

Then & Now: Chelsea's Vogel's & Foster's

Where could you go to buy a hat or have your photo taken in early Chelsea?

From Chelsea Area Historical Society/Jan Bernath

Vogel's & Foster's, one of the oldest department stores in the country, began years ago with the successful entrepreneurship of an early businessman Harmon S. Holmes.

The first building at 109 South Main Street was built by local builders Maroney and Monroe in 1876. A year later, 107 north of 109 was built on the site when Holmes partnered with a local doctor who owned the previous wood structure destroyed by fire. By 1887 Holmes owned both structures and remodeled them to function as one store by removing two front interior staircases and adding an interior archway.

In 1911 the south building was extended to match the length of the other building. A water fountain was added at the archway, which is still there today. Holmes installed a typical feature of early department stores with numerous employees. An 1880's state-of-the-art "Lamson Cash Carrier" system ensured proper accounting from the registers. It utilized a basket on a cable pulley to take cash from the sales counters to the bookkeeping offices.

Initially, the north building housed dry goods and groceries, while the south building had clothing. Carpets and shoes were sold upstairs. Two of the early renters upstairs were Ernest E. Shaver's "Eureka" photograph gallery from 1877 to 1918 and Nellie Maroney's and Ella Craig's millinery (hat) shops in the 1880s and '90s.

In 1893 he reorganized the business again as H. S. Holmes Mercantile Co. with his newly promoted officers, Ed Vogel and Dallas Wurster, to help run it until his retirement in 1914. The business was sold to them as a partnership, and the name was then changed in 1917 to Vogel and Wurster that sold only clothing.

When Ed Vogel died in 1933, his daughter Helen Vogel took over his role. She and Wurster split the business in 1945 with the north store for women's clothing, naming it Vogel's. She graduated from Vassar--a highly selective women's college--and was well travelled, but she returned to her hometown to run the women's store. Vogel had few display racks in her store, and served her customers out of individual storage boxes on counters and tables. She had a keen eye for selecting correct sizes and suggesting matching accessories.

The south store was for men's clothing and Wurster took in a new younger partner, Bob Foster, who was hired after WWII. The men's store was then named Foster's Men's Wear in 1950 after Wurster's death. Foster was known for his kind manner and utilizing the recreational clay horseshoe pits in the basement. Vogel and Foster are fondly remembered by Chelsea residents.

Jack and Friedelle Winans bought the Vogel's store when Helen Vogel died in 1973. Bob Foster retired in 1977 and sold the Foster's store to Winans who reunited the two stores as one business. Winans continued to offer fine clothing for the entire family under the name of Vogel's & Foster's, Inc.

Current owner Mike Jackson purchased the business in 1994, and later the two buildings. Jackson inherited the old creaky hardwood floors and kept the ambience of an old-fashioned clothing store with new popular name brands of shoes, accessories, and clothing.

The iconic store is closing due to the retirement of Jackson. At the time of this writing, the future use of the building is not known. Hopefully, it will retain the historic features lovingly preserved by previous owners.

Minnie Eisenbeiser & Nellie Maroney. Photo: CAHS.





Helen Vogel.
Photo: CAHS

Vogel's &
Fosters. Photo:
Doug Marrin



Mike Jackson. Photo: CAHS

