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Fifth Avenue's First Lady

DOROTHY SHAVER

Largely forgotten except in fashion and some business histories, Dorothy Shaver was a trail-blazing female executive at Lord & Taylor department store in New York City. Upon her promotion to president of the company in 1945, *Time* magazine dubbed her “Fifth Avenue’s First Lady.”¹ Born in Arkansas in 1893, Dorothy Shaver worked at Lord & Taylor from 1924 until her death in 1959, climbing up the corporate ladder rung by rung. Shaver’s rise from comparison shopper to president distinguished her from other leading female executives such as Beatrice Fox Auerbach of G. Fox & Co.

and Hortense Odlum of Bonwit Teller, who both attained their high positions through their husbands. In this sense, Dorothy Shaver was unique because she became president, as *Life* magazine reported, “exactly as a man would have done —by vote of the male directors of the Associated Dry Goods Corporation, which controls [the store].”²

During her life, Dorothy Shaver was a well-known leader of the American fashion industry. Even though fashion historians have discussed her important role in promoting American fashion designers like Claire McCardell and American fashion itself, her life has yet to

be explored in depth. The basic question motivating my research asks what distinguishing factors allowed Dorothy Shaver to achieve such business success. In answering this question, my dissertation examines the life of an important woman to analyze larger issues involving the nature of women’s roles within the development of the fashion industry, American consumer culture, and American business.

In the fall of 2008, with the support of a CSW Travel Grant, I travelled to Washington, D.C., to conduct research at the Smithsonian



Lord & Taylor department store on 5th Avenue between 38th and 39th in New York City. The store moved to this 10-story Italian Renaissance Revival building when it was completed in 1914. In 2007 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the building a city landmark. Dorothy Shaver’s office was on the ninth floor.

ANYONE WHO HAS UNDERTAKEN ARCHIVAL RESEARCH CAN ATTEST THAT EVEN WITH AN EXCELLENT FINDING AID, YOU NEVER KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU WILL COME ACROSS INSIDE THE MANY FOLDERS AND BOXES. FOR EXAMPLE, IN GOING THROUGH SHAVER'S CORRESPONDENCE, I DISCOVERED SEVERAL LETTERS TO AND FROM PROMINENT BUSINESSMEN, INCLUDING THOMAS J. WATSON, SR., WHO WAS HEAD OF IBM FROM 1914 TO 1956. FURTHER INVESTIGATION REVEALED A BUSINESS FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO THAT LASTED SEVERAL YEARS.

National Museum of American History. At the Archives Center, I combed through The Dorothy Shaver Papers collection. Assembled by Shaver's sister after her death, the collection holds the bulk of her business papers including speeches, periodical clippings, photos, letters, other documents, and recordings.

Anyone who has undertaken archival research can attest that even with an excellent finding aid, you never know exactly what you will come across inside the many folders and boxes.

For example, in going through Shaver's correspondence, I discovered several letters to and from prominent businessmen, including Thomas J. Watson, Sr., head of IBM from 1914 to 1956. Further investigation revealed a business friendship between the two that lasted several years. This discovery was very excit-

ing, because scholars of women in business such as Kathy Peiss and Angel Kwolek-Folland have generally characterized businesswomen in female-centric industries like beauty and fashion as being somewhat insular, excluded from more male-dominated networks and businesses like IBM.³ Yet Dorothy Shaver's connection to Tom Watson points to how we might rethink this characterization in an effort to truly "incorporate" women into business history and business into women's history.

The Dorothy Shaver Papers collection also includes numerous articles that sought Shaver's thoughts on the issue of women's increasing presence in business. She repeatedly stated that men and women have equal mental capacities and talents for business success. She also expressed her

belief that women should have the same opportunities as men. With Shaver in charge, Lord & Taylor's policies towards women were very progressive; the company allowed and encouraged women to return to work after having children. On the other hand, Shaver also saw the sexes as distinct and believed that women were still primarily wives and mothers. In her own life, however, Dorothy Shaver was neither a wife nor a mother; she never married, never had children, and resided much of her life with her similarly single and childless sister, Elsie, in a spacious Manhattan apartment. Her own life reflected a far less traditional worldview than the one she imagined for other career women or her female customers. Closely examining the debate about career women that Dorothy Shaver's papers reveal

is essential to understanding the opportunities, limitations, and choices that businesswomen, particularly female executives like Shaver, confronted in the period that prefigured the movement for civil rights and second-wave feminism.

What allowed Dorothy Shaver to succeed was not just a keen sense of business and management, but also a talent for selling. Shaver understood how modern advertising was no longer just concerned with selling products, but was also about selling ideas and lifestyles, since *desire* more and more trumped *necessity* in buying. With the late nineteenth-century shift to mass production, mass consumption increasingly became a defining feature of American life, culture, and identity. Dorothy Shaver understood this dramatic change and realized that to sell women's

fashion, retailers needed to focus less on the clothes themselves and more on the images and ideas they came to represent.

Lord & Taylor's 1945 advertising campaign, "The American Look," best characterizes Shaver's approach. The key feature of "The American Look" in fashion, as Dorothy Shaver saw it, was American women themselves. The campaign featured a photo essay in the April 1, 1945 issue of *Life* magazine that pictured seven attractive young women and asked, "What is the American Look?" Each of the women was featured in a different setting to embody supposed characteristics of all American women, including cleanliness, confidence, agelessness, domesticity, naturalness, good grooming, glamour, and simplicity. The essay argued that American G.I.s missed the "look" of

American girls, and letters to Dorothy Shaver from American soldiers who had seen the *Life* article back up the assertion. To these lonely men, the young models represented the ideal of American womanhood.

The Lord & Taylor "American Look" campaign, launched just months before the end of World War II, demonstrated how much American identity and consumerism had become bound up in each other. Dorothy Shaver and other leaders in the fashion industry were trying to sell a form of Americanism to women who were not only to *consume*, but were also to *embody* these values on domestic and international stages. Shaver argued that the "American Look" showed the world Americans' freedom, prosperity, and youth, what would offer a stark contrast to communism during the

Cold War. She envisioned that the “American Look” would be copied around the world and that Americans would rival the French as fashion leaders.

Ultimately my work on Dorothy Shaver will increase our understanding of the history of women in business and the roles they played in shaping American consumer culture that has come to be a defining feature of our identities and lives as Americans and as women.

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Notes

1. “Fifth Avenue’s First Lady,” *Time*, December 31, 1945, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,886788,00.html>.
2. Jeanne Perkins, “No. 1 Career Woman,” *Life*, May 12, 1947, Dorothy Shaver Papers, Box 16, Folder 2, NMAH.
3. See Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998); and Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women & Business in the United States*, (New York: Palgrave, 1998).

CSW TRAVEL GRANTS PROGRAM

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