

## Tom Bloch: *Tobacco, Golf and Parties*

Michael Nobel Kline: If you can say 'my name is Tom Bloch.'

Tom Bloch: My name is Tom Bloch. I was born in Wheeling and have lived here for close to 88 years. And all the time except while I was away at school, college and during the second war. And I expect to continue to live here for the rest of my life.

MNK: We hope it's 88 more years.

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TB: Well, that's a little too much, but--

MNK: Can you tell me something about your people, your family? Your people and where you were raised and so on?

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TB: ... father's side. My great grandfather Bloch came from Germany in the late 1840s when people were leaving Germany in droves. And at that time there was considerable German population in Wheeling. I know very little about except he came. He had three children, which my grandfather was the oldest. And my grandfather and his brother began-- Well, my grandfather had been in the wholesale grocery business on Main Street. And flood pretty well wiped things out. And he and his brother started packaging chewing tobacco from ... from stogie wrappers. That had been done for some time just in, on labeled paper bags. And they processed tobacco, flavored it and called it Mail Pouch. First sales were in 1879. And it was the first loose leaf labeled chewing tobacco of its, of its kind. Plug chewing tobacco had been manufactured for some time. Not at all sure when that began, but the plug manufacturers used southern tobacco for their product and Mail

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Pouch used cigar leaf, which is a northern tobacco. Tobacco's grown in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Wisconsin. And the company grew and prospered. At the death of my great uncle, my father left, left college, I believe 1901, to run the business. And he took over the day-to-day operation of the company from his father who spent considerable time traveling. And that is my father's side of my family. On my mother's side, my great, great grandfather, Alexander Collier, came from Glasgow, Scotland. He was born in Fife, Scotland. He came to Philadelphia, married, had a number of children, moved to Richmond, Virginia, and later to the Kanawha Valley, what is now Charleston. His first wife died; he remarried and had another large family. One of his sons from that family was my mother's grandfather, William Collier, who came to Wheeling. And his,

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his daughter, Blanche Collier, married my grandfather, Thomas ... Moffet, who was the son of John Moffet, minister at the Second Presbyterian Church in, in Wheeling. And my mother, Jessie Moffet, married my father, Jesse Bloch, and I was the first of two of their children. The other child, my sister Betty who married ... L. Harris, both of whom are now deceased. I attended public school in Wheeling, Woodsdale Elementary School then Triadelphia District High School for three years. Then went to Phillips Exitor Academy where I graduated in 1925. And then went to Princeton, graduating there in 1929. I went, went to work for the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company that summer and continued until my retirement. In 1932 I married Nancy McElheny Fulton, who was born and raised in Wheeling, the daughter of Doctor W. S. Fulton who founded the Wheeling Clinic in 1924. His wife, Martha McElheny Clark, who was also native born Wheelingite.

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In, in those days the social activities in Wheeling were quite different from the present. There were many more parties. Girls didn't have formal coming out parties, but during Christmas vacation there were always a number of private dances. And during the, during the summer there were weekly Saturday night dances at the Wheeling Country Club. Life was, was very pleasant. The Depression of the '30s affected Wheeling, particularly those who had interest in the steel and iron companies. Fortunately, the tobacco, tobacco business was not too badly affected.

MNK: Why was that?

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TB: Well, I, I can't really tell you except that, that the sales held up remarkably well, which is of course the, is the, is the final answer. I've been active in community organizations. The United Fund, which began as a community fund, later a community chest. I was active there in the campaigns and was member of the board. I was life-long member of Vance Memorial Presbyterian Church of which I've been an elder for 30 years. My family were Republicans. I've been a Republican all my active life.

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My father was a member of the West Virginia House of Delegates and later the West Virginia Senate. For some time I was the director of the Children's Home of Wheeling, and for several years as president. I was director and president of the Wheeling Chamber of Commerce, the director of the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce and the West Virginia Manufacturers Association and also a member of the board of the National Association of Manufacturers. In the tobacco industry I was a director of the Associated Tobacco Manufacturers and the Tobacco Institute.

MNK: Excuse me just a moment. That's okay. I wondered if you could tell us about the very earliest processes by which they began to package or-- How did, how did they get-- Your great, great grandfather was, was wiped out by a flood?

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TB: No, my grandfather.

MNK: Your grandfather. And so then from that they began to, to package and sell tobacco. Could you describe that a little more so we can get a picture of exactly what processes they used very early on?

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TB: Well, the-- They bought-- They said kinds of, wrapper kinds from local stogie manufacturers, of which there are a great many in Wheeling at that time. And they, they started out. Then flavoring was added to it. It was dried and packed then in a paper pouch and sold through tobacco distributors. ... and moved to ... street and expanded there and been at this location entire life of the company. The company had, had warehouses in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Connecticut where tobacco was bought from the farmers, stored and then shipped to Wheeling to be, have the stem removed and processed.

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And in 1941 we bought the Penn Tobacco Company in Wilksborough, Pennsylvania, whose principal product was Kentucky Club Smoking Tobacco. And in 1946 the operations in Wilksborough were moved to Wheeling. The company also bought Christian Peeper Tobacco Company in St. Louis, which was a manufacturer of smoking tobacco. And that was done in Wheeling also from then on.

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MNK: How did they come up with the name Mail Pouch? Because that seems like such an ingenious marketing--

TB: Well, the story is that the, my grandfather's brother ... people went to post office and waited, waited for the mail to come out. And it always eager to get that. And it was then carried in a leather pouch, that was the mail pouch. So that was picked as the name of their product. West Virginia Mail Pouch.

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MNK: So people were waiting for their shipments of it to come through the mail?

TB: Um hmm. No, waiting for letters. Just anxious to receive mail. That was the reason.

MNK: Because this by its simplicity is such an ingenious name.

TB: It's a simple name. The named turned out to be a pretty good choice.

MNK: And then they began to advertise on, on, primarily on barns? Can you talk about that a little bit?

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TB: Yes. On barns and, and painted signs on buildings. The company employed painters. They were in crews. And the crew would, would get a lease for, for the side of a barn and or the side of a building and, and paint, paint the sign. The signs on buildings in towns

and cities was, was interrupted by difficulties with union painters. Our crews were not members of the union. And finally that was-- With barns it wasn't any problem. They, they continued until-- Lady Bird Johnson was the, the death knoll for barns. And there's a prohibition of painting a barn within a certain distance of a highway that was supported with federal funds.

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Those that were in existence stayed there. But later on then Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia proposed legislation which exempted Mail Pouch, was from Americana. But never increased very much after that, but-- And our last sign painter was retired. He, he lives over in Ohio and he sometimes paints, paints barns or signs for, for individuals who want them.

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MNK: What's his name?

TB: Harley ... I can't think of his last name now.

MNK: But anyway, this, this Mail Pouch was something that, that working people particularly could, could identify with and, and so it was--

TB: Oh, yes.

MNK: Just a big hit right away, was it?

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TB: Yes, it was, it was and kept, kept growing. Outside of painted signs and barns, our principal advertising was, was a point of sales advertising in-- Our salesmen would put up advertising in a, in a retail outlet, which they were paintings on different subjects. Were quite interesting and were well received and often would stay in a store for three or four months. Was-- The real competition was for shelf space in retail outlets.

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MNK: What were the very earliest processes they used? The machines that were used and so on to, to process and package this tobacco?

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TB: Well American Machine and Foundry Company produced a packing machine which was used solely by all chewing tobacco manufacturers for years until laminated foil package came out. We started the package first for Kentucky Club Smoking Tobacco. And then it went to chewing tobacco and it was accepted and used by-- Continental Can developed the package for us to begin with.

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MNK: What were the peak years of, of production? And how many employees did you have working?

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TB: Well, well peak number of employees, including those in our, in our warehouses, was in the neighborhood of seven hundred.

Then our peak, peak year for, for sales of Mail Pouch was, I believe, 1931. It's a long time ago.

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MNK: It began to taper off after that?

TB: Yes. Quite gradually, however. Things held on fairly well, wasn't a radical decline.

MNK: Were there a number of women who, who worked in, in the Bloch Company?

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TB: Yes. Yes, a great many. More than half of our factory employees were--

MNK: Could you talk about that?

TB: Hmm?

MNK: Could you talk about that a little bit?

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TB: Well, there really isn't much-- They were the machine operators, and they, they did it well. That was it.

Carrie Nobel Kline: Who were the machine operators?

MNK: She asked you who, who you were talking about.

TB: What?

MNK: She asked you who you were talking about.

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TB: Well, he asked about women employees.

CNK: Thank you.

MNK: How about during the war years? Did, did-- Was Mail Pouch shipped to the front?

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TB: Very little. For the, for the Armed Forces it was mostly cigarettes.

MNK: Why was that? Didn't the servicemen want a good chew out in the trenches?

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TB: It seemed not. And I can't give you the reason.

MNK: Well, I know I chewed a lot of it, especially working in the woods or-- Especially cutting wood with a power saw, that's my favorite time to chew.

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TB: That's, that's good anytime. It goes better some times than others. It's too involved to go through what's happened to the company except we had a merger with a, with Helm Tobacco Company, which turned out to be not too happy a one. Not as good as we thought it would be. And General Cigar Company made a tender offer for the stock, of all the stock of the combined merged company. And ... successfully opposed it. And so General Cigar bought all the stock, owned everything. And that was as far, that was the end of our interest in the company. I stayed on. My son who had been with the company stayed on for a while. And they wanted him to move to New York where he was really needed, but he didn't want to raise a family in New York so he left. And with a friend, they purchased control of a brokerage company, Hazlett, Burt and Watson, and have been running it since. Been very happy there. So I've, I've-- Well, General Cigar Company then sold, sold the company and parts have been sold off. And now there are no, there are no smoking tobacco products made here. But the snuff of, of Helm is now made in Wheeling. But I've--

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When I retired General Cigar Company, which is, named been changed to ... me to stay on. So I've stayed on here where I've, this has been home for, since 1950. So that my secretary and I are here, and we're the only ones on this floor. And it's a very nice place to live.

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MNK: What is the future of tobacco products in the United States?

TB: Well, that's anybody's guess. But I'd say that few people would say that the future is very bright. And presently their activity about further regulation control of cigarettes is, is pretty strong. And, well, Philip Morris Companies, which is a very large food company, is, is doing well. The question about the tobacco end of it is in doubt.

MNK: Do you think tobacco is linked to, to diseases in people?

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TB: Is what?

MNK: Linked in somehow, in some way to diseases in people?

TB: There's a question of lung cancer with smoking. But with the chewing tobacco and snuff there is, has been a lot of research done. And no connection between tobacco used that way and, and any, any cancer of any kind.

MNK: Can you tell me more generally some of your recollections of Wheeling in, in the '30s when the company was doing so well?

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TB: You mean in connection with the company?

MNK: Well, just generally what Wheeling was like in, in the, in the 1930s.

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TB: Well, it was a-- For me it was an extremely nice place to live. My greatest interest outside of--

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TB: Outside my family, church and business was golf. And golf around here is most enjoyable. We had a, an annual invitation tournament that was Labor Day weekend, was particularly enjoyable. Everyone ... of the country club. There were parties all the time and, and people from all around the area who came. And there also in Pittsburgh there were a lot of invitation tournaments that were-- The Allegheny Country Club invitation tournament was oldest consecutive tournament in the country at that time, and it was most enjoyable. That's the cup that came out of it.

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MNK: You were a pretty hot golfer, huh?

TB: Yes. Then I, I-- Back then I played pretty well and enjoyed it immensely.

MNK: What was the toughest hole on the, in, on the Wheeling course?

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TB: I wouldn't pick any one as being the toughest. Although the then 13th hole would probably be.

MNK: You had rough on either side or-- What was so tough about it?

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TB: Well, it was a long par four, and it was rather a difficult driving hole. And I'd say it was the hardest hole then to make par.

MNK: Who is the gentleman over the mantle?

TB: Oh, that's my grandfather Bloch, Samuel Bloch. That's a good portrait and a good likeness.

MNK: Um hmm. Did you spend much time in downtown Wheeling other than at the office? Could you describe the downtown to us at all?

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TB: Of course I was there every day, but not really-- I wouldn't say I would do too good a job of describing anything that was outstanding about it.

MNK: It seems to have had a reputation as a sort of a wide open city. Do you recall much about that?

TB: Yes, it was. I think you got some information about Bill Lias from Ron Hobbs if I'm not mistaken.

MNK: Um hmm.

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TB: That was in his heyday, and that was when things were pretty much at their worst.

MNK: Were you acquainted with him, with Mr. Lias?

TB: Only very casually.

MNK: Where did the workers live, the Bloch Tobacco Company workers? Did they live-- Did you maintain any housing for them?

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TB: No. Mostly in, in South Wheeling in the neighborhood here.

CNK: ... all your life.

TB: Well, since I was, let's see, since I was, I think eight or nine years old.

CNK: Was the family then always Presbyterian?

TB: Beg your pardon?

CNK: Was your, was the Bloch family always Presbyterian--

TB: No.

CNK: Then?

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TB: No, my mother's family was.