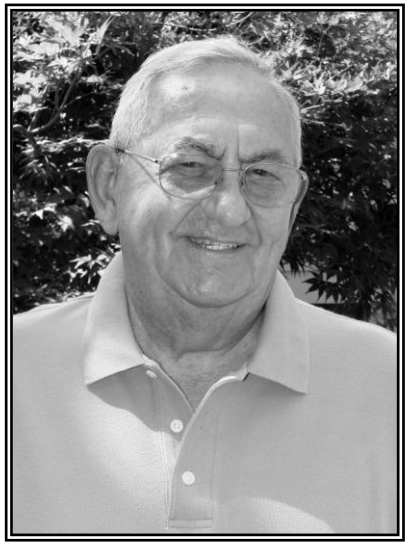
CHAPTER 16

LOOKING BACK WITH
ERNIE MAGARIO

"Man, if I'm going to work THIS hard, I'm going to go to work for myself!"

With those words spoken nearly fifty years ago, Ernie Magario of Brownsville resolved to start a business career. His experiences in operating a series of Brownsville stores illustrate how someone with little fear of failure and a lot of gumption can succeed in business.

When Ernie's business career began in 1961, the "Neck" was jammed with shoppers every day. When he called it quits thirty years later, that once-vibrant stretch of stores, offices and eateries was silent at midday. From his front row seat during those thirty years, Ernie Magario witnessed the swan song of the Neck.



Ernie Magario, 2010

Unlike the recent history of the Neck, the story of Ernie Magario's life is an uplifting one. This classic tale of an immigrant's son who made good began in a mining patch not far from Brownsville.

"I was born and raised in Allison 2," Ernie told me, "the oldest of three children of Fred and Mary Marino Magario. My two sisters are Genevieve Capatosti, who is active with the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, and Theresa Suranski, who resides in McKeesport."

"Your parents were immigrants?"

"My dad and mother came to America from Italy, met in Allison, and got married here. My dad was a coal miner, and we lived in the

patch."

"And your schooling . . .?"

"I went to Redstone High School and graduated in 1946," Ernie said. "After graduation, I went to Philadelphia for a year and worked there. There were gaslights on the Philadelphia streets, and each gaslight post had a clock. We would go around and make sure the clocks operated properly and repair them if necessary.

"I did that for about a year. I came home for Easter, went down to the A&P store in Snowdon Square and talked to Paul Vereb, the manager. He gave me a job in the produce department, and I never went back to Philadelphia. I worked at the A&P until I went to the service around 1950."

"You enlisted?"

"I was drafted during the Korean War and stationed in Germany. Two years later, I came home from the service on a Friday and went back to work at the A&P on the following Monday."

"This was in the mid-1950s?"

"This was around 1952 or 1953. Then Bob Tunney from West Brownsville, a staff manager at Prudential Insurance Company who shopped at the A&P occasionally, talked to me. He wanted me to become a salesman with his company. I decided to give that a try and went to work for him at Prudential's Brownsville office in the Gallatin National Bank building."

Ernie was good at his new job and was soon promoted, but the hours were brutal.

"I got promoted to staff manager after six months," Ernie said, "and Bob got promoted to manager, so he left and I took over his staff. I worked there for a couple years, then transferred to Uniontown at the old shopping center and worked there for a while.

"The bad thing about being a staff manager was that back then, insurance men had regular routes and they would go to the customers' homes monthly and collect payments on their policies, sell new insurance policies, etc. I would hire guys as salesmen, they'd try it for a while, and then they'd quit. Then I'd have to go out, collect the payments, and find somebody else for the job. I also had to go out with other agents and try to help them sell some insurance.

"That went on for a while until one day I thought, 'Man, if I'm going to work THIS hard, I'm going to go to work for myself!'"

Ernie decided that Brownsville was fertile territory for an energetic businessman.

"I always did like Brownsville, even though I didn't live there. As a kid, I used to get on the streetcar at Allison for six cents and go to the

movies in Brownsville for a dime. So I started looking around downtown Brownsville for a way to get into business for myself."

When the 1960s dawned, Brownsville's Neck shopping district was still a very busy place. Ernie noticed a narrow vacant storefront that was just what he needed.

"In between Sonny Cooper's men's store and Dezure's meat market was a small shop where Cohen's Wallpaper and Paint store had been. It was just a long narrow room, only six or seven feet wide and about forty feet long. I decided to put a card and gift shop in there.

"I got hold of American Greetings, and they came down and looked at it. They thought it was a good spot, right across the street from Thrift Drug, which had a lunch counter and was always busy. I opened that store and called it Ernie's Card and Gift Shop. The cards were along one side the whole length of the store, and along the other side were shelves with gifts and glassware. There was no back door." Ernie laughed as he added, "Everyone who came in there after I opened up called it a one-lane bowling alley."

"So that was the beginning of your career as a Brownsville businessman," I nodded. "Do you recall what year that was?"

"I went into business in June 1961."

"And it wasn't long before you decided to try to expand your business?"

"That's right. When I wasn't in the store doing something, I would stand outside and look around. I would watch the other merchants like Mr. Kart, Bernard Trumper, and Sonny Cooper, who all hung out at Thrift Drug because of the lunch counter. They were successful, and I thought, maybe I can find something more. So I talked to Sonny Cooper, who was in business next door to me. Sonny and I were pretty good buddies. He used to tell me all the time, 'Whatever you do, Ernie, just hope they don't call off Christmas!' Sonny encouraged me to look for more business opportunities in town.

"Then one day, Don Swogger came into my store. He said 'Ernie, why don't you buy my hardware store?'"

"Where was Don's store?" I asked.

"He was in the store front where Isaly's had been, down the street from my card and gift shop."

"Did Swogger's Hardware replace Isaly's there?"

"No, Circle Sales and Service followed Isaly's in there, then Don moved in next. His hardware store had been up where the Antique Bar and Grill is now. He moved his hardware into the building where Circle Sales and Service had been, because it had a side door and there were more shoppers in that part of town. It didn't have much parking, but it

did have some room in the back."

"Why was Don selling his hardware store?"

"He was hired as Plant Engineer at the new Brownsville General Hospital, so he was getting out of the hardware business."

"Running a hardware store requires having a certain knowledge about the items you sell," I observed. "Customers often ask for technical advice."

"Exactly," Ernie agreed. "And when Don asked me to buy his store, I told him, 'Don, I don't know anything about hardware,' which was true. He said to me, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I've watched you. I'll carry the paper for you.'"

"What does that mean?"

"That he would lend me the money to buy his business, and I would make monthly payments to him. So I told him, 'I'll take it.'"

"Now, were you still operating the card shop as well as the hardware store?"

"I moved out of the card store, but I brought the cards with me to the hardware store. So instead of calling it a hardware store, I called it Ernie's Hardware and Variety Store."

"How far down the street did you move?"

"Just a few doors down, on the same side of the street. Next to my card shop, moving in the direction of the Cast Iron Bridge, was Sonny Cooper's men's store. Next to that was Jay's ladies' wear store**,** then the Nut Shop**,** then Hopson's Wallpaper and Paint store, and then my hardware store."

As Ernie described his newest venture, I wondered: how could this man who knew nothing about hardware hope to succeed in the hardware business?

"When I took over the hardware store," Ernie said, "I called American Standard. They gave me a book with all of these pictures of hardware in it." Ernie chuckled and said, "When somebody would come in and say, 'I need a 2-inch T' or an 'elbow,' I'd go in the back room, look at the book, and come out and give it to them. I took the book home and I studied it. So it wasn't too long that I had it down pretty good."

As Ernie described his entry into the world of hardware, I had to admire his fearlessness in jumping into a business selling merchandise about which he was clueless. Some might call it foolhardy. Others might call it having an optimistic "Can-Do" approach to business.

Ernie didn't even pause for a breather after taking over the hardware store. He was already planning bigger and better things.

"I decided I was going to expand the hardware store as fast as I could, instead of piecemeal," he said**.** "Even though I had bought the

Brownsville's "Neck" shopping district in the late 1950s

hardware business from Don Swogger, I did not own the building. The building had three store fronts. My hardware store was on the left, the vacant Endicott Johnson shoe store was in the middle, and Kroger's was on the right, taking up half the building. I thought, 'I'm going to get that store room in the middle and really expand this thing, and either make a go of it or go bust!'"

One of the many things Ernie admits he knew very little about was paint. Another was linoleum. A third was wallpaper. So it should come as no surprise that his next venture was to open a paint, flooring, and wallpaper store. Next, our conversation with Ernie continues as he explains his carefully conceived business plan − best described as "One Thing Led To Another."

FROM CARDS TO LINOLEUM TO DONUTS

In 1963, Ernie Magario purchased Swogger's Hardware in Brownsville's Neck. It was his second business venture, following on the heels of the 1961 opening of Ernie's Card and Gift Shop. When Ernie purchased the hardware store, he closed the card and gift shop and took the card inventory with him to his new business, which he called Ernie's Hardware and Variety Store. It was located in the store room that once housed Isaly's.

Ernie knew precious little about hardware. Nevertheless, he resolved to immediately expand his inventory and add new product lines. To do that, he needed more space. The building housing his hardware store also contained the vacant Endicott Johnson shoe store and Kroger's. Ernie had his eye on the empty shoe store.

"I thought, 'I'm going to get that other side and really expand this thing; either make a go of it or go bust,'" Ernie told me. "Mr. Hopson had just died, and he had carried this Everlasting paint that he sold for $2.98. He'd run a sale twice a year, selling two gallons for five bucks. Since Hopson's Wallpaper and Paint Store had closed, I thought, 'I'm going to pick up that paint line.'

"I got hold of the Everlasting Paint Company in Cleveland. Then I called Pennsylvania Linoleum in Pittsburgh. They promised me this area's exclusive franchise on their linoleum. Before I ordered anything, I approached the people taking care of the empty Hopson's store and said I needed a place to store linoleum and excess paint. They told me, 'If you keep the windows clean, put some merchandise in there, and make it look like a store front, you can use it for free.'

"That worked for me, and I ordered a truckload of linoleums, 9 x 12 and 12 x 15 sizes, and a truckload of paint − white, light grey, battleship grey . . ."

"You still remember the colors of paint you ordered forty years ago?" I interrupted.

"Oh, yes," Ernie assured me. "I ordered battleship gray because in the patches, they painted the front porch and the block foundation that color. Some folks went light gray on the top deck and battleship gray around the bottom. Of course, everybody bought white, and there were about twelve other colors that were already mixed.

"I ran that stuff for $2.98 a gallon most of the year. When Easter was near, everybody would change their linoleum and start painting, so I ran the paint two gallons for $5. For the linoleum, the 9 x 12 was $6.99 and the 12 x 15 was $11.95."

"Per square yard?" I asked innocently.

"For the whole thing!" Ernie laughed. "In the patches, everybody had linoleum on the floor, and they would buy a 9 x 12 or 12 x 15 sheet, then get that three-foot-wide brown runner that looked like wood and put it around the perimeter. It made a nice border. They'd buy that on Easter, then right before Christmas, they'd change it again. They didn't glue it down; they just rolled it out and laid it down."

"Was that flooring made of vinyl?" I asked. I was surprised that it lasted less than a year.

"Yes, but it was pretty thin," Ernie said. "Everybody knew it was

cheap and how long it was going to last."

In very little time, Ernie had progressed from selling cards and glassware to dealing in hardware, paint and flooring. His "One Thing Leads To Another" business strategy was picking up steam.

Then the Philco man paid him a visit.

"A fellow came around and invited me to a show in Pittsburgh for Philco refrigerators, televisions, freezers, and all that," Ernie said. "I told him, 'Man, I don't have that kind of money to stock my store with appliances.' He said, 'We'll put it in on consignment. You'll have three months to pay for it.' I agreed. I rented the vacant shoe store next door and cut a doorway through the wall from my hardware store into that room.

"When I opened that room up, I put the paint in there and brought in the appliances. I put one of each linoleum pattern on display in the hardware store and stored the linoleum at Hopson's. When people bought linoleum, we delivered it for nothing."

"That's quite a bargain, considering the price of the linoleum," I said.

"Well, eight out of ten people, if they bought the linoleum, they also bought the paint," Ernie explained. "So it worked out well for us.

"Then I got another crazy idea. Supreme Wallpaper, which was to the right of Kroger's, went out of business. I figured, nobody in town sells wallpaper. If I have the paint and I have the linoleum, I may as well go into the wallpaper business."

"And your background in the wallpaper business was . . .?"

Ernie laughed. "I didn't know a thing about wallpaper."

In taking on the wallpaper business, Ernie used a strategy that he would employ several more times in his business career. He went out and hired some expert help.

"I talked to the lady who had worked at Supreme," Ernie explained. "Her name was Rosie Laverdi. I called her 'Little Rosie.' She had worked for Supreme for a long time.

"I hired her to work for me and told her, 'Rosie, you're in charge of the wallpaper. Don't worry about anything else. You just take care of the wallpaper. If you want to, when we're not busy, you can do other little things, but just take care of the wallpaper.'

"We took one wall of our store, stapled a piece of each pattern on the wall, and put the rolls behind it. We sold the wallpaper in 'room lots.'"

"Room lots?"

"Rosie knew every patch in the area, and she knew the size of the rooms in those patch houses. She would make up these bundles – room

lots we called them. In a room lot, you got enough wallpaper rolls for the room, and you got a choice of two ceiling papers, either 'ice,' which had a little design in it, or 'plain.' You also got the border. It was all measured in the right amounts for the room. Rosie sold them the right amount of paste, everything they would need."

Ernie's next idea for a new business was sparked by the demolition of part of the Neck business district. In May 1970, plans were announced to condemn the buildings that housed Cooper's Men's Wear (still in business at the time), Jay's Women's Wear, the Nut Shop (also still in business), and Hopson's. The borough planned to build a mid-town parking lot in their place. The following year, the buildings were torn down.

The loss of the popular Nut Shop started the wheels turning in Ernie Magario's entrepreneurial mind.

"The Nut Shop had a lunch counter," Ernie said, "and they made delicious candy and donuts too. When they condemned those stores, I got to thinking, 'People are going to need a place to eat. Maybe I ought to open a restaurant.'

"Dee Kubitza had owned the Nut Shop. I went to see her and said, 'Dee, if I open a restaurant, will you come to work for me?'

"She said, 'Sure. Where are you going to open it?'

"'I don't know,' I said. 'I'll look around.'"

In November 1970, remodeling was well underway at the former Square Tavern on the corner of Charles Street and Brownsville Avenue in Snowdon Square. A new tenant, the State Liquor Store, was preparing to move into the remodeled space. It had formerly occupied another store room in that same building.

"I went for a walk around the Square," Ernie said. "When I noticed the room that the liquor store was vacating, I went to see the building's owner, Dr. Joseph Klimoski.

"'Doc,' I said, 'how about renting me that room? I want to put in a restaurant.'

"'Sure,' he said, 'but I'm not going to fix anything up. That's up to you.' Doc gave me a pretty good deal on the rent, and I opened Ernie's Restaurant."

"That sounds like an expensive kind of business to start from scratch," I said.

"I bought used equipment," Ernie said. "A place in Monongahela went out of business, so I went down and bought their booths, their counter, and their stools. In the room I was renting for the restaurant, we took out the tile, scraped the floor down, laid carpet, then installed the stuff I had bought."

As was true of Ernie's other business ventures, his inexperience proved to be no obstacle. Under the watchful management of Dee Kubitza, Ernie's Restaurant quickly became popular. Before long, Ernie began contemplating filling the hole in the community's donut appetite that was created by the closing of the Nut Shop.

"How about donuts?" Ernie asked Dee one day.

"A good idea," she replied, "but I can't do that. My son used to do that, but he went into business for himself."

"If I can find somebody to make the donuts," Ernie said, "what do you think?"

"That would be okay," Dee said, "but he is going to have to come in after we close the restaurant for the day, because the kitchen isn't big enough and he would be in my way."

It was important to keep Dee happy. Ernie knew she was vital to the restaurant's success.

"Dee was doing the cooking for the restaurant," Ernie told me. "If it were not for her, I couldn't have kept that place going. She could take a chicken and make six chicken meals out of it."

With Dee's blessing, Ernie started looking around for a donut specialist. Little did he realize how much equipment and space were involved in making donuts. But how would he have realized that? After all . . .

Ernie didn't know a thing about making donuts.

Next, Ernie dives into the donut business, tries his hand at selling ladies' and children's clothing, and cooks up a plan to open a subterranean dining room in Snowdon Square.

ERNIE MAGARIO CREATED A DEVIL'S DEN

In May 1970, several downtown Brownsville buildings were condemned to make room for a municipal parking lot. That summer, Ernie Magario stood in front of his hardware store and gazed up the street at the Nut Shop, doomed to be reduced to rubble. As he contemplated the impending demolition of the popular lunchtime attraction, Ernie Magario saw what others did not − an opportunity.

The following year, Ernie opened a restaurant in Snowdon Square. In charge of the kitchen at the new restaurant was Dee Kubitza. Dee had formerly operated Dee's Diner in town, then sold it and joined her son Joe as his partner in operating the Nut Shop until it closed.

For years, Joe Kubitza had produced the delicious donuts for which

the Nut Shop was famous. Ernie Magario remembered the popularity of those donuts, so he asked Dee what she thought of the idea of adding homemade donuts to the menu at Ernie's Restaurant.

Dee liked the idea but set one condition: the donuts must be made after the restaurant closed for the day. There would not be enough room in the kitchen to make donuts while the restaurant was open. Ernie agreed and embarked upon a search for a donut chef.

"Someone mentioned," Ernie told me, "that Harry Furlong and his wife Lizzy had formerly operated a bake shop near the Hiller post office, so I went up and talked to them. I said to Harry, 'You guys want to go to work?'

"'Doing what?' Harry asked me.

"'Making donuts.'

"'Do you have the equipment?'

"'No. But if you'll come to work for me, I'll go buy it.'

"Harry agreed to make the donuts," Ernie said, "so I told him, 'I'll get the equipment, then I'll let you know.'"

Ernie may not have realized that making those delicious glazed donuts requires enough machinery to equip a bakery.

"Remember, we were making the donuts from scratch," Ernie told me. "Romeo in Uniontown agreed to get me the Multifoods flour, a good donut flour. I bought some of the equipment I needed on Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh, and Romeo ordered some of it for me. I bought a proofer to raise the dough, a machine to form donuts and drop them into the hot grease, and the donut cooker with the grease in it.

"I also needed a mixer, but the one I looked at cost too much money. So I went down to International Bakery on Second Street. It had closed, but John Dalson, who had operated it, still had his stuff in there.

"'I have just the kind of mixer you need,' John told me. 'It's in good shape. We'll even take it out, bring it over and set it up for you.' I'm glad he did, because that thing was big and heavy.

"After buying all of that equipment, I figured we were ready to make donuts. Harry Furlong came down to the restaurant to look things over. I said, 'There it is, Harry. What else do we need?' He said, 'We need racks so the excess oil can drip off the donuts, trays where we can put the glaze on them or add the filling, and a cart to hold the racks.'

"I thought, 'Man, what am I getting into here!' So I bought those items too. Harry's wife suggested that we also make filled donuts, but she didn't mean the type with the filling inside the donut. We made donuts with an indentation on top, used a scoop to put cherries or pineapple in the indentation, then iced around it so the filling showed with the icing. The customers liked those."

"It sounds like you now had a fully equipped bakery on your hands," I said.

"We did. We started making hoagies, and that led us to baking our own hoagie buns, bread, and Italian bread. Dee baked delicious pies with real high meringue, and for the holidays we made nut rolls, apricot rolls, and prune rolls. So we were a restaurant and a bakery, all in one. And that was really crowding us for room."

The search began to find more space. Beneath Ernie's Restaurant was an unused basement where the previous tenant, the State Liquor Store, had stored empty boxes by tossing them down the back stairs. Ernie had previously closed off those stairs to create more work space in the kitchen. Now he wanted to use the basement.

"I asked the building's owner, Dr. Klimoski, if it was okay to cut new steps just inside the front door that would lead downstairs. He agreed. We cleaned up the basement, re-wired it, paneled and carpeted it, installed new chairs and tables, and opened up a dining room downstairs.

"The downstairs room was more for serving dinners, while the upstairs was intended more for the lunch counter crowd, although we served lunch downstairs too. The Rotary, Kiwanis, and Chamber of Commerce all held their meetings downstairs.

"The ladies who worked over at Kart's and in the other stores in town got into the habit of going downstairs for lunch. That was fine, because that gave us more room for customers upstairs. The ladies kept talking about how they wanted to watch their soap operas while they ate, so I said, 'OK, I'll look into getting a television.' I bought one of those eight-foot projection TVs, and they came every day to watch those soap operas while they had lunch."

"Ernie," I said, "didn't you give that downstairs dining room a special name?"

Ernie laughed. "Well, not exactly that room. My dad was still living at that time, and one day when he was in the restaurant, I told him, 'Dad, I'm going to put a bar in here.' He said, 'Boy, you're crazy.'

"At that time, the State Liquor Store occupied the right-hand storefront in that building, and my restaurant was on the left-hand side. Chick Koval had a bar in a room behind the liquor store. I said to my dad, 'If I can get that license off Chick Koval, who wants to get out of the business, I'm going to open a bar underneath the state store.' So I pestered Koval for two or three months, and he sold me the license for a thousand bucks.

"We knocked a hole in the stone wall that separated the basement under my restaurant from the basement under the State Store. We made

a wide doorway, dug out an unexcavated part of the basement under the State Store, and turned it into the Red Devil's Den."

"Was it possible to enter the Red Devil's Den without going through the downstairs dining room?"

"Yes, there were outside steps leading down from the sidewalk along Charles Street, and we upgraded and enclosed them."

"What did your new bar room look like?"

"We decorated it in black and red with devil Halloween masks over the lights. I had ashtrays made up with the red devil on them. Steve Hallem of Allison, an excellent woodworker, carved a giant pitchfork as a gift, and we hung it on the wall behind the bar. Anytime someone would go away on vacation, he would bring back something that pertained to the devil.

"The Red Devil's Den caught on right away. The railroaders thought it was the greatest thing in the world. They came over from their offices in Union Station, and the guys who worked on the railroad on both sides of the river came too. They were my best customers.

"We had Steeler parties and showed the games on that big screen TV. We even had a Hawaiian luau. Bert Kotan cooked a pig upstairs in the bakery oven and put an apple in its mouth. We carved fresh pineapples, made mai tais. We had the pig and all the other food and charged only fifteen dollars or so. It was a lot of work, but it was real nice and a lot of fun."

I had been wondering about something. "During all this time," I said, "when you were fixing up the restaurant, making more space in the kitchen, installing new front stairs, adding a downstairs dining room, and creating the Red Devil's Den – you didn't own the building, right?"

"That's right. I was renting from Dr. Klimoski. That is, until Doc came to me and said, 'I'm going to sell the building.'

"I didn't know if I wanted to spend that kind of money to buy it, but man, I had a lot of money invested in there, while Doc hadn't invested a dime. So I thought about it, then I went to see him.

"'Give me a good deal,' I said to Doc, 'and you can stay in your upstairs office rent-free.'"

"There were offices in that building?" I interrupted.

"Yes, the offices of Dr. Klimoski and Dr. Ralph Garofalo were on the second floor, plus McClain's beauty shop. Doc Klimoski discussed my offer with his wife, we agreed on a price of $65,000, and I bought the building."

A sudden thought occurred to me. "Ernie, didn't you miss telling me about a business? Didn't you operate a ladies' clothing store in town?" I asked.

Sure enough, forgotten in the saga of greeting cards, appliances, donuts, and mai tais was Ernie's venture, shortly after the restaurant opened, into the ladies' and children's clothing business.

"One morning," Ernie said, thinking back, "Fay Sidler, an older lady who operated Sidler's ladies' wear store across the street from my hardware store, came over and said to me, 'I want to go out of business. Why don't you buy me?'"

Learning the ropes about linoleum, paint, and appliances was a challenge that a man like Ernie could handle. But selling ladies' hats, dresses, and lingerie?

Next as our conversation comes to a close, Ernie will describe the hilarious Grand Opening scene as his hired security man, Lloyd "Tubby" Flick, tried valiantly to hold back a crazed throng of women as they stormed the doors of Ernie's Ladies' and Children's Wear.

EVEN IN CHOOSING RETIREMENT, ERNIE MAGARIO'S TIMING WAS RIGHT

"Ernie, did you forget to tell me about one of your businesses? Didn't you operate a ladies' clothing store in town?"

Ernie Magario and I had been discussing the businesses he had owned in Brownsville, and he was beginning to describe his retirement when I realized he hadn't mentioned one of his stores − Ernie's Ladies' and Children's Wear.

"Yes, I had one other business," Ernie nodded. "Across the street from my hardware store was a ladies' clothing store called Sidler's. In the early 1970s, Fay Sidler came over to my hardware store one day and said to me, 'I want to go out of business. Why don't you buy me?'

"I told her, 'I don't know anything about ladies' clothing.'

"She said, 'How much will you give me?'

"I said, 'Are you selling the building too?'

"She said she was. The building had two storefronts with a stairway in the middle. Sidler's was on the left, and M&S Shoes was on the right. Upstairs were Mrs. Sidler's apartment and several others, along with a small tailor shop run by Mr. Cesarone.

"'I'll sell it to you cheap,' Mrs. Sidler told me. 'My kids want me to go to Pittsburgh.'

"'I said, 'I don't know anything about the clothing business, but to help you out, I'll give you $35,000.' She said no.

"About two weeks later, she came across the street with her

daughter. Her daughter said, 'My mother wants to sell you that place.'

"I told her, 'I offered her $35,000, but I'm not offering any more than that, because I don't know anything about the building. I didn't even go over and look at it.'

"Her daughter said, 'She'll take the $35,000.'

"I said, 'OK, give me a couple of days.' Ernie realized he needed to find someone who knew how to run a clothing store.

"Near the Nut Shop was a clothing store called Jay's Women's Wear," Ernie said, "owned by Henry Newberg. In 1970 the borough condemned the building Jay's was occupying, putting the store out of business. The lady who had run that store was Kathy Logorda (Sikina) from Allison.

"I called Kathy and said 'I'm buying out Mrs. Sidler,' and she agreed to work for me. Kathy and I went over and looked at the merchandise in Sidler's and realized that a lot of it was dated, so we went to Pittsburgh to visit the wholesale clothing outfits on Fifth Avenue.

"We looked at what they called 'house dresses,' which a lot of women in the patches wore. They retailed for around $5. One guy we visited had a mess of them for $2.75 apiece, so I bought two hundred of them in small, medium, large, and extra large sizes − not too many smalls.

"We put the house dresses and other purchases in my van and brought them back to Brownsville. Later we attended a merchandise show at one of the Pittsburgh hotels and bought some children's wear – Buster Brown, Cinderella, and several other brands. We also bought some Bute Knit ladies wear and gave a good-sized order to a company called Alfred Dunner, which was little known then but is a big name now.

"Then we had a 'Going Out Of Business' sale for the merchandise that was left over from Sidler's. I said to (Leonard) 'Tubby' Flick, 'How about coming to work for me for this sale? I'm going to run a full page ad in the *Telegraph*. Be there by eight, because the sale will start at nine.'

"I got down there about seven thirty that morning and fifteen minutes later, here came Tubby. He couldn't get in the front door for all the people that were out there already. We had to take him upstairs through Mrs. Sidler's apartment and down the back stairs into the store.

"Tubby said, 'Ernie, when you open that door, we're going to have a mess in here.'

"'Well,' I said, 'just let in so many at a time.'

"He opened the door, and they all pushed their way in, throwing stuff all over the place. People grabbing merchandise off other people.

It was unbelievable. Tubby said, 'I've never seen anything like it.'

"But we did make a few bucks on the sale and got that store going. We called it Ernie's Ladies' and Children's Wear."

"You never had any problem thinking of names for your businesses, did you?" I said, smiling.

"Nope," Ernie laughed. "Everything was 'Ernie's.'"

"And now you don't own any businesses in town. How and why did you divest yourself of those businesses?"

"Let's start with Ernie's Ladies' and Children's Wear," Ernie said. "Norman Wimer, a funeral director here in town, had a wife named Candy who often shopped in there. One day in 1984, Norman said to me, 'Did you ever think about selling that clothing store?'

"I said, 'No, not really.'

"He said, 'If you ever do, give me a call.'

"A week went by. I began to think that maybe it would be a good time to sell it after all, so I told Norman, 'I'll sell you the business on the condition that you keep Kathy as the manager. The rest of the help are all good workers, but that'll be up to you. Norman bought the business for $60,000 and began paying me $300 a month rent, since I still owned the building."

"I also told Norman that two fellows were interested in buying the building for $35,000 as an investment. He said, 'I can't afford that,' so I said, 'If they buy it, I'll make sure they give you the lease.' They bought it."

In 1984, Candy Wimer opened Candy's Clothing Store. In November of the following year, the infamous Flood of '85 hit Brownsville and some of the businesses in the Neck went under, literally and financially. Candy Wimer's store reopened after the flood, but eventually went out of business.

"I felt bad about that," Ernie said, "although I also got flooded across the street at the hardware store. Flood insurance paid for some of my damage. We were able to clean up and sell some of the hardware, but a lot of stuff, such as the wallpaper, was ruined."

"What about the appliances?"

"I had gotten rid of the appliances. To sell appliances you have to have good technicians or you're in trouble. When I went into the appliance business, Pat Ballon did my service work for me. When Pat went out on his own, I gave up the appliances."

A year after selling his clothing store, Ernie was quoted in a July 1985 Brownsville *Telegraph* article as recognizing it was "time to slow down" and that he was planning to sell Ernie's Restaurant and Red Devil's Den.

"I sold the restaurant and bar business for $65,000. It went through a couple of owners after I sold it. A guy named Charlie Wall from Fredericktown bought it, but he didn't do well. Dr. George Wilhelm, a chiropractor in Brownsville, also owned it for a while. He tried to upscale it with ideas like featuring lobster and cocktails, but those ideas didn't fit Brownsville, and he didn't make a go of it either.

"Eventually I sold the building to Crosskeys Human Services, which is using the entire building except for the liquor store. I sold it to them for $50,000, which was a good price for them. Liggett wanted to buy it from me, but I told him I'd give it away first."

"I see. So then all you had left was your hardware store."

"Actually, I sold the hardware business twice. In the early 1980s, Bob Miller bought it from me and renamed it Colonial Hardware. After a year or so, Bob closed it. Then I formed a partnership with my sister Genevieve and her husband, Herman (Mundo) Capatosti, and I went to see Scott Bowman, the agent for the building.

"We rented the place from Bowman and reopened the hardware store, which my sister and her husband managed for a few years. They collected utility payments there (electric, gas, sewage, and railway express), which reduced our advertising costs because everyone who came in to pay a utility bill walked past the merchandise to get to the little office in the back where they paid their bills."

"In the end, I bought out Genevieve and Mundo, then I sold the business to Paul Mammarella. He ran it for a while, then it closed up for good."

With the sale of the hardware store, Ernie's Brownsville business career was over.

"I owed my success," he told me, "to my great employees and all of my loyal customers over the years."

"Ernie," I said, "after having had such an active business career, how do you keep busy now?"

"I am treasurer of the Hiller fire company. That's really an education. People don't realize how much money it takes to operate a fire company. Eighty per cent of the time you are out there trying to raise money for the equipment, insurance, and utilities. It has really been an eye opener for me."

Knowing Ernie Magario, if anyone can handle that task, he's the man for the job. After all . . .

Ernie doesn't know a thing about fire trucks.