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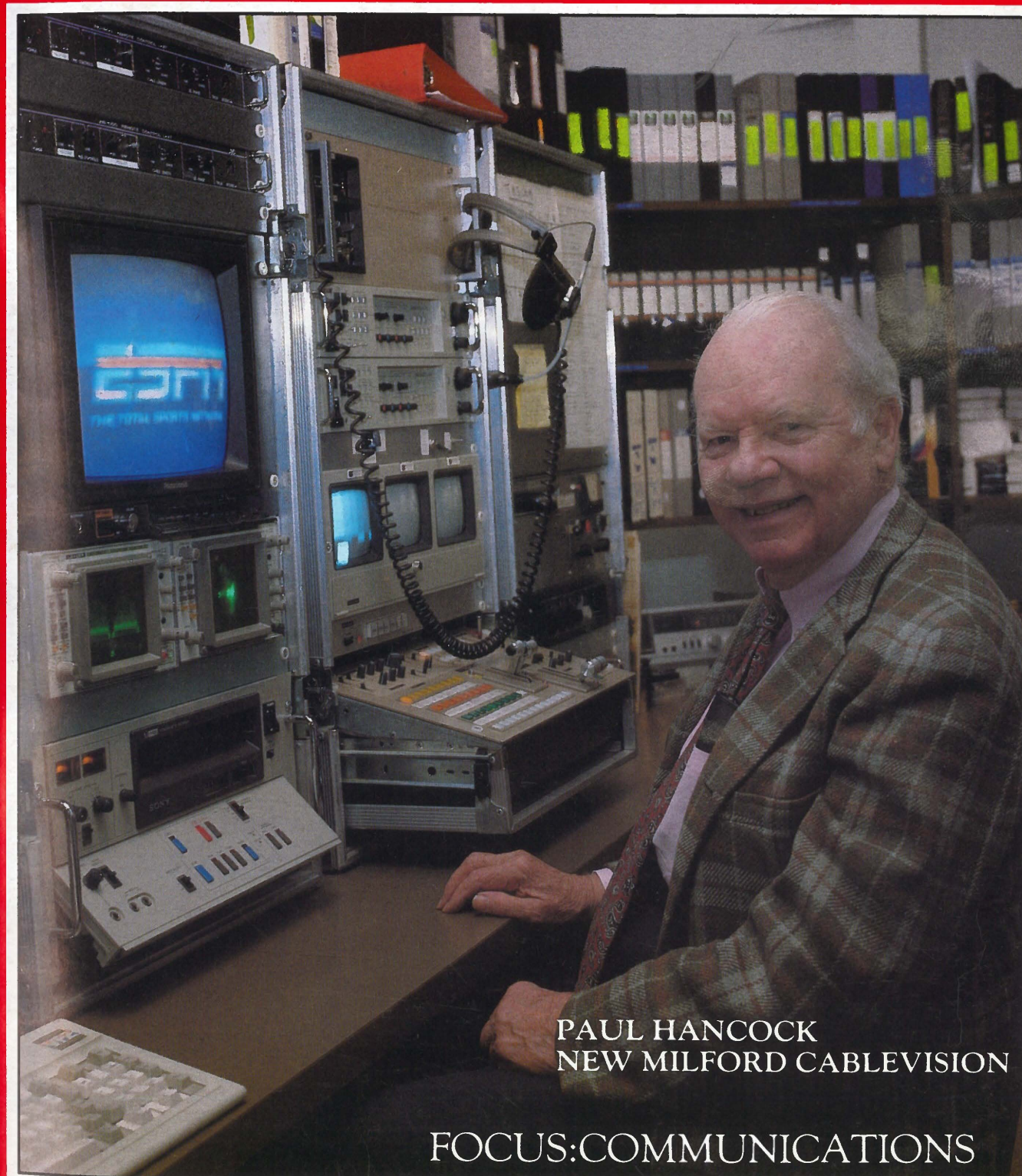
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# Halloween lasts all year at Topstone Industries



**Mel Goldberg heads Danbury's Topstone Industries, a major supplier of Halloween masks, costumes and other products.**

by Jeannette Ross

**T**rick or treating was never like this. If you buy one of Topstone Industries' mask creations, you could be any of more than a dozen alien or monster-type creatures, or you could be one of several clowns, a gorilla, gargoyle, or vampire. Too common? How about a face that looks like it's melting, or an ugly mug with a grotesque little monster popping out of the skull? Perhaps you'd like the hideous little critter

protruding from the eye socket? A little too gross? Disguise yourself with a caricature of a Maine fisherman, pirate, chef, swami, or Japanese aviator. You could impersonate Ronald Reagan, Bozo the Clown, Laurel or Hardy. You can even add a little audio to that visual fright with masks that distort and amplify your voice.

Halloween is the second biggest party night of the year, after New Year's Eve, and Topstone Industries is taking full advantage. With a product catalog that would warm Stephen King's heart — company president Mel Goldberg admits "we make some really

disgusting stuff" — Topstone is riding the crest of a Halloween mania that has swept the nation over the last five years.

Both Topstone's headquarters on Sand Pit Road in Danbury, and Goldberg belie the company's spooky business, and reflect more its international image. Nestled on a ten-acre, \$4.2 million campus, business is conducted in a modern building with lots of glass and skylights surrounded by rolling green lawns and woods. Goldberg is a quiet, pleasant man who enjoys working with plants. He created the Japanese garden that graces the company's front entrance,



## FOCUS

## Topstone

and a rocky display of foliage plants set off to the side. Inside, the reception area is quiet and comfortable, offices are spacious, and only a gallery of artistic movie posters — one depicts Dracula, another Boris Karloff — gives away the company's stock in trade.

Topstone provides one-stop shopping for the Halloween retailer. A customer can deck herself out from head to toe from Topstone's line. In addition to the disguises mentioned above, there are masks with feathers, sequins, and fake fur. There are false beards and mustaches. Wigs of every color and style are available. Pick from assorted body parts: ears, noses, tusks, hands, paws, feet, and tails. Even a witch isn't just a witch anymore. Not when she shines from head to toe with a lavish application of glitter lipstick and glow-in-the-dark pantyhose. Need something to carry in your hand? How about a giant bone, executioner's axe, or magician's walking stick?

Moving into full costuming, the right combination of bodysuit and fishnet tights will turn any woman into a "luscious nurse," "provocative maid," "sensuous clown," "cunning pirate," "wicked witch,"



**Sally Governale is vice president, special products. She not only designs products, advertising art and catalogs, but she also designed the company's headquarters building.**

"temptuous devil," "blushing bride," "cuddly recruit," "delectable wench," "sassy cheerleader," and "sly convict." There are also versions of the pirate, devil, maid, nurse, witch, clown, and soldier that use

more fabric. Men can also be clowns and pirates, or a monk, executioner, ninja, convict, or English bobby.

The children's costume line is not nearly so extensive, but it includes pirates, Indians,

devils, and witches, and a new item still in development — girl and boy space travellers.

But there is more to Topstone's masks and costumes than meets the eye. Safety is uppermost in Goldberg's mind, from the products he sells to the warehouse where they are stored.

"As an industry, we stress safety," Goldberg said. "We are working on high-intensity lighting to integrate into our costumes. We call it 'see-curity.' We've also worked on flame-retardant clothing," he added. "I don't want to see children hurt."

Sometimes an increase in safety can mean a little less profit. Topstone offers no red face make-up since that pigment contains a skin irritant, and the company shows no designs that encourage people to paint their entire faces. "We are not a prime source of Halloween cosmetics," Goldberg admits.

He also won't carry "blood capsules" — regular gelatin capsules containing fake blood. You pop one in your mouth, bite down, and the result is you look like you're bleeding from the mouth. Goldberg objects to this item because it looks too much like real medicine. "I'm very much against the use of drugs, and with this, a child could pick up his mother's prescription medicine at a later date, and not know what it is," he explained. "My feeling is, let's make toys that look like toys."

Goldberg's concern with safety carries over to the physical plant as well. Although you wouldn't think it to look at his office — witches' hats are spread on the floor along with bits of multi-colored fluff and other objects — Goldberg is a stickler for order

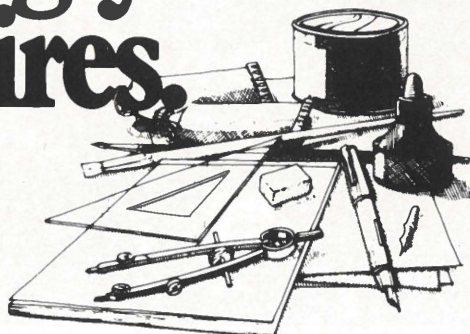
and neatness. "Without organization there is disarray," he said as he toured the packing, sampling, and shipping area — all with thousands of boxes neatly stacked. The building features an elaborate sprinkler system and fire walls to minimize an

**Distribution Manager Scott Fralstat, right, checks a customer order with Terri McGuire, administrative assistant.**



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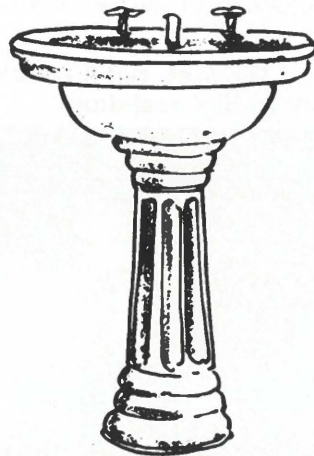
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## FOCUS

### Topstone

possible damage.

It wasn't so long ago that Goldberg and others in the industry thought Halloween might suffer a major setback. It was right around the holiday, in the early 1980s, that the original Tylenol tampering incident occurred. As a result, many parents were reluctant to let their children go out trick-or-treating. "We thought Halloween was dead," Goldberg recalled, "But we were wrong." People began having more parties, and both children and adults started dressing up more than ever. But instead of appropriating Dad's worn jacket as the start of a hobo outfit, or getting creative with an old sheet, adults and children were putting on the dog, so to speak, from top to bottom.



**Warehouse manager Erasmus Garcia assembles a customer order.**

And this has been nothing but good for Topstone's bottom line. The company's product catalog for 1989 is 80 pages long, up from 20 pages just five years ago. In that short time, fiscal growth has soared 25 percent a year. Coincidentally or not, that is when Goldberg took over Topstone.

Topstone has been in the Halloween business for more than half a century. The company originated in an old cider mill on Topstone Drive, off Route 7 in Ridgefield. It was an area known at the time as Topstone, Connecticut. From there, the company moved to Bethel and then to Danbury. Goldberg arrived at Topstone in 1961 to help run things for a company that had a financial stake in it. At the time, Topstone occupied 12,000-square-feet and had a yearly sales volume of between \$300,000 and \$400,000.

After a few moves in Danbury, Topstone settled into its present location in 1986. It now occupies 185,000-square-feet, with an annual sales volume in the millions. Goldberg also diversified Topstone by branching out into other holidays — Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Mother's Day, and Easter. A separate catalog features baskets, bunnies, Easter eggs, balloons, toys, and "Kiss me, I'm Irish" buttons. The spring holiday line accounts for 25 percent of Topstone's business.

When Danbury was still in the hat business, Topstone manufactured its own products. Even up until five years ago, most of the masks were made in this country. But Topstone has gone multi-national, and all products are imported from Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, Mexico, China, Hong Kong, and Thailand. To do otherwise could price Topstone out of business.

"There is a lot of hand labor involved in our products," Goldberg said. "From a labor and environmental point of view, it is difficult to make them in this country."

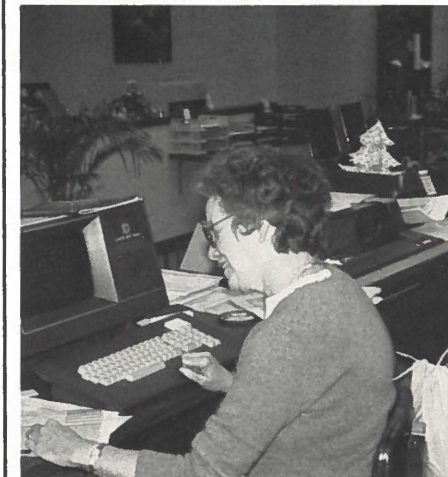
Topstone's client list is also multi-national. Party shops, dime stores, seasonal merchandisers, and department stores in the U.S., Australia, South America, and Hong Kong carry Topstone's products. The company will sell to any merchandiser, large or small, and has no minimum order. Selling is divided among two sales teams. With a national sales office in New York City, one group acts as a sales management team and handles major accounts. The second group is made up of independent reps across the country.

Within the company itself are 35 full-time employees, although that number will swell to 100 in the summer when Halloween items are being shipped. Four people, in addition to Goldberg, make up the management team: Steve Feldman, senior vice president; Sally Governale, vice president in charge of the art department; Al

Cusumano, controller; and Scott Fraistat, who oversees the international, credit, and collection divisions.

For his own part, Goldberg has worn all the hats at one time or another — from the loading dock to product development. These days, in addition to running the company, he sticks primarily to creating new products and indulges his favorite

#### Longtime staff member Kathleen O'Brien, right, reviews billing.



hobby by acting as in-house photographer. Last summer he shot the 1989 catalog with a crew of local children modeling costumes. He also travels extensively on buying trips and leaves every six weeks for a three-week trek, often to the Orient. The only job he resolves not to do anymore is selling. "I'm too attached to my products," he confessed.

But the sales team is doing a good job by itself, and Topstone needs to expand its 108,000-square-foot on Sand Pit Road (a separate warehouse in Danbury is 75,000-square-foot.) Goldberg thinks another 35,000-square-feet will hold them for five more years, but because of bureaucratic red tape, he doesn't expect to break ground until 1990.

Goldberg appears to have accepted a give and take philosophy to business. He could immediately increase profits by moving the company to the West Coast, because that's where the products arrive from the Far East. "But I like to live here," he said, referring to his home in Fairfield. His wife is a "budding actress" in New York, and his children attend Eastern colleges. "We price our products as though we are on the West Coast, and we give up several hundred thousand dollars in profit that way," he explained because of the need to ship things East, and then ship them back to West Coast clients.

"But it's worth it," he said matter-of-factly. "We're successful enough." •

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