A different kind of

- Traveling Salesman Story

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COME in," says the strong, almost harsh voice.

Inside the hotel room, the first thing that catches your eye is the row of bright dresses banked against two walls.

Then the big man with the craggy, florid face, framed by white, neatly-combed hair. He offers a friendly drink from the nearly-empty bottle of scotch which sits on the table in the middle of the room.

On the bed, pushed against the wall, a suitcase, a camera, two travel folders on Nassau, a copy of the Wall Street Journal and two thick account books.

This 18x20 hotel room is, for a few days, the world of Bill Frezell, traveling salesman. And then — as it has been for 40 years — it will be other rooms in other hotels in other cities.

You ask Bill Frezell how it is, how it was.

"As a young fellow I gandy danced on the railroad. Then I worked in the wheat fields of Montana and in the copper mines at Butte. And then I traveled half-way around the world on freighters as a coal passer. I was a pretty tough hombre. In those days I weighed about 240, was 6-1 tall. After I came back from the Orient I hitchhiked across the continent and worked on the Great Lakes. Finally, in 1925, I took a job in a millinery place, of all things. People said, 'You wouldn't guess what Bill is doing now!' I've been selling ever since."

There is pride and enthusiasm in his voice when he shows you the family photographs.

"My territory is from Memphis south to Florida. Six states. Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida. I do the swing five times a year. I've been home since July 10 but now I'll be on the road until Thanksgiving. Then I'll start out again Jan. 15. It's not a bad job.

"I am planning that at Thanksgiving maybe we will take this trip to Nassau. This summer we took the cruise to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. In the time while I'm at home I don't work, except to get on the phone and ask customers how the various numbers are moving, try to get in another hundred pieces."

Bill Frezell has been selling the Mancini dress line (\$26 to \$125 retail) of the California firm of Phil Altbaum Inc., for years. He left hats for dresses in 1945 and many merchants have been his customers for more than 20 years. They are friends, but it is a careful friendship.

"When I come to a town and get invitations to homes for dinner, I don't accept. I feel that it doesn't pay to get too close and too friendly—homewise—in a business situation.

"I'll take them to dinner, gladly, the whole family, rather than go to their house. This way, by not going to their homes, but going out on my own terms and in my own ball park, I'm in control and you've got to be in control of the relationship at all times.

"To look at my line, they have to come here to the hotel. It's not that I'm independent. I just feel that a merchant isn't doing himself justice when he tried to look at a line in his store where there are so many interruptions. You are talking to him about this garment and a customer comes in. Finally he comes back and you start in again, and somebody else comes in. Your customer doesn't know what he is doing, what you are saying. When he comes up here to this room he is away from his business. You can visit for a few minutes."



The customers come one by one to the hotel room to talk with Bill Frezell. Some come from out-of-town stores, from Bradenton and Sarasota and Clearwater. In between visits he may call on old friends, to see window displays and to check on what stock is moving, what isn't.

"The average salesman will check in at the hotel and then will be pounding the pavement all day, calling on accounts and making appointments to show them what he's selling. After he's walked all day he hasn't got much energy to chase all night.

"If he has, he's not doing justice to the job he's supposed to be doing in the daytime, and he won't remain a salesman very long. Or he'll be in another line next month, and with someone else next year. The successful traveling salesman is early to bed, early to rise, and he's on the job seven days a week.

"When you get finished with the trip you're so fed up with meeting people and talking and looking at these dresses, that I've seen the last week on the road when sometimes I ask the people, 'You don't want to buy anything, do you?' To hell with them, that's the way you feel.

"It wasn't always that way, of course."

Bill Frezell explains that he now is making more than \$40,000 a year, and that he is able to have considerable investments. This week he is taking it easy because the shipping strike delayed some net goods from England, and his line of dresses is only half complete — he is not pushing it hard.

"When the line is full I'll have 100 dresses. This is only 50. That's why I'm sitting around. Last night I had a little mail to take care of, I read, and then I took in a movie — I don't even remember the name of it. I had nothing to do today, so I went over to the stock market and watched things over there . . . took it easy. I was debating with myself whether to work any more this week or wait until my line is complete.

"I read a lot. Here are two books I'm reading now — 'From The Terrace' and 'The Sound of Thunder.' That's all I do, is read."

His average swing is six or seven weeks. In Florida he "opens up" in Tallahassee, St. Petersburg, Tampa, Miami, Orlando, Daytona and Jacksonville.

And at every hotel where he opens up, the other salesmen will come up and greet him by name, and after they leave he will go ask the desk clerk who they were. After 40 years, the towns, the hotel rooms, the faces, the jokes all are familiar, so familiar.

"I've been in this business a long time. I can tell what a town's like when I drive into it. I can tell what a store is like when I walk in you can size it up. Sometimes you just talk to the owner because you know it would just embarrass him if you tried to make a sale.

"I can recognize a salesman too. He is more self assured than most people, has more confidence in what he is doing and when he talks to you he knows what he is talking about."

There are voices in the hallway, a knock at the open door, and two men step inside and say "Hi-ya, Bill." One has a large paper bag in his arms, and Bill Frezell asks him what's in the bag. "Prune juice," the man says grinning. "I'll be over after a while," Bill Frezell says.

"When I go to a hotel, every damn salesman there will come to my room. They know me, they know the business I write. Years ago I used to envy those guys. Then I found out that about half of them are phonies ... all front, liars ... very few men on the road I associate with.

"Most salesmen are here today, gone tomorrow. The old timers, I don't ask about them any more, because when I do they are six feet under — dead.

"But it's a good life. Lonely? Let me put it this way... the weekends are the worst. During the week the days go fast because you're busy. It's nothing. But the weekend is the worst. The weekend is long."