we really didn't know, and it was always happening to the next guy. Yeah, it was a tough time. Lot of people died, and a lot of people suffered. That's not the romantic part of the Village anyhow. It sort of came toward the tail end of all this.

Dziedzic: Yeah, the changes that we see now are—like you were saying before you left, different people live there now. Hard to move in there as a young person. Being downtown, not

to dwell on things that are sad, but I wanted to ask also if the World Trade Center bombing in 2001, if you were affected by that, too, because I know that everything below 14th Street, basically, was cordoned off. What was the impact of that on your store?

Fred Bass: Well, we had a store down on South Seaport. Lot of people there made a lot of money on this, a lot of money. There were some rip-offs on us. The government came in with big dollars, donations were enormous. We got paid for every day we were closed, but it affected everything, too. People were very good. [00:39:46]

Fred Bass: One of my customers, a gal, I asked her, “What are you doing now?” Worked for a law firm. She says, “Well, they put me in charge of the money.” I said, “What?” “All the money they’ve collected for these people, 9/11 thing.” I said, “Oh, that’s interesting. What do you mean? What are you doing over there?” She said, “I discovered that a lot of the big companies around us were coming out with big donations to their employees and things like that, but what I was worried about was the little bodega with three people working there and didn’t know how to handle the money and give it to them. So I’ve been doing that.” Suddenly, they realized that, hey, there’s a lot of people hurting on this that aren’t getting the money, and her part was her firm was devoting, I don’t know, something like one-tenth of their salaries, which was a lot of money, because it was a big law firm, for this thing. She was in charge of distributing. She says, “The guy that we get our fruits from or our vegetables, our coffees from in the morning, some of them were just disappearing.” They didn’t know what to do, so they went off doing something else. We got them back, and we got them doing things. There was a lot of nice things going on.

Dziedzic: Yeah, I’ve never heard of that happening before. And that was just a customer, you said.

Fred Bass: Yeah. She was a customer, a neighborhood customer. Let’s put it that way.

Dziedzic: Are there still neighborhood customers? Are there still, you know, those kinds of intimate conversations happening with regulars at the store?

Fred Bass: No, I don’t think so. Maybe a little here and there. We’ve had some funny things happen. We had one guy who died, and in his will he wanted to be buried with two shopping bags from the Strand. They showed a picture of it with the casket and the two bags of books.

Things like that were kind of a nice, funny touch. We're trying to just feel good because shopping at the Strand was fun for them, and they enjoyed themselves.

Dziedzic: How do you feel about handing over the reigns to your daughter?

Fred Bass: I feel good about it. I feel sad that I have to give up the reigns and I'm not doing it myself. When there are problems like there are now, I'm not there to take care of them, but still. Time!

Dziedzic: Well, from my perspective as a customer, it seems like she's doing a very great job.

Fred Bass: She's sure good. She's surrounded herself with good people, who have surrounded themselves with good people, which is an important thing, you know. She's gotten rid of a lot of the mediocre people, I'll put it that way.

Dziedzic: Are there any other things you want to say to kind of wrap up the interview? You've shared so much already.

Fred Bass: It's just that the image of the Village was such an exciting scene for us when we were growing up. In our teenage years, we really thought it was—

Patricia Bass: Hi.

Fred Bass: Hi, Patsy.

Patricia Bass: Hi! You're still here?

Dziedzic: We resumed after a short break.

Fred Bass: There's a mystery. There still is a mystery about it, about the Village, and there are still artists down there. There are still people down there, and there are still very wealthy people who have restored the brownstones and made a good cultural place out of it. They're enjoying it, and they're making it a better place for everybody. [00:45:02]

Dziedzic: All right, well, I think we can end there. Thank you so much for your time.

Fred Bass: OK.

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE: Bass_FredGVHSPOralHistory2.mp3]

[END OF INTERVIEW]