

# Federated Department Stores Project

by **Kae Bara Kratcha**, Entrepreneurship and Social Science Librarian

The catalog summary of the [Federated Department Stores Project](#) begins, “This project comprises a series of interviews with those who built the largest department store organization in the United States, Federated Department Stores.” Scholars interested in the history of retail business, business organizational structure, consumer taste as reflected in department stores, and other related topics related to merchandising in the United States will likely find relevant information in these recordings. In listening to interviews from the Federated collection, however, I found that the provenance of the collection is at the heart of the narratives held there. The provenance reads, simply, “Underwritten by the children of Fred Lazarus, Jr.”

Who was Fred Lazarus Jr.? Lazarus, or “Mr. Fred,” was the founder and board chairman of Federated Department Stores, which eventually became Macy’s, Inc. Based on the oral history accounts of fellow businessmen and employees in the collection, Lazarus was a savvy and innovative merchandiser. Indeed, Lazarus’ story, as told through the Federated Department Stores Project, is one of a single great businessman leading a growing organization to profit and success.

**Gladys Kleeman Lazarus**, one of Mr. Fred’s daughters-in-law, adds a different perspective to the archive. She discusses her first impressions of her father-in-law, his unusual relationship to his children, and how he treats the women in his family:

[\[Oral history interview with Gladys Kleeman Lazarus, 1965; Audio Clip 1\]](#)

Transcript:

*Gladys Kleeman Lazarus: I remember I was terribly interested in my husband’s point of view about his father. I was very close to my father and I loved him very dearly, but I didn’t have any ancestor worship. The boys, as you know, ... it’s almost ... I don’t like to use the word ‘unnatural,’ but it isn’t a normal relationship inasmuch as it’s an adoration, which I have never quite understood. It’s different than any relationship between .... I guess you know that. You’ve been through all this. But it’s quite unusual. I don’t think I go along with it completely, nor do I really understand it. I think you can admire people and love them but this is something that’s beyond my understanding.*

*Ed Edwin: Can you remember anything else that Ralph might have said about his dad in those early years or how he prepared you for the meeting?*

*Gladys Kleeman Lazarus: Well, he once told me another thing that was rather odd: Once you become a Lazarus, you have no faults. He would never allow me to criticize or do anything like that. They were a people apart. And I was brought up in a family that was quite different. We enjoyed each other and talking about each other and finding fault maybe rightly or wrongly. It was quite hard for me. It took me several years to learn to keep my mouth shut. I think their relationship is rather wonderful, but I wouldn’t want that relationship with my boys and their father.*

*Ed Edwin: You think it's just a little bit too pure adulation. In the first meeting, again, what was your father-in-law's reaction? How did he treat you? What were his mannerisms or demeanor?*

*Gladys Kleeman Lazarus: I don't know how much you know about German Jewish families but girls don't mean very much. Maybe you know this. I don't know whether you do or not. It's the boys that are important. Now, Dad enjoys a pretty woman and everything but he doesn't respect them as he respects a man. He loves us all, but it's an entirely different relationship with the women than it is with the men. He'll do anything for us if we're in trouble or anything like that, but you know that you're a second-rate citizen, if you follow what I mean. He continues treating us... He'll still tell me when he thinks I do something wrong with the children. He doesn't treat women as adults. And I listen and agree with him and then do what I want to do. I've learned that much over a period of time.*

For me, [Gladys Kleeman Lazarus's](#) perspective on Mr. Fred illustrated an important detail about the rest of the collection: narrators were very unlikely to say anything negative about a Lazarus in a project funded by the Lazarus children.

That is not to say that the Federated Department Stores Project can't further our understanding of business and labor history. [Herbert Samuel Landsman](#), a research director at Federated, admires Lazarus' business acumen and status in society in his oral history. Landsman contrasts Lazarus with Lincoln Filene, a fellow department store retailer. He says of Filene:

[\[Oral history interview with Herbert Samuel Landsman, 1965; Audio Clip 1\]](#)

Transcript:

*Ed Edwin: Let's go back to the Filene organization. First of all, what do you remember of Lincoln Filene personally? What kind of a man was he?*

*Herbert Samuel Landsman: Well, Lincoln Filene was essentially not a businessman dedicated to making high profits. That was not his primary interest, which caused, I'm sure, problems over the years between him and Mr. Fred. He was a person who had an enormous interest in personnel in the store, in morale and welfare programs, but more importantly, outside the store, he was of gigantic importance in all kinds of gigantic welfare activities. For example, he and his brother were the people who started the cooperative movements here, which goes way back. There were books written about this. The credit unions: they started small banks which would provide long-term loans for small industry.*

Landsman continues:

[\[Oral history interview with Herbert Samuel Landsman, 1965; Audio Clip 2\]](#)

Transcript:

*Herbert Samuel Landsman: I don't think Mr. Fred was impressed with Lincoln as a businessman but he was impressed with him as an American citizen because Filene as a retailer was one of the first on a variety of distinguished organizations and boards which retailers had never been on before. I think he was the first retail member of the Business Council, for example. When he died there was a full page in Women's Wear about Lincoln Filene. Mr. Fred was reading it and*

*pointing out the amazing number of things that Lincoln was involved with long before they would have considered retailers on the same level with captains of industry or something like that.*

*So he had these strong interests. He had a strong interest in unionization, which I'm sure wouldn't be shared by Mr. Fred, but he just did.*

*Ed Edwin: How did he feel about unionization?*

*Herbert Samuel Landsman: Well, for example in about 1908 or so he formed a company union in Filene's and put two members of this union on the board of directors. Now, Mr. Fred I think would regard this as an absolutely idiotic move; and, as it turned out, it did turn out to be a difficult move as the years went on. But this was the kind of person that Lincoln was.*

The Federated Department Stores Project includes 47 interviews with the businesspeople who built Federated Department stores and the family of Fred Lazarus, Jr. Columbia University students, staff, and faculty can browse and listen to full interviews from the Federated Department Stores Project through the [Digital Library Collections \(DLC\) portal](#).