

Shopping for a length of cloth evolved into the French Room

Old-time stores had little glamour, only male clerks

Strolling the streets and looking at the window displays of merchants is a fairly recent practice. Before this century, stores placed all of their goods on tables and wall shelves. If there were windows in the front of the store, they were open for light while the store was in operation, and at night heavy shutters protected the windows from breakage.

In 1901 a Lancaster firm, Williams and Hughes, opened with the first show windows ever seen in Lancaster. According to one account, the other merchants looked upon this "with disdain." It was not until "ready-made" clothes were available for the masses (about 1910) that merchants began to purchase mannequins to display the new styles. Previously, the merchants had sold yard goods to their customers who took their purchases home and sewed themselves or took the cloth to seamstresses or tailors.

In 1900 it was unlikely that a

woman worked in a store. The clerks were usually all men. The first women to break into merchandising were milliners (makers of women's hats). This was a time that heavily trimmed hats were the style. Some milliners worked in small shops and actually designed the hats and created them from scratch.

Winthrop's full name in the early 1900s was Winthrop Normal and Industrial College. The normal curriculum was designed for teacher training. The industrial curriculum included domestic science, extension work, office skills and other skills that included millinery training.

It would take several days to create a really fancy hat. In 1903 the most popular style was a wide-brimmed hat with rows and rows of narrow lace edging. The most elaborate hats took as much as six bolts of lace. The trimmings were spectacular. Ostrich feathers, birds of paradise, flowers, fruits, plumes, pleated ribbons and sequins were added to already elaborate hats.

The milliner's stock in trade also included false hair pieces. Large rolls of hair called "rats" were used to achieve bulk. False curls, switches or braids were sewn into some hats. Matching the customer's hair to the hair pieces became quite a task. Belk's stores, which were soon in every town of any size at all, became well-known for their millinery departments.

Then the department stores that

began selling ready-made clothing also began hiring milliners who would make hats to match the ready-to-wear or "store-bought" outfits. Another factor in bringing women into the stores was the perceived need to have women clerks to supervise the dressing rooms and to help with alterations.

After a while, department stores like Friedheim's in Rock Hill or Wylie & Co. in Chester, as well as women's dress shops like Miss Virginia's in Lancaster, had women buyers who would go to New York at least twice a year to select clothing for their local customers.

About 1918, stores began putting up electric signs to attract customers. It was not until after World War II that one finds neon signs and automated displays.

It was a far cry from 1918 when in 1951 Friedheim's Department Store completely remodeled and added new features including the French Room for display of formal evening dresses. With full-length mirrors and plush carpeting, along with couches and chairs for friends and family, Carrie Castles presided over an area that added a new dimension to Rock Hill's retail offerings. Well-to-do women were heard to remark, "You don't have to go to New York anymore to do your shopping!"

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