

The Kisber Family

Louis Kisber
(1875-1939)

After immigrating to the United States, Louis Kisber resided in Nashville, Tennessee. There, he married **Rachel Frank** (1880-1955), daughter of Abraham and Betty Frank. Louis and Rachel Frank Kisber had three children: **Isadore** (1908-1925), **Freda** (1903-1921, 1st husband was Jacob David Lindy), and **Jonas, Sr.** (1901-1968). Along with his brothers-in-law, Alex and Ben Frank, he established the business, Frank Brothers and Kisber. Ben Frank retired around 1910. Alex Frank retired in the 1920s and sold his interest to Louis Kisber. The name was changed from Frank Brothers and Kisber to Kisber's Department Store. After Louis's death in 1939, Kisber's Department store continued under the leadership of Jonas Kisber, Sr.



Frank Brothers and Kisber (1922)

Jonas Kisber, Sr.
(1901-1968)



Jonas Kisber, Sr. (1941)

From Jackson Sun Obituary
(January 16, 1968)

Funeral services for Jonas Kisber, one of Jackson's most prominent merchants who built a modest family retail operation into one of this area's leading clothing firms, will be Wednesday morning at 11 o'clock at Temple B'nai Israel. Rabbi James Wax of Memphis and Rabbi Ernst Appel will officiate.

He was born in Nashville but moved with his parents to Jackson in 1905 and attended public schools here.

His father, the late Louis Kisber, was one of the founders of Frank Bros. and Kisber's on Market Street. The store has been known as Kisber's since the elder Kisber bought out his partners [in the 1920s]. Jonas Kisber, a graduate of La Salle Institute in Chicago, became president of Kisber's after his father's death [in 1939].

The firm has kept pace with the growth of Jackson and in 1951 moved to its present location on Lafayette Street. The present store was expanded with the addition of a third floor in 1964 and the company opened an additional location in the Old Hickory Mall last July. The Old Hickory store is as large as was the original facility.

Mr. Kisber was also a civic and Jewish leader. He was a **past president of Temple B'nai Israel [1945-1948 and 1966-1967]**, Tennessee and Jackson B'nai B'rith, Jackson-Madison County Industrial Development Corporation, and the Madison County March of Dimes.

He had been a director of the National Retail Merchants Association, Chamber of Commerce, B'nai B'rith Home for the Aged in Memphis, National Retail Credit

Association, Tennessee Council on Alcoholism, and Jackson-Madison County United Fund.

Surviving are his wife, Mrs. Gertrude Strull Kisber; two sons, Jonas Kisber, Jr. and Stuart Strull Kisber; a daughter, Mrs. Patsy Kisber Schornstein; a sister, Mrs. Robert Brest [Freedra]; and six grandchildren.



Kisber's in the Maurice Building on East Lafayette

Gertrude Strull Kisber
(1907 – 1993)



Gertrude Strull Kisber (1941)

*From Jackson Sun Obituary
(April 1993)*

Services for Mrs. Gertrude Kisber, 85, will be held at 11 a.m. Thursday at the Temple B'nai Israel with Rabbi Beth Davidson officiating.

A native of Greensburg, Kentucky, she was the daughter of the late Joseph and Rose Bohn Strull. Mrs. Kisber was associated with her late husband in Kisber's Department Store for over fifty years. At his death in 1968, she became Chairman of the Board of Kisber's Department Store. Mrs. Kisber was the National Retail Merchants Association Independent Retailer of the year in 1984. She received the First Lady award from the State of Tennessee in 1985. She was a member of the Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce Ambassadors and received a Life Time Membership in 1992. She was an Honorary Life Time member of the Board of Directors of the Miss Tennessee pageant. She was a member of the National and International Retail Merchants Association. She was **the former president of Temple B'nai Israel [1979-1981]** and former board member of B'nai B'rith Home for the Aged in Memphis, Tennessee.

She is survived by her daughter, Patsy Maillard; two sons, Jonas Kisber, Jr. and Stuart Kisber; six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.



Mrs. Gertrude Kisber accepts the Independent Retailer of the Year Award presented by the National Retail Merchants Association from her son Jonas Kisber, Jr. during recent ceremonies at the New York Hilton Hotel.

January 10, 1984

NRMA Honors Gertrude Kisber

Gertrude Strull Kisber, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Kisber's Department Store in Jackson, Tennessee, was selected by the board of directors of the National Retail Merchants Association (NRMA) to receive the industry's 14th Annual Independent Retailer of the Year Award. Presentation of the coveted award to Mrs. Kisber was made by her son, Jonas Kisber, Jr., president of Kisber's at the annual independent stores luncheon at the New York Hilton Hotel, Tuesday, January 10, 1984.

"We are proud to honor Gertrude Kisber in recognition of her many distinguished services to retailing," James R. Williams, NRMA president, said in announcing the award. "Her creativity, dedication, enthusiasm and willingness to share ideas, time and energy with her colleagues add to the stature and to the excitement of retailing today. These are just some of the reasons that make the independent store such an outstanding and valued segment of the industry." Mrs. Kisber has served on the board of the NRMA and is a member of the international committee.

Kisber's was founded in 1905 by Louis and Rachel Kisber, Mrs. Kisber's mother-and-father-in-law. Her late husband, Jonas Kisber Sr., became a partner of the firm in 1926. Ten years later, Mrs. Kisber began working in the store where she took a special interest

in fashion merchandising. To stay in touch with fashion trends she travels to New York every six weeks and occasionally to Paris.

In addition to her son Jonas, Mrs. Kisber has two other children. Stuart S. Kisber is president of Able Advertising Distributors, Atlanta. A daughter, Patsy Schornstein, is in public relations and real estate in Chicago.

The 1983 Independent Retailer of the Year was Philip W. Brezee of Brezee's Department Store, Oneonta, N.Y. Mrs. Kisber is the first woman and the second Tennessean to receive the award. Harwell W. Proffitt of Proffitt's Inc. of Alcoa, Tenn., won the award in 1974.

The independent stores luncheon marked one of the high points of NRMA's annual convention which attracted around 12,000 executives from the association's 45,000 U.S. and 5,000 international member stores. Membership ranges from the largest chain and department stores to smaller independent merchants and specialty stores.

The four-day program January 8-11 featured educational sessions workshops and panel discussions devoted to nearly every aspect of retailing. Concurrent with the convention, the National Retailers Business and Equipment Exposition highlighted 600 booths of the latest in products and services for retailers.

LOVED AND LOST - KISBER 'S FAMILY STORE VICTIM OF TIMES

The Commercial Appeal - Friday, August 30, 1991

Author: Jerry Huston The Commercial Appeal

There is a funereal atmosphere here among the final racks of merchandise as the loyal pay their last respects to Kisber 's Department Store.

Sometime next month, once the remaining items are sold, the 86-year-old family-owned store will close - a harsh, unromantic end to a store that built a reputation on some romantic notions of personal service and genteel courtesies.

The store, thought to be the last family-owned department store in the state, has fallen victim to the lagging economy, a longstanding lull in the retail industry, and increasingly fierce competition from large department store chains.

They are circumstances that experts say are driving many family-owned businesses in America to extinction. But the Kisber family, with four generations invested in the store, finds it small consolation.

"It makes me sad, not only for us, but for all the small independents. It seems we're falling off one by one. Pretty soon, people won't remember what a family store really was," said Jonas Kisber Jr., president of Kisber 's.

In the quiet aisles of the store, located in the Old Hickory Mall on the north side of town, it seems customers already are mourning the store's passing.

"I guess I never thought of Kisber 's as just a store. . . . It's kind of like seeing your old school torn down," said Mary Neal, 68, who has shopped here, on and off, for three decades.

The store's demise is the end of a retail story that began in 1905, when a Lithuanian immigrant named Louis Kisber and two partners, who later sold out, opened a retail shop in downtown Jackson.

In the early years, there was tough competition among a handful of family- owned stores in Jackson. It was an age before the chain stores, when personal service and courtesy earned customer allegiance.

But as Jackson grew, retail chains moved in and the family stores began to wither. Tuchfeld's, Holland's and Rosenbloom's all died off, leaving only Kisber 's.

In 1967, Kisber 's expanded, opening a store at the Old Hickory Mall. It moved into larger quarters at the mall in 1978. As the downtown area fell into disfavor by shoppers in recent years, Kisber 's in 1985 closed its downtown location.

"We had competition, but it was friendly competition. People appreciated service and would come back for it. . . . It's a different ballgame now," said Gertrude Kisber , 85, Jonas Kisber Jr.'s mother.

Customers said they will remember the extra touches that made Kisber 's special - the friendly greetings, the courteous, prompt assistance, the attractive displays, sales people who strove to please, the congenial atmosphere.

Every year around the holidays, the store was bright with the colors of the season. Gift-wrapping is always without charge. In the days before credit cards, installment plans were offered, much like small-town general stores. When customers fell behind for a legitimate reason, deferrals often were worked out.

"After this many years in business, you can't help but develop friendships with people. We've outfitted whole generations of families," Kisber said.

And so have his employees, many of whom have spent decades at the store.

For Rosemary Poole, 65, the store has provided the only job she ever had. She started in 1944, working part time while in high school.

"Mainly, it's the way we've been treated. They (the management) always made you feel like you belonged, that you were worth something," said Ms. Poole, now the store's controller.

Kisber said his family has striven to participate in civic and charity functions each year and be involved in the community. Matt Kisber , Jonas Kisber Jr.'s son, is a fifth-term Democratic representative from Jackson.

The store's most celebrated charity comes once a year, when Kisber 's provides to Miss Tennessee her wardrobe for the Miss America pageant. The store has outfitted every Miss Tennessee since the state pageant moved to Jackson 30 years ago.

But community ties couldn't protect Kisber 's from the price competition with chain stores.

Within the Old Hickory Mall alone, Kisber 's competes with Sears, J. C. Penney, Goldsmith's and Woolworth's. Across the street, expected to move into Kisber 's location, is Parks-Belk Department Store, a regional chain store.

Generally, large store chains can buy in high quantities and offer lower prices than independents. Kisber insists his store, which offers higher- quality name brands, can

compete on a daily basis, but concedes he cannot consistently compete with the clearance-sale prices that big chains can offer.

"The rate of growth of department stores in general is declining as specialty stores gobble up the market. They can react faster to style changes than department stores, especially small independents," said Alice McCord, senior vice president for research for the National Retail Federation.

Kisber said the recent recession came after a string of several lackluster years. He would not say how much the store lost last year other than "a lot more than we wanted to."

In the end, customer service and the finer touches lost out to convenience and customer thrift. When it came to lowering quality in order to lower prices or going out of business, he chose the latter.

"We didn't want to see the image of the store tarnished," he said.

According to Ms. McCord, studies show that "no matter what people say about service, it's not the first priority."

"It might be regrettable, but people are willing to sacrifice service and personal selling for lower prices," she said.



Louís Kísber (1875-1939)
Rachel Frank Kísber (1880-1955)
Jonas Kísber, Sr. (1901-1968)
Gertrude Strull Kísber (1907-1993)

זִכְרוֹנָם לְבִרְכָּה.

Zichronam liv'rachah.

May their memories be for blessing.