

## BALTIMORE'S M.S. LEVY AND SONS: Straw Hat Makers to the World, 1870-1960

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*From 1860 to 1960, Baltimore was an important center of the men's ready-to-wear clothing industries. German-speaking Jews created many businesses that manufactured and sold underwear, men's suits, and specialty items like hats and umbrellas. The straw hat making firm started by M.S. Levy is an interesting example of a Baltimore-based, family-owned niche business that existed for 90 years, through three generations of a single family. The M.S. Levy and Sons story has two main chapters. The first covers the period from its founding by Michael Simon Levy in the 1870s through his son Julius' death in 1926. This is the story of ascension. A premonition about the coming popularity of straw hats, together with a small but important technological breakthrough, positioned a family and a small industry for significant expansion. The second period began in 1930 with the introduction of wool felt hats and the death of William, M.S. Levy's oldest son, and includes the Great Depression, unionization, merger, third generation leadership, and finally, in 1959, the family's withdrawal from the industry. This later period, as told by grandsons of the founder, is the story of struggle followed by decline.*

Until the mid-twentieth century, American men wore hats most of the time. The hats they wore varied by season. Cold weather hats were made of wool and fur. Straw dominated warm weather hats. For years May 15, "Straw Hat Day," began the three month season and was the deadline against which production was geared.<sup>1</sup> Straw hats were popular for both aesthetic and practical reasons. In a pre-air conditioned, pre-sunscreen world, straw hats helped prevent sunburn, sunstroke and headache while providing ventilation.<sup>2</sup>

M.S. Levy and Sons is the story of the rise and fall of a family and its niche industry. It is also the tale of shifting trends in fashion as influenced by technology, politics, and

convention. The procurement of raw materials from around the world, together with a national and international appetite for straw hats made possible the rise of this industry.<sup>3</sup> This story of straw hat making, a small but fascinating industry, has been largely untold.<sup>4</sup>

Baltimore's hat industry pre-dates M.S. Levy and Sons. Just before the Civil War several straw hat makers relocated from New England to Baltimore, beginning the manufacture of straw hats in earnest. Very quickly, straw hats "outrivaled those of fur hats in their most prosperous time," in terms of the number of makers and the volume of production.<sup>5</sup> In 1878, Michael Simon Levy, a Jewish, German-born cap maker who came to Baltimore in the late 1860s began to finish and trim straw hats.<sup>6</sup>

By 1890 Baltimore was home to eight straw hat establishments that employed more than 1,100 men and women. Of these, M.S. Levy and two others comprised "the big three."<sup>7</sup> Baltimore-made straw hats were sold in every American state and territory, and throughout the world. Baltimore earned the title "the straw hat city."<sup>8</sup> Early on, M.S. Levy understood that to increase the production of straw hats made from straw braids, the process needed to be mechanized. A special sewing machine "foot" that could accommodate straw braid was required. Levy designed a special foot and pioneered the production of machine-sewn straw shells.<sup>9</sup> This innovation fueled the growth of the business to the point that in 1899 M.S. Levy had the financial wherewithal to commission architect Joseph Evans Sperry to design his firm's factory building.<sup>10</sup> That building, a grand six story edifice, reflected the complexities of hat making, by including its own bleachery, lining-maker, box manufacturing plant, and printing department.<sup>11</sup>

The leadership of M.S. Levy and Sons was always dominated by relatives, especially sons and grandsons of founder Michael Simon and his wife, Betsy Jacobs Levy. The Levys had ten children, six daughters and four sons. All four boys worked for the firm, as did a son-in-law, several grandsons and a grandson-in-law.<sup>12</sup> "Even if business was [considered] 'not good,' whenever anyone in the family needed a job, there was a place for him."<sup>13</sup> For women, of course, this was not the case. While the firm hired women, no female family member was ever permanently employed there.<sup>14</sup>

William Levy, Michael and Betsy Levy's oldest son, left high school to join the business.<sup>15</sup> An 1886 partnership agreement named William and his brother, Jacob, as their father's partners.<sup>16</sup> Following Jacob's untimely death in 1899, the firm reorganized.<sup>17</sup> This time the partners were M.S. and sons William and Julius. William was the procurer of the firm's raw materials, and Julius, the "star salesman."<sup>18</sup>

Because M.S. Levy and Sons manufactured and sold straw hats, effective salesmen were critical to its success. This group included both Levy relations and family outsiders.<sup>19</sup> Though personnel records do not survive, it is the salesmen about whom the most is known. Their job entailed travel, first by train and then by paneled truck. In the early years, salesmen had two or three trunks, each about four feet deep by six feet wide and four feet tall. A sample room "as large as a small bungalow" was required to display all of the styles. A salesman completed calls to his customers in "anywhere from 8 to 10 weeks," usually traveling from July to October to take orders for merchandise to be available to the consumer the following summer.<sup>20</sup> Among other tactics, salesmen exhibited a large variety of "attractively trimmed hats" and had a "special jobbers line."<sup>21</sup>

10 At least two forewomen, along with numerous foremen, oversaw M.S. Levy and Sons'

factory operations. Women oversaw the trimming and leather departments, while men had charge of printing, bleaching, sizing, pressing, flanging (curling or setting the brims) and packing.<sup>22</sup> In M.S. Levy's first period, the firm "always tried to think about ... older employees" and was considered (at least by its leaders) "an ideal place in which to work." In 1925, about ten percent (more than one hundred employees, including many of the foremen and women) had been with the firm for twenty years or more. The firm recognized these long-serving employees through the "Twenty Year Club" which rewarded each member with \$50 on the day before Thanksgiving.<sup>23</sup>

Still, Levy family members controlled the firm. In the first generation, M.S. Levy dominated. In the second, his sons William and Julius were in charge. The third generation's leaders were grandsons Leslie Moses and Lester Levy. Though Moses planned to be a lawyer, "his grandparents let him know that they wanted him to come into the hat business...Michael Simon intended to train him for eventual leadership."<sup>24</sup> He went to work at the firm shortly after his high school graduation and served in capacities ranging from head of purchasing to president for 53 years, retiring when the family sold its interest in 1959. Lester Levy was William's son. Like his cousin Leslie Moses, Lester spent his professional life in the hat business. In 1919, at age 23 and following college and military service, Levy joined the firm, where he remained for four decades. He later remembered 1919 as "a terrible year for a young man to learn what a real business required. In the first place, straw hats were tremendously popular at that time and the demand far exceeded the supply."<sup>25</sup>

Though Leslie Moses and Lester Levy together ran the firm for some forty years, the period between Moses' entry into the firm in 1905, and Levy's arrival fourteen years later is significant in terms of both the growth and structure of the enterprise. One enormous change was the 1911 death of Michael Simon Levy. While Moses worked with and for his grandfather, Levy never did. M.S. Levy's death occurred just as a major change in the make-up of the firm's customers occurred. Before 1890, wholesalers comprised the vast majority of M.S. Levy's customers. Yet, the visionary Julius Levy believed that the then emerging large hat stores would be the future of the business and succeeded in acquiring them as customers. Chain hat stores like Truly Warner and B.H. Kaufman started in the early twentieth century and proved to be particularly important customers for the firm, selling tens of thousands of hats, "many of them purchased through the Levy organization."<sup>26</sup>

To a large degree, the firm's success in the 1920s resulted from Julius Levy's drive to serve predominantly large retail customers. J.C. Penney became a customer in 1924 and was soon the hat maker's most important client. The relationship between M.S. Levy and Sons and Penney continued for more than two decades. Having Penney as a customer was a benefit in many ways, not only was Penney soon the major purveyor of Levy-made straw hats, the retailer also preferred having their hats shipped to warehouses in St. Louis as quickly as they were available.<sup>27</sup> Because manufacturing was seasonal (it began in early fall and continued until July, taking about ten months for the manufactures to make enough hats to satisfy the demand of the six week straw hat sales season) and because most customers did not want orders shipped until shortly before the selling season, hundreds of thousand straw hats were stored in warehouses in the winter.<sup>28</sup> In the first decades of the twentieth century, when straw hat making was at its peak, hatters used up

much of Baltimore's premium warehouse space.<sup>29</sup> The Levy organization was helped by Penney requiring that their merchandise ship immediately.

In 1926, the firm had its most profitable year ever: business exceeded \$3.5 million and the demand for straw hats reached its highest point. That same year Julius Levy, the firm's president, died. Leslie Moses, with two decades of straw hat making under his belt, ascended to the presidency, Lester Levy became vice president and William Levy assumed the role of chairman of the board.<sup>30</sup> The firm's leaders were compensated handsomely. In 1927, William Levy and Moses each received \$18,000. Vice president Lester S. Levy earned \$7,500 and Ellis R. Ephraim, another Levy grandson, was paid \$6,000.<sup>31</sup> Vacation time was also generous for some. The straw hat industry's seasonal nature allowed Moses and Lester Levy to travel eight to ten weeks each year, "as long as the business prospered." That reality afforded them the luxury of long European honeymoons in the 1920s.<sup>32</sup> In the years that followed, Levy often combined work and holiday on extended trips when he and his wife scouted trimmings for the hats.<sup>33</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, employment at Baltimore's straw hat factories peaked at about 2,300 people. With more than one thousand workers, M.S. Levy and Sons was the single largest hat maker in town. In-town hat makers included Brigham Hopkins which employed more than six hundred people and Townsend Grace with more than three hundred workers.<sup>34</sup> Smaller Baltimore firms together employed another 300 hat makers.<sup>35</sup> M.S. Levy and Sons long had cordial relations with the others. The principals, though competitors, also cooperated. During the 1920s, all had "as much business as their plants could handle." The executives of the big three were "not only close friends, but they consulted each other... as to production and sales problems." If one firm was falling behind on an order, one of the other companies would assist.<sup>36</sup>

In 1928, Baltimore produced "more straw hats than any other city in the world," making five million-plus "grass lids for Mr. Well-Dressed Man" and sold them for approximately \$6.5 million. Only New York approached Baltimore's production, though there "the output of the entire state is equivalent only to that of our one city." In the late 1920s, the employees of M.S. Levy and Sons alone turned out about 1.8 million hats per year, making it the largest straw hat maker not only in the city, but in the world!<sup>37</sup>

Despite these successes, the nature of hat making and buying changed as the popularity of straw hats began to decline. The 1930s was a decade of uncertainty and transition at M.S. Levy and Sons. The Great Depression took a toll on the Levy hat factory, its workers, and its executives. Both Moses and Levy cut their salaries "to keep the business operating" and according to oft repeated family lore, to "save the jobs of the one thousand or so employees." Leslie Moses' investments fell in value, yet he "continued to receive a good salary." He and his wife, Helene Lobe, maintained "a cook, maid and nurse for the children, two automobiles, and vacations in Florida, Cuba, and Maine."<sup>38</sup>

Though exclusively a straw hat maker for two generations, in 1930 (a year before William Levy's death), M.S. Levy and Sons expanded its lines and began to manufacture felt hats as well. In a full page newspaper ad, the firm declared that "because there are both Summer and Winter in a year," felt hats were being added. The Levys claimed customer demand as the driver: "So many of our good friends who liked our straws told us they'd like to see us make felts with equally high ideals." Felt production began "with a clean slate,

with new blocks, new machinery, new ideas of manufacture and styling.”<sup>39</sup> Leslie Moses oversaw felt hats, a part of the business which “particularly during the war years” was profitable, but “did not live up to the reputation set by the firm’s straw hats.” While seasonally it made sense to make both straws and felts, it turned out technologically that the two sets of processes were not compatible. In Lester Levy’s view, the firm was “never able to get the right foremen and our straw hat people did not seem to get the hang of “finishing” felt hats.”<sup>40</sup>

Felt hat making may have been the trigger for worker unrest. For more than fifty years, M.S. Levy and Sons had enjoyed a record of harmonious employer-employee relations. The Levys, like many factory owners, saw themselves (and were largely seen by their workers and the community) as paternal and benevolent. They wanted to avoid the unionization of their factory. In August, 1935, however, when the firm announced plans to manufacture a lower grade of felt hats, which management assured would be “equally profitable to the employees,” workers were unconvinced. Concerned that a cheaper grade of wool felt would require more careful finishing, the workers feared that the plan and the revised work schedule it required (two weeks on and one week off), would cause a reduction of 27.5 percent of their total wages.<sup>41</sup> Wishing to “have a pay envelope each and every week,” the workers were unhappy.<sup>42</sup> On August 7, 1935, Leslie Moses met with a committee of five felt hat finishers. In response to insufficient work the previous year, a fact “well known to the employees as well as the management,” Moses contended that the goal of the new work arrangements was to provide steady employment. Calling the finishing department “over-manned,” Moses apparently told the workers that laying off some employees was another way that earnings could be increased. But, priding himself on his family’s reputation as compassionate employers and hoping to encourage the committee to cooperate with the proposed plan, Moses reported that “in his many years experience no men were laid off without cause.”<sup>43</sup>

When Moses went to lunch, the employees “voluntarily left their benches.” They walked out in protest, contending that the firm refused to meet to discuss a settlement, a claim Moses and others disputed.<sup>44</sup> The next day, only the finishers’ committee chairman showed up to meet with Moses.<sup>45</sup> The others struck. As a result of that worker action (and lower than anticipated profits), the Levy family temporarily discontinued “all manufacturing of felt hats and thereafter arranged to contract for this work elsewhere,” moving the felt business to a factory in Falls River, Massachusetts.<sup>46</sup>

The Maryland State Commissioner of Labor and Statistics investigated the strike of M.S. Levy and Sons’ felt hat makers. Though he concluded that there was “no dispute nor controversy to be settled,” as state law neither prohibited nor penalized a firm from contracting elsewhere for manufacturing, “the fact remains that approximately one hundred workers [were] without employment” in the middle of the Great Depression. In the commissioner’s view, both sides were responsible. The strike resulted from “summary action of the strikers in walking out before the new type of work had been demonstrated to be detrimental to their wages, and...to the summary action of the employer in discontinuing operations forthwith and thus preventing the possibility of mutually satisfactory adjustment.” Though both sides were “within their rights,” the labor commission concluded that the result was “highly unfortunate and detrimental to the

state's interest," because, in the midst of difficult times, Maryland "lost an industry which could provide these people with a source of income."<sup>47</sup>

The loss of felt hat making jobs in Maryland, though unfortunate, was temporary. In 1929, the Litman family of New York, owners of New England Panama Hat Company, bought Baltimore's Brigham Hopkins firm. President Max R. Litman, his son, Arnold, his brother, David, and his nephew, Jack Noahson served as officers.<sup>48</sup> In 1939, M.S. Levy and Sons merged with the New England Panama Hat Company. That year the Levy concern again made wool felt hats in their Baltimore factory. The merged firm, called Men's Hats, Inc., was relatively large. Prior to the merger, Brigham Hopkins employed 700 people, many of whom, like Levy workers, were third and fourth generation hat makers. Brigham Hopkins sold 1.5 million hats annually in countries like Mexico, Canada, Brazil, China, England, Austria, "Siam and other foreign countries."<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, in 1938, on the eve of the merger, M.S. Levy and Sons had more than thirty salesmen and offices in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, in addition to their Baltimore headquarters.<sup>50</sup>

Despite M.S. Levy and Sons' earlier labor troubles and the fact that Brigham Hopkins had produced straw hats exclusively, *Baltimore Magazine* reported that the merger made the city "a felt hat manufacturing center."<sup>51</sup> Post merger, the Levy plant made felts while three lines of straws (Levy, Brigham Hopkins, and New England Panama Hat) were individually styled and sold by the sales staff of each group.<sup>52</sup> The nature of the new enterprise puzzled workers. For clarity, the new firm announced: "There have been rumors afloat and we would like to settle your minds. M.S. Levy and Sons, Inc. and Brigham Hopkins Company have arranged to combine in the matter of distributing felt hats. *Neither company is taking over the other company.* The manufacturing of straw hats by both companies will continue in both plants under the same conditions as at present."<sup>53</sup>

Managing the merged entity of Men's Hats, Inc. was tricky. Though Max Litman and Lester Levy got along well, Litman and Leslie Moses "clashed frequently." Personality differences and the firm's precarious financial state caused great tensions. The hat business changed significantly in the 1940s: Litman, a difficult personality, ran the business from a distance as stalwarts of M.S. Levy and Sons left the scene.<sup>54</sup>

Post merger, some workers attempted to unionize Men's Hats, Inc. In February 1940, Lester Levy responded by sending a personal letter to every employee declaring his intention to "live up to the policy of the National Labor Relations Act." Levy said that employees had the "unrestricted right to form or join or not to join any labor organization whatsoever." Sharing his own strongly anti-union preference, Levy reminded workers that his family kept the business going from 1930 on "for the sake of our employees, some of whom had been with three generations of my family." Even when the business suffered ongoing losses, Levy, like Moses and Litman, pledged his "personal resources to finance the business and to prevent putting our hundreds of employees out of work."<sup>55</sup>

At the time of the merger (less than a year earlier), "the new firm could have operated on a reduced scale without personal guarantees," but the result, according to Levy, "would have been that half of the employees of the two firms would have had to be laid off." Unionization was apparently the breaking point for Levy. His tone was ominous: "these arrangements cannot continue, in my opinion, if the business is to be subjected to what I consider outside dictation. Under those circumstances, I would no longer jeopardize my

private interests and welfare, and I would not continue to make the sacrifices and take the risks I have in the past.” To give teeth to his threat, Levy invoked the name of his much respected forebears: “Those of you who remember William and Julius know that, since the organization of the Levy business, no Levy has failed to live up to any statement he made to you, and I shall not be the first to deviate from the family tradition.” He closed by saying that “together we can solve our joint problems. Do as you think best.”<sup>56</sup>

Unmoved either by Levy’s threats or by the enumeration of his personal sacrifices, the workers voted for the union. According to Levy, “the hatters’ union finally succeeded in unionizing our operation, despite a threat on my part to withdraw from the business if such a thing happened, for which I was called into court and given a terrific dressing down by the National Labor Relations Board.”<sup>57</sup> Though the fight to unionize was hard fought, once the deed was done, Moses “got along famously with the union representative and there were no more labor troubles.”<sup>58</sup>

The union influenced important decisions, such as racial integration. The firm, at least until 1940, had an unstated segregation policy. Its work force was ethnically and religiously mixed, but white. The outbreak of World War II and the military’s attendant need for commodities, including hats, proved very helpful to Men’s Hats.<sup>59</sup> With the onset of the war, many industries in Baltimore that had been all white began to integrate racially opening up their plants to black southerners who came to town in pursuit of industrial employment opportunities. In the case of Men’s Hats, Inc., the union agitated successfully for a policy to keep the firm all white. Around 1944, Men’s Hats, Inc. posted a “Negroes Need Not Apply” sign at the front door of the factory building. Lester’s wife, Eleanor Kohn Levy, a social justice advocate, was “shocked to see that sign on the building.” At first she thought it was a Community Chest sign, but realized it was something much more ominous. The union “certainly put one over on Men’s Hats.” She called it “an ugly piece of business.”<sup>60</sup>

The firm’s embrace of a formal policy of racial exclusion offended other family members too. After spending a summer working with a Quaker group on projects to “improve interracial relations,” Leslie Moses’ daughter, Amalie took her concerns about the sign to her father. He explained that union problems would worsen if integration was attempted. Amalie Moses had an ally, Arnold Litman, Max’s son, who was then working at the factory and shared her concerns. “Baltimore was hopelessly Southern [after World War II] and so was Pop,” Amalie Moses later reflected.<sup>61</sup>

After 1946, Men’s Hats did integrate. When the Sunpapers sent noted photographer Aubrey Bodine to the plant to take pictures for a photo series on important Baltimore industries, David Litman, Max’s brother and a factory superintendent who was a short-tempered man with limited English skills, conducted him through the plant. They came to a place where blacks and whites were working together and Bodine told Litman to “get those black girls out of there so [he] could take a picture.” Litman, who, according to Lester Levy, had no racial prejudice “in him,” was so offended by Bodine’s request that he yelled, “Get out of my factory...and don’t come back either.”<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, troubles mounted. Hats, especially straws, fell out of fashion after World War II. The cause is not clear. Some posit that “the automobile...ended the reign of the sailor, once the summertime symbol of America” because “men’s hats and modern

automobiles were incompatible. There was not room in a car for a full-sized man with a hat on his head.” Straw hats went first. “The felt hat, which had more utilitarian value,” survived longer.<sup>63</sup> As early as 1938, the *Baltimore Sun* reported “the hatless fad, started years ago by college youths, is a serious matter to the hat maker.”<sup>64</sup> A playful 1940 newspaper article reported “a survey of the city’s factory areas made at rush hour...reveal[ing] that for every fedora there were...three caps.” Still, the dozen or so local cap manufacturers reported that business was poor, with smaller orders each year. “People just seem to have given up wearing anything on their heads nowadays. No wonder they have so many colds.”<sup>65</sup> Lester Levy explained the demise of men’s interest in wearing hats by connecting it to the military’s mandatory hat wearing. “Many of the military forces, after their discharges, were anxious to appear as unregimented as was possible.” Though “nudity had not yet gained much of an impact on the masses,” Levy noted that “at least the young man could expose nude heads without shocking anybody.”<sup>66</sup>

Given the waning popularity of hats, it is not surprising that Men’s Hats, Inc. saw business slacken. Hardest of all for the firm was the end of its relationship with JC Penney which first contracted and then discontinued its business with the firm, a loss which “could not be made up elsewhere.” Men’s Hats’ business practices had not evolved with the industry. Where other large hat manufacturers, like Stetson, advertised their straw hat lines aggressively in an attempt to brand their product, Men’s Hats had not. That, combined with the fact that other large felt hat manufacturers offered subsidies to their customers, cut into the firm’s revenues, which reduced straw hat sales “substantially.”<sup>67</sup>

Men’s Hats diversified its product lines. The firm began manufacturing and distributing various clothing items, including caps and raincoats. Lester Levy developed and presided over Flip-It, a cap and cloth hat business popular with new customers, including college co-eds, like the Mount Holyoke College friends of his daughter, Ruth, who first gave and then sold the caps to her cronies. Early in 1949, Ruth wrote to Lester “strictly a ‘between us business men’ letter” in which she reported, “It is harder to sell than to give. You have to find the right psychological moment.” Ruth’s best sellers were “fatigue hats and the plain corduroy.” Not only did Ruth sell the caps she brought to campus, she also took orders. Ruth considered the possibility of selling the hats “at Filene’s or the college bookstore,” but concluded, “Maybe I’m a coward, but I really guess I don’t want to go too much in the business.” Among other reasons, her fashion conscience bothered her. She felt badly “letting people get the wrong hats for the wrong reasons. One girl wanted a grey corduroy for a grey fur coat!”<sup>68</sup>

Where caps were a success for Men’s Hats, raincoats failed. Both the New York Litmans and the Baltimore Levys explored their markets for a “competent manufacturer.” The Baltimoreans were interested in working with Israel Myers, a local raincoat manufacturer who had a small rainwear business. When Levy and Moses called Litman for his approval they discovered that, as president of Men’s Hats, he had already signed a binding contract with a New York manufacturer of nylon raincoats which turned out to be made with a fabric that did not breathe. Within a year, Men’s Hats’ new association cost the firm \$100,000 and raincoats were dropped “like a hot potato.” The failure was “doubly painful because had the right decision been made on a partner, it could have been a success.”



rainwear manufacturer in the world.”<sup>69</sup>

Even as Men’s Hats, Inc. explored new products, they continued manufacturing straw hats. In 1947, Baltimore produced three-quarters of all the straw hats made in the country. The factories generated 18,000 hats “every day in the rush season” for a total of 2.5 million hats annually, “more than are produced anywhere else in the world.”<sup>70</sup> In 1952, Men’s Hats was Baltimore’s sole straw hat making concern, and “the largest in the country for the manufacture of straw hats.”<sup>71</sup> In 1953, Men’s Hats produced 2.2 million hats annually, of which 1.8 million were straws and the rest felts. With the exclusion of straw work hats, Men’s Hats straw hat production represented fully a third of the global straw hat market.<sup>72</sup>

In July 1955, the Hat Workers Union, Local 89, signed a contract with Men’s Hats establishing a form of guaranteed annual wage. The contract affected 600 workers. This was notable because Men’s Hats was the first in the hat industry to provide a form of guaranteed annual wage; the company agreed to contribute ten percent of the workers’ earnings to cover unemployment and vacation benefits.<sup>73</sup>

During the 1950s, Lester Levy, Men’s Hats treasurer, wanted to merge again; however, Max Litman was “difficult.” No merger was forthcoming. Finally, in 1958, Levy proposed to Litman that “either he sell out to the Levy family or we sell out to him.” In January 1959, the Litmans bought out the Levys, paying stockholders for the amount of their investment which, according to Levy, was “a mite small.”<sup>74</sup>

In 1960, the first year Men’s Hats operated without Levy family involvement, the firm’s straw hat production fell to a million hats. Baltimore’s straw hat production stopped entirely in 1964. Men’s Hats, having been taken over by a court-appointed trustee, liquidated the stock, machinery, and other equipment to pay off creditors. When the plant closed, between 250 and 300 people lost their jobs, and neither the union nor its members knew about the decision to close the plant, which was made in July when most employees were on seasonal layoffs. Straw hat making then disappeared from Baltimore.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the fact that cousins Leslie Moses and Lester Levy led the firm for its entire second period and derived comfortable livings from it, both recall the firm’s prosperity as short lived. They suggest that the business was profitable only into the 1930s. If this were true, why did the family remain heavily involved for another three decades?<sup>76</sup> Certainly, loyalty to the family and its legacy in the straw hat business was important. Without the involvement of M.S. Levy, sons William and Julius, and grandsons Lester Levy and Leslie Moses, perhaps straw hat making would not have become such an important Baltimore-based industry. In any event, the industry the Levy family pioneered and shaped provides valuable insight into aspects of American industrial and business history. Though its importance may not compare to larger industries, there is a place in economic and business history for better understanding smaller, family operated, niche markets like straw hats. There is room, here too, for a more thorough and nuanced understanding of family motives and dynamics in telling their stories about the rise and fall of industries in which they and their forebears were directly involved.

## NOTES

1. *Anonymous*: "Baltimore Tops US as Straw-Hat Center," *Evening Sun*, 11 December 1947; and Lester Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry*, 1975, 10, Box 27, File 950, Jewish Museum of Maryland (JMM).
2. Frederick N. Rasmussen, "Just so you won't forget it, yesterday was Straw Hat Day," *Baltimore Sun*, 16 May 1975.
3. Hat making required international supplies and at least once contributed to an international trade dispute. In 1926, Baltimore's straw hat interests got into a trade dispute with Italian hat makers over proposed rates of duties of the Smoot Hawley tariff bill. Italy claimed that the Baltimoreans, "with their greater mechanized efficiency, needed no tariff protection. But President Coolidge backed the local hatters and ordered the tariff increased from 60 to 88 per cent. In 1938, the *Baltimore Sun* reported "the bulk of the braid comes from the far off rice fields of China. Panamas, the genuine article, come from the hot countries of South America, chiefly Ecuador, Peru and Columbia, reaching here as "body" supplies, which already have been woven by dark-skinned fingers into the...shape of a hat. Italy furnishes the popular Milan braids, while small Switzerland ships to the local market as well." World War II cut supplies of straw from Japan, Baltimore's prime source. But, clever local manufacturers imported increasing supplies from South America to compensate. William F. Conhurst, "When Sun's Rays Get Hot Straw Hats Regain Favor," *Baltimore Sun*, 17 July 1938; and *Anonymous*: "Baltimore Tops US as Straw-Hat Center," *Evening Sun*, 11 December 1947.
4. In 1890, William T. Brigham, a principal in the firm Brigham Hopkins which traced its origins to 1814, published *Baltimore Hats: Past and Present*, a volume comprised of articles that had first appeared in a hat trade journal. Since then there has been no scholarly inquiry into Baltimore's hat making industry. William T. Brigham, *Baltimore Hats: Past and Present* (Baltimore: Isaac Friedenwald Press, 1890).
5. Brigham, *Baltimore Hats* (Baltimore: Isaac Friedenwald Press, 1890), 94-95, 112.
6. With three or four employees, M.S. Levy first made cloth hats and caps from his home. In 1869, he partnered with Robert Austrian to manufacture and job trade in hats. The partnership, R. Austrian & Co., lasted five years. After the partnership dissolved, Levy began experimenting with straw hat making. Herbert Moses, *In Memoriam: Michael Simon Levy and Betsy Levy* (Baltimore: Lord Baltimore Co., 1912), 9-11.
7. While it is not known when Townsend Grace ceased to exist, by 1953 Men's Hats, Inc. (a merger of M.S. Levy and Brigham Hopkins) was the only firm in Baltimore making straw hats, including some bearing the Townsend Grace label. Audrey Bishop, "Baltimore Makes Headlines," *Baltimore Sun*, 1 March 1953; and Lester Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry*, 1975, 6, Box 27, File 950, JMM.
8. Brigham Hopkins' 1884 factory building at Paca and Redwood Streets was built to accommodate 600 workers. In 1895, at about half its capacity, Brigham Hopkins was the largest straw hat maker in town, producing about 1,600 dozen hats per year. The annual value of Brigham Hopkins' hats alone exceeded a million dollars. Brigham, *Baltimore Hats*, 101, 115, 139; Lester Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*

- (Baltimore: self published, 1978), 2; and George W. Engelhart, *Baltimore, Maryland: Book of Its Board of Trade*, (c. 1895), 190.
9. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 3.
  10. Moses, *In Memoriam: Michael Simon Levy and Betsy Levy*, 12; and Brigham, *Baltimore Hats*, 98.
  11. J.H. Noahson, "Baltimore as a Straw Hat Center," *Baltimore Magazine*, July 1933.
  12. Abe Hartman, the husband of M.S. Levy's daughter, Debbie, oversaw the firm's Chicago office and worked as a salesman. Grandsons Lester Levy and Leslie Moses both assisted William Levy in procurement. Grandson Herbert Moses worked with Julius Levy and then supervised the manufacturing operations. Three Ephraim grandsons (sons of M.S. and Betsy's daughter, Esther, and her husband, Isaac Ephraim) were also employed. Ralph was a salesman in Philadelphia; Ellis' sales territory was Baltimore and Washington, D.C. and Frank Ephraim was a clerk. Granddaughter Abbie Moses' husband, Bernard Feustman, began as a salesman, taking over Sol Brenner's territory. Feustman left the firm to join a Baltimore investment house, and then returned in the 1930s. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 5; and Baltimore City Directory (Baltimore: R.L. Polk and Co., 1915).
  13. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses, 1887-1979* (Portland, ME: Anthoensen Press, 1988), 14.
  14. Lester Levy's daughter, Susan, worked in the office for a brief period.
  15. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 2.
  16. That agreement stipulated that M.S. Levy contribute \$53,251 to the firm while each son gives \$20,000 in cash, stock, machinery and fixtures. The firm's profits were divided so that M.S. Levy received 5/12, while William got 4/12 and Jacob 3/12. Their annual draws were \$4,800 for the father and \$2,400 for each son. M.S. Levy and Sons Business Records, MS 2019.1, Maryland Historical Society (MHS)
  17. Jacob Levy was Betsy and Michael Simon Levy's second son. In 1892, Jacob fell while running for a trolley, causing "a form of paralysis. His condition grew more serious year by year and he died 9 October 1899," leaving a widow, Bertha Arnold Levy, and two children. Elsie Levy Felser, "Bertha Arnold Levy," undated, Levy Collection, MS 77, Box 30, JMM.
  18. The business was capitalized at \$240,000. M.S. contributed \$100,000 while both sons gave \$70,000. M.S. received 5/12 of the profits. The sons split the remaining profits with each receiving 3.5/12. M.S. Levy and Sons Business Records, MS 2019.1, MHS; and Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 4, 13.
  19. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 5-6.
  20. Lester Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry* (1975), 6. Box 27, File 950, JMM; and J.H. Noahson, "Baltimore as a Straw Hat Center," *Baltimore Magazine*, July 1933.
  21. Board of Directors Minutes, 5 December 1923, Committee on Sales Policy, MS Levy and Sons, MS 2019.2, MHS.
  22. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 8-9.
  23. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 10-11.
  24. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 11-12.
  25. *Maryland in the World War, 1917-1919: Military and Naval Service Records*, Maryland War Service Records, vol. 2 (Baltimore: 1933); and Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat*

Years, 1, 6.

26. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 4, 6, 8.

27. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 12.

28. Anonymous: "Taking on New Styles in World's Straw Hat Capital," *Baltimore American*, 4 March 1928; and J.H. Noahson, "Baltimore as a Straw Hat Center," *Baltimore Magazine*, July 1933.

29. Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry*, 8. Box 27, File 950, JMM.

30. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 4, 13.

31. Board of Directors Minutes, 17 October 1927, MS Levy and Sons, MS 2019.2, MHS.

32. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 20, 60, 64-65.

33. In the 1950s, Lester and Eleanor Levy went on buying trips to Italy, the Orient and South America.

34. Brigham Hopkins, too, enjoyed the years of the mid 1920s. In 1926, the firm gave two thousand straw hats free to members of casts of every show on Broadway. The marketing gimmick paid off. In the seasons that followed, the firm was "recognized as a source of supply," and charged for their straw hats on and off the great white way. Anonymous: "City Still Straw Hat Center," *Baltimore Sun*, 10 January 1960.

35. These firms were: Henry Goodman and Company, the Hobbs-Francis Company, and A.D. Smith and Sons. Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry*, 9, File 950, JMM.

36. Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry*, 9. Box 27, File 950, JMM.

37. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 8; and Anonymous: "Taking on New Styles in World's Straw Hat Capital," *Baltimore American*, 4 March 1928.

38. Despite Moses' success as a hat executive, his daughter Amalie Moses Kass' memories of the business are "rather negative and derive from Pop's perpetual worry over it." From early on, he "always insisted that he did not want [his son] Alfred to work there." According to Alfred, "Dad had erected the mental springboard that would encourage his children to leave Baltimore for their education, and eventually for good. Great opportunities lay elsewhere. Moreover, the family tradition so important to Dad had been played out. It could not continue in the same form and setting for a fourth generation." *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 13, 21-68, 71.

39. *Daily News Record*, 3 March 1931.

40. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 71; and Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 13.

41. The absence of payroll records made it impossible to know whether the change did, in fact, adversely affect wages. Anonymous: "Official Report Commission of Labor," *Baltimore News Post*, 4 October 1935.

42. Anonymous: "Official Report Commission of Labor," *Baltimore News Post*, 4 October 1935.

43. Minutes of Meeting, 8 August 1935, MS Levy and Sons, MS 2019, MHS.

44. Minutes of Meeting, 8 August 1935, MS Levy and Sons, MS 2019, MHS, and Anonymous: "Official Report Commission of Labor," *Baltimore News Post*, 4 October 1935.

45. Minutes of Meeting, 8 August 1935, MS Levy and Sons, MS 2019, MHS.

46. Anonymous: "Official Report Commission of Labor," *Baltimore News Post*, 4 October 1935; and *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 74.

00 47. Anonymous: "Official Report Commission of Labor," *Baltimore News Post*, 4 October 1935.

48. "Power Pictorial of Brigham Hopkins," September 1936, Vertical File, Enoch Pratt Free Library; and Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 16.
49. "Power Pictorial of Brigham Hopkins," September 1936, Vertical File, Enoch Pratt Free Library.
50. M.S. Levy and Sons officers were: Leslie W. Moses, President; Lester S. Levy and Sol M. Brenner, Vice Presidents; Ralph L. Ephraim, Secretary; and Walter H. Schwartz; Assistant Secretary 1938 Auditor's Report, MS Levy and Sons, MS 2019.1, MHS
51. *Baltimore Magazine*, May 1939.
52. *Baltimore Magazine*, May 1939.
53. Unsigned letter, c 1939, Levy Collection, JMM.
54. Alfred Levy and Sol Brenner both died in 1941. Ellis Ephraim died soon thereafter and Ralph Ephraim stopped working shortly after Men's Hats was formed. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 21.
55. Letter from Lester Levy to Men's Hats employees, 27 February 1940, MS 2019, MHS.
56. Letter from Lester Levy to Men's Hats employees, 27 February 1940, MS 2019, MHS.
57. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 20.
58. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 74.
59. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 17.
60. Letter from Eleanor K. Levy to Lester S. Levy, 6 October 1944, JMM.
61. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 13, 25.
62. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 28.
63. Audrey Bishop, "Baltimore Makes Headlines," *Baltimore Sun*, 1 March 1953; *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 71.
64. William F. Conhurst, "When Sun's Rays Get Hot Straw Hats Regain Favor," *Baltimore Sun*, 17 July 1938.
65. *Anonymous*: "Flopperos and Skimmers Decorate Local Craniums," *Baltimore Sun*, 13 September 1940.
66. Levy, *Baltimore's Straw Hat Industry*, 1975, 6. Box 27, File 950, JMM.
67. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 20.
68. Letter from Ruth M. Levy to Lester S. Levy, early 1949, JMM.
69. Leon Axel was the manufacturer. *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 71; and Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 27.
70. William F. Conhurst, "When Sun's Rays Get Hot Straw Hats Regain Favor," *Baltimore Sun*, 17 July 1938; and *Anonymous*: "Baltimore Tops US as Straw-Hat Center," *Evening Sun*, 11 December 1947.
71. *Baltimore Magazine*, June 1952.
72. Audrey Bishop, "Baltimore Makes Headlines," *Baltimore Sun*, 1 March 1953.
73. *Baltimore Sun*, 27 July 1955.
74. *Baltimore Magazine*, October 1956; and Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 20-21.
75. *Anonymous*: "Men's Straw Hat Company Closing After 90 Years," *Evening Sun*, 3 July 1964; and Frederick N. Rasmussen, "Just so you won't forget it, yesterday was Straw Hat Day," *Baltimore Sun*, 16 May 1975.
76. Levy, *Recollections of My Straw Hat Years*, 10-11; and *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 13, 68, 71.

