

Oleta Craft
Interview 124a
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ABSTRACT: Oleta Craft, owner of the Dress Craft clothing store, recalls working at the Mize Factory in Nacogdoches and opening her store in Diboll. She remembers how she built up her stock and gained loyal customers, dealt with salesmen, kept the store going when times were tough. She also recalls her encounter with a cross dresser who came to buy women's clothing at her store.

James Craft interviewing Oleta Craft

James Craft (hereafter JC): I am interviewing my grandma on the history of her business in Diboll, Texas. Why did you decide to go into the clothing business?

Oleta Craft (hereafter OC): It's a long story. In 1949 we moved from the farm to Nacogdoches. Papa Craft was a contractor and I was just a housewife. We still had the two boys at home. Your Uncle Jim was in school and your daddy was only two years old. Some times there were not enough jobs to keep papa busy and we had the bills to pay so I went to work at the Mize Factory for 75 cents an hour. I made \$30.00 a week and helped pay the bills.

JC: What is the Mize Factory?

OC: It was a manufacture where they made ladies ready-to-wear; they made all types of women's dresses. I worked all over the factory learning all about materials and how to make fancy detail trim on the dresses. Pretty soon there was a need for someone to work with the designers and I was chosen for the job. The designers would design the pattern and cut the dress, then I started putting it together, one piece at a time. They timed me on each piece of it, like the collar was so many minutes, the sleeve was so many minutes but they timed all the time I spent on that dress until it was complete. That way, they could tell how fast the ladies out in the sewing room department, how fast they needed to sew to make the production line and that was one of the ways they had to set their price on it. They first got the price of the material, how long it took me to finish one dress and how long it took for the press to get it all pressed and the tags and the best and everything on it and got it to the stockroom. They timed it from the time it was cut on the marking table and carried to the machines and to the press. After it was finished at the press, the lady put the tags and the bests on it when it got in the stockroom and they took all the time that it took to do that, therefore they could make a correct price for the salesmen to charge for the dress when they carried them on the road the next time.

JC: How many people worked at the Mize Factory?

OC: There were about 200 ladies working there and we were just like sisters, or real close friends. We had lots of fun but we also worked real hard to keep that production line up because if we failed to make production, sometimes we got laid off and everybody tried to help each other to be able to keep the production up.

JC: Well, what do you mean by you had lots of fun?

OC: Sometimes we would take a covered dish lunch, everybody would take a covered dish. We would spread our lunch out in the back. It was kind of like being on a picnic. We were always off on the 4th of July and Thanksgiving. At Christmas time Mr. Mize would take us all to a big hotel or something and we would have a big Christmas dinner. He gave each one of us a ham to take home for the family to have at Christmas.

JC: How long did you work at the Mize Factory?

OC: Altogether about ten years, but I worked about six years before I moved to Diboll and then I drove back and forth to work every day for about four more years.

After we moved to Diboll and I was going back up there to work all the time the people kept asking me where they could buy the clothing and there were no stores in this area that was handling that line of dresses so that gave me the idea of starting my shop. I had planned to bring dresses home on weekends and just have a showing on Saturdays in my home. But we lived in a restricted area of town and the city wouldn't allow me to have a shop, a business in that area. So we went and talked to Mr. Vaughn, Mr. Lefty Vaughn who had a furniture store and he built a little room on the side of his furniture store, just a small room and a restroom and we opened the store September 16, 1962.

JC: Did you continue to work at the factory?

OC: Yes, for a little while, I had a high school girl – we were open from one in the afternoon until 9 at night, and I had this high school girl go up there after lunch and open the store and she kept it open until I got to Diboll about 5 o'clock and I kept the store open then until 9 o'clock. We did this from September until the last of the year and I quit my job the first of the year and stayed with the shop then all by myself.

JC: How was your business when you first started?

OC: Things were real slow because I only had about 40 dresses to work with and we didn't have a lot of money to replace them but all my years at the factory had taught me to be able to design a dress and to cut my own pattern. I would go to the factory and get a lot of sample cuts, which was, a sample cut was considered five yards of material, and they picked all the prettiest patterns and made them into sample cuts. I would go up there and get the sample cuts and bring a whole bunch down to the Pine Bough. Mrs. Davis was the manager down there, was a pretty large lady and I made a block to fit her and I let her pick out the materials and I designed her dress with the trim on it and completed it

for her and she paid me quite a good price for it. I also did alterations and sewed for the cheerleaders and just any kind of sewing that people needed to have done because there were a lot of times that we didn't see a customer all day but with my sewing I had plenty to do. As we sold a dress we used the money to buy more, we stayed in the little shop for about a year and a half while we built the building we are in now.

JC: How did you get your merchandise from the old shop to the new shop?

OC: That was a pretty big job because we didn't have any extra money to hire a mover to bring it down here to us. We didn't have a lot of merchandise anyway so I took the little girl that was working with me and we had a pretty good size car so we would put the dresses in the back seat and the trunk and we would bring a load down here and hang them up and go back and get another load, we had to make several trips but we got it all moved in one day. After we moved into the new building it was a lot easier for me because we had built a home, we built a home down in the restricted area and we built our home altogether in this building so it made it a lot easier for me to be able to do my work. All the front part of the shop was in the business part, the shop was in the center, my alterations and work room were on the south end of the building and your daddy's bedroom was in the north end of the building. Our living room and kitchen and the rest of our bedrooms were on the backside of the building with a double garage on the back.

JC: How did your business pick up after you moved into the new shop?

OC: Things were still slow but I worked by myself, I would get up early in the morning and do my alterations and my bookwork before it was time to open the store, then I'd have everything ready for the ladies when they came to work. Each year we got a little more stock and pretty soon the salesmen were beginning to come by to bring us showing merchandise and that made it easier for me because I didn't have to go to the factory to pick up the merchandise. Up until that time I had to go to the factory and pick up merchandise, different factories, there was one over at Rusk that sold junior clothes and I always went back to the Mize Factory and got my ladies clothes. Every time I would get a little money I would go into the factory and pick up some more dresses.

JC: Can you remember anything unusual that happened when your salesmen started to come?

OC: Yes, it was kind of funny. There was one old man, and he was quite old then to be on the road, and they called him "Big Joe." He came in with his big trunk of sweaters and he was the kind of salesman that just put it out on the counter and would say "There it is, if you want it buy it." I was standing there looking through the sweaters one day and all of a sudden he started dancing around in the floor and he had taken a cramp in the back of his leg. He was just about to have a fit. He was just hollering and carrying on and I happened to think we had a vibrator in the back so I ran back in the living room and got it and carried it out there and I said, "Here, Joe, use this on your leg and it will make it quit hurting." He took it but he couldn't get to it, it was on the back of his leg, up and down his leg, so I said, "Well, Joe you will have to pull your pant leg up for it to do any good."

He was trying to get it up and I said, "Oh, give it to me and let me rub it." About that time – your daddy was asleep in the bedroom because he was working part time at the fiberboard plant and he was sleeping. He heard all the commotion in there because there was just a wall between his bedroom and the shop, and he heard us talking and Joe hollering and me telling him to pull his pant leg up and he came tearing out of that bedroom and down the hall, running in the shop and he said, "Mother, what in the world is going on in here?" I was really trying to help the old fellow to get easy because I didn't think anything about rubbing his leg, he was hurting and he needed some help.

JC: What do you think helped your business to grow more?

OC: I began to notice that it seemed like all of our customers had some kind of price problem. I started noticing that and, of course, did a lot of alterations to make their clothes fit but I began to buy things that were more suitable, I got to know my customers and I knew what kind of clothes they wanted so when I went to market or factory I got things suitable for them. Some of the people were very large, some very small, some were even crippled but they liked to have clothes just like everybody else. So after I fitted them out the first time, why, when they needed something else they remembered how nice I had been to them and they always came back to me to help them again. It always made me feel good when I helped someone like this because I hadn't just made a sale, I had also made someone happy.

JC: Did anything strange or different ever happen while you were working in the shop?

OC: Oh yes, there were lots of things that happened that were a little bit unusual. One thing in particular, and I don't think I will ever forget this as long as I live because it scared me half to death. Back then these things just didn't happen and I was still working by myself. One morning a man walked in the door and looked like an ordinary old farmer from the country. He had on tennis shoes, overalls and an old cap. He walked over to the counter and asked me if I had any dresses on sale that would fit him. And I thought he was really joking with me. About that time they were having a lot of plays called "The Womanless Wedding" and men would act in women's clothing and I thought he was just coming in here, maybe he was in one of those plays somewhere. I thought that was why he wanted the dress so I said, "Oh yes sir, I have some right here" and I just walked on in the back and pulled out one – back then the dresses didn't have a waistline, they were just straight dresses from the shoulder down – I brought one out that I thought would be about his size and I kind of kidded him and said, "This looks like it will fit you." He said, "Yes, I like that." I reached over and got another one, he looked like he would be about a size 16 so I just reached over and got another size 16 and handed it to him. He said, "I like that one, too." I said to myself, because things had been real slow that morning and I thought, "Here are two good dresses I will get rid of." So I went over to the counter and started making the ticket and he said – I noticed he had a sack in his hand but I didn't think anything about it – he said, "You have a place I could try these on?" I said, "Yes, I do." It kind of shocked me to think that a man would come in here to try on a dress, but I told him I had a dressing room right there and it had a curtain, just like we still have. We have curtains over the front of them and I pulled the curtain back and put him in the

dressing room and closed the curtain and went back over to the counter. He stayed in there for a little bit and in a minute he said, “Ma’am, I believe you are going to have to help me.” I thought he had put his dress on over his clothes and was – wanted me to zip it up because they both zipped up the back so I just went over and pulled the curtain back and the poor old man had pulled all his clothes off to put on the dress, he just had on his underwear and his tennis shoes and it scared me so bad I could hardly be still, but I didn’t laugh, I was just shaking like a leaf and I said, “Well, sir, if you will turn around, they fasten in the back.” He was trying – it was ladies underwear and he was trying to fasten the top things in and I said, “Well, sir, that fastens in the back and if you will just turn around I’ll fasten them for you.” So he turned around and I fastened his underwear, his bras and everything for him. I was afraid not to. I just never had an experience like that and I was scared to death. But, anyway, I fastened them and turned around just like he was some little old lady. About that time the freight man came in and I was just shaking like a leaf. I got a pencil and wrote down on a piece of paper “stay here” and this guy, I never will forget him, he had a big chew of tobacco or something in his mouth and he looked at me and he would look at the dressing room. I wrote another little note on the paper, and said, “I have a man in there trying on a dress and I’m afraid of him.” Sure enough he stayed with me. When I had a chance I called down to the police station and asked one of the policemen to come up here and when he came I told him, “Don’t let him know that I called you but I want you to stay with me until he is gone because I am afraid of him.” So sure enough they hung around like they were shopping and pretty soon he left. After he left and got out on the road they stopped him and talked to him and he said he was so ashamed of himself. He had done that all of his life. Sometimes he actually felt like he was a female and he said he had spent everything he had ever made by going into stores and buying women’s clothes and trying them on and then getting home and realizing what he had done would burn them up. Then when he got that desire again he would go somewhere else and buy some more. He actually was a sick person. He was a transsexualist. They don’t sometimes realize what they are doing. Sometimes they actually feel like they are females. I think that was the most exciting thing that ever happened in all my twenty-five years of business.

JC: Did your business continue to grow?

OC: Yes, I can say each year through all of our twenty-five years each year the business has become a little bit larger. We hired some help and we have now, the size range from a junior one to a lady’s 54 because all of the people that I have spent time fitting and making them comfortable and happy, their families appreciate it very much and they started shopping with me, too. Therefore, I needed all sizes.

JC: Do you think you will ever sell the store?

OC: I truly don’t know. If I ever sold this store it would be like selling some of my family.

JC: Do you still enjoy working in the store?

OC: Oh yes, that's something I look forward to every morning. There isn't a day passes hardly that I don't see an old friend or have an opportunity to help someone. Lots of times people will come in here that are just burdened with some kind of problem and they will get me over to one side and tell me all about it, maybe it is someone that their husbands had started running around, or maybe someone that was sick, or maybe they have someone in the family who is in trouble and they just need somebody to care and talk to, so they come in and visit with me because I have known them for a long time. They are just real good friends and can talk to me and tell me any of their problems and I have never acted like I didn't have time for them. When someone has a problem we are all supposed to share it with them.

JC: Are there any other reasons you want to keep the shop?

OC: Yes, it gives me security, it gives me a chance to help people and it makes me feel like I am needed.

JC: How does it make you feel needed?

OC: All through the years every time someone had a problem or needed something, anytime anybody came to me for a donation, I never refused them. I can remember one time we a family that didn't even live in this county, I didn't know the people but someone else did that lives here. I said I will be glad to help, this lady, I told her to come up and I would give her some clothes and she came in and I gave her some clothes and everything she needed to make a complete outfit and I really forgot all about it but about three years later at Christmas I had a family in that was shopping quite well with me and, at that time, they were spending quite a bit of money. When they started to leave they asked me if I remembered them and I said, "No, I'm sorry, I don't." They said, "Well, we are the children of this lady that you gave the clothes to three years ago when her house burned and she said, "We just want you to know that we appreciate it."

JC: Do you have anything to add about yourself?

OC: No, not really, other than I just hope God will give me health to continue doing what I'm doing because it gives me an opportunity to do a community service.

JC: Is that all?

OC: Yes, I think so.

JC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW