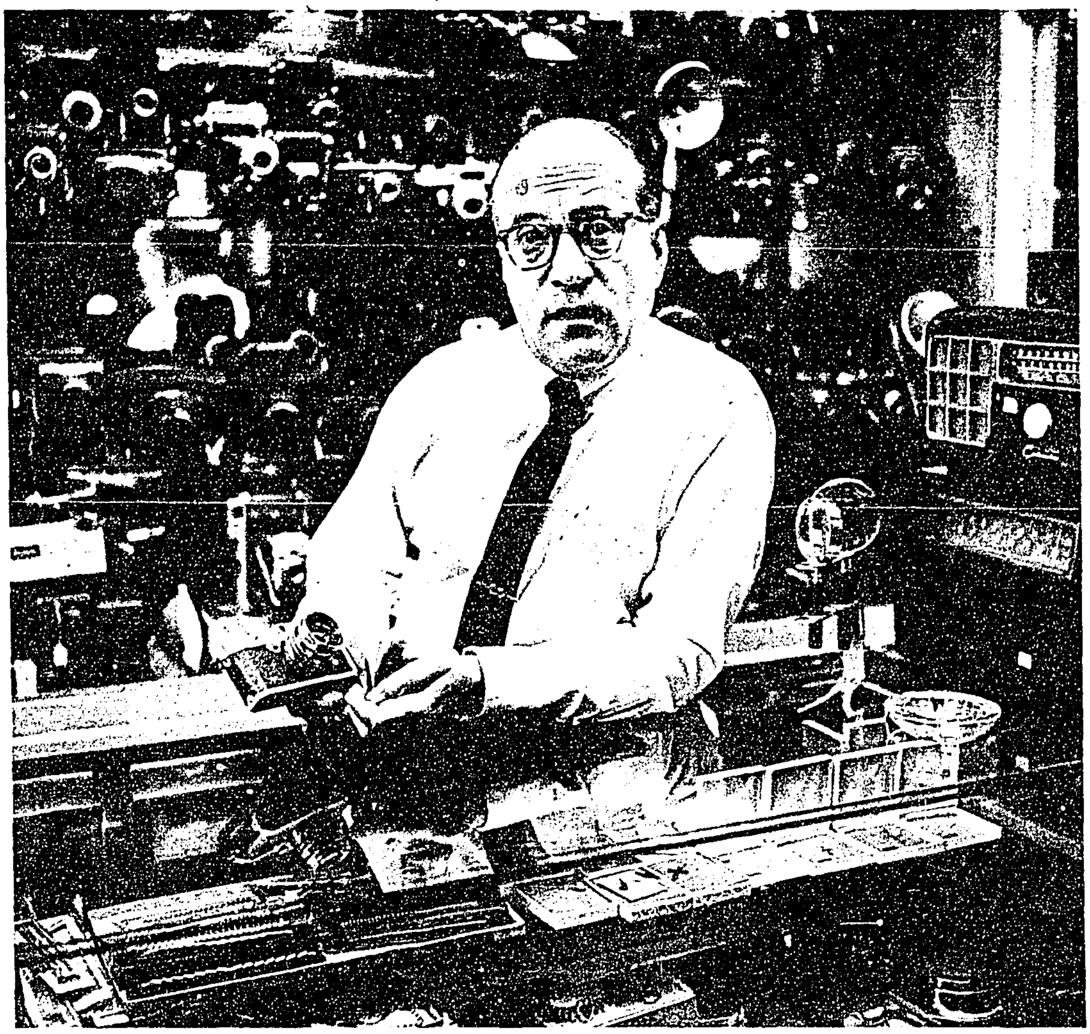
A Man Who's an Expert on 'Everything'



That's a Pawnbroker on The Block Who 'Can Tell The Value of a Diamond From Across the Street'

Jules Livingston exhibits one of the 50,000-odd articles, pledged by some 40,000 customers, that fill his East Baltimore street pawnshop and make it look like a cross between a bank and a department store.

By Francis Swann

JULES LIVINGSTON of "The Block" on East Baltimore street is a self-proclaimed expert on "everything."

"You got to be—to be a pawnbroker," he says. "You get so you can tell the value of a diamond from across the street."

Mr. Livingston is the third generation of his family to carry on business under the sign of the three gold balls. His grandfather, Louis Livingston, started the firm in 1890 and was succeeded by Isaac L. Livingston, who gave way to Jules in 1929.

"How do you get to be a pawnbroker?" He shrugs. "You got to be born one."

Livingston says the business has changed drastically since his grandfather's time, when there were only eight pawnbrokers in Baltimore and "The Block" was the center of business activity. At present there are 41 licensed and bonded establishments in the city.

Some 50 or 60 years ago the most pawnable article was a suit of clothes. Suits were hand tailored and expensive. It was good practice to lend $25 to $50 on one. Ready-made clothes have reduced prices and produced more suits until now the market is glutted with articles of clothing. These and watches bear the brunt of the hock-shop business.

IN addition to a valuable collection of diamonds and antique jewelry, an inventory would show about 20,000 watches and perhaps 7,500 suits at Livingston's. There was a time when the pawnbroker thought he had gotten rid of half of these watches. During World War II, with imports cut off from Europe, watches became scarce. A wholesaler ordered 10,000, to be delivered in New York. Livingston took them there—and on arrival found that his buyer had lost interest. Why? It was VJ-Day and watches were no longer a scarce item.

Diamonds may be a girl's best friend, but they are also the pawnbroker's best friend and most stable item. In this field Livingston's experience is invaluable. He does his own evaluation and, incidentally, is frequently called upon to make appraisals for other dealers and wholesalers. Radios, television sets, cameras and clothes are eventually outdated and depreciate in value, but no one has yet discovered how to make a better or more modern diamond.

But even diamonds can at times be headaches—if they happen to be stolen property.

"A man comes in to pawn a diamond for $500. How do I know it's his?" Livingston asks, and then answers his own question: "Well, he's got it, hasn't he?" This is the creed of most pawnbrokers. Possession is usually proof enough of ownership.

NOT too long ago, Livingston was instrumental in solving a Cleveland jewel robbery by ignoring this precept when one of the stolen diamonds was offered to him. A police bulletin described the diamond and Livingston turned it over. The thieves then were traced.

The Livingston shops on East Baltimore street have six floors of merchandise of all descriptions, making the establishment a cross between a bank and a department store.

Of the 50,000-odd articles representing pledges to some 40,000 customers, one of the most unusual is what Livingston describes as "some funny kind of religious thing from the Russian Orthodox Church." It consists of an elaborate solid gold figure, encrusted with diamonds, mounted on a five-foot silver staff. This "funny" thing was pledged about fifteen years ago for $2,000.

In normal times about 90 per cent of all articles are redeemed, although some may find their way in and out of hock many times during the year. There are suits that spend more time on Livingston's racks than on the backs of their owners, being redeemed every Friday and re-hocked every Monday.

IT might be reasonable to suppose that more people would be in need of extra money before a holiday and so be more prone to pawn things then, but just the reverse is true. Jewelry and clothes that have been in hock all year are frequently redeemed just before Christmas so that they can be worn and enjoyed during the holidays. With the festivities over, many of them then find their way back to Livingston's until the next holiday.

Other articles are seasonal, too. Fishing equipment may be in pawn all winter every winter, along with golf clubs, outboard motors and other summer accessories. One floor of the building at Gay and Baltimore streets resembles a small armory, full of shotguns, high-powered rifles and target twenty-twos.

Another section of the small warehouse could conceivably outfit a sizable symphony orchestra. Every kind of musical instrument from a piccolo to a double bass has at one time or other been in hock—except for a piano; "nobody every carried one of those in."

As for things that people have brought in—recently a man placed a pair of trousers on the counter and asked for a $2 loan. The trousers were in good condition and so was the customer. The deal was quickly made, and the customer walked out of the shop with $2 and a pawn ticket—and wearing no pants.

"I think he got as far as St. Paul street before he was picked up," Livingston says.

In a pawnshop the credit rating of a customer has nothing to do with the amount of the loan. This is where experience is the only teacher the pawnbroker has.

It is to the advantage of the pawnbroker to lend as much as he reasonably can on any article, for his profit comes from the interest that accrues—2½ per cent per month.

Technically, if an article is not redeemed after six months it is offered for sale at public auction. If it does not bring the full amount of the loan, the pawnbroker can do one of two things: he can buy it back himself, or he can sue for the difference in price.

"Money Loaned on Anything of Value" is more than just an advertising slogan to Livingston. It is a motto to which he has always adhered closely—except in one instance.

He explains the episode with a straight face. "This man came in and wanted to borrow some money on his artificial leg. He started to unstrap it and hand it to me, but this one I couldn't go for. I wouldn't have felt right—taking away his means of support."