For
The Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

An Interview on
Mildred Custin

by
Mildred Finger
Q. For the oral history collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with Mildred Custin. The date is April 16, 1989; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Mildred, where were you when you first started to become a retailer? Where did you get into retailing, and how?

A. Well, my first job was at Macy's.

Q. New York?

A. Yes.

Q. Are you a New Yorker?

A. No, I came...I was...grew up in Boston. I was born in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Q. Well, let's talk about that first a little bit. You were born there. And you went to school there?

A. No, I left there when I was about four and a half-five years old. I went to school in Boston, through college.

Q. What were you planning to do when you grew up?

A. Well, I don't really think I had any great plans as I was growing up, but as I was about ready to embark on life it was about the beginning of the Depression, and I knew I had to go to work. So, at the end of my junior year at Simmons, the Dean of the Secretarial School set up a meeting with prospective employers for the graduating class--the seniors--and
he asked me if I would be the receptionist. And I said I was glad to, and there was a woman among the prospective employers who was chatting with me while waiting. And instead of offering any one of the seniors a job as her secretary, she asked me if I would take the job. Of course I had another year to go in school, but she offered me then...I think it was $35 a week, and that was about $5-$10 more than the seniors were getting at the time, so I decided I would take the job and if I could get more money then than the graduating class, why not do it. So, she was doing a...She was with Biedecker of Boston. She was a...I guess she was...I don't know...A free lance writer I guess, of some sort. And she was also doing a sales training program for the John Hancock Life Insurance Company. So, I went to work for her and after about six months I began to feel very sorry for myself, not being able to graduate with my class, and I went back to school one day to speak to the Dean, and I asked her if there was any way, if I came back to school, could I graduate with my class? And she said, well, if I came in for the second semester and I got all A's in my courses I could graduate. Which I did.

And my first job, when I got out of school was secretary to a patent attorney in Boston. And the patent business was at a very low ebb at the time because the Depression was just about starting. I was graduated in June of 1927, and I worked for him for about six months and he had no clients. I had nothing to do but read Corpus Jurus, and I got through
him and I decided to quit. And I had heard about Macy's training program and I thought, well, that sounded very interesting and I would take myself to New York and see if I could get it, into Macy's training program.

So, I got an interview with a woman who was then head of training—a Miss Demarest—and she interviewed me and she decided very quickly that I was not good material for retailing. Well, at my tender age, that was too much of a blow so I decided I would just stay in New York until I got a job. At Macy's. And when I got to be Vice President the first thing I'd do would be fire that woman!

So, I got a job in the comptroller's office as special assistant in the statistical area. I had had several good courses in statistics in school, and I thought, "Well, I'll use that," so I got a job at Macy's and I got a...went back to Boston, packed up my clothes and went down to New York and found a place to live in a student residence on 76th street near the Drive. I shared a room then with two girls who were going to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I was the only one in the student residence who had a job. And after about... I had been at Macy's about nine or 10 months when my mother came down to visit me from Boston and she took one look around my room and before I knew it my bags were packed and I was back on the train to Boston with my mother.

Q. How old were you?
A. Oh, I was about 24, I guess.
Q. But you couldn't resist her blandishments, to going back home?

A. Well, as a matter of fact, I think I was almost a little relieved that she came to get me because I was getting into all kinds of scrapes and difficulties. And I had led a very sheltered, protected life in Boston and I wasn't prepared for life in the big city, by myself, on my own. I was rather relieved that she came to get me.

And I got a job as secretary to general merchandise manager of a store called Sheppard's in Boston, which is no longer in existence. And....

Q. At that point you already had some kind of an interest in retailing.

A. At that point I was not only interested in retailing but terribly interested in merchandising, in the general merchandise manager's office at Sheppard's. And I kept pounding on my boss's desk asking, "When can I be a buyer?" And one year, in the early fall, he said to me...He asked me if I would look around the store; that he was planning to have a special gift shop just for Christmas, with merchandise gathered from all over the store, and would I find someone who could run this shop for him. I said sure, and a few days later he came back and he said, "Well, Miss Custin, have you found anybody to run that Christmas shop for me?" And I said, "Yes, sir," and he said, "Who?" and I said, "I'll run it." And he said, "Who'll be my secretary?" And I said, "Well, I'll do that too." So, I
managed the Christmas shop and it was a huge success. It had to be, because it was on the fifth floor, and if anybody asked for a refrigerator, which would have been on the third floor, I would have gone down and picked it up myself. It was an enormous success, he fired the regular gift shop buyer and gave me that job, and I became a buyer.

I went to New York on my first buying trip, and I didn't know the difference between a dozen and a gross. I knew absolutely nothing. But my gift shop was a huge success, too. And after less than a year there he asked me if I would take the art needlework department. And gee, I had never had a knitting needle in my hand in my life. "That doesn't make any difference," he said, "you just be a merchant." So I got that department. And... Is this being too wordy?

Q. Not at all. You're being great.
A. So we were a highly promotional store--Sheppard's--and they had sales called thunderbolts...

Q. Thunderbolts?
A. Thunderbolts. And in order to have a thunderbolt, you'd get a quarter of a page ad in the paper with a streak of lightning going through them. But you had to have an item which would do $5,000 in a day. And, of course, there wasn't very much in the gift shop area that could bring in $5,000 in a day. But I still wanted to have a thunderbolt from my department, and a salesman came in and he was selling dinnerware and he had a 32-piece breakfast set that retailed for $3.99. Three dollars
and ninety-nine cents. And I said to him, "How many in a car­
load?" And he said a thousand. Well, that would only be $3,999
if I sold them all, so that wouldn't do. So I asked him if there
was anything he could add to bring it up. So he said, "Well,
if you took a sugar and creamer you'd have 35 pieces, and that
could retail for $4.99." And they all came pre-packaged in nice
little cartons. And I asked the boss if I could have a thunder­
bolt and I described the item to him and he said yes. And I
still remember the item just as clearly as if it were today,
and this was back in the '30s. It was pink bodied earthenware
with silver color "ray" (?) roses. It was very pretty. And he
ran the ad, and the first day, out of the thousand sets, we
1,350. And I kept ordering carloads and we'd bring the address
labels to the railroad siding and just put them on the cartons
as they came in.

Q. That was really a very successful item.
A. Yes. We had several after that. But then there
was a competing store called R.H. White in Boston, and the vice
president of that store came over to my department one day and
looked around and he asked if I would come and chat with their
president, with Ben Raphael...I don't know if you ever heard of
him?

Q. R-a-p-h-a-e-l?
A. Yes. He started Filene's basement, and then he
went over to R.H. White's, which was a Federated store, and
became the president. Really a tough guy. And they hired me as
their buyer of lamps, gift shop, art needlework, china, glass--what not--and I'll never forget... That was also a promotional store. But Boston was a promotional city. There wasn't anything but promotional stores. Every store had a flier every week and a sale every day. And I was going to have my first lamp sale at R.H. White's and this manufacturer... I still remember his name--Neuwirth--and that was in 1929...

Q. How do you spell his name?
A. N-e-u-w-i-r-t-h. And I got these floor lamps with onyx bases and silk shades to retail for $9.99. A phenomenal value. And my first ad was to run, and the morning it was to run I could hardly wait to pick up the paper to see my ad, and the headline of the paper that day was "Banks Close."

Q. Oh, God.
A. And the story of how I got from there to Wanamaker's...

Q. And fashion.
A. Oh, no... I didn't get into fashion until 1945.

And I got into retailing in 1929.

Q. I didn't mean to interrupt you, I'm sorry.
A. I just haven't thought or told this...

Q. Yes, well please...
A. If I'm being too detailed...

Q. Not at all. You're being wonderful. Not at all.

So you said you wanted to...
A. So there was a job open at Wanamaker's, as buyer
there in their needlework and gift shop. And that was the choice job of its kind in the country, and it was said in the market that every buyer from out-of-town would buy a roundtrip ticket to Philadelphia to be interviewed for that job. And the salesman was talking to me one day and he said, "Why don't you apply for that job?" And I said, "Oh, I would never get it. I'm too young and I haven't had the experience. I'm too young and I'm too inexperienced." He said, "Well, I think it might be a good idea to write to Mr. Shipley. Charles Shipley, President of Wanamaker's. So I wrote a letter and I waited and I waited and I didn't get any answer. And one day we were having a fashion show of hand-knit dresses and sweaters and things that was being put on by the company from whom we bought all the knitting yarns--James Lee, then--and the fashion show was going to be in our auditorium, and just as I was getting ready to go into the auditorium, this tall (?) ... woman breezed toward me and said, "Are you Miss Custin?" I said yes. She said, "Well, Mr. Shipley asked me to come to see your department and talk with you. Mr. Shipley, you know. Wanamaker's." I said, "Oh, that's lovely, but I have this fashion show going on. Would you like to come in? And after the show I'll be glad to talk to you."

Well, the representative of the yarn company's name was Custis. Miss Custis. And during the commentary of the show, they kept saying "Designed by Miss Custis. Designed by Miss Custis." And this woman, who was Gretchen Crawford, thought
that I had designed all the clothes. So, when the fashion show
was over, she came to me and said, "Oh, when can you come down
and see Mr. Shipley? I think it's wonderful: Not only are you
a merchant, but you can design all these beautiful knit things!"
I had to explain that I really hadn't designed them.

Anyway, I made an appointment to see Mr. Shipley
on Labor Day, which was a week or so away from that time, and
he hired me after talking to me for only about 20 minutes. And
I could never understand why he hired me, knowing he had inter­
viewed so many buyers across the country. And why he had spent
so little time interviewing me. And I didn't find out until
months later that the reason he hired me was that he just decided
he was going to hire the youngest person who came along, and I
was the youngest.

Q. Why had he made that decision, do you suppose?
A. Because most of the ( ) . . buyers were old
spinsters and he wanted a ( ) . . approach to the job.

Q. It was a very mature market, I suppose.
A. Yes. And I had this absolutely beautiful gift
shop in an enormous space, which is now the auditorium of the
store. And I arrived on October 1st, and in January they told
me I was going to go to Europe on a buying trip. Well, that was
exciting--going to Europe for a buying trip!

Q. What year was that?
A. That was 1935, October 1st.

Q. And I never did ask you when you were born.
A. January 25, 1906.

Q. So you were 29, when you went to Europe.

A. That first trip to Europe was so exciting. I went to 10 countries in six weeks, and that was the beginning of many, many, many trips. Then the war came along. In the meantime, along with the gift ship and the art needlework and the antiques, which I had been buying, we had a shop called the "Tree Booth Shop." I don't know if you ever heard the name.

Q. Yes, I have.

A. And it was probably the first of the boutiques in this country, and it was started by Robin Wanamaker. And it was a beautiful shop. It carried mostly, well all, imports from France, and they were mostly lingerie, negligees, blouses and accessories. And when the war came along it had completely cut off their source of supply, and it had this enormous space and it had not been doing very well. And the president of the store asked me if I would take that over. And I took that over, and we had to change its image from an import shop to an American shop. And we had beautiful blouses and things like that, but not enough, certainly, to justify this enormous space which this department had. And it was important to the image of the store to have a "Tree Booth Shop." And Wanamaker's once had a very top position in high fashion, which it had lost to the specialty shops, like "Nan Duskin" and the "Blum" store. And I had to buy my clothes outside the store, which bothered me no end. I'd go to "Duskin's" or "Blum's" and buy my Norells
and things like that, which I loved.

So I went to see Mr. Shipley one day and I told him that I thought it was time that Wanamaker's went back into the fashion business—the high fashion business—and he thought about it and he said, "We'll do it." And I thought he should use the "Tree Booth Shop" space for the high fashion specialty shop within the store and put that space to better use. And he said, "Well, we'll do it on one condition. If you agree to run it." And I said, "Mr. Shipley, I haven't been on Seventh Avenue in my life." He said, "Well, you can start now."

So, we started planning for the shop. I think it was in the spring of 1945, and I went to the market and bought for the opening, which was the fall of '45, and I didn't know anything about fashion but I'd go to a manufacturer like "Ben Reig," and I'd write down a style number I liked and the colors, and then I'd put the sizes in. Well, I didn't know anything about splitting size ranges, so if it was a style I thought I could sell or I liked, I would buy it across the board. In those days it was 12-16, or 12-18. Twelve to 16, I guess, with a few 10s maybe, but nothing ever smaller. But I never had less than 36 of a style, no matter what the price, because that's the way sizes and colors ran. So, when that shop opened, it was very successful from day one, because we had every size and every color. We couldn't miss. We also had a big stock. But that shop still exists and has made its mark in fashion in Philadelphia. It's still very...I think it's still a successful
specialty shop within the department store. And after that, at Wanamaker's, I became merchandise manager of intimate apparel and children's along when I was buying...And then the ready-to-wear divisional merchandise manager's job opened up, and they decided I could have it. And I'll never forget, (?) [machine cuts out] deans of Wanamaker's, Mr. Barker, I told him I was going to be the divisional merchandise manager of ready-to-wear, and all he could say was, "What? A woman?!"

Q. Yes, I just (?) ... about the role of women in retailing.

A. Right. And from there I ended up as Vice President in charge of all fashion and accessory merchandising...

Q. At Wanamaker's.

A. At Wanamaker's. This was about 1957. By '57. And at that time Mr. Albert Mr. Greenfield, who owned the three Bonwit stores in the Philadelphia area, which were not connected with the New York stores, offered me the job of Vice President of their stores, and they would have a front man as President, and I said, "No, thank you very much. When you're ready to offer me the President's job, I'll be glad to talk to you." Well, it wasn't very long after that he offered me the job as President of the...

Q. Were you the first woman president of a retail store that size in this country?

A. No. Dorothy Schafer was.

Q. Oh, right. Of course it was.
A. So I became President of the Binwit stores in the Philadelphia area, and I went there in April of 1958. And in 1963, Genesco bought the Philadelphia group of Bonwit stores (machine cuts out).

Q. Bonwit's three stores in Philadelphia were...?
A. ...owned by Mr. Greenfield. Albert M. Greenfield who was (?) . real estate developer in Philadelphia. He was known as Mr. Philadelphia. (?) . financial interest in the New York group which was (?) . which had been owned by (?) Mr. Hoving was the President then. And he and (?) . when he made the deal to sell the Philadelphia group to Mr. Jarman, who was Chairman of Genesco, they were riding downtown towards Penn Station...Mr. Greenfield was on his way back to Philadelphia, when he said to Mr. Jarman, "You know, Tiffany goes along with that deal don't you?" Until then, Mr. Jarman wasn't really aware of it. And the first thing he wanted to do was unload Tiffany's, which was probably one of the biggest mistakes he ever made, it's been such an enormous success.

Anyway, by January of '65, Mr. Jarman asked me if I would come to New York and be President of the chain, which I did.

Q. You innovated a lot of things when you were with Bonwit's, didn't you. I mean...Could you talk about some of those things? The men's department for example, and other such...
A. Well, the men's shop was quite an innovation at the time, because it was the beginning of the "peacock" revolution
for men, and (?) . . been a very conservative sort of business with little or no change in fashion or style for years. And when this new look came along in Europe, no one in New York or in the whole country was the least bit interested in doing anything with it. When Pierre Cardin came to see me, we thought this could be a very exciting thing for Bonwit's. And we (?) . . it was a huge success from day one.

Q. You did a lot of other shops, didn't you, that were really quite innovative too? You did the "Courreges" shop, for example...

A. Oh, "Courreges," that was in the women's area. But in the men's area we were also the... We introduced Turnbull & Anser to the United States, and had it exclusively for the country when we had it, and that's turned out to be a very successful venture in this country. We were (?) . . boutique for men, the first one's to have a "Hermes" shop. That was all in the men's area. In the women's area, we did a "Courreges" boutique in... I think that was in the spring of 196... No, it was the fall of '65, when we did, when we first did the "Courreges." We followed that with Pierre Cardin for women. That was followed by Ungaro for women. . (?) . . amount of... We did the safari room, which was... I guess we were the first ones to give unknown designers a showplace for their (?) . . their lines. That's where Giorgio San Angelo first came on the scene, in the Safari Room. We were the first ones to (?) . . present Calvin Klein.

Q. Yes. I was about to say, you had those extraordinary
windows in 1968.
A. That really started Calvin off on his career. He came to my office one Saturday with this rack of dresses and coats which he had designed, and he had literally pushed that rack up himself from 36th and Seventh to my office at 56th and Fifth. I don't know whether it was because he didn't want a tiny wrinkle in any of those things, or whether he didn't have the cab fare--either one--but there he was. And we had the merchandise manager and the buyer in my office. I was very impressed with the young man and with what he had done, and we gave him his first order, which was $100,000 at retail, which in those days was a lot. I think the price, his wholesale price, was around $39.75, at cost. And I said to him, "Now, young man, if you want to come back here a year from now," I said, "You will have to increase the price of each of these garments at least $10, (Calvin says it's $20, but I'm sure it's $10) or you won't be back here." I was sure he couldn't deliver the quality that he was showing at the price he was asking. So we agreed to pay him $10 more for each garment (?) . . . getting the order and he went back to see his friend Barry Schwartz and told him all the good news and they took the order to the bank, I guess, and got the piece goods financed.
Q. You also had a very special relationship with a number of people, like Norell and Zuckerman...
A. Norell...Zuckerman...
Q. Could you (?) talk about some of those. How
MILDRED CUSTIN

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did they (?) . . about. . .
A. (?) . just natural lines for the image that
Bonwit's was projecting.
Q. What image had you developed for them? Because
they had not had "an image" in a long time? When you came.
They were an unfocused specialty store.
A. Well, not only were they unfocused, but we had
looked at all the stores on Fifth Avenue and found that all the
stores carried the same lines, the same merchandise, and there
really was no identity or no reason to shop at any one store,
except for its convenience or proximity. So, we set out to get
as many exclusives as we could. And we never used a designer's
name on a shop.
Q. After you had the Safari Room...
A. Unless we had it exclusively. Like "Courreges"
or Cardin or (?) . . the time we had those all exclusively;
you couldn't find them anywhere else in New York (?) . . The
Norells and the Galanos, we hadn't discovered them or come upon
them in the first place. I was very well familiar with them be­
cause of our Philadelphia experience, in both Wanamaker's and
Bonwit's, but we decided...
Q. Do you think you were ahead of the New York store
in Philadelphia?
A. Hmmn?
Q. You were ahead of the New York store in Phila­
delphia?
A. Oh, in many ways, yes. We were much more innovative.
Q. When you say "We," do you mean you or...
A. Bonwit's.
Q. The store as a whole.
A. Yes. (?) .. a mystery to me.
Q. So, you say, the stores were very innovative.
A. Oh, the Philadelphia stores were very innovative.
Q. Philadelphia was also known in "my advantaged circle" as a kind of off-priced city. Lots of women...
A. We had (?) .. There was a lot of what was called at the time "bedroom boutiques." (?) .. Anybody who wanted to could get on a train, go to New York and buy it wholesale and bring it back and sell it to somebody off-price. It was a very difficult city for fashion.
Q. But nonetheless, you felt the stores were very innovative.
A. Yes. (?) .. historian of Philadelphia, and she could probably tell you more about the Philadelphia store than I.
Q. I'm interested in your history, rather than (?)..
A. I mean about Bonwit's, and what we did (?) .. outstanding reputation. I think Womenswear, they did a double spread story on Bonwit's in Philadelphia around Christmas and they had a full-length picture of me on one page, and in tiny type alongside the picture it said, "What Bonwit's New York
could use for Christmas." Bonwit's-New York could use Mildred Custin for Christmas. That was very embarrassing to me, because Bonwit's-New York chain had its own president then.

Q. Who was that?
A. Bill Smith was President at the time. They had had a succession of them.

Q. Yes, they had. When did you become President of the New York store?
A. January 1965.

Q. And you retired in...
A. January 1970.

Q. And what sort of business did you set up?
A. Well, I set up a consulting business, and (?) . . . clients in the beginning. I was restricted as to retailers. So, we didn't have any retailers except the May Company in Canada, because they were out of the country. But my contract with Genesco prevented me from taking any retailers as clients. But, we had a number of interesting clients. And (?) . . . real estate developer in Chicago, who was doing the first vertical shopping center in the country--"Watertower Place"--on North Michigan, and the young man who was a friend of the developer came to see me in my office one day. He'd just come from a trip to Europe where he was trying to get (?) . . . for his "Watertower" place, and he didn't have much left. And when he discussed it with me I...The reason was he wasn't getting to principals. When he had an appointment with anybody it was the PR person or
somebody, but he wasn't getting to the principals. And he asked me, after our meeting, if I would work with him on getting shops on "Watertower Place," success of "Watertower Place" has been a wonderful venture, because in the beginning nobody thought any vertical shopping center could make it. The success is that they did.

Q. What are the shops that they have now? Or what are the shops (?) . I should say.
A. Let's see . No, Cardin didn't have his shop. Gee, I've almost forgotten what we got from them.
Q. (?) . level. . people like the Gap.
A. No, they were on the upper levels. We had the third and fourth levels, which was (?) . for a designer boutique. We had Cartier (?) .
Q. Not Tiffany?
A. No. (?) . My memory. (?) . Next venture in shopping center development wasn't very happy when we agreed, after much persuasion, to do the Renaissance Center in Detroit. We got marvelous tenants, but the thing was just destined for failure from the beginning.
Q. That's a very difficult city, isn't it?
A. Hmmn?
Q. Detroit is a very difficult city.
A. Oh, downtown is very difficult. And the building was designed by Mr. Portman, who hadn't a clue about retail shopping habits or design.
Q. Was that Mr. Portman of Hyatt?
A. Yes. And the design was so bad it was almost impossible to find a retail area.
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