

Sam Nelson

Freedom of speech and press as well as assembly lasted three days in 1905 in White Russia. When socialists gathered in the public square to celebrate, the Cossacks gathered to slaughter them. With the pogroms and the Russo-Japanese War, Jews left Russia in droves. Sam Nelson landed in Boston at age seventeen. He had read that in America you could earn forty dollars a month. He missed the White Star Line ship in Liverpool but was put in second class on another ship. He suffered seasickness the first four days, but he had a ball the next seven. There were 400 Irishmen on board who provided a lot of fun. Sam wanted the ship to go on forever. He enjoyed the food and entertainment.

In Boston he boarded a boat to Portland where his sister Rose Crasnick lived. She had married a second cousin, Robert, who had recently completed a four-year term in the Russian army. Sam lived with them until he married in 1917.

After a half-hour of training, he was given a half dozen items and change and told to peddle from house to house in Portland. For two weeks he repeatedly climbed three and four flights of stairs for a profit of two dollars and fifty cents. He decided it wasn't worth expending his energy for that. As an apprentice for Casco Manufacturing Company, he learned to cut material for shirtwaists (women's clothes) for four dollars a week. After a year he asked for a two dollar raise. When he was told one dollar was enough for a "greenhorn," he left—even though he had met his wife, Edith Caplan, there.

His next job was with Bates Manufacturing where he learned cutting by machine. He knew he could cut men's shirts by hand, but the company gave him two weeks to learn. For nine months he earned thirteen dollars a week and then received a one dollar raise every three months.

Ever eager to learn, Sam became a business partner with his future father-in-law in the junk business. Here he learned to buy carloads of rags that included clothing. He sorted out thirty-three grades of rayon, wool, and cotton into bales for dealers to sell to mills for reprocessing. From 1915 to November 11, 1918, the business was great. But he should have left when the rumor came on November 6 that the war would end. The bottom fell out, and he had to start life again with large debts. He said, "In those days, people trusted you." He paid one thousand dollars to Miller in Lewiston and gave his last five hundred dollars to another dealer, who said, "Let's call it square." His debts were paid.

His next job turned out to be his best. He went to work as a cutter of overalls for the Kaddish brothers. In 1940 when the owners suffered misfortunes and severed the partnership, Sam and three workers took over the plant. When he retired the following year, he had one hundred people working for him in 1960. He suffered a heart attack in 1959, and when he retired, the Nelsons spent summers in his camp on a lake. They had a two family house in Woodford. He said he worked hard building floats and rock walls and fishing. They also traveled to Israel and Europe. One son graduated from MIT and served as personnel executive on the New York Board of Education. His other son joined Israel Bernstein's law firm and became active in the Jewish Community Center. Samuel continued to serve on the Board of the Jewish Federation he helped to establish.

When I interviewed Sam, he was temporarily visiting one of his three daughters. His wife suffered a stroke in 1971 and died at the Jewish Rehabilitation Center in Swampscott, Massachusetts. He was returning there to live because he said it was like a beautiful hotel. The family is very close—he had recently served at the circumcision of his great-grandson. He is proud of his eight grandchildren.