

Neil Bassin of Buckingham Florist

A NARRATIVE EXCERPTED FROM

AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH VIRGINIA LILLIS SMITH, MAY, 2012

(The entire interview is housed in the archives of the Center
For Local History, Arlington Public Library)

In 1942, right at the beginning of the Second World War, my father and my uncle thought they might get drafted. So they were looking for a business that they thought that ladies could run, and it would be appropriate for them. They founded York Flower Shop in town [D.C.]. When they were not drafted they took over a flower shop in Buckingham, which is in the center of Arlington. It had been an early location for Conklyn's Florist. After a few years my father and uncle split the partnership, and my uncle took York Flower Shop in D.C., and my parents took Buckingham.

The Buckingham apartment complex was finished in '39. The units and some of the commercial area around there were united in one big corporation. Mrs. Freed, who lived over in town, at the Shoreham Hotel, was the owner and president. She owned all four corners of the big intersection of Glebe Road and Pershing Drive. One corner was Buckingham Drugs, which later would become Drug Fair's number one store. When Mrs. Freed wanted to develop another corner (the SW corner) of the intersection she told Mr. Gerber, the owner of Buckingham Drugs, that he was going to go over there into a larger store. From what I heard, he sort of hemmed, but she told him that if he didn't do that, she was going to rent it to People's Drugs. He moved.

At the end of the war, my father wanted a larger space. We were in the middle of the block (SE quadrant) close to Buckingham Theater, along with Chet's Restaurant, a shoe repair, a barber shop, Aristo Dry Cleaners and First National Bank. So he asked Mrs. Freed if he could have the {NE} corner store, where Buckingham Drugs had been. This was done in 1954 or 1955. By that time I had joined my parents in the business.

Our clientele was basically everybody, Arlington businesses, families, and Arlington Cemetery. There were two major wire associations in those years, Teleflora and FTD, that brought in a lot of business. Arlington Cemetery is one of the big areas which we served. In Arlington there used to be maybe ten funerals a day. And it wasn't many days that we didn't run over there at a certain time for a funeral. And we still do. We used to get business from the Russian

Embassy, and other countries, when they wanted to provide a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or at maybe someone special that's buried at Arlington that's affiliated with their country. Also the guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier bought their flowers from us. Servicing Arlington Cemetery was and still is a big part of the business as it was for other florists, Reed's, Elliott Florist, Arlington Florists, Conklyn and Hillside Florist

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on the Pike. In most aspects of the florist business, we were very successful because of the location we were in. People knew us. I would say that's the major factor why our business was so successful, I mean, we had people when they were born, when they were married, and when they died, because the business is over sixty years.

We wouldn't accept an order from an out of town person unless we knew them. I wouldn't say we wouldn't have done it, but it just was easier. It was impossible for us to do this before the credit cards became popular.

We got our flowers from wholesalers in town, mostly located around one block downtown, between Thirteenth and Fourteenth on Eye Street. Schaffer was a wholesaler. So were Paul's Wholesale and Goody Brothers. Around the corner were District Wholesale, and Flowers Inc. They were all in one area until they sold that block. They were getting the flowers from California. They used to run a refrigerated truck from California to the East Coast. And they would make it in maybe a day and a half, or two. And then there was one that came up from Florida. They were flowers grown in the fields, and the greenhouses. The fresh field flowers would start in Florida, like gladiolas from Florida. Then when it got too hot in Florida, the bulbs stopped blooming, and they went to Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina. Then we were getting them from local, Maryland and Virginia growers. In New Jersey out on the shore there were a lot of growers. And then it went up to New York, went even to Canada, you know, depending on what kind of flower it was.

We ran the store, my parents and I. We always had a driver. For many years it was Jimmy Hoffman, til he moved to Reed's Flowers. We just kept adding employees as we needed them. I did design work but primarily I answered the phones and waited on the customers. Most of the advertising was done through the telephone book, as most florists would tell you. It doesn't pay a florist to put an ad in the paper. It's too expensive. During the war people paid \$15 to

\$25 for funeral flowers. Now, it's \$50 and up for eight or nine glads in a paper maché container.

The florist business has evolved. In the old days, people would come to the flower shop to pick up weekend flowers, and to send flowers out of town. Now the grocery stores are handling flowers for twenty-five percent of what we sold them for. For the grocery store, it's a great deal, a big profit. They don't deliver and they don't do the fine design work, like wedding work. Later the wire associations evolved into their taking the orders, like 1-800-FLOWERS, which is not a wire association. And Proflowers.com. Florists do all different types of business through the telephone, and wire associations, and over the internet.

Some flowers came from local folks. Mr. Culpepper owned the corner of Pershing Drive and South Second Street. He was a professor of Horticulture at the University of Maryland. He was a farmer. The main thing for him was his flowers. And he grew beautiful flowers. He would sell them to me, and I think he went to Mrs. Reed and sold her some flowers. We used to get daffodils and tulips and peonies, in season. Just gorgeous flowers, especially daffodils. He developed numerous daffodils, many of which were named after him. Huge beautiful yellow or white daffodils. When he died he left his property to the county, with the stipulation that it be used as senior housing. It's known today as Culpepper Garden.

Also we had some ladies trim their forsythia and pussy willows to sell to us. Some folks would go down into the country in West Virginia and cut magnolia, or rhododendron, or laurel leaves. They used to cut it and sell it to all the florists.

Six years ago I sold the business to Mrs. Kim, a Korean lady. She bought it because she wanted to send her daughter, her only child, to college. And they don't have citizenship, so the only way they could stay in the country is if she owned a piece of property. The daughter has graduated from college and is in law school this year.

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