Female presidents of Bonwit Teller: Hortense Odlum (1934-40) and Mildred Custin (1965-70)

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Female presidents of Bonwit Teller: Hortense Odlum (1934-40)
and Mildred Custin (1965-70)

By

Michael Mamp

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Apparel, Merchandising and Design

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2014

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ABSTRACT

The Industrial Revolution allowed for the mechanized production of mass amounts of consumer goods including apparel. The marketplace flooded to a frenzied pace beginning in the mid nineteenth century. As such, stores evolved from the dry goods environments of the early nineteenth century to become larger in scale; the department store was born. Many historians such as William Leach have concluded that department stores contributed to the development of a distinctive American culture built upon consumption. Not only were goods available but they also were presented to consumers in a compelling aspirational environment. Shopping became the American pastime and women in particular found new social opportunities in the public sphere with hours spent in stores.

One such store that developed in this era was Bonwit Teller founded in 1895. Bonwit’s was executed on the scale of a department store, but founder Paul Bonwit chose to only offer the best most luxurious fashions for a female only clientele. As a woman’s place, Bonwit’s particularly benefited from female leadership. This dissertation examined the history of Bonwit Teller which up until this time has remained somewhat obscure, but also documented the stories of two female presidents of the store Hortense Odlum (1934-40) and Mildred Custin (1965-70).

Without previous work experience and little education Hortense Odlum would come to Bonwit’s during the Great Depression when the business was on the brink of failure. Although Odlum came to her position through her wealthy husband’s acquisition of the company, she quickly proved herself a formidable leader and savvy businessperson. Women continued to shop during the Depression; however, price was a mitigating factor. Odlum worked to offer quality, fashionable attire across all price points from the best couture to the most sensible day suiting. In doing so she created new departments to accommodate her pricing strategy including the Salon
de Couture, Rendezvous, Debutante and College Girls. Taking her cues from what she expected as a female shopper she also established a beauty salon in the store. To attract a male customer during the holiday season she established the 721 Club that made shopping for the women in their lives easier. Odlum also connected with her female customers and established a Consumer Advisory Committee. By the time Odlum left Bonwit’s in 1944 she had tripled the volume of the store and planned the company’s first branch location in White Plains, New York.

Twenty-one years later Mildred Custin became the second female president of the store. The 1960s were a period of rapid cultural change. During this time, Custin introduced European designers such as Pierre Cardin, and André Courrèges to the American market and domestically she placed Calvin Klein’s first major order. Custin introduced menswear to Bonwit’s previously women’s only assortment and subsequently fueled the spread of the Peacock Revolution in the United States. As a woman with a gentle voice, but stylish clear vision, she embraced fashion and styles of the era and led Bonwit Teller through a period of phenomenal success.

This research is important, as aside from scholarship regarding Dorothy Shaver and her career at Lord and Taylor, documentation of female leadership in retail is limited. Shaver is documented as the first female president of a major American retail firm and yet Odlum preceded her by ten years. Also, Custin started to work in the fashion retail business as early as 1928. The history of women is often abbreviated and in the case of leadership in American retail, practically ignored. This research attempted to document two of the assuredly countless untold stories and contributions of women in retail.
CHAPTER ONE: General Introduction

Introduction

For millions of Americans from the nineteenth century onward, the department store was the mainstay of the consumer experience. Historians such as William Leach have posited that the department store facilitated the development of a new American culture that was focused on consumption.¹ In these environments, memories were made that withstood the test of time. Department stores enabled shoppers’ opportunities to purchase wedding dresses, bar mitzvah suits, engagement rings, as well as consumer products such as washing machines. No longer did consumers need to have clothing made at home, by seamstresses and tailors. Clothing was designed, manufactured, advertised, and sold with the majority, rather than the individual in mind.²

The purpose of this research was to investigate the history of a unique retail establishment enacted on the scale of a department store but with a very focused assortment. Bonwit Teller was a New York based women’s apparel and accessories store that was synonymous with style and luxury. Bonwit’s eventually expanded to Ohio, Illinois, Massachusetts, Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, California, Kansas, and South Carolina.³ The company had a successful history of female leadership and was one of the first major American retailers to have a female president with Hortense Odlum from 1934-40. Again in the 1960s the store would have another influential woman at the helm with Mildred Custin from 1965-70.

More specifically then, the purpose of this research is to tell the story of Odlum and Custin and their respective impacts at Bonwit Teller.

The advent of the department store in the nineteenth century provided the founders of Bonwit Teller a blueprint to develop a large-scale retail concept. Shopping became a feminine gendered activity allowing more public sphere opportunities for women. Mechanized production flooded the marketplace with apparel related products and stores arose to accommodate the American pastime of shopping. Women that were interested in careers or needed employment found opportunities within the department store. While other historians have focused on female salesclerks, the present dissertation focuses on the leadership positions assumed by Odlum and Custin. These stories serve as a microcosm of their respective time periods told from the perspective of pioneering women in retail. Those interested in costume history, cultural studies and women’s studies will find this research useful.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation followed a non-traditional format that allows for the completion of two scholarly articles related to an umbrella concept. These articles were developed with specific publication targets in mind. Chapter three was prepared for submission to *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* and is executed in Chicago reference style. *Dress* requires articles to be submitted with endnotes versus footnotes and a bibliography. *Dress* is one of the premiere journals in the fashion history field and is available online through Maney Publishers. This journal regularly publishes papers detailing the professional histories of retail and design giants including Dorothy Shaver and Charles Kleibacker. As such, it was deemed an appropriate fit for the Odlum article. *Dress* requires no more than thirty pages of text for submission. Chapter four is prepared for submission to *Fashion Style and Popular Culture* the official journal of the
American Popular Culture Association and is executed in Harvard reference style. *Fashion Style and Popular Culture* requires in text-citations, discourages the use of notes and requests a reference list to accompany each submission. Total word count of no more than five thousand words is requested. *Fashion Style and Popular Culture* is a new journal in the field that welcomes research that connects popular culture and fashion. Chapter four examines merchandising decisions in a popular culture context; therefore, this publication was considered an appropriate outlet. Figures utilized in chapters three and four are found at the end of their respective sections as required for submission to these journals.

**Research Questions**

Research questions that guided the study:

**Article 1**

1. What were the circumstances surrounding Hortense Odlum’s ascension to president of Bonwit Teller?
2. What merchandising strategies did Odlum enact at Bonwit Teller? How were these strategies specific to Depression-era retailing?
3. What was Odlum’s approach to customer service?
4. What was the impact of Odlum’s presidency on Bonwit Teller?

**Article 2**

1. What were the circumstances surrounding Mildred Custin’s ascension to president of Bonwit Teller?
2. What merchandising strategies did Custin enact at Bonwit Teller? How were these strategies specific to 1960s era retailing?
3. Were product offerings under Custin’s leadership significant or indicative of mid 1960s fashion trends?

4. What was the impact of Custin's presidency on Bonwit Teller?

**Definition of Terms**

**Consumerism**: A preoccupation with and inclination toward the buying of consumer goods. A new way of shopping that viewed goods as possessing expressive qualities that elicit emotions and contribute to identity formation in consumers.4

**Department Store**: A store having separate sections for a wide variety of goods often including apparel, household goods and furniture.5

**Fashion**: The prevailing style (as in dress) during a particular time. Implies change over time.6

**Merchandising**: Sales promotion as a comprehensive function including market research, development of new products, coordination of manufacture and marketing, and effective advertising and selling.7

**Product Presentation**: The presentation of goods in an aesthetically pleasing way that often involves changeable elements such as props, color, mannequins and the use of services to enhance the shopping experience.8

**Ready-to-Wear**: Ready-mades described clothing produced for mass consumption in the early twentieth century.9 After the 1920s, the term ready-to-wear gained more widespread usage to describe clothing bought off of racks from retail outlets. As such the term ready-to-wear is used consistently throughout this dissertation.

**Retailing**: The selling of products, in the context of this dissertation fashion products, to consumers resulting in a profit. Throughout the early and mid twentieth centuries, retailing occurred primarily in stores or via catalog mail order.10

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
**Specialty Store**: A store having a more specified assortment such as women’s apparel, children’s apparel, men’s or accessories.\(^\text{11}\)

**Styles**: Take into consideration fashion design choices such as silhouette, fabrication, and color.\(^\text{12}\) Styles are often reflective of the historical era in which they occur such as the shirtwaist of the late nineteenth century and the tubular, short dress preferred by flappers of the 20s.

**Limitations**

The overarching focus of this study is the American specialty store Bonwit Teller. Two distinct articles focus on the leadership of presidents Hortense Odlum from 1932-40, and Mildred Custin from 1965-70. The intention is to document the relatively undocumented stories of these female leaders to Bonwit Teller and the fashion industry in general. The researcher was particularly interested in concepts related to American stores, merchandising, fashion designers, and customer service. Other stores in America, and the sale of fashion in other influential parts of the world such as France and England were not included in this study.

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CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

American Department Stores

Christopher Breward refers to the twentieth century as the age of mass-production, mass-consumption and mass media. This age of consumption was fueled by the development of the American department store. Abroad, particularly in France, consumers shopped at The Bon Marche as early as 1852. In the United States stores such as Lord & Taylor evolved from dry goods formats to full-scale department stores. In addition to selling merchandise, department stores were beautiful awe-inspiring environments that seduced shoppers and allowed for intimate interaction with products not previously allowed.

In 2010, Dinty W. Moore author of The Emperor’s Virtual Clothes: The Naked Truth about Internet Culture stated:

The classic gargantuan department store is as much about fantasy as it is about commerce, though the former has always diligently served the latter. We, the unsophisticated American consumers of the early to mid twentieth century, still reeling from the advent of electricity and horseless carriages, upon finding ourselves ushered into a veritable Versailles of light, color, sound and aroma (candy counters, hot cashew nuts, perfume, talc, piles of clean, folded cotton linens), are hard-pressed to leave without gathering at least some small bit of this daydream into our glossy shopping bag. We have seen the future of American consumption, and we want some.

Retailing in America, at the turn of the twentieth century, was dominated by the presence of the department store. The dry goods stores of the previous century had yielded to mammoth enterprises that skillfully combined products, environments, and showmanship to create a

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15 As cited in Michael J. Lisicky, Wanamaker's Meet me at the Eagle (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2010), 9.
shopping experience not previously seen.\textsuperscript{16} In a way, one could compare the impact of department stores to the way in which the Internet revolutionized information exchange in the latter twentieth century. Never before had such a vast array of products existed as under one roof. According to William Leach, “Department stores revealed the totality of what the American economy was producing and importing.”\textsuperscript{17} By 1910, many of these stores had more than one hundred twenty five different departments including women’s clothing and accessories, men’s clothing and accessories, fine jewelry, housewares, and children’s.\textsuperscript{18} One can only imagine the sense of awe and wonderment a shopper must have experienced when first encountering this array of merchandise. Perhaps the emotion was similar to the experiences of consumers in the last decades of the twentieth century as they came to discover webpage after webpage of products available with the simple click of a mouse.

Department stores evolved out of general goods stores where clerks gathered requested items for customers that were often kept behind counters, in barrels or in locked containers. These stores focused on providing basic items, in a limited assortment, with minimal focus on mass manufactured goods. A woman shopping could purchase food items, fabrications and notions to make a new dress for herself or a member of her family, as well as general household products.\textsuperscript{19}

The Industrial Revolution made it possible to manufacture large quantities of goods that “triggered a self-supporting manufacturing and retailing cycle.”\textsuperscript{20} Further enhancements to

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\textsuperscript{16} Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{18} Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}.
\end{footnotesize}
\end{flushleft}
technology including the invention of the sewing machine in 1846, the long cutting knife about 1870, which allowed simultaneous cuttings of multiple layers of fabrics, and the application of electric power to drive the sewing machine and the knife by machine stimulated the growth of the ready-to-wear apparel industry. Other specialized machines mechanized pinking, buttonholing, snap-fastening, and other once laborious hand-processes.21

Partly due to the technical advancements that allowed for mass-production and the relative affordability of production equipment, entry into the apparel manufacturing industry was easy. Products previously only available via custom order to the very wealthy were now more accessible to cross-sections of society. This included everything from porcelain, crystal, and the finest of silks used in apparel.22 Markets that were flooded with goods demanded different outlets of purchase that in scale and organization could handle breadth and depth of assortment.

The American department store therefore is a result of the growth of manufacturing and industrialization. As the market flooded with goods, ambitious entrepreneurs showed “a high degree of ingenuity and creative ability.”23 Across the country, businessmen, and to a lesser extent businesswomen recognized that increased availability of goods allowed for a new mode of presentation and salesmanship. Bonwit Teller (1895) and R. H. Macy in New York (1858), John Wanamaker in Philadelphia (1876), and Joseph Hudson in Detroit (1881), among many others, would build retail businesses that set a new standard in consumerism, one constantly trying to outdo the other.24 This was in stark contrast to the general or dry goods environments that were often visited out of necessity in the previous century.

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22 Williams, *Dream Worlds*.
It is important to understand that these department stores were truly spectacles to behold with “facades of color, glass, and light.”25 Technological advances in lighting and glass making facilitated the creation of elaborate storefront windows that featured an ever-changing assortment of goods in fanciful and artistic arrangements. Marshall Field’s in Chicago built a store on State Street that was twelve stories tall and had more than 1.5 million square feet of selling space. This was in 1907 and featured a Tiffany mosaic dome, which to this day “still causes those who enter to gape in awe at the splendor overhead.”26 This was a dramatic change from the dry goods stores of the previous century, which were more utilitarian in presentation with limited, if any, consideration for aesthetic environment. Products in dry goods stores were also often separated from the consumer by counters and cases requiring a sales person to retrieve all requests. As a result of new visual merchandising strategies enacted by department stores, courses to train window dressers were developed in the early part of the century sparking competition to build the most elaborate window displays.27

To gain a sense of how rapid and vast department store expansion in America was in the early part of the twentieth century, consider that in 1907 more than two hundred thousand people visited the new location of Wannamaker’s in New York City.28 In 1907 the population of New York City was approximately four million meaning that close to five percent of the entire city’s population visited the store on opening day.29 Wannamaker’s was an east coast department store

25 Leach, Land of Desire, 39.
26 Gayle Soucek, Marshall Field’s the Store That Helped Build Chicago (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2010), 73.
28 Michael J. Lisicky, Wanamaker's Meet me at the Eagle (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2010).
founded by John Wannamaker in Philadelphia. This new store in New York employed over
6,000 people and had “eight spacious floors loaded with the best makes of reliable merchandise
selected especially for New York sales.”

Such massive locations allowed for diverse departments that catered to a broad customer
base. There were high prices, low prices, or no prices for those just looking. A constant turnover
of merchandise created a need to frequently re-merchandise the store. Consumers began to feel
as though they were seeing something different every time they entered the store, not realizing it
had just been moved around.

Women’s Roles and the Department Store

According to Christopher Breward, department stores, particularly in America,
contributed to a democratization of class and gender. Wanamaker’s, Marshall Field’s, and many
others featured restaurants, cafes, public restrooms, and even bargain basements that appealed to
a diverse cross section of society. Women in particular found department stores to be a means
to the development of a new identity linked to consumerism. In many ways these stores
facilitated the move of females from a private to a more public sphere of existence. Judith R.
Walkowitz in her narratives on sexual danger in late Victorian London posited, “shopping
emerged as a newly elaborated female activity.” Women of low, middle and high class
converged in different roles under the roof of the department store. Lower class women found a
way to seek employment often contributing to the welfare of their families while women of

30 The original Wannamaker’s location in center city Philadelphia today is the location of a
Macy’s department store.
31 Lisicky, Wanamaker’s Meet me at the Eagle, 30.
32 Lisicky, Wanamaker’s Meet me at the Eagle.
33 Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian
34 Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures.
means found a new past time in shopping, and socializing in stores. Aspirational middle class women were inspired by the dazzling beauty of department stores and the possible lifestyles presented through consumption of goods. Consumption on this scale was a drug once ingested often repeatedly desired. Middle class women, in particular, coveted the items they saw in department stores. The idea of shoplifting became prominent in late nineteenth century Western Europe and America and was explained by male doctors as the female mental condition of kleptomania brought on by meeting of the supposed weak feminine psyche and the aggrandized department store.\textsuperscript{35} Those that could afford new goods, wanted more and more. Those consumers that could not afford lusted for products and a new lifestyle. Concepts of living beyond one’s means blossomed.

\textit{Distinctively American Service}

Shopping was made additionally enjoyable by professional salespeople trained to cater to the every need and desire of their customers. Early American department stores were modeled off of their European (most likely French) counterparts such as Bon Marché, and Printemps. However, service was a concept unique to the American mentality. In Chicago, Marshall Field’s enacted the service philosophy of “give the lady what she wants.”\textsuperscript{36} Over time, the customer is always right viewpoint became a cornerstone of American retailing. Women proved to be ideal salespeople in the department store. Sales women understood, at least to a certain extent, the needs and desires of other women. They were also able to pamper and placate male shoppers that may have felt uncomfortable in this terrain of consumerism.\textsuperscript{37} Susan Porter Benson’s work explored the dynamic created on department store selling floors as lower class female

\textsuperscript{36} Soucek, \textit{Marshall Field’s the Store That Helped Build Chicago}, 31.
\textsuperscript{37} Porter Benson, \textit{Counter Cultures}. 

salespeople, often managed by men, waited on upper class, predominantly female shoppers. Certainly some women broke through to mid management and an even lesser amount to executive positions while most were left fueling consumption that they themselves could never personally partake of.

One could say that department stores contributed to the development of the American dream. Work hard and you can have many, many, things. This focus on consumer goods; buying them, lusting for them, stealing them, going into debt for them, contributed to the development of an American cultural identity rooted in consumption.

*Consumption Culture in America*

Prior to 1880, America was primarily an agrarian society controlled by land barons. The rise of the middle class created a focus on entrepreneurship. New businesses were established across the country and were often family owned and operated. In fact, most department stores in the United States such as Wanamaker’s, Marshall Field’s, Macy’s, Neiman Marcus and Bonwit Teller started as family owned- and operated-businesses. America was heralded as the land of opportunity where an immigrant could have an idea, work hard, and achieve the fortune of his or her dreams. The Industrial Revolution provided a mechanism by which “a multitude of goods were produced to satisfy needs that no one knew they had.”

According to Mikyoung Whang, “before industrialization, the family was the core social unit. Most American families were rural, large, and self-sustaining; they produced and processed almost everything that was needed for their own support.” Industrialization facilitated an increase in population in urban areas and also promoted a move from the private to the public

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38 Leach, *Land of Desire*, 16.
39 Mikyoung Whang, “Nelly Don’s 1916 Pink Gingham Apron Frock: an Illustration of the Middle-Class American Housewife’s Shifting Role from Producer to Consumer” (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2011).
sphere as significantly more women went to work. This migration and change from an agrarian to an industrialized society created a demand for ready-made goods. Many authors such as Jessica Daves have traced the development of the ready-to-wear industry in America to the humble beginnings of the shirtwaist. Daves described the shirtwaist as simplified bodice and seam paired with a moderately full skirt as: “suited to the plentiful labor of the plentiful young women immigrants…the first nationwide hit in the history of American fashion.”

Versions of the sewing machine had been in development abroad since the late eighteenth century. However, it was Isaac Merritt Singer’s patent of 1851 in the United States that opened the floodgate of possibility for the mass creation and dissemination of manufactured textile and apparel products. According to Joan Perkin, “operating a sewing machine at 3,000 stitches a minute a seamstress could assemble a shirt in an hour with neater results, though her pay was low.” Bruce Stewart noted that “the Singer company’s incredible knack for marketing made the sewing machine as desirable for use in the home as in industry.” By the end of the nineteenth century Singer machines were present in factories in the United States, Canada and England. When Singer died in 1875 he had amassed a fortune of over thirteen million dollars.

As apparel and other related products flooded department stores, people wanted, but didn’t necessarily always have the means to purchase. In order to fuel consumer desire for goods, many retailers decided to extend lines of credit to customers. Suddenly, you were able to go home with a shopping bag full of purchases even if you walked into the store without a penny in

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42 Ibid., 35
44 Ibid.
your pocket. Historians such as William Leach have suggested that this desire for new products contributed to an American culture that uniquely centered on the acquisition of goods and services. It seems plausible to suggest that the practice of extending credit in retail stores contributed to the acceptance of living beyond ones’ means.

Beautiful Goods & The Show Window

Not only did department stores, offer an assortment of goods that consumers had not previously seen, but they displayed them in a way that fascinated shoppers. Externally, the primary method employed by department stores to entice consumers and to generate impulse purchase was the development of the window display, early on called show windows. According to William Leach,

Nothing competed with them (windows) for selling power, not the advertising cards, not the posters or billboards not even the early electrical signs. They (windows) belonged to a constantly expanding landscape of glass, perhaps the most graphic indication that a new economy and culture of desire of extraordinary dimensions was in the works.

Although shop owners in the nineteenth century displayed goods in windows, it was the growth of the department store in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America that solidified window dressing as an important means of promotion and salesmanship. According to Leach, prior to this time “many stores exhibited nothing at all in the windows; some avoided display as tasteless; and most simply did not know how to exhibit the manufactured goods.”

What started as arranging goods in a pleasing way within storefront windows grew to become the foundation of the field of visual merchandising. Gayle Strege, Curator of the Historic Costume and Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University defined visual

45 M.D.C Crawford, The Ways of Fashion (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1941). Crawford notes that even prior to WWI Bonwit’s had extended 120,000 in house charge accounts.
46 Leach, Land of Desire, 55.
47 Ibid., 55.
merchandising as “the selling of a store’s goods through visual means, incorporating advertising, window displays, and interior sales floor design and display.”

Original product display developed in the shadow of ascending American consumerism as, according to Joseph Hancock, the rise of manufactured goods prompted retailers “to adopt various methods of promotion targeting specific types of clientele.” As stated by Leigh Eric Schmidt, “window trimming, a dynamic merchandising medium with its own complex aesthetic, exploded in importance in the period from 1880-1920.” Schmidt examined the commercialization of the calendar whereby every holiday (even created ones) became an opportunity for a new storefront window that celebrated the day and promoted a related product. Easter windows combined crucifixes with hats and Thanksgiving windows showed puritans with cutlery. Christmas was the most consumption-based distinctively American holiday.

As American consumption of goods grew so did those mechanisms that supported their successful promotion. In 1889 The Dry Goods Economist “the most influential voice in late-nineteenth-century merchandising” started to report on retailing instead of their previous focus, finance. This creation of a professional journal geared towards the merchant trade is an example of a greater shift towards consumerism in the period. The publication advised merchants on how to attract customers via merchandising strategies and display techniques.

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51 Leach, Land of Desire, 55.
Enticing Customers

Visual Display Origins

Focused display of products behind glass had an unlikely early proponent in the character of a famed children’s book author and also had its foundation in a city more associated with stockyards than fashion. An early proponent of display was none other than L. Frank Baum, author of the beloved *Wizard of Oz* books.

L. Frank Baum was born in Chittenango, New York in 1856.\(^{52}\) He was the son of a wealthy businessman and was home schooled with his siblings. Baum expressed an interest in the theatrical at an early age. He developed productions, toured with them and his father even built a theater to support his work. In 1882 Baum married Maud Gage who was the daughter of famous suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage.\(^{53}\) By 1888 Baum was dissatisfied with life and business on the east coast and decided to seek new opportunities in the great West. Several of his wife’s relatives had done the same and he decided to follow in their footsteps with his wife and young family in tow. The Baum family settled in Aberdeen (then part of the Dakota territory, officially becoming a state in 1889). Baum’s first enterprise in Aberdeen was the creation of a dry goods store called Baum’s Bazaar. Ever the theatric, Baum immediately stood out as he painstakingly arranged the interior of his store he wanted a “fun place to shop.”\(^{54}\) To announce his new store to the town of Aberdeen Baum took a creative approach and wrote a poem:

> At Baum’s Bazaar you find by far,  
> The finest goods in town;  
> The cheapest, too, as you’ll find true  
> If you’ll just step around.

\(^{53}\) Schwartz, *Finding Oz*.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 134.
There’s glassware neat and new and sweet;
Their crockery is a wonder:
There are sets for water, cups and saucer
At twenty cents and under!

And then their line is extra fine
In goods real Japanese;
The albums plush go with a rush,
The lamps can’t fail to please.

You’re sure to find just what you mind,
The bric-a-brac so rare.
The baskets light, the jewels bright,
The flowers so fresh and fair.  

On his grand opening day he gave away a free box of candy to every woman that entered the store. From the start, Baum pursued creative advertising, innovative store display, and developed ties to the community in the development of clubs and organizations sponsored by the store and carried a glittering assortment of merchandise. For one Christmas season (which would be the store’s last in 1889) he even created a catalog that advertised his entire assortment, six hundred items. However, Aberdeen was a pioneer town that was often plagued by severe weather and a tenuous economy. Baum’s sophisticated merchandise did not appeal to the local clientele that had other things on their mind. Therefore, Baum’s Bazaar went out of business shortly after the Christmas holiday of 1889. Between 1889 and 1891 Baum turned his focus toward publication of a newspaper called The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer. However, this proved unsuccessful and by 1891 he had come to the realization that perhaps he had gone too far west in his pursuit of success. Chicago was developing as the great new American city and promised

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., for a complete description of Baum’s early foray into retailing see chapter eight, *The Story Store*. 
prosperity in its burgeoning economy and boomtown construction. Baum decided to abandon Aberdeen and moved his family to modest accommodations on Chicago’s north side.

By 1891, Chicago was announced as the location for the World’s Fair of 1893 this meant the construction of an exhibition the world had not previously seen. The building of over two hundred structures for this four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the Americas was dazzling and incorporated extensive electrical lighting and the use of white stucco.58 This dramatic construction and subsequent exhibition in 1893 appealed to Baum’s ideals of showmanship and fantasy. This fantasyland however, was far from the reality faced by the Baum family at the time.

To support his family Baum at first wrote for the Chicago Evening Post, but then took a job as a buyer of fine china and dishware at Siegel, Cooper & Company that was a smaller competitor of the Chicago retail giant Marshal Field’s.59 However, this still wasn’t enough income to support his family and Baum then took a job as a traveling salesman for Pitkin & Brooks, which “entailed finding his own way in a sales territory west and south of Chicago that encompassed Iowa, Missouri, and the lower half of Illinois.”60 In this job he would travel from town to town with cases of fragile china that he would physically load and unload at each stop. This was a stressful job that took him away from his wife and children as well as the glittering

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58 Rebecca Loncraine, The Real Wizard of Oz: The Life and Times of L. Frank Baum (New York: Gotham Books, 2009). This dazzling display came to be referred to as the White City is said by authors such as Loncraine and Schwartz to have served as Baum’s inspiration for the creation of the Emerald City in his Wizard of Oz books.

59 Schwartz, Finding Oz. In his Oz books Baum would later create an entire land called Dainty China Country where every object and inhabitant was made of delicate porcelain.

60 Ibid., 245.
splendor of Chicago that he had come to appreciate, in addition his income was commission based.61

While traveling from store to store Baum “noticed that many shopkeepers had no idea how to present their wares attractively, how to appeal to the roving fickle eye of the customer.”62 This led to his focus on concepts of window trimming and Baum was among the first to formulate specific strategies to increase sales through the artful and conscious display of products. According to Rebecca Loncraine, “he became an important innovator in the emerging consumer economy.”63 Baum developed the idea of a trade journal devoted to window dressing called The Show Window and published the first edition in November of 1897.64 Baum “filled The Show Window with photographs of the most ambitious, elaborate, extravagant, and theatrical displays of goods ever seen.”65 Merchants clamored to purchase the journal and found inspiration in its pages that transformed simple handkerchiefs and stockings into elaborate wreaths and garlands that could set the theme for an Easter display. Baum also showed shop owners how to create mannequins, landscapes, and exotic settings such as Venice that were wonderful to behold but linked to specific products including everything from china, dresses and corsets. Baum left his traveling salesman job and devoted his days to the creation of The Show Window and his nights and weekends to his personal passion, children’s fiction writing. Also, in 1897 he formed the first organization devoted to the principles of display called the National Association of Window Trimmers.66

61 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 155.
66 Ibid.
Baum’s theatrical background, love of beautiful products and drive came together in his focus on window display. From 1897-1902 he would produce The Show Window until he sold it and focused the rest of his professional life on the creation of unforgettable children’s literature. It is clear that Baum’s work brought legitimacy to the burgeoning field of visual merchandising and helped merchants of the era and beyond find a way to entice customers with artful techniques.

Baum was not the only influence on display that came out of the Midwest. Also in Chicago, Marshall Field’s department store led the way as an icon of consumerism, allowing for the creation of a store that influenced the nation and world. Harry Gordon Selfridge started work at Marshall Field’s in 1879 as a stock boy and worked his way to second in command (after Mr. Field himself) by 1887. Selfridge was an energetic, ambitious young man (only 30 when given complete control of the Marshall Field’s business) whom understood intrinsically that retailing was as much about putting on a good show as it was about successful operations. Employees referred to Selfridge as “mile a minute Harry” as he was an omnipresent force in the store intimately involved in every nuance of the business.

In 1883 the Marshall Field’s store was remodeled, including the creation of two large street front windows that flanked either side of the entrance to the store. Prior to this windows at the store only functioned as a mechanism to illuminate the interior, these two windows were built to allow for product display and others were added within the next decade.

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68 Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady.*
69 Ibid., 207.
71 Ibid.
In Chicago one retailer was making decisions about product presentation, service and assortment planning that would shape the face of the American retail industry. Harry Gordon Selfridge was himself a conspicuous consumer that was always dressed impeccably, changed clothes several times a day, had a lavishly decorated office and a personal barber that attended to his daily grooming needs. Perhaps his own penchant for shopping and consumption fueled his unending drive to exceed customer expectations finding new ways to create desire for goods. This flare for the theatrical extended to windows at the store that under Selfridge “entered a new and colorful phase…he knew the real value and lure of a beautiful window.” When Selfridge heard of an innovative window dresser by the name of Arthur Valair Fraser who worked in a dry goods store in Creston, Iowa he immediately requested a meeting and then hired him to work for Marshall Fields.

Arthur Valair Fraser was born in Quebec, eventually moved to Iowa and by 1895 worked for Marshall Field’s in Chicago. From 1895-1940 Fraser served as display director at the department store where he experimented with color, developed early forms of mannequins and earned a reputation as a genius of window design. In 1897, red was the en vogue color of the moment as dictated by the Parisian fashion houses. To capitalize on this trend Fraser dressed six complete windows in red. Derek McCormak described the presentation, “in one he placed red

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72 Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*. Selfridge’s long-term impact on consumerism is seen in the Masterpiece Classic television production of their series entitled *Mr. Selfridge* starring actor Jeremy Piven as Selfridge. The show follows Selfridge’s development of his namesake department store in London. See http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/programs/series/mr-selfridge. Selfridge would take his lessons learned at Marshall Field’s and apply them to the development of his own department store in London starting in 1906.
73 Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*, 224.
74 Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady*.
75 Derek McCormak, “One Moment November 1913” (*Saturday Night* July/August 1999).
Fraser earned the reputation as being an innovator and in many ways father of window dressing as expressed in journals of the time such as *Women’s Wear Daily* and the *Chicago Dry Good’s Reporter*.

It was Fraser who developed the process of blocking the window from view while the display was in process. This is first noted as a practice starting with the day after Thanksgiving of 1913. Crowds had gathered to see the new Marshall Field’s windows that would mark the launch of the holiday season on the city. The crowd grew as they waited for drapes to reveal the window within. Finally, they were pulled back to reveal a remake of a holiday party. According to Derek McCormak, “elegant young women held glasses and hung garlands and lifted forkfuls of fake turkey into their mouths.” Fraser had developed a new type of mannequin using papier-mâché and wax that looked realistic with beautiful hair, and silk eyelashes. These mannequins were able to stand on their own and were the closest replication of the human form ever previously used in the display trade. Immediately the display world “went mad.”

Manufacturers attempted to recreate his creations and rival window trimmers copied his work. Concepts of window display and visual merchandising supported by Baum, Selfridge and Fraser set new standards in the merchant trade. These men also helped to elevate the mundane to fanciful displays that not only inspired but also elicited the ultimate response, ringing cash registers. Benson wrote, “window shopping became a welcome diversion,” especially for women.

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76 Ibid., 225.
77 McCormak, “One Moment,” 86.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 18.
In a society of spheres clearly divided by gender, windows gave women a legitimate reason to stroll up and down streets solitarily or in the company of other women without men at their side. A new sphere had been developed for females in the public arena that was gendered feminine and linked to consumption.\(^81\) Perhaps no other department store of the period understood this link between consumerism and females better than Bonwit Teller, which from its early days broke the mold of traditional department stores and created a genre of store that followed department store concepts of space, size and assortment but with goods only for women and their children. Women had found a distinctive place of their own in a store that was more luxury oriented and aspirational than any other.

*New York and the Ready-to-Wear Industry*

Where Chicago served as a center of innovation for visual display techniques, New York City as early as the mid nineteenth century had been a center of fashion production. By 1850 New York supported more general manufacturing than any other city in the nation.\(^82\) According to Michael Zakim, “New York’s emergence as the undisputed center of credit and the distribution of both domestic and imported cloth…made centralized large scale production of clothing possible.”\(^83\) The city’s position as a seaport facilitated import and export of materials as well as completed products.

Immigration also supported the development of garment manufacturing as inexpensive labor poured into the city throughout the later half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Waves of immigrants poured into the city one after another just as manufacturers

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\(^81\) Leach, *Land of Desire*.
\(^83\) Ibid., 74.
required workers. \textsuperscript{84} Seventh Avenue became the center of garment making where mechanization of work created a need for functional specializations of labor. Initially traditional hand tailors and sewing machine operators toiled together; however eventually the need for the later superseded. \textsuperscript{85}

This environment of apparel mass production prompted the launch of multiple large-scale retail businesses in the city such as Lord & Taylor, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Macy’s. It was in this environment of burgeoning garment production and retail innovation that a new concept in shopping was born. This store was one that targeted only female customers with the best fashions of the period.

\textit{Bonwit Beginnings}

Paul J. Bonwit was born in Germany on September 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1862. \textsuperscript{86} After spending his teenage years in Paris, he immigrated to the United States in 1883 at the age of twenty-one. \textsuperscript{87} Mr. Bonwit took his early career pursuits seriously. Shortly after arriving in New York he made a decision to move to Lincoln, Nebraska to take a job in a department store. \textsuperscript{88} After this experience in Nebraska, he returned to New York and began to work with Rothschild &

\textsuperscript{85} Green, \textit{Ready-to-Wear, Ready-to-Work}.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} This proved to be a pivotal moment in Mr. Bonwit’s career. His experience at Miller & Paine department store in Lincoln, NE apparently inspired him sufficiently to consider opening his own business. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Lincoln, NE was a retail hub in the state over which Miller & Paine dominated. See Jeff Korberlik, “Pederson Makes Magic with Miller and Paine Cinnamon Rolls” \textit{Lincoln Journal Star}, (June 7, 2007).
Company a manufacturer that specialized in outerwear. His influence on the business was appreciated as the firm was eventually renamed Bonwit, Rothschild & Company.89

In 1893, at the age of thirty-one, Bonwit married Sarah Woolf, and the couple welcomed two sons.90 Two years after his marriage, Bonwit opened his own store at 6th Avenue and 18th street, Manhattan, New York. In 1897, requiring an investment of additional capital, Bonwit entered into a partnership with Edmund D. Teller and the nameplate Bonwit Teller was born; the business incorporated in 1907.91 Teller was a silent partner as there is little record of his involvement in the business other than his initial investment.92

From 1911 to 1930 Bonwit’s was located at 5th Avenue and 38th Street, Manhattan, New York (Figure 1). It was in this location that Bonwit Teller established itself as a true luxury retailer.

Early in the twentieth century Mr. Paul J. Bonwit realized that the new era demanded ready-to-wear apparel of the finest caliber. It was his ambition to create the first great store devoted exclusively to the finest apparel and accessories for women and misses.93

It is important to note that Bonwit Teller blurred the line between department store and specialty store. Originally, the store only carried items for women and children; menswear was

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89 Rothschild & Company is still in operation today and owned by Rothschild family descendants. The company is a luxury, New York based manufacturer that develops their own product and produces goods for brands such as Elie Tahari and Donna Karan. See www.rothschild.com.
90 See Hendrickson, *The Grand Emporiums* and Odlum, *A Woman's Place*. Paul and Sarah’s son Walter would later become Vice President and General Manager of Bonwit Teller. This was part of the agreement that Bonwit came to with Odlum when Atlas took control of the company.
91 Hendrickson, *The Grand Emporiums*. Little is known about the relationship between Bonwit and Teller.
92 Ibid.
93 “Park Avenue Fashions” Bonwit Teller. Promotional material from the Iowa State University Special Collections Department, Bonwit Teller, 1928.
not added until the 1960s.94 In 1928, Bonwit’s described themselves in promotional material, as standing for all that “is fresh and new as long as it is in harmony with the exacting demands of good taste.”95 At this time the store was located at 38th Street and 5th Avenue and carried everything from riding habits and dresses to perfume, jewelry and bathing apparel. Smartly dressed drivers in Rolls Royce automobiles were available to deliver your packages to your doorman when your shopping was done, effectively alleviating the weary shopper from carrying them home.

Figure 1. Bonwit Teller at the corner of 38th St. & 5th Ave., ca. 1910. Image © The Museum of the City of New York

94 “The Reminiscences of Mildred Cust in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology." New York, April 6, 1989. According to Custin menswear was added to the store during the 1960’s and a period of resurgence in men’s fashion known as the Peacock Revolution.  
95 “Park Avenue Fashions” Bonwit Teller.
M.D.C Crawford stated, “Paul Bonwit was among the few personalities in our market who insisted on style, who passionately believed in fine merchandise.”96 This passion for stylish, high quality luxury product displayed by Mr. Bonwit would shape the perception of the company. He established a perception that would become part of the cultural understanding of Bonwit’s place in the broader schema of luxury consumption. References to Bonwit’s style, luxury and place in the upper echelons of monetary consumption were confirmed in film, television and literature. Poet Anne Sexton would write her take on the Cinderella fairy tale with a reference to Bonwit Teller.

*Cinderella* (excerpt)

You always read about it:
the plumber with the twelve children
who wins the Irish sweepstakes.
From toilets to riches.
That story.

Or the nursemaid,
some luscious sweet from Denmark
who captures the oldest son’s heart.
From diapers to Dior.
That story.

Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,
the white truck like an ambulance
who goes into real estate and makes a pile.
From homogenized to martinis at lunch.

Or the charwoman
who is on the bus when it cracks up
and collects enough from the insurance.
From mops to **Bonwit Teller**.
That story.97

The choices that Bonwit made for his business at 38th and 5th created a perception of luxury that has apparently continued in perpetuity.\(^98\) Clearly, Bonwit knew what he was doing in the development of his brand. After nineteen very successful years at 38th and 5th, where Bonwit’s had solidified its place as a luxury retailer, the store moved further uptown.

Predicting the industry trend, in 1930, Bonwit’s established their flagship store at the corner of 56th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan (Figure 2). Bonwit’s was among the early retail pioneers that moved their business uptown in Manhattan. Today one can walk several blocks in any direction from this intersection and you will encounter some of the most luxurious, expensive, widely known, respected, and publicized retail establishments in the world. Stewart and Company previously occupied the new location.\(^99\) The building had been extensively remodeled in 1929 for Stewart and Company and was considered very modern and innovative in the construction of separate areas in the store, “each highly individualistic in feeling and with lighting systems to fit their own schemes of decoration.”\(^100\)

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\(^98\) See: http://www.amctv.com/shows/mad-men/episodes/season-3/souvenir, Mad Men was a very popular television show that focused on the story of a New York advertising agency during the 1960s. In the 2009 season of the highly popular television show Mad Men one can find a Bonwit’s reference. Episode eight of season three finds the character of Pete Campbell in the Bonwit’s dress department to return a very expensive item, the title of this episode was The Souvenir and specifically referenced a dress returned to Bonwit’s.

\(^99\) Hendrickson, The Grand Emporiums. Stewart and Company was founded by A.T. Stewart as an early dry goods store in New York in 1823, many historians consider him the founder of the first true American department store. His business would prosper until his death in 1876 and would eventually be acquired by the Wanamaker brand originally of Philadelphia.

\(^100\) Ibid., 169.
Unfortunately, this layout did not appeal to Mr. Bonwit who felt that separate rooms and distinctive lighting detracted from the beauty of his merchandise. He actually thought the store was “too beautiful” so he removed defined spaces, and made the store a cavern of endless walls and fixtures with an overall indirect lighting system.\textsuperscript{101} The very progressive interior, which had been hailed in 1929 as “daringly modern” was destroyed.\textsuperscript{102} This decision was uncharacteristic for Mr. Bonwit who up to this time had strategically grown the business that bore his namesake. According to M.D.C. Crawford, “Paul Bonwit belonged to a group of merchants who knew merchandise rather than merchandising.”\textsuperscript{103} Meaning that he recognized quality goods, but perhaps struggled with finding ways to collectively present and promote a diverse assortment. However, he was most likely also under a great deal of pressure. This new location was a

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\textsuperscript{101} Hendrickson, \textit{The Grand Emporiums}, 170.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{103} Crawford, \textit{The Ways of Fashion}, 239.
significant investment for the retailer and opened just as the country entered the Great Depression.

The Bonwit family also experienced hardship during this time. Mr. Bonwit suffered his own health problems. In 1930 he was sixty-eight years old and had been running his own business for more than half of his life. From the early store that opened in 1895 to this new large location, Bonwit weathered the proliferation of the automobile, the Great War, suffrage, prohibition and many other technological and societal changes that required constant modifications to the business. The world at this time was a rapidly changing place and a successful merchant had to change with it. In 1932, the sudden death of his wife Sarah left Bonwit depressed and for the first time thinking about life outside of his business. He had expected business to be booming at the new store and that couldn’t have been farther from the reality. If the business was going to survive he needed to find someone with deep pockets to breathe new life into this 35-year-old retail establishment. The investment of Edmund Teller in 1897 had propelled the business forward, now he needed a similar partnership just to survive.

*The Great Depression*

The Great Depression effected American businesses and homes across the country. Famed retailer and former CEO of Bergdorf Goodman department store in New York, Ira Neimark, wrote of Depression era America:

Can a comparison be drawn between the Great Depression and the recent recession? Having lived through both, in my opinion, there is no comparison because the Great Depression was a disaster for everyone. There were bread lines all over New York, no employment insurance, and no other help for the 30 percent unemployed.104

Most historians identify the stock market crash of October 1929 as the start of a sudden recession. However, costume historians Jane Farrell-Beck and Jean Parsons point out “between

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1923 and 1929, banks closed at an average rate of two per day.\textsuperscript{105} The early part of the decade had been characterized by the flapper; an un-corseted, bob haired female that smoked, danced the Charleston and went from one party to the next. The roaring times of the decade came literally to a halt with the crash of 1929. Farrell-Beck and Parsons posited that the apparent prosperity of the decade actually concealed problems with the American banking and agriculture infrastructures. By the time the dust settled the stock market landed at “50 percent of the value.”\textsuperscript{106}

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic novel \textit{The Great Gatsby} fictionalized not only the quintessential ideas of the jazz age, but also the staggering amount of wealth that had been acquired by a relatively small portion of the population. This unequal distribution of wealth in the country made the impact of the Depression that much more far reaching.\textsuperscript{107} Unemployment in the United States soared to over twenty-five percent affecting households of all class levels.\textsuperscript{108} In addition, the panhandle of the country (Texas and Oklahoma) entered a period of drought in 1930 intensified by dust storms brought on by improper crop rotation and soil conservancy.\textsuperscript{109}

In this environment of uncertainty Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president in 1932 and went to work on a series of social reforms that were far-reaching and long lasting. During this period, social programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) created jobs for workers doing everything from building bridges and roads to completing public works of

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Farrell Beck and Parsons, \textit{20\textsuperscript{th} Century Dress in the United States}.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
The WPA also created sewing shops that helped to provide textile products to needy Americans, while also creating work for female laborers.\textsuperscript{111}

The effects of the Depression were felt in unique ways in New York City. Forty percent of New York City residents in 1910 were foreign immigrants.\textsuperscript{112} Additionally, large numbers of people had migrated from rural areas to urban environments as mechanization negatively affected agrarian life. Imagine a city in the throws of economic depression that was comprised of a diverse population for whom English may not have been a native tongue. In short, the job pool was limited yet the candidate pool was vast and largely unskilled. It was in this stressful economy that Bonwit Teller, a luxury store that had prospered greatly in the early part of the decade, moved from their former location to a new store at 56\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} Avenues in New York. The move was expensive and ultimately caused the first major setback the company had experienced since its inception in the nineteenth century. Without an influx of capital it was not certain the store would survive.\textsuperscript{113}

\textit{Atlas to the Rescue}

Floyd Bostwick Odlum was born in Union City, MI in 1892 (Figure 3). When he was twenty-four years old (1916) he came to Manhattan: “so green that he tried to walk from Grand Central Station to Wall Street (three and a half miles).”\textsuperscript{114} In 1923, along with several other men (and their wives) he pulled together an initial investment of forty thousand dollars and created

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Crawford, \textit{Ways of Fashion}.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Time}, "Lady from Atlas," (October 22, 1934), 61.
Atlas Corporation.\textsuperscript{115} This investment proved very successful. By 1929 Odlum had turned forty thousand dollars into fourteen million. Sensing that the economic boom of the 1920s would bottom out, he sold over half of Atlas’ holdings prior to the crash of 1929. In the first few years of the Depression he used this excess cash to grow the worth of his company to over 121 million dollars, making him one of the richest men in America. In this process he “picked up a rag, tag and bobtail assortment of assets along with the stocks and bonds of hundreds of major U.S. corporations.”\textsuperscript{116} According to \textit{Time} magazine, in three years (1930-33), Odlum acquired many companies paying only a “few-cents” on the dollar.\textsuperscript{117} “Out of Depression Atlas emerged as No. 1 U.S. investment trust and Odlum emerged as the U.S.’s newest tycoon, the only one extant who had done his pyramiding when other pyramids were crumbling.”\textsuperscript{118} Among this diverse collection of “furniture factories, vacant lots, amusement parks and fruit ranches was Bonwit Teller.”\textsuperscript{119}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Floyd Bostwick Odlum, ca. 1940.}
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\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Time}, "Atlas into Hearst," (March 10, 1941), 86.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Time}, "Lady from Atlas," 61.
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Time}, "Odlum Makes a Deal," (1940).
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Time}, "Lady from Atlas," (October 22, 1934), 61.
In order to finance his 1930 move from 38th and 5th to 56th and 5th Bonwit borrowed money from Ungerleider Financial Corporation. Ungerleider then transferred to Floyd Odlum’s Atlas Corporation. Bonwit Teller was apparently in a state of chaos, not making money, lacking inventory and practically forgotten in fashion circles in 1930. However, up until this time the store had made about five hundred thousand dollars annually, which was a respectable profit. Odlum’s keen business aptitude kicked in. He sensed an opportunity to revive the iconic New York retailer. After all, earlier in the century the retailer had earned a reputation for luxury and style. Perhaps what made Odlum so successful was that his ego did not deter his business efforts. He was more than willing to admit that a department store that catered to primarily female customers was far outside of his comfort zone. With this highly developed sense of leadership he would then make a choice for the new president of the store that would upset the fashion world and solidify the success of Bonwit Teller in the darkest days of the Great Depression.

In 1932, Odlum asked his wife to do him and his associates a favor. In fact he sprung the request in front of his partners at the end of a meal she had hosted at their home. According to Hortense, in her autobiography A Woman’s Place, her husband asked her opinion of the store to which she replied, “I can’t tell you anything about what’s wrong with Bonwit Teller because I’ve never been in it.” Her husband and his associates pressed her more about why she had never gone shopping at the well-known store. According to Hortense Odlum, “I suppose I never heard anything about it that made me think I’d find what I wanted there.”

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120 Time, "Lady from Atlas."
121 Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 7.
122 Ibid.
Hortense and Floyd were married in 1915. They came to New York by way of Utah and Mrs. Odlum always asserted that she had “never earned a penny in my life.” Hortense was the mother of two, a seemingly devoted wife, and daughter of a Utah Mormon minister. Mrs. Odlum relates the details of her experiences at Bonwit Teller in her autobiography. She would start as a consultant in 1932. However, she became a legend when she succeeded Paul Bonwit as president of the company in 1934.

Early on, Hortense realized that she needed to put the intimate spaces back into the store. One of her first decisions was to move the millinery department to the first floor of the store and the department immediately showed an increase in sales volume. She improved the assortment, looked for partnerships with notables in society and fashion and created specialty departments that focused on things such as clothes for college women, and costumes.

Mrs. Odlum would not only lead the company through one of its most profitable periods, but would position the brand for expansion in cities across the country. She had a focus on customer service and personally interacted with customers. Her practical Utah upbringing would result in the catchphrase, “High class but not high hat” meaning that the store would offer luxury products in a way that was friendly and approachable, devoid of snobberies.

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125 Ibid. Odlum also cites her move of the millinery department as one of the first changes she made at the store in her autobiography A Woman’s Place (1940).
126 Ibid.
127 Time, "Lady from Atlas."
One could argue that Odlum came about her position because of her influential husband, which may be true. But whatever she lacked in experience she made up for in results. Ironically, she divorced Floyd in 1935, but continued a business relationship with him.128

_Hortense Odlum_

Article one (chapter three) tells the story of Hortense Odlum, the first female president of a large 5th Avenue store from 1934-40.129 While others, such as Lord & Taylor featured women presidents like the influential Dorothy Shaver, who was known as “The First Lady of the Merchandising World,” Odlum remains relatively unknown and preceded Shaver as president of a retail firm by ten years.130 Odlum is a key figure in the history of Bonwit Teller and of retailing in America. When she became involved with the business in 1932 the company had been taken over by her husband’s investment firm Atlas Corporation. Floyd Odlum, Hortense’s husband, was deciding whether or not he should close the business. In fact, Odlum’s work during this time kept the store open.131

_Mildred Custin & 1960s Youthquake_

Article two (chapter four) examined the work of another woman at the helm of Bonwit Teller, Mildred Custin. Custin served as president of the retail chain from 1965-70. She was the second female president of the store and took control during the socially complex 1960s. It had been twenty-five years since a woman was in charge of the retailer, and much like the 1930s of Odlum’s tenure, the 1960s presented unique challenges and a need to be more reflective of the times in assortment and product presentation.

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128 Odlum, _A Woman's Place._
129 Ibid.
130 Tiffany Webber-Hanchett, "Dorothy Shaver: Promoter of "The American Look" _Dress_ 30 (December 2003), 80.
131 Odlum, _A Woman's Place._
According to Constance Johnson Korosec, “fashion designers of the decade of the 1960s were forced to accommodate and assimilate their creativity into the social and cultural upheaval of the times.”132 Hostility was personified early in the decade with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and further perpetuated with war in Vietnam. Distrust and disrespect for established norms parlayed into the development of distinct styles in appearance such as mods, and hippies. The civil, women’s, and gay rights movements all gained momentum during the decade and contributed to the presence of a more diverse customer with particular styles. Fashion for men of the period entered a renaissance as the Peacock Revolution introduced new silhouettes, colors and fabrications for menswear. Much like the 1930s retailers like Bonwit Teller had to find a way to diversify assortments to address the needs of new and socially diverse customers. Whereas Odlum’s main concerns were focused on price and versatility. In the 1960s it was Custin’s challenge to reevaluate and ensure Bonwit’s was seen as being on the cutting edge of fashion and first to market with options for new customer segments.

Style and popular culture converged during the decade as popular music took the world stage with groups such as the Beatles and Rolling Stones. Music groups embraced new styles by designers such as Pierre Cardin. Fashion design in general took more cues from street and subculture groups. Starting in the mid to late 60s designers like Zandra Rhodes incorporated connecting devices such as safety pins as well as intentional tears inspired by these subcultural trends.133 The 1960s were a melting pot of diversity at various levels and clothing styles changed and diversified rapidly to remain relevant.

133 Monica Sklar, Punk Style (London: Bloomsbury 2014).
Women in Retail

A primary focus of this dissertation is to document two more of the untold stories of women in retail. Other than Dorothy Shaver’s time as president at Lord and Taylor, no other significant historical work has been dedicated to female retail executives of the past. The stories of Hortense Odlum and Mildred Custin only scratch the surface of potential research in this area. Other women such as Geraldine Stutz served as President of a major retail firm at Henri Bendel. But aside from top level executives there were countless other women that ran made to measure departments such as Sophie Gimbel at Saks Fifth Avenue and Fira Benenson at Bonwit Teller. Public relations specialist Sara Pennoyer developed campaigns for Bonwit Teller that focused on the unique qualities of her female President Hortense Odlum and also wrote a book called Polly Tucker Merchant that encouraged young women to pursue a career in fashion retail.

This research also showed that Bonwit’s, unlike many other departments stores in America, relied on the savvy leadership of their female executives. Hortense Odlum and Mildred Custin were not the only women to lead Bonwit’s through times of prosperity. Helen Galland (1980-83) would also benefit from the trail blazed by Odlum and Custin and served as the final female president of the company. All three would shatter glass ceilings and leave indelible marks on the world of fashion through their work at Bonwit Teller.

Conclusions

Many researchers have used the department store as a lens to frame the story of consumerism in America; however I have yet to identify any significant work that focused specifically on the history of Bonwit Teller. For over ninety years Bonwit’s served as a beacon of style, service, and American ingenuity and did so with a unique approach that understood and embraced a feminine perspective with its customers and leaders. This is a story that can inspire,
inform and shape our understanding of successful retailing strategies of yesterday and tomorrow. Of particular interest is the story of pioneering women that opened the door for future generations of female executives in retail. The stories of Hortense Odlum and Mildred Custin are lesser known but nonetheless important. Additionally, strategies that began during their tenures involved innovative approaches to merchandising, visual display and support of fashion designers that lived on for decades to come. Mrs. Odlum is afforded her due place in history especially since researches such as Tiffany Webber-Hanchett in *Dress* and Stephanie Marie Amerian in her 2011 dissertation have cited Dorothy Shaver of Lord and Taylor as the first female president of an American retail firm; however, Odlum preceded her by ten years.\(^{134}\)

Mildred Custin made a dramatic decision at a key point in the store’s history to add menswear to the assortment. Her understanding of the times, specifically the Peacock Revolution that had begun in Europe as early as 1960, created new business opportunities for the store. Custin created a men’s boutique to feature the work of Pierre Cardin and subsequently introduced his fashions to the American market for men and women. Like Odlum, Custin responded to the times and made decisions to diversify her assortment. While Odlum was primarily concerned with price and quality, Custin saw an opportunity to offer greater variety and style. Youth culture of the 60s helped to launch more designer brands and styles to meet the needs of a growing middle class that was more diverse on multiple levels including race, gender, age and economic status. As such, Custin introduced André Courrèges to the American market,

\(^{134}\) Tiffany Webber-Hanchett, "Dorothy Shaver"; Stephanie Marie Amerian, “Fashioning a Female Executive: Dorothy Shaver and the Business of American Style, 1893-1959” (PhD diss., University of California, 2011). Lord and Taylor marketed Shaver’s position as president and her innovations at the company; in addition Shaver’s personal archives are available to researchers at the National Museum of American History, effectively making her story an attractive research topic. In comparison, Odlum left little other than her autobiography in terms of primary sources so the process of generating themes is somewhat more complicated but nonetheless important.
placed Calvin Klein’s first major order and reorganized Bonwit’s interiors into a series of in
store boutiques such as the S'fari Room. Custin’s impact on the store proved successful and she
increased volume for the company by close to thirty million dollars in a five-year period.
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CHAPTER THREE: Hortense Odlum: Bonwit Teller’s First Female President, 1934-40

In preparation for Dress: The Journal of The Costume Society of America

Abstract

Dorothy Shaver is documented as the first female president of a major American retail firm and yet Hortense Odlum at Bonwit Teller (1934-40) preceded her by ten years. Odlum came to position as president of Bonwit Teller when the country was in the throes of the Great Depression. With no work experience and little education Odlum approached the business from the only perspective she knew, that of a customer who appreciated style, service and practicality. Odlum diversified pricing at the store to meet the needs of Depression era shoppers and created branded departments in the process. She updated the store to include services that were important to women such as a beauty salon. Her Consumer Advisory Committee provided a link to consumer opinions and a promotional message based on the idea of a store by women for women. Odlum not only improved business, she tripled the volume at Bonwit Teller.
Introduction

From the late nineteenth century onward, a myriad of new retail stores developed within the United States. These establishments provided shoppers, particularly women, assortments of fashion products that helped shape the American culture of consumption. Ready-to-wear flooded the marketplace with apparel and related items that allowed for the democratization of fashion. Authors have explored the role that women played as consumers and entry-level saleswomen in stores in both America and abroad. However, less is documented regarding female management and leadership contributions in retail. Stories of legendary men such as Marshall Field, Harry Selfridge, John Wanamaker, and James Cash Penney abound. Conversely, aside from scholarship regarding Dorothy Shaver and her career at Lord and Taylor, documentation of female contributions in retail are limited. Shaver is credited as the first female president of a major American retail company and the “first lady of the merchandising world.” However, Hortense Odlum, who served as first president and then chairwoman of Bonwit Teller from 1934-44, preceded Shaver by ten years. Furthermore, although Bonwit Teller operated for close to a hundred years (1895-1990), the history of the store remains somewhat obscure. Aside from brief summaries in books that speak to the history of department stores, no comprehensive history of the company exists.

The New York based Bonwit Teller was founded by Paul Bonwit as a women’s specialty store in 1895. In the early part of the twentieth century, Bonwit’s was known as a retailer that provided luxury goods to a discerning clientele. Mr. Bonwit was a merchant that demanded the finest of fashions for his customers and his passion for style and quality established his namesake business as a premier choice for New York’s elite. A promotional catalog produced by the store in 1928 stated, “It was his [Paul Bonwit’s] ambition to create the first great store devoted
exclusively to the finest apparel and accessories for women and misses.” From 1895 to 1930 the store enjoyed ever-increasing sales that prompted relocation to larger spaces. In 1898, Bonwit’s moved from the original location at 22nd Street uptown to 28th Street and Fifth Avenue; in 1911 to 38th Street and Fifth Avenue and in 1930 a final move to 56th Street and Fifth Avenue.12

The final move to 56th Street and Fifth Avenue represented a change in focus and leadership for Bonwit’s. The exclusivity that Bonwit’s was known for vanished in the cavernous space previously occupied by A.T. Stewart and Co. department store, a larger and more diversified business. At the same time, sales had softened as a result of the Great Depression and Paul Bonwit had exhausted his reserves moving to the new location. Also, he did not sufficiently update the store interior, nor was he able to fill it with enough products. The brand quickly fell from fashion.13 Bonwit defaulted on his loans and Atlas Corporation, operated by Floyd Odlum, acquired the company in 1931.14 Odlum, a lawyer and venture capitalist by trade, was unsure of what to do with a woman’s store; however, he noted that the company in the years leading up to 1930 had generated nearly five hundred thousand dollars in annual profits.15 This previous financial success intrigued Odlum so he decided to ask his wife, Hortense, for advice as to what was wrong with the store (figure 1).

What started as a casual inquiry from husband to wife in 1932 led to an exciting new career for Hortense Odlum. At first, she served as consultant from 1933-34, then as president of the firm from 1934-40 and finally as chairwoman of the board from 1940-44.16 Without previous work experience, and little education, Odlum, at the age of forty, reestablished Bonwit Teller as an icon of the American retail industry. Her clear focus on customer service and stylish quality
merchandise offered at diverse price points in a pleasing environment was in tune with consumer demands of the 1930s, and helped re-brand the store as a fashionable destination.

During the Great Depression as much of twenty-five percent of the workforce was unemployed. Women continued to shop, however, as evidenced by the products produced and sold by both private industry and government funded programs. Price became a more pertinent factor in the increasingly competitive market. Shoppers of the 1930s balanced economic and social factors that affected their choices regarding apparel consumption. Shopping habits changed as women needed to maximize their clothing purchases. They achieved this through comparative shopping, evaluating similar clothing styles sold by different stores, and purchasing based on price in order to get the most for their money. Generally speaking, consumers chose to buy less-expensive clothing rather than cease buying altogether.

As male unemployment intensified, more women looked for work to help support their struggling families. While less than twenty percent of the nation’s adult women worked outside of the home, clothing remained a social identifier of “status or desired status and a tool for finding and keeping work.” Department and specialty stores adopted diversified pricing strategies that capitalized on the availability and lower cost of mass manufactured goods. Apparel consumption focused on meeting the needs of an economically diverse clientele. Class conscious, yet financially strapped women searched stores for bargains but also found ways to repurpose and use secondhand items as well. The 1930s gave way to consumption of apparel products that was focused on price and clever practicality in the management of identity through fashion.
Methods

To tell the story of Hortense Odlum’s ascension to this unprecedented leadership position as a female executive and to understand her merchandising strategies, a historical method approach was utilized. According to Louis Gottschalk, the historic method involves the careful analysis of multiple sources to formulate plausible hypotheses of what really happened. To begin the research, Hortense Odlum’s autobiography *A Woman’s Place* (1939) was read page by page for mention of any strategy employed at the store and its affect on business. Strategies were coded into recurrent themes, such as store design, customer service and communication, diversified pricing and merchandise assortment. This coding, according to Klaus Krippendorf, is the reduction of many words, phrases, or visual sources into simplified categories.

Once the themes were identified, the fashion and news press was used to corroborate the strategies detailed by Odlum. The following outlets were searched: *Time, Newsweek, Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar*, and the *New York Times*; either through an electronic database search for the *New York Times* or on microfilm for every issue of *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* from 1930 to 1940. For example, Odlum detailed in her book that she worked with buyers and manufacturers to develop moderately priced yet stylish dresses offered in newly branded departments. Advertisements and articles from both the fashion and news press of the period corroborated the existence of these departments.

Archival sources including the Gladys Tilden papers, University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library provided insight as to changes taking place at the store when Odlum assumed presidency. Tilden acted from 1934 to 1952 “as traveling representative for Bonwit Teller covering all social and style events, buying, reporting, marketing surveys, and fashion lectures.” The papers examined included correspondence between Tilden and Bonwit Teller
corporate offices in New York as well as personal correspondence with Paul Bonwit. Additional archival sources were referenced from the McQuarrie Memorial Museum, St. George Utah: Odlum’s birthplace. Oral history from Ira Neimark, former CEO of Bergdorf Goodman, further informed the research. Neimark, now in his 90s, began his career in retail at Bonwit Teller in 1938. He agreed to answer questions via electronic correspondence and provided valuable personal insight into Bonwit Teller of the 1930s and Odlum’s leadership style.

The use of multiple sources allowed for the validation of strategies noted in Odlum’s autobiography. Since Odlum would have completed an autobiography for the purpose of self-promotion, the use of varied primary sources supported the development of a more realistic picture of her leadership. Secondary sources such as department store and fashion histories by M.D.C Crawford and Robert Hendrickson verified facts such as dates of operation mentioned in Odlum’s autobiography.

**Background**

*Humble Beginnings*

Hortense Odlum was born in 1892 the third of six children to Hector and Ella McQuarrie in the small town of St. George, Utah where her father was an elder in the Mormon Church and a farmer. Her paternal ancestors converted to the Mormon faith while still in their native Scotland and immigrated to Utah in 1855. Hortense, who referred to herself as the “homely sister of three beauties,” was a precocious child that delighted in staging elaborate puppet plays for neighborhood children and spent solitary hours in the attic dreaming of her future and acting out a variety of fantasies. Her proclivity for shop keeping was evidenced at an early age, as she would make cornhusk dolls that she then sold to neighbor children in a makeshift store she had set up in her backyard in exchange for pins, matches or eggs.
In 1915, through her sister Zella, Hortense met a lawyer from Colorado by the name of Floyd Odlum. They were married that same year, and the first of two children (Stanley and Bruce) was born in 1916. Their first year of marriage was one of scrimping and saving to support their new family on Floyd’s salary of fifth dollars per month. Hortense said of this period, “my budget ignored such needs as clothes and amusements. We were clothed in so far as the demands of decency required…it didn’t matter that we couldn’t afford even a daily paper.”

Floyd Odlum’s company gave him a raise to seventy-five dollars per month and then asked him to relocate to the New York office of the firm. With two suitcases holding all their worldly possessions and new baby Bruce, in tow, the Odlum’s moved to New York via train, where their lives changed rapidly. Floyd ascended the corporate ladder to the position of Vice president and then started his own company in 1923 with an investment of forty thousand dollars that by 1930 had grown into a value of over one hundred and twenty million. His company, Atlas Corporation, sold holdings prior to the stock market crash of 1929 and was then able to use that liquidity to acquire several new companies for a fraction of their value before the crash. In just fourteen years, Floyd Odlum rose from a salary of less than a one hundred dollars per month to one of the ten wealthiest men in America.

An Unexpected Request

Unbeknownst to Odlum a plan was brewing that would catapult her life forward, cementing her philosophy on the roles of women in and outside of the home in ways she could never have imagined. In December 1932, after a dinner that she hosted for her husband and his business associates at the Odlum home in Forest Hills, Long Island the group retired to the living room for discussion and digestifs. Floyd began to relate the story of how Atlas had acquired Bonwit Teller, that it was “on the rocks” and they wanted her opinion as to what was wrong with
the store. She replied, “I can’t tell you anything about what’s wrong with Bonwit Teller because I’ve never been in it.” This was a powerful statement coming from a woman who had considerable disposable income and a keen interest in fashion. After sixteen years of living in New York and moving in circles that required an extensive wardrobe she had never once set foot in the store. When her husband’s business partners persisted as to why, she replied, “I suppose I never heard anything about it that made me think I’d find what I wanted there.”

A New Point of View

Without previous management or business knowledge, Odlum approached her association with the store from the only perspective she really knew, that of a customer first who appreciated quality, style, service, and friendliness. She created an environment that catered to a modern woman offering products that would be appreciated, truly a Woman’s Place. Odlum had been everything from extremely poor to unbelievably wealthy. These experiences informed her approach to making a store that was in her own words, “high class, but not high hat” meaning that style and elegance would abound but every woman, regardless of income or social class would feel welcome. She ultimately developed a store that offered women’s fashions and services from a feminine point of view.

Following the holiday season of 1932, Odlum began her assessment of Bonwit’s in an advisory capacity. She started by doing what felt natural to her, helping customers on the selling floor. She came to several conclusions that seemed to guide her for the rest of her career. Her observations included: there was no sales help available when you needed it, the store was dismal and unpleasant to shop in, the merchandise was not desirable and there was certainly nothing for a woman on a budget, and finally a general malaise or melancholy had fallen over the store. For the first few months of 1933 she went to the store every day, smiled incessantly at
everyone, took copious notes and asked questions of anyone she came into contact with, from management to customers.\(^{44}\)

One of the first suggestions that Odlum made for Bonwit Teller was to relocate the millinery department to the first floor of the store. Paul Bonwit whom continued to serve as president of the firm until October 1934 and his executive team were against it. However, Odlum was undeterred and maintained “women know what women want in a store.”\(^{45}\) She met with buyers, architects and display people to plan the assortment and execute the department. She instinctively knew that a hat was an impulse purchase and that women on a budget could better afford a new hat to create a different look versus an entirely new dress. Odlum’s instinct was correct, the new department opened and millinery sales tripled.\(^{46}\)

In the summer of 1933 Odlum went on her annual pilgrimage to her native Utah for a few weeks.\(^{47}\) When she returned to New York she found that an entire floor of the store had been blocked off to save money on utilities, displays were dull, and the morale that she had “worked her heels off to improve,” had returned to its previous state.\(^{48}\) It occurred to the Odlums that if Hortense’s improvements to the store were going to have any real lasting impact, she needed to have more authority in the business. They developed a plan to gradually retire Paul Bonwit permanently from the business and to install Hortense as president.

Paul Bonwit’s wife, Sarah, had passed away early in 1934 and he was also in ill health.\(^{49}\) However, the transition was not an easy one as the staff at the store was resistant to change and Bonwit personally viewed the Odlums as unscrupulous in character. His correspondence with Gladys Tilden throughout 1934 evidenced his concerns for what “those people [the Odlums]” would do next.\(^{50}\) He complained of a lack of funds as “the bankers are not very liberal with him” and that “Machiavelli never did anything so clever as those people conduct their affairs.”\(^{51}\)
Bonwit frequently told Tilden not to repeat any of this and also in 1934 extended her a personal loan, “from me to you.” However, despite Paul Bonwit’s attempts to undermine Hortense with his former staff, Odlum moved forward with her plans and by October of 1934 was made president of the store. Bonwit publically retired for health reasons and left for an extended stay in Europe where he continued to communicate with former employees regarding changes taking place at Bonwit’s.

**Strategies for Improved Business**

From her first accomplishment with millinery in 1933, Odlum took a consistent and strategic approach to improving business. In many ways her ideas epitomized an experiential approach to shopping that researchers have since identified as including environment, pleasure, and features that contribute to the overall consumer experience. Intuitively, she set about creating a store that women would want to shop in.

**Store Improvement and Expansion**

Among her first impressions, Odlum noticed the store was in need of a paint job, better lighting and a good cleaning. She quickly addressed these issues but also achieved even greater milestones that set the environment of the store apart from competitors. These are particularly noteworthy as to do so was a significant financial investment during the Depression.

In the 1930s air conditioning was not yet widely available, the first air-conditioned car was not manufactured until 1939, only the wealthy had the pleasure of affording private residence air conditioning, and most businesses did not employ the technology until the mid to late 1940s. The Great Depression initially stalled the widespread adoption of air conditioning and World War II further delayed progress of the invention first developed in 1902 to cool an overheating printing press. However, in May of 1938 more than thirteen hundred employees
gathered to celebrate as Odlum “cut a silver cord putting the motors into operation.” The store capitalized on this and announced the innovation in an advertisement on the fifth page of the *New York Times*, which featured a quote from Odlum, “We have air conditioned every inch from entrance to eaves. And that means a cool comfortable healthful summer for employees as well as pleasant shopping for all our customer friends” (figure 2). A cool environment in May 1938 ensured good business for the summer, particularly as retail stores often experienced decreased sales in the hot months of July and August.

As business increased under Odlum’s tenure, more departments were added to the store, and additional space was required. In mid-1938, construction began at the store that would add two additional floors at a cost of eighty-five thousand dollars. This added twelve thousand square feet of selling space that according to Odlum would be used “to handle increasing business and to permit reallocation of a number of selling departments as well as to provide additional space for service departments” (figure 3). These additional departments and services allowed Odlum to gain market share and attract customers to the store. In the throes of the Great Depression, and within three years of becoming president, business, dramatically increased and the sales staff grew from about six hundred to over fourteen hundred people. Between 1935 and 1937 total sales volumes at the store increased sixty-two percent and profits grew an astounding three hundred and five percent. These financial achievements allowed Bonwit’s to pay back a three hundred thousand dollar bank loan in 1937. Therefore, by the time Odlum expanded the footprint of the store and added air conditioning, she had generated a profit and eliminated all debt from the ledger. Additionally, the *New York Times* reported in 1939 “one of the largest realty deals consummated recently in the 5th Avenue district” when Bonwit Teller acquired sole ownership of the building they occupied and purchased the space outright from the landlord.
The store’s financial success is further explained through the discussion of merchandising strategies, services and a focus on the opinions of customers both internal and external.

Diversified Pricing, Assortment and Services

Diversified pricing or products offered at a variety of price points, prompted Odlum’s creation of new departments in the store. It was her viewpoint that women of different economic means should all be able to feel good about how they looked. According to Odlum:

> Shopping is a very important thing to a woman. And she should be given help, expert help, in finding just the right thing for her, regardless of her income. Stores ought to take more of an interest in her problems, not just let her wander around until she buys something in desperation!65

As such, Odlum created a variety of departments and services including: Salon de couture, Rendezvous, Debutante, College Girls Department, a beauty salon, and the 721 Club all of which catered to a diversity of clientele.

Salon De Couture

Odlum focused, starting in 1934, on the development of a new department at the store that provided access to the finest fashions of Paris and offered custom services for the most elite women. This department was the Salon de Couture. The newly designed space occupied the entire fourth floor of the building, and was decorated by a celebrated female interior designer of the time, Agnes Rowe Fairman whose work for Bonwit Teller “achieved an atmosphere of that described as a Parisian couturier’s salon.”66 Odlum recognized, being a discerning woman of means herself, that Bonwit’s was not offering exclusive enough products for New York’s social elite. Competitors such as Saks Fifth Avenue’s Salon Moderne, headed by Sophie Gimbel since 1931, were very successful, and Bonwit’s was not effectively competing in this arena.67

Fira Benenson, who went by the professional name of Countess Illinska, was hired as head designer for Bonwit’s Salon de Couture and served in this capacity from 1934 until 1948.68
Benenson created made to order clothes, and showed small customizable collections each season of her own designs to Bonwit customers (figure 4). The Salon de Couture also fulfilled requests for orders with Paris fashion houses such as Schiaparelli, Mainbocher, Lanvin, and Chanel with the assistance of Gladys Tilden, Bonwit’s liaison in Paris (figure 5). The department hosted events that would appeal to a customer with a developed aesthetic such as a display of 17th and 18th century French courtesan hand fans in April of 1934. Strategically, the Salon de Couture was also developed as a way to ensure service of the American couture market as the threat of war increased in Europe. Odlum recalled, “I insisted that we have the facilities to create exquisite gowns which would always be remembered by their wearers.” The department was very successful and Benenson headed it for the next fourteen years.

Rendezvous & Debutante

Odlum was not just interested in meeting the needs of her wealthiest customers. Personally, she understood the needs of a woman on a budget. When she and Floyd had first moved to New York they were invited to a Thanksgiving dinner at the home of a wealthy colleague. Floyd had no dark shoes so he painted a light pair with shoe polish. This was met with complaints of the smell of fumes during dinner. Hortense wore an ill-fitting dress that didn’t suit her because it was the only thing she could find in her limited price range. In her autobiography, she noted:

Because I had been one of them, I knew that there were countless women with modest budgets who knew and wanted to wear good clothes, good in the sense of design and fabric as well as practicality. Their numbers had been increased by the first years of the depression. There was an enormous market waiting for any merchant who would take the time and trouble to find out what its needs and preferences and financial limits were.

Odlum had observed that the moderate dresses that were offered at Bonwit’s were covered in decoration in order to compensate for the fact that they were poorly made or
designed. She stated: “There isn’t a dress in that department that a well-dressed woman would want to wear. I’ve never seen so many Christmas tree ornaments on clothes. Our moderate priced merchandise must be the best we could find in the markets.”\textsuperscript{76} It was Odlum’s assertion that women would respond to dresses that were of better fabrication with clean line and minimal ornamentation which would allow the wearer to be stylish yet practical, offering length and versatility in wear. She worked and pleaded with her buyers and manufacturers (all of whom were men) to deliver this kind of merchandise. Despite their protests she insisted and finally new product arrived in spring 1934 and was presented in newly branded departments called Rendezvous and Debutante.

Both departments were geared towards a younger, yet moderate priced customer. Joan Klein of \textit{The Jewish Bulletin}, who penned a regular column on shopping and fashions, wrote in 1934, “one of the bright spots of Bonwit Teller 5\textsuperscript{th} Avenue is the exciting young Rendezvous fashion shop on the second floor…all in down to Earth pricing and designed to make the most of your good points.”\textsuperscript{77} A review of advertisements for the Rendezvous department illustrates a frequent focus on quality fabrication, simplicity of line, and versatility of wear and styling through multiple pieces (figure 6). Items in the Debutante department were slightly more fashion forward, and often featured in \textit{Vogue} (figure 7).

\textit{College Girls Department}

Another new department established in 1934 was dedicated to the college-aged woman.\textsuperscript{78} Starting in the 1920s a broader access to higher education resulted in more than one million Americans attending institutions of higher education by 1930.\textsuperscript{79} By this time, more women than ever before achieved a high school diploma and subsequently female enrollment at co-educational and female only colleges across the country rose.\textsuperscript{80} Under Odlum’s direction,
Bonwit’s began to market specific apparel products to these women. Advertisements for the new shop featured an adoption of masculine fabrications and casual silhouettes as well as a modest price point (figure 8). The College Girls department proved to be a long-term success. Twelve years later, in 1946, a fashion show on the eighth floor of the store featured products developed by Bonwit’s buyers and designers whom had visited colleges such as Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Bennington and Vassar as inspiration for the collection.81

The creation of the College Girl department demonstrated Odlum’s connection to and understanding of female consumer’s of the mid 1930s. A year after the creation of Bonwit’s college department, in 1935, Betsy Blackwell created Mademoiselle magazine as a new publication that specifically targeted college aged women.82 Mademoiselle was revolutionary in that the magazine offered examples of moderate priced yet stylish product appropriate to this market. The college issue in the month of August would eventually generate advertisement revenue of over one million dollars and was the first women’s fashion publication to do so.83 Odlum was clearly on the forefront in her understanding of how many women would choose to pursue self-improvement such as higher education versus immediate marriage and children.

Beauty Salon

Aside from improved assortment, a more attractive store, more engaged salespeople and a customer centric attitude, Odlum also recognized the need for the addition of experiential services. In October of 1934, one of the first additions made soon after Odlum’s appointment to president was that of a beauty salon.84 Other stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue already had salons; however, Odlum recognized this service was distinctly lacking in a store meant to primarily service women.85 She stated, “I wanted to have eventually under our roof every convenience for women who were shopping. A beauty salon was certainly one of them. (...) I
knew how weary a woman can get who’s been shopping all day, and how thankfully she relaxes under the ministrations of a skillful hairdresser.”

The salon was under the direction of Monsieur Leon who came from Paris to head the new department, and featured a plush interior with individual booths for clients, specially designed wall murals, and yellow draperies and furniture. Agnes Fairman decorated the new space and Monsieur Leon held a reception for the press on opening day with models coiffed in his creations. This addition was long lived; from October of 1934 onward the store was never again without a beauty salon.

721 Club

Odlum realized there was an opportunity to increase sales during the holiday shopping season. Women, whom were most often busy shopping for others during the holidays, were also the recipients of Christmas gifts. In order to appeal to men shopping for women, the 721 Club originated in 1934. Odlum (1939, 225) explained:

Another way we’ve tried to lighten the masculine gift burden is to have all through the Christmas season a department, which is for the exclusive use of our men customers. We call it the 721 Club (our street number on Fifth Avenue) and we’ve tried to make the atmosphere there as much like a man’s club as we could so that they’d feel more at home than they usually do in a woman’s shop. They can settle back in comfortable chairs and sip refreshing drinks while they look at gift suggestions.

The club that was advertised as the “gift headquarters for men” (figure 9) was located on the fourth floor of the store and hosted an annual cocktail event to launch the beginning of the season, referred to as a “stag” party. In November 1938, a sixteen-year-old Ira Neimark started what would become a legendary retail career as an attendant at Bonwit’s 721 Club. It was his job to greet and direct customers coming in. On the day the club opened, Neimark made a lasting impression on William Holmes the general manager of the store (whom the Odlums hired to help carry out Hortense’s strategies in 1935) when he greeted him with “good morning Mr. Holmes.”
Neimark recalled, “I was told later that Bill Holmes was so impressed with my initiative that he told personnel to keep that young man on after Christmas.”

The club proved very successful. What started during Odlum’s first holiday season as president in 1934 with one hundred members had grown to over five hundred members in 1937. In order to shop at the 721 Club you had to be a credit account holder or the husband of an account holder, thus encouraging shopping of both husband and wife. Each season, Bonwit’s would also hold a preview for women to get a glimpse at the new gift assortment. Women shoppers were able to leave behind a wish list that itemized their current sizes to make shopping for the men in their lives even easier. The club was staffed with attractive women in green dresses, and maintained an air of exclusivity via its’ private entrance, red lacquered doors, and sign above the entrance that read, “721 Club, For Men Only.” The club became one of Odlum’s longest lasting initiatives and continued annually until 1971 when pressure from the Human Right’s Commission of New York persuaded several New York department and specialty stores to do away with male only shopping services or clubs.

Bonwit’s was the pioneer of the specialized Christmas shop for men. In 1952, Saks Fifth Avenue opened the male only Stag Club, borrowing its name from the Bonwit’s annual opening party. In 1954, cosmetics firm Elizabeth Arden also opened a male only private shop called 1 East Fifty-fourth Street, which was named after the store’s address, copying Bonwit’s branding strategy from twenty years earlier. Other retailers offered male only shopping services in the form of specialized salespeople such as Lord and Taylor’s Red Rose Shoppers, and Bergdorf Goodman’s Christmas Angels but without a private club like atmosphere with coffee and pastries in the morning and cocktails in the afternoon. Upon the closing of the 721 Club in 1971 a long-term patron lamented, it was “the only place you can get a decent drink on Fifth Avenue.”
Throughout the 1930s, Bonwit’s branded their advertising and promotional activities with the tagline, *The Smart Woman’s Angle*. The *Smart Woman’s Angle* promotional strategy (figure 10) was developed in partnership with Sara Pennoyer whom Odlum hired in 1935 as the fashion promotion director of the store. Pennoyer, who worked for Bonwit’s from 1935 until 1947 would eventually become vice president of the store in 1942 and also supervised window display. She authored a book in 1937 entitled *Polly Tucker: Merchant* that told the fictional story of a woman whom through hard work achieved a position as a buyer in a glamorous Madison Avenue department store. The book and corresponding branded apparel was sold at Bonwit’s (figure 11). Profits from the sale of the book provided funds to support the Bonwit Teller Employee’s Mutual Aid Association, which provided scholarships for store employees. Ira Neimark was a recipient, supporting his enrollment at Columbia University. Odlum wrote an introduction to the text in which she encouraged young women to consider a career in retailing, “a field in which she does not have to compete in any disadvantage with men.”

The ‘Smart Woman’ was also emphasized in Odlum’s public support of women in business. In 1938 the Chicago Fashion Group recognized Odlum for “the definite improvement she has brought about in the status of women in business.” Odlum’s own gender was not in her opinion a limit to her potential. She explained, “Women belong in the business world and have a great field there. Woman’s job can be done with personality, charm and intelligence, for women have as much intelligence as men.” In 1930 the International Federation of Business and Professional Women was formed as a means to achieve equitable status for women pursuing careers. The organization (known in present day as the Business and Professional Woman’s
Foundation) promoted the Women in Business Week every October since 1938. Odlum was recognized by the organization as part of the weeklong celebration that same year.

**Consumer and Employee Committees**

Odlum’s hiring decisions, merchandising strategies, and personal transition from housewife and mother to business leader and champion of women in business evidences a feminist approach. *The New York Times* reported that she was “assembling a staff of executives, almost entirely feminine.” To develop a holistic feminine point of view in her business, Odlum turned to the most important female voice, that of the customer. She did this first through the creation of an open door policy that made her personally accessible to any customer who wanted to lodge a complaint. This policy proved so enlightening and useful to her understanding of customer perceptions that she decided to make regular customer interaction a mainstay of her leadership approach. In 1935, Odlum created the Consumer Advisory Committee. Ira Neimark described the committee as, “Hortense Odlum’s crowning achievement. Her leadership of the committee brought great public relations to the store and made a profound impression on her customers. To be on the committee was an honor and a privilege.”

According to Odlum the premise of the committee was simple, “let’s be unprofessional and do things that were never done before. Let’s be feminine and follow our hunches. Let’s be cordial as we would be in our own homes. Let’s know our customers…their point of view and taste. Let’s keep asking them what they’d most enjoy in a shop if it could be exactly as they wanted it” (figure 12). In the beginning Odlum brought with her the uncomplicated point of view of a customer. She realized that to retain that honest and somewhat naïve perspective she would have to connect with customers on a regular basis.
The Consumer Advisory Committee provided Odlum and her team with valuable insight; however, it was also a convenient public relations opportunity to further support the *Smart Woman’s Angle* campaign. The committee met on a monthly basis as Odlum would host a lunch in her office with a variety of both charge and cash customers, whom according to Neimark received a “valued gift” for their participation.\textsuperscript{114} A *New York Times* advertisement from October 9, 1938 featured a summary of the committee’s work and an illustration of Odlum at lunch with her customers (figure 13).\textsuperscript{115} As an off shoot of the customer luncheons, Bonwit’s also held customer conferences for larger audiences that provided workshops for women on dressing, and fashion trends.\textsuperscript{116} One such conference held at the St. Regis hotel in March of 1938 was so popular that over twelve hundred women were turned away.\textsuperscript{117}

The consumer-focused committee was such a success from both a store operations and publicity stand point that the concept was expanded in 1937 to store employees. Starting in 1937 Odlum met with salespeople whom were elected by their coworkers for monthly lunches on a six-month rotation, the following fall a separate non-selling advisory committee was also formed with employees from non-sales functions such as alterations, switchboard, or mailroom.\textsuperscript{118} It is clear that Odlum appreciated her employees both in word and in action. In December of 1938 bonuses totaling twenty-five thousand dollars were paid to employees based on their length of service and department managers were given a two week paid vacation.\textsuperscript{119} Odlum personally handed out the envelopes which included the message, “May you have the good Christmas you so richly deserve-to all a Bonwit New Year!”\textsuperscript{120}

*Goals Achieved*

By January of 1940, Bonwit’s achieved annual sales of over ten million, which were a one hundred and ninety percent increase in volume since the beginning of Odlum’s presidency in
On the anniversary of her sixth year as president the store achieved this financial milestone, which was a record for the company not seen since the early days of the 1920s. Having achieved what she set out to do, Odlum stepped down as president at the end of 1940. William Holmes, whom she hired as the store’s general manager and vice president was promoted to fill the open position and stated, “there will be no change whatsoever in our policy and we will carry on all the principles Mrs. Odlum has laid down for us.” Odlum became chairman of the board and served in this capacity until 1944 when she permanently retired. According to Ira Neimark, “the general public perception of Bonwit Teller during the late 1930s was the best high fashion retailer on Fifth Avenue. It was no doubt due to Hortense Odlum’s vision.”

After her retirement Odlum led a life out of the spotlight. She made frequent trips to her hometown of St. George, Utah. She divorced Floyd amicably in 1935, was married briefly to Porfirio Dominici in 1938, and married for a final time in 1954 to Angel Kouyoumdjisky. Odlum passed away at her son’s Californian home following a long illness on January 12, 1970.

**Conclusions: Who is Really the First? Forgotten Women**

In many ways the story of Hortense Odlum and her success at Bonwit Teller is not unique. During the Great Depression, other retailers of the period were looking for ways to diversify pricing and attract customers with different services and promotions. However, hers is the story of a woman, whom with no prior training or work experience, applied a feminine perspective to her business and achieved a positive outcome. She internalized her new role as president of the store and simply approached the job from a customer’s point of view. She also appreciated the feminine opinions of her employees. Her vast life and economic experiences up
until her career at Bonwit Teller informed her understanding of what women of various walks of life needed and wanted from a store of their own.

The history of women in general is often abbreviated and in the case of leadership in American retail, practically ignored. Dorothy Shaver of Lord and Taylor remains a shining example of a pioneering businesswoman. However, future research must continue to explore the role of businesswomen in retail and their assuredly countless stories. These histories, such as that of Hortense Odlum, are not easily constructed but are essential to the understanding of female contributions to the development of retailing in America. Women were not just shoppers and saleswomen but some, like Odlum, were able to crash through the proverbial glass ceiling. It seems reasonable to conclude that women were uniquely suited to creating successful shopping experiences for their like-minded peers. For Hortense Odlum, a keen fashion sense, an internal understanding of her female customers, and a proclivity for hard work manifested one of the most successful periods in the history of Bonwit Teller. Future researchers can explore other notable women of retail, including Mildred Custin. Custin served as president of Bonwit Teller from 1965-70 and supported the Peacock Revolution with the introduction of menswear to the assortment.


10 Crawford, *Ways of Fashion*.

11 Promotional Catalog, “Park Avenue Fashions Bonwit Teller, 1928,” Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library.

12 Ibid.

13 Crawford, *Ways of Fashion*.


22 Katrina Srigley, “Clothing Stories.”


25 Hortense Odlum, *A Woman’s Place*. Her own experiences shopping for a dress she could afford as a young woman prompted the creation of both the Rendezvous and Debutante departments that focused on classic style at an affordable price.

26 Gladys Tilden Papers, BANC MSS 88/229 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Ms. Tilden’s father was the famed sculptor Douglas Tilden. He attended Berkeley as a student and many of his public sculptures are in the town of Berkeley, CA. Ms. Tilden pursued a varied career in fashion and government.

27 Odlum’s maiden name was McQuarrie and in 1938 she provided funds to establish this museum for the preservation of the history of Southern Utah. The museum has maintained an archive of materials related to Odlum and her family’s history. See McQuarrie Memorial Museum at www.dupstgeorge.org.

28 Neimark was CEO of luxury retailer Bergdorf Goodman from 1975-1992 and wrote two books detailing his experiences in the fashion business. See *Crossing Fifth Avenue to Bergdorf Goodman An

29 Ira Neimark (former CEO of Bergdorf Goodman), in discussion with the author, October 2013. Institutional Review Board approved, IRB ID 13-426, October 8, 2013. According to Neimark one of his daily duties, “was to fetch lunch from the employee’s cafeteria for Mrs. Odlum, her lunch as I recall was usually ham and cheese on whole wheat toast.”

30 Memories, presented to Hortense Odlum June 17,1935 retrieved from the McQuarrie Memorial Museum Archive. This was a collection of stories, oral history, songs, and poems all dedicated to Hortense and the history of her family on the occasion of the dedication of the museum.

31 Ibid.

32 Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 16; and the remembrances of Edna and Nett Whitehead childhood neighbors of the McQuarrie family from Memories retrieved from the archive of the McQuarrie Memorial Museum.

33 Memories, McQuarrie Memorial Museum

34 Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 32.

35 Ibid.

36 “Atlas into Hearst,” Time, March 10, 1941, 37 (10), 86.

37 Ibid.

38 Odlum, A Woman’s Place.

39 Ibid., 7.

40 Ibid., 7.


43 Odlum, A Woman’s Place.

44 Ibid.


47 Memories, McQuarrie Memorial Museum.

48 Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 48.

49 Gladys Tilden Papers. Personal correspondence between Paul Bonwit and Gladys Tilden throughout 1934 notes condolences regarding the passing of his wife and a surgery he underwent that did not heal well.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.


54 Odlum, A Woman’s Place.


60 “Store to Add Two Floors, Bonwit Teller Will Begin $85,000 Addition in May,” New York Times, April 19, 1938, 39.
Mrs. Odlum Cites Sharp Sales Gains, Volume Has Tripled in Three Years She Has Been President of Bonwit Teller,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1937, 32.

“$223,672 Cleared by Bonwit Teller,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1938, 36. In two years from 1935-37 under Odlum’s leadership profits at the store increased from a deficit of $108,929 in 1935 to a positive $223,672 in 1937. Total volume grew during this same period from 5.8 million to 9.4 million.

Ibid.


Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 9.


Gladys Tilden Papers. A letter from Paul Bonwit dated January 26, 1934 announced the establishment of the Salon de Couture to Gladys Tilden and instructed her to assist Fira Benenson with any requests she had. Telegram correspondence between Tilden and Benenson (whom signed all her notes with the singular ‘Ilinska’) from 1934 and 1935 documented orders and requests from the most notable fashion houses of Paris for Bonwit’s customers. Tilden also maintained trend notes and reported these back to Benenson (and Bonwit’s) on a seasonal basis.


Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 116.


Odlum, A Woman’s Place.

Ibid., 95-96.

Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 72,115


Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 110.

“Beauty Salon to Open,” *New York Times*.


Odlum, A Woman’s Place, 223-24.


Ira Neimark, October 2013.
94 Ibid.
103 Sara Pennoyer, Polly Tucker Merchant (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1937) X. Pennoyer dedicated the book “To Bonwit Teller New York and the people who have made it what it is.”
105 Ibid., 51.
111 Ira Neimark, October 2013.
112 “Just as I Imagined it Five Years Ago, Bonwit-A Woman’s Place,” New York Times, October 1, 1939, 5.
114 Ira Neimark, October, 2013.
115 “We Rest our Future,” New York Times. This ad was released the same week Odlum was honored as part of the National Women in Business Week of 1938.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
120 Ibid., 47.
122 “Mrs. Odlum Marks Sixth Year in Post, Bonwit Teller Head Reports Volume at Record Level,” New York Times, October 2, 1940, 40.
123 Holmes Elected by Bonwit Teller, Becomes President of Store, Succeeding Mrs. Odlum, Who is made Board Chairman,” New York Times, October 17, 1940.
124 Ira Neimark, October 2013.
125 Memories, McQuarrie Memorial Museum.
Selected Bibliography


Figures

Figure 1. Hortense Odlum ca. 1940. Image © The McQuarrie Memorial Museum, St. George, Utah.
Bonwit Teller

The Mercury Goes DOWN but Spirits Go UP

"We have air-conditioned every inch from entrance to caves. And that means a cool, comfortable, healthful Summer for employees as well as pleasant shopping for all our customer-friends."

Hortense N. Odlum

On June the first, a ribbon of freshly cleaned breeze twelve inches wide will begin to move through the new Bonwit air-conditioning system at the rate of sixty miles an hour. Throughout the length and breadth of the building, temperature, air and drafts will be controlled. You won't shiver. The difference in degree between the outdoor and inside temperature won't be too great. We've seen to all that.

Q: What you will get is lots of clean, pure, gently-circulating air that's nice to breathe. Dust and pollen particles will be filtered out (good news for the hay and rose fever group). Heavy Summer mugginess will be banished. Workrooms, stockrooms—all the important back-stage area—as well as all the selling floors will be made as inviting and comfortable as the most modern science can contrive.

Q: At this particular time, it's a daring move. A challenge, really, aimed straight as a snowball at this Summer's much publicized doldrums. Maybe it's our pioneer blood, or maybe it's merely because we're women, but it seems to us that the thing to do at this moment is to put the chill in the air and go to work. But we can't expect customers to come shopping if trying on a new dress is an ordeal. And we can't ask our staff to do a superb job unless they feel secure, confident and unprejudiced by weather. So we've air-conditioned the whole way and keyed ourselves to make your shopping as tonic as a sea trip. So bring on your Summer, 1938. Bon air to Manhattan—the greatest resort of them all.

Fifth Avenue at Fifty-sixth Street • New York

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Figure 3. Bonwit Teller expansion. Odlum directed the addition of over 12,000 feet of selling space in 1938. Image © The Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 4. Brown wool dinner dress with matching hat and shoes by Fira Benenson for Bonwit Teller ca. 1940. The dress featured gold fleur de lis embroidered on the neckline and sleeves. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 6. Rendezvous advertisement that featured a three-piece suit in practical tweed for $39.75. Note that versatility is emphasized, “practically a wardrobe in itself,” and that the garment is good for a “long life on campus or in the suburbs.” *The New York Times* August 29, 1935, 5.
Figure 7. Advertisement for coat from Bonwit’s Debutante department made in Botany’s Velvedeau, *Vogue* September 15, 1937, 49
Figure 8. Bonwit Teller College Special advertisement featured trousers, ascot and sashes in the traditional menswear fabrication of Tattersall. The addition of the College Girls Department indicated support of the pursuit of higher education for women. *Harper’s Bazaar* August, 1935.
Figure 10. Bonwit Teller advertisement that featured the *Smart Woman's Angle* promotional campaign. The text discussed achievements of Odlum’s Consumers’ Advisory Committee. *The New York Times*, April 26, 1936, 5.
Figure 12. Illustration from Bonwit Teller advertisement of Hortense Odlum with a cake in the shape of the store. This marked her fifth year as President and celebrated the achievement of what Odlum referred to as a Woman’s Place “Just as I imagined it.” The New York Times, October 1, 1939, 5.
Figure 13. “We rest our future on the Human Side of Storekeeping.” Illustration featured Odlum at the head of the table at luncheon with one of her Consumer Advisory Committees. *The New York Times*, October 9, 1938, 5.
CHAPTER FOUR: Peacocks Roosting: Mildred Custin introduced menswear to Bonwit Teller of the 1960s and led the organization through a period of phenomenal success

In preparation for: Fashion, Style and Popular Culture

Keywords: Mildred Custin, Bonwit Teller, Peacock Revolution, Pierre Cardin, André Courrèges, Calvin Klein, Bill Blass, S’fari Room, retail, history

Abstract

Mildred Custin served as the president of New York City based-retailer Bonwit Teller from 1965-70. The 1960s were a period of rapid cultural change fueled by multiple social paradigm shifts related to concepts of gender, race, sexuality, and age. Fashion of the era reflected these changing ideals. During this time, Custin introduced European designers such as Pierre Cardin and André Courrèges to the American market. In the United States she placed the first major order of up and coming designer Calvin Klein. The introduction of menswear under Custin’s leadership to Bonwit’s previously women’s only assortment fueled the spread of the Peacock Revolution in the United States. As a woman with a gentle voice, but clear fashion-vision, she embraced styles of the era and led Bonwit Teller through a period of phenomenal success.
Introduction

Mildred Custin served as Bonwit Teller’s president from 1965-70 (Schiro 1997). Bonwit’s, which operated from 1895 to 1990, was a unique retail establishment, on the scale of a traditional department store but with the focus of a specialty boutique for women. By 1965, Bonwit’s faced new challenges. In an ever-changing fashion landscape, shifting ideas of gender and multiculturalism increasingly influenced society. Custin, a soft-spoken, fashionable Bostonian, interpreted the Zeitgeist of the time and offered assortments of product that reflected the era. She placed Calvin Klein’s first major order, introduced the American male consumer to Pierre Cardin and metaphorically took customers to the moon with the futuristic space travel inspired fashions of André Courrèges. Custin’s choices as a merchant and business leader served as a microcosm of 1960s popular culture and testament to her success. As a woman, she continued a history of female leadership success at Bonwit’s and rose to an executive position in a time when few women had done so.

By the mid 1960s, after 70 years of business, Bonwit Teller was a major force in the luxury retail landscape of America. Total revenue in 1964 was 54 million dollars in twelve locations throughout the East, South, and Midwest (Sloane 1965). Although Bonwit’s was a long established retailer, the organization was nimble. Executives realized that change was necessary to survive in an evolutionary climate fueled by shifting and varied consumer needs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fashion dissemination and consumption changed dramatically with the advent of mechanized production (Abelson 1989). The industry was again poised for yet another evolution as women achieved greater influence in the public sphere and men, in
particular, embraced new creative modes of expression in dress (Kutulas 2012). Mildred Custin successfully shepherded Bonwit’s through this culturally burgeoning era. She reestablished the store’s reputation as a fashion leader just as Hortense Odlum had done as president of Bonwit’s from 1934-40 (Mamp 2014).

Methods

The historical method was utilized for this article. The most significant primary source was a transcript of an interview conducted with Custin in 1989 as part of the Oral History Project at the Fashion Institute of Technology. This oral history provided information regarding Custin’s personal life, career trajectory and her leadership at Bonwit’s including a first-hand account of the merchandising strategies she employed. Themes emerged from review of the transcript such as the Peacock Revolution, new European and American designers supported, store renovation, and merchandising. These themes then became codes, which according to Miles and Huberman (1994) are ‘tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to inferential information’ (56). To verify Custin’s strategies a general search was then executed via the New York Times and Vogue’s electronically searchable databases. News articles and images retrieved corroborated statements from Custin’s oral history transcript. Secondary sources included books and articles that shed additional light on the era and provided context for Custin’s decisions.

Early Career

Mildred Custin was born on 25 January 1906, and spent her early life in Boston where she attended and graduated from Simmons College (Schiro 1997). Early rejection of her application to the R.H. Macy & Company executive training program did not deter her, and she instead took a clerical position with the retailer in 1928 (Schiro 1997). She
worked for several other retailers in Boston before accepting a position in 1935 with John Wanamaker of Philadelphia. Here she fine-tuned her skills as a merchant initially working as a gift buyer and then as the chief buyer for a moderate women’s specialty fashion department called the Tree Booth Shop (Custin 1989). It was in the Tree Booth Shop that Custin first bought apparel starting in 1945, and learned how to diversify her assortment with color and sizing. According to Custin (1989), ‘I never had less than 36 of a style, no matter what the price […] when that shop opened it was very successful from day one because we had every size and every color’ (11). Her success with the Tree Booth Shop led to promotions as first merchandise manager of ready-to-wear in 1947 and then in 1951 vice president of the Wanamaker’s organization (Anon 1958). When Custin was approached to become the regional president of Bonwit Teller’s three stores in Philadelphia in 1958, at the age of 52, she had already spent 30 years working in the retail industry. However, her influence in the fashion and retailing world would expand considerably.

By 1965, Custin raised sales at the Philadelphia division of Bonwit Teller by 26 per cent through the creation of eye-catching windows, and the design of luxurious store interiors (Anon 1965b). In fact, she was seen as such a success that the Philadelphia Merchant Association named her Man of the Year in 1963. Time magazine (1965b) reported on her being referred to as a man as ‘one of the crosses successful women must bear’ (72). To be successful at work Custin explained, ‘there isn’t room for a husband and children in the kind of job I have, retailing is a full time job’ (Anon 1965b: 72). Time further described Custin as belonging to a special group of female executives in retail such as President Dorothy Shaver at Lord & Taylor and President Geraldine Stutz at
Henri Bendel whom if ‘content to wear a costume ring instead of wedding band can rise to rule the executive suite’ (Anon 1965b: 72). Custin and Shaver never married and Stutz only briefly in the 1960s; none had children (Wilson 2005).

Custin served as regional president in Philadelphia for Bonwit’s until 1965 when she was offered a promotion to president of the entire company based out of the New York flagship store located at 56th Street and 5th Avenue. She accepted the position at a salary of $60,000 per year which accounting for inflation equates to approximately $448,000 in 2014 (HBrothers 2007). In this new role of expanded responsibility, Custin led a multi-million dollar fashion retailer, which like other stores of the era needed a fresh approach to navigate the turbulent social climate of the 1960s. Custin would be just the woman for this job.

1960s Style

Kaiser and Bernstein (2014) described the 1960s as ‘a period that is particularly compelling as a time of rapid cultural change [...] challenges to authority were abundant, and so were dramatic attempts to impose authority’ (98). Youth culture exploded in the 1960s in a mode not previously seen since the roaring 20s. Michael Kammen (1999) described how during the 60s newly affluent young people adopted a variety of personal styles and approaches to consumption from the clearly anti-establishment viewpoint to a more conservative approach that ultimately led to the development of yuppieism. This increasingly diverse and youth focused culture went shopping in a way no previous generation had ever attempted creating a new mass consumer culture (Kammen 1999).

A growing middle class in the United States comprised of more liberated and racially diverse consumers found ways to display individuality through the varied fashion
styles of the era. Mods, hippies, liberated women, groovy men, and persons of color all demanded more choice in clothing styles which prompted the launch of new fashion businesses around the world. Internationally, London became the center of all things swinging and modern as the fashion boutique counter-culture of Carnaby Street supported new stores by the likes of mod queen Mary Quant and purveyor of the men’s style revolution John Stephen (Breward 2003). Boutiques offered fashion forward style choices at price points that were made more attainable through off shore production and an ever-expanding availability of new synthetic materials (Aquilina-Ross 2011). Fashion and music intertwined through mass media elements such as television and print magazines as youth scrambled to adopt clothing styles of their favorite groups such as the Beatles or the Rolling Stones (Breward 2003).

The American consumptive spirit, in particular, was fueled during the era with the advent of shopping malls made possible through de-urbanization and white flight as countless families sought a new way of life in the suburbs of cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles (Farrell-Beck & Parsons 2007). A buy-now, pay-later attitude was embraced as credit cards allowed for immediate gratification. Credit usage also provided valuable consumer data to advertising and marketing firms which in turn developed consumer focused campaigns in print, radio and television (Kammen 1999). Data rich consumer profiles partially fueled the establishment of new advertising firms. The 60s were a period when a person with an idea for a new product had at their disposal more outlets to connect with potential consumers than ever before.

_Vogue_ magazine dominated the delivery of fashion editorial under the watchful eye of Editor Diana Vreeland for most of the decade. Vreeland celebrated the unique and
believed the 60s were a time of revolutionary style as different became, in her opinion, for the first time, beautiful (Vreeland 1997). In one memo dated 1 February 1965 she wrote, ‘how boring to copy the past with all the magnificence of today and tomorrow’ (Vreeland 2013: 102). It was Vreeland that first embraced the influence of celebrity culture at Vogue. Her 1966 cover which featured the uncommon beauty of Barbra Streisand, with her exaggerated makeup and substantial nose, contributed to a new understanding of what beautiful was or could be (Figure 1). Vreeland embraced the new, different and somewhat obscure and used the pages of Vogue to communicate her unique point of view throughout the 60s. Vreeland’s Vogue allowed the outsider to shine. Her exotic demeanor and embrace of the avant-garde eventually led to her abrupt dismissal, but Vogue undoubtedly became a powerhouse under her leadership and a beacon of style and fashion for the 1960s and beyond.

It was in this climate of cultural diversity, mass consumption, and shifting beauty ideals that Custin took the reins of Bonwit Teller. Like Hortense Odlum before her in the 1930s, Custin immediately set about renovating stores, which created appropriate spaces to highlight new and modified product offerings. Bonwit Teller of the 1960s was strikingly different than when Odlum started in 1934 with a single store (Odlum 1939). By 1965, Bonwit’s was a twelve-store chain with locations in New York City, Manhasset, Long Island; White Plains, NY; Short Hills NJ; Philadelphia, Oak Brook, IL; Chicago, Palm Beach, Florida and Boston. Despite the size of the organization, Custin’s first six months on the job at the beginning of 1965 proved the most financially successful in the company’s history (Barmash 1965).
In July of 1965 she announced a two million dollar renovation plan that would focus primarily on the Boston and New York City stores. This renovation allowed the sixth floor of the New York store to be completely repurposed. Custin stated she wanted to ‘remove the drawing room look and instill the atmosphere of small intimate shops’ (Barmash 1965: 21). Custin was aware of the urban boutique culture emanating from London, but perhaps more importantly recognized the value of the suburban customer and stated assortments in those locations would be, ‘tailored to the needs of the community’ (Sloane 1965: 23). To better understand the needs of these branch locations, in February of 1965, Custin created a new executive position of director of branch stores to supervise merchandising activities outside of New York which she filled with Robert Einstein a 38 year old Harvard graduate (Sloane 1965). Through store design she organized Bonwit’s to allow for the introduction of new lines from American and European designers alike. Custin realized the differences between urban and suburban customers and made renovation decisions to support long term growth in both venues. She laid the foundation for the creation of unique in-store boutiques that reflected the diverse style choices of the era for both women and men.

Competitors of the period also scrambled to represent the plethora of clothing styles that developed out of 1960s counterculture. Custin’s approach was not necessarily different than others of the time. At Henri Bendel, another large New York City store that catered to fashionable women, President Geraldine Stutz also considered her square footage and how best to use it for things to come. In 1958, almost in prediction of what the 60s would offer in terms of style and choice, she redesigned the entire first floor of her store to create a u-shaped branded Street of Shops which has since been
acknowledged as a predecessor of shop-in-shop and designer boutique merchandising (Wilson 2005). However, if Stutz was an example of being ready for change, in 1965 Bonwit’s was somewhat behind the fashion and retailing curve. It took a woman like Custin, who unlike her male predecessor was able to analyze and interpret the cultural and consumer trends of the period in a way that satisfied existing and also attracted new shoppers. She continued a Bonwit’s female leadership tradition in her ability to be a woman of the times. Her focus is evidenced in her immediate drive to ensure the needs of diverse customers across the chain were met. The renovation and reorganization of physical space that Custin undertook starting in 1965 allowed for product introductions that not only generated volume but also created a style for the store that she referred to the ‘Bonwit Teller Touch’ (Anon 1965b: 23).

**Peacock Revolution**

When Custin came to New York to run all of Bonwit’s she was 59 years old. Yet her sensibility was far from that of the establishment, which if defined by age alone, the youth of the 60s would have associated her with. Custin had an appreciation for the melding of both high and low brow popular culture even in her own style choices. One reporter noted Custin’s outfit during an interview, and the choice personified this melding, ‘a brown jersey Cardin dress splattered at the hem with white plastic circles’ and a ‘Mickey Mouse watch encircled her left wrist’ (Bender 1969: 68). Perhaps it was this ability to meld diverse styles and cultural references that made the idea of introducing a new fashion category for an entirely different gender of customer to Bonwit Teller possible. Her mix of a high-end dress with a watch linked to American popular culture personified Custin’s distaste for what Levine (1988) described as ‘class bound
definitions of culture’ (255). Masculinity had been strictly defined in dress in the United States for over a century. In introducing male customers to a store dominated by woman’s goods, Custin supported new ideas of what it meant to be a man of the era.

According to Aquilina-Ross (2011), John Stephen’s shop, which began on Carnaby Street London in 1956, flung open the door for the male fashion revolution of the 1960s: ‘Until his arrival, even if men had wanted colorful clothes, there was little available that was ready made; stagnation in men’s style was due to lack of opportunity’ (Aquilina-Ross 2011: 15). Kutulas (2012) stated that prior to the 1960s ‘fashion was a female realm and shopping-consuming—a female activity. Women used clothing, hairstyles, and makeup to construct identities and attract male attention. Only gay men and other masculine outliers followed fashion’ (167). Wilson’s novel, The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit (1955), personified masculinity as conformity in clothing style during the 1950s. Yet by 1965 the peacock had emerged from urban London roots to flourish in a frenzy of individualized exploration of color, silhouette and fabrication. The ready-to-wear market had finally embraced the male gender and subsequently exploded with choice for men of all socio economic statuses, sexual orientations and ages (Aquilina-Ross 2011).

One designer who capitalized on a loosening of social norms in dress for men was Pierre Cardin. Cardin was a new breed of designer, who similar to his peers Yves Saint Laurent and André Courrèges, embraced style and attitudes that developed from youth culture and the street. One of the original bad boys of fashion, the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture actually withdrew Cardin’s membership as a result of him showing a ready-to-wear collection in 1959. Cardin is attributed with discovering and marketing the
collarless Nehru jacket of the mid 60s, which was seen as revolutionary due to its abandonment of traditional tailoring and classic bespoke silhouette that had been in place since the 19th century (Breward 2003). Cardin created suiting for men with silhouettes that were reminiscent of the Edwardian period. Many men adopted these new styles proving, according to Nora Ephron, (1970) ‘that dandyism and homosexuality did not necessarily occur simultaneously in nature’ (87). The male of the mid 60s enthusiastically flung open Pandora’s box with newfound enthusiasm for expression.

Custin started work on the creation of the Men’s Department at Bonwit Teller as soon as she took control of the chain at the beginning of 1965. Renovation and planning took slightly over a year and by the fall of 1966 Bonwit’s introduced not just menswear to the assortment but did so with an introduction of Pierre Cardin to the American market. According to Custin (1989) ‘the men’s shop was quite an innovation at the time, because it was the beginning of the peacock revolution […] clothing (for men) had been a very conservative sort of business with little or no change in fashion or style for years’ (14). Bonwit’s introduction of clothing for men to a physical environment that was synonymous with femininity was a gamble in itself. Other stores that already carried menswear such as Brooks Brothers and Saks Fifth Avenue hesitated to adopt European menswear styles, which were more daring in color, fabrication and silhouette than American options. In Western Europe men had adopted these fashion forward clothing options as early as 1960 and became known as peacocks. Indeed Cardin showed his first menswear collection in Paris in 1960, yet the American market remained unreceptive (Walford 2013). However, Custin (1989) thought otherwise, she stated, ‘we thought this could be a very exciting thing for Bonwit’s […] it was a huge success from day one’ (14).
The first manager of the Men’s Department at Bonwit’s was Jack Daniel Zarem. He was also a customer of the new Pierre Cardin boutique evidenced by his cotton brown velvet suit purchased from Bonwit’s in 1967 (Figure 2). New choices in silhouette like the Nehru jacket, as well as the use of lush fabrications such as jacquards and velvets like that of Zarem’s suit aided the evolution of the conservative American male to the peacock status of his European counterparts. Male consumers even embraced fur as an outerwear option and manufacturers reported selling out of styles for men (Taylor 1969). By 1968, the American menswear industry experienced seventeen per cent total sales gains over the previous year (Ephron 1968).

Timing for the opening of the Pierre Cardin Men’s Boutique at Bonwit Teller on 6 October 1966 was ideal (Ickeringill 1966). The occasion was celebrated with an in store cocktail party and fashion show the evening prior which 400 guests attended. The wife of Hervé Alphand, the then French Ambassador to the United States, commented on the new silhouettes, ‘all the clothing is close to the body without being tight, it makes men look longer and thinner and the fatter they are the thinner they look’ (Ickeringill 1966: 75). According to the New York Times (1969) the new Cardin boutique for men at Bonwit Teller introduced ‘the French couturier’s neo-Edwardian silhouette for men, the double breasted blazer and other notions then deemed radical or effeminate’ (68). The in-store boutique was modeled after Cardin’s Paris flagship Tout Pour L’Homme that had three floors and was the largest menswear store in Paris of the time (Anon 1966) (Figure 3). Customers immediately responded. Vogue (1966) reported that one shopper left ‘Bonwit’s Cardin shop after ordering jackets, trousers, raincoat, sweaters, shirts and ties, and the hat to be shipped to him in Virginia…on second thought…he couldn’t wait to
wear the hat...walked out with it on his head' (107). The Men’s Department with Cardin took off and Custin soon added other vendors such as the haberdasher Turnbull & Asner, accessories by the French luxury house Hermes, and in the fall of 1967, Bill Blass. Bonwit’s became the fashionable destination for peacocks as Custin had also negotiated exclusivity with all the vendors represented in the Men’s department (Custin 1989). Cardin was initially available in the United States only at Bonwit’s and the store added a women’s boutique shortly after.

Bill Blass, who was initially only a women’s wear designer, expanded his business to fashion for men as well. His first collection of menswear in 1967 featured items such as reversible collarless jackets in bright colors, a lack of formal neckwear and knickers (Morris 1967). At the time he predicted that ties would eventually disappear altogether (Ephron 1968). The Bill Blass section of the Men’s Department at Bonwit Teller opened on 7 November 1967 (Klemesrud 1967). Color and variety in fabrication abounded including, ‘a red corduroy blazer worn with black and white checked wool slacks […] a red Nehru blazer sweater worn with hot pink corduroy slacks’ (Klemesrud 1967: 38) (Figure 4). Like Cardin, Blass’ menswear was originally exclusive to Bonwit Teller. Custin’s focus on a male customer proved long lasting as the Men’s Department at Bonwit’s expanded to every store in the chain and was in operation until the company went out of business in 1990.

**Women’s Fashions**

Custin’s embrace of new styles was not limited to the Men’s Department. She established partnerships with both European and American designers whom brought innovative and exclusive looks to the store. As she had done with Pierre Cardin for both
men and women, Custin looked to another European style maker this time as an opportunity to expand her female customer base. She sought out exclusivity of representation, and in 1966 one third of Bonwit’s imports for women were exclusive to the retailer (Nemy 1966).

The Parisian based André Courrèges exploded on the fashion scene in 1965 when he introduced a space travel inspired look epitomized with short white boots, shiny plastic fabrications, boxy silhouettes and short skirts. However, Courrèges was not prepared to deal with the massive response to his space age inspired fashions and product manufacturing was troubled. The designer did not complete another major collection until 1968 when his partnership began with Bonwit Teller. Despite his early troubles, Custin recognized the designer still had the ability to be at the forefront of fashion innovation and on 6 February 1968 the André Courrèges Couture Future boutique opened on the fourth floor of Bonwit’s in New York City (Ickeringill 1968) (Figure 5). According to the *New York Times* (1968) the clothes were ‘much softer now with a rounded look and lots of scallops on hems or necklines there is even an occasional peter pan collar’ (46). This less severe mod-style of Courrèges is evident in a dress from his Bonwit Teller collection worn by Custin, then age 62 (Figure 6). Courrèges commented, ‘when I wanted to impose style, I had to be very brutal about it, now I have changed I can be Courrèges shouting as well as smiling’ (Ickeringill 1968: 46).

Custin not only sought out established European designers but also supported new American designers. Calvin Klein’s career began with a visit to Mildred Custin’s office in 1968 (Calvin Klein 2013). Klein had completed a collection of samples and through one of the buyers for Bonwit’s arranged a meeting with Custin. She was impressed with
the collection. However, she knew that Klein would be unable to maintain the quality he was showing at the wholesale price he was asking. Custin (1989) told him, ‘now, young man, if you want to come back here a year from now you will have to increase the price of each of these garments at least ten dollars’ (15). Klein received his first major order under Custin’s tutelage for 100,000 dollars retail. His youthful silhouette, and clean American take on design was perfect for the Miss Bonwit shop Custin had created to attract a younger clientele. Under her guidance the store advertised Klein’s collection and also featured the clothes in all eight of Bonwit’s windows effectively launching the ascension of one of America’s most famous designers of the twentieth century (Figure 7).

Custin also created another branded in-store boutique named the *S’fari Room* where she featured exotic looks and new designers from around the globe. Custin (1989) stated, ‘we did the S’fari Room […] we were the first ones to give unknown designers a showplace for their lines, that’s where Giorgio Sant Angelo first came on the scene, in the *S’fari Room*’ (14). According to Sharon Zukin (2005) ‘Bonwit’s S’fari Room featured a smaller changing assortment where women could hunt for the big game of new fashion’ (136). Although there was a focus on offering new and varied designers in the department it was the concept and marketing of the space that Women’s Wear Daily referred to as ‘the total sell’ (Anon 1968: 4). The branded shop was highly promoted. A March 1969 cover of *Vogue* featured brightly colored beads by Giorgio San Angelo that were available at Bonwit’s *S’fari Room* (Figure 8).

For Custin, the ability to recognize a new trend or potential product offering was not limited to apparel. As hemlines went higher throughout the 60s Custin asked of her friend and cosmetics innovator Estee Lauder, ‘what are we doing about legs?’ (Morris
This led to the creation of a line of skin care and beauty applications specifically for legs and carried exclusively at Bonwit Teller. Like Hortense Odlum before her, Custin believed direct contact with her customers showed them that she understood their needs and interests. This personal communication with her predominantly female customers was in Custin’s opinion important as, ‘after all women buy about 70 per cent of men’s wear and most of the home furnishings too’ (Barmash 1968: 74). As such, Custin discussed hemlines, along with other fashion topics and happenings at the store in the memos included in each month’s charge card statements.

Custin reluctantly left Bonwit’s in 1970 as the company had a mandatory retirement age of 65. However, her career was far from over and she went on to establish Mildred Custin Ltd. a retailing and fashion consulting firm (Anon 1970). In this new business she was part of the development team that created vertical malls in the United States including Water Tower Place in Chicago and the Renaissance Center in Detroit (Custin 1989). Vertical malls, particularly Water Tower Place in Chicago, contributed to the revitalization of downtowns and attracted shoppers, tourists and new urban residents following de-urbanization trends of the 1960s (Oser 1987). Custin operated her consulting firm until 1991. She passed away in 1997 at the age of 91 (Schiro 1997).

Conclusions

Expanded product offerings and representation of fashion that reflected the era under Custin’s leadership prompted a hugely successful period for Bonwit’s. When Custin took control of the business in 1965 the company produced 58 million dollars a year and by the time she left in 1970 total volume was over 85 million with the addition
of only one new branch store in Troy, Michigan (Bender 1969). Custin’s promotion of exclusive and au courant fashions created a dynamic, desirable store to which the fashionable women and men of the period flocked. Mildred Custin was a leader and innovator who played a significant role in the success of some of the most famous fashion and retailing ventures of the twentieth century and yet her story remained relatively untold.

Although Custin achieved a great deal in her time at Bonwit’s, she approached her job in neither a heavy handed nor dictatorial way. Her demeanor was demure as one former employee commented, ‘she has such a dainty air she seems so helpless you want to protect her, of course, she is as helpless as a cobra’ (Morris 1965: 25). The New York Times reported that Custin had a ‘reputation for femininity grace and charm bulwarked by superb taste and a capacity not only for working hard herself, but also for inspiring others to work hard’ (Morris 1965: 25). Custin led her team to success through this appreciation of hard work, determination, and creativity yet did so in such a way that her femaleness was honored. In 1965, Custin at Bonwit’s and Geraldine Stutz at Henri Bendel were the only two female presidents of major retail companies in New York and yet their histories remain obscure. Researchers must peel away the layers of time to reveal these accomplishments as testament to what women in retail achieved but also to serve as inspiration to female leaders of tomorrow.
References


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Figures

Figure 1. *Vogue* March 1966 cover that featured Barbra Streisand. Streisand’s physical features were considered exotic and unconventional. Diana Vreeland’s choice to feature her on the cover of the magazine personified changed concepts of beauty and fashion for the era. Image © Richard Avedon Foundation.
Figure 2. Jack Daniel Zarem’s Pierre Cardin Suit from 1967. Jacket labels identified the Bonwit Teller Men’s Shop, and Pierre Cardin. The suit was made from lush high pile chocolate brown cotton velvet. Images © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 3. Bonwit's Men's Department Manager Jack Daniel Zarem and Mrs. Hervé Alphand in the new Pierre Cardin boutique at Bonwit Teller. Green felt walls and black leather accents were modeled after Cardin's Paris men's store Tout Pour L'Homme. Mrs. Hervé Alphand was the director of the Paris store. Image © Vogue 15 November 1966, 107.
Figure 4. Examples of menswear from the 1967 Bill Blass collection at Bonwit Teller. The exaggerated plaid suit on the left includes trim ankle length trousers while the double-breasted jacket on the right is executed in shocking red. New approaches to silhouette, print and color helped define style components of the Peacock Revolution. Images © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 5. Acid orange pantsuit from the Courrèges *Couture Future* ready-to-wear line offered exclusively at Bonwit Teller in 1968. Pants at the time were still uncommon for women and this ensemble boldly communicated changing gender ideals. Image © The Museum at FIT.
Figure 6. André Courrèges dress worn by Mildred Custin, 1968. This cotton dress is an example of the modified approach to futuristic design Courrèges adopted that featured details such as scallops, patch pockets and peter pan collars. This dress was part of his newly launched women’s ready to wear collection. The label reads, ‘Made Exclusively in France for Bonwit Teller.’ Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 8. Color and exoticism abounded in this June 1969 cover of *Vogue* that featured beads by Giorgio Sant Angelo available at Bonwit’s S’fari Room. Image © *Vogue*.
CHAPTER FIVE: General Conclusions

General Discussions

This dissertation has shown that the history of consumerism, fashion and style is well told within the context of the department or large-scale retail store. Furthermore, in the case of Bonwit Teller during the 1930s and 1960s, business and merchandising strategies employed serve as vehicles to discuss the broader social contexts of the eras. In both instances, women such as Hortense Odlum and Mildred Custin effectively navigated turbulent times to a positive business result. As women, they both instinctively knew what other women of the period wanted in a store that was primarily for them.

This research importantly illustrated there are many untold stories of women in retail. Their impacts on the history of fashion and business in the Unites States and beyond have not been adequately explored. These stories are not easily constructed, as many women such as Odlum and Custin did not leave significant archival material. However, it serves neither the discipline nor the collective history of women to allow such an impediment. Dorothy Shaver has assuredly earned her respected spot as a pioneering businesswoman in fashion retail, but the clear point is that she was not the only one.

In addition, Bonwit Teller occupied a significant place in the history of retailing in America. At 56th Street and 5th Avenue Bonwit’s sat adjacent to luxury retail giants like Tiffany’s and across the street from the legendary Bergdorf Goodman. Yet, until this research, little has been documented regarding Bonwit’s history. It is interesting to note that just as the histories of women in this field have often been abbreviated or ignored, so to has been the story of a store that was truly a Woman’s Place.
During the 1930s Hortense Odlum navigated a turbulent financial climate with price diversity in her assortment, specialized services and a pleasing environment. However, she also focused on the morale of the store and trained her salespeople to offer helpful service to customers. Personally, she found a way to connect to customers via her Consumer’s Advisory Committee and she also sent personal thank you notes and correspondence to customers. Although Odlum was a woman of considerable means she had personally experienced many different socio-economic statuses in her life. Her personal experiences informed her decisions about creating branded departments that met the diverse financial needs of customers. Whereas Bonwit’s had been a store that offered luxury products to discerning clientele, Odlum opened the doors to women of multiple walks of life. The Salon de Couture met the needs of her most affluent fashion conscious customer, but she also serviced the needs of consumers on a budget in Rendezvous and Debutante. Odlum also clearly understood that women were exploring new life possibilities and she created the College Girls department to attract young aspirational women.

Prior to Odlum’s arrival at Bonwit’s previous male leadership did not seem to be in tune with what women needed and expected from a store for them. The addition of a beauty salon, afternoon tea service, and general concierge services created an environment that made shopping easy and desirable. She also recognized that many of her female customers had male partners that needed to buy gifts. Custin established the 721 Club to service male customers during the holiday season and it proved a success.

Odlum stepped down as President in 1940 and then served at Chairwoman of the board until 1944. Bonwit’s did not have another female President until Mildred Custin took the job in 1965. Custin, like Odlum before her, came to her position at a time that was full of social upheaval. Whereas the 1930s were turbulent due to financial outcomes of the Great Depression,
the 1960s were a period of vast social change related to age, gender, and race. Custin also diversified her assortment but this time price was not the key factor. A variety of fashion providers and designers developed in the 1960s as a diverse market demanded more variety. Boutique culture, emanated from London, was about providing variety and uniqueness in style. Custin organized Bonwit’s to reflect this boutique culture and in doing so introduced André Courrèges, Pierre Cardin and Calvin Klein to the American market. Perhaps most importantly, Custin recognized that mass change was happening in men’s apparel abroad due to the Peacock Revolution and decided to add menswear to the assortment at Bonwit’s for the first time since the store’s inception.

Where Odlum was extremely conscious of price and service, Custin was a very fashionable woman who was aware of the latest trends. She consistently looked for ways to put Bonwit’s at the forefront of fashion leadership of the era and her decision to embrace menswear personified this acumen. Custin’s personal collection of fashion forward ready to wear survives in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is testament to her style, and status as a fashion leader and interpreter of the era.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research has uncovered many opportunities to further document the histories and contributions of women in retail. Recommendations for future research include further exploration of other female Presidents of major firms such as Geraldine Stutz at Henri Bendel and the final female President of Bonwit Teller Helen Galland. In addition the work of Sara Pennoyer who was the Promotional Director at Bonwit Teller during Hortense Odlum’s Presidency is of note. Pennoyer was also an author who encouraged young women to pursue careers in retailing. In addition, the work of *Salon de Couture* manager and designer Fira
Benenson (known professionally as the Countess Illinska) at Bonwit’s and Sophie Gimbel of the *Salon Moderne* at Saks present opportunities. Gladys Tilden, who lived abroad and acted as a trend reporter for Bonwit’s during the mid 1930s, is also a viable research topic as her archive is maintained at the Bancroft Memorial Library at the University of California, Berkley.

During the 1950s Visual Director Gene Moore and his assistant Daniel Arje created window displays for Bonwit’s that featured artwork of the period. Artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns all displayed artwork in Bonwit’s windows when they were relatively unknown. Further research could explore this movement of art into a commercial sphere and the subsequent impacts on the artists who participated. Both Arje and Moore left significant archival materials that could also be used to tell their respective histories.

Material culture associated to Bonwit’s has survived. There are 125 apparel items in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York attributed to Bonwit Teller of various periods. An in depth total history of the store could be told using material culture as a context. Imagery could be organized according to time periods.

In addition, oral history used in this dissertation from Ira Neimark proved very useful. A larger scale oral history project could be executed to capture the reminiscences of women who remember shopping at Bonwit’s.

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Personally, I am forever grateful to have Morris Breyer as my partner in life and very best friend. For his unending support, patience, and encouragement I am eternally thankful. This project is as much his accomplishment as it is mine. To all my friends and family that were there for me throughout my graduate program at Iowa State you have my sincere thanks.

This work that documents the untold stories of women in retail is inspired by and dedicated in memory to my mother Lorraine Barbara Mamp. She worked as a dress buyer for Crowley’s department store in Detroit for thirty years before her death. Her dedication and perseverance inspire me yet today.
APPENDIX

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 10/10/2013
To: Michael Mamp
4730 Mortensen Rd #109
Ames, IA 50014

CC: Dr. Sara Marcketti
1060 LeBaron hall
Dr. Mary Lynn Danzor
1068 LeBaron Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research
Title: Bonwit Teller a History
IRB ID: 13-426

Approval Date: 10/8/2013
Date for Continuing Review: 9/30/2015
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others, and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is re-established.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.