



Hortense Odlum: Bonwit Teller's first female president, 1934-1940

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From the late 19th 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. Authors have explored the role that women played as consumers and entry-level saleswomen in department stores in both America and abroad.¹ However, aside from scholarship regarding Dorothy Shaver and her career at Lord & Taylor, little is known about other female leaders of retail companies. Shaver is documented as the first female President of a major American retail company and the “first lady of the merchandising world.”² However, Hortense Odlum, who served as first President and then Chairwoman of Bonwit Teller from 1934-1944, preceded Shaver by ten years.³ 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.

A historical method approach was utilized for this research. Primary sources included Odlum's autobiography *A Woman's Place* (1939), fashion and news press articles and advertisements from the period, archival records from multiple sources, and oral history.⁴ The use of multiple sources allowed for the validation of strategies noted in Odlum's autobiography.

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.⁵ 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

¹ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American*

² See Stephanie Marie Amerian, “Fashioning a Female Executive: Dorothy Shaver and the Business of American Style, 1893-1959.” PhD diss, University of California, Los Angeles, 2011; Tiffany Webber-Hanchett, “Dorothy Shaver: Promoter of ‘The American Look,’” *Dress* 30 (2003): 80-90.

³ “Hortense Odlum of Bonwit Teller Head of Store Here from 1934-1944 is Dead,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1970, 24.

⁴ Archival sources including the Gladys Tilden papers, University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library. Oral history from Ira Neimark, former employee of Bonwit's and CEO of Bergdorf Goodman, further informed the research. The study received IRB approval.

⁵ “Pleads for Customers, Mrs. Odlum Says Stores Must Recognize Public's View,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1938.

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.⁶ She ultimately developed a store that offered women’s fashions and services from a feminine point of view.

The Great Depression coincided with Odlum’s term as President. During this time, as much as 25% of the workforce was unemployed.⁷ Women continued to shop, and as such Odlum diversified pricing at the store to meet the needs of her economically diverse clientele. She offered everything from the best couture to sensible dressing. In addition to diversified pricing, 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 collectively catered to women of different economic status, young women, and even men.

Under Odlum’s helm, Bonwit Teller realized great success. By January of 1940, Bonwit’s achieved annual sales of over 10 million, which was a 190% increase in volume since the beginning of Odlum’s presidency in 1934.⁸ 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.”⁹ Odlum became Chairwoman 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 1930’s was the best high fashion retailer on Fifth Avenue. It was no doubt due to Hortense Odlum’s vision.”¹⁰

During the 1930s, women were not just shoppers and saleswomen but some, like Odlum, were able to crash through the proverbial glass ceiling. She accomplished what she set out to do, to create a *Woman’s Place*. Retail, according to Odlum was an excellent career choice for women as it was “a field in which she does not have to compete in any disadvantage with men.”¹¹

⁶ “Mrs. Odlum Heads Bonwit Teller,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1934.

⁷ Jane Farrell-Beck and Jean Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress in the U.S.* (New York: Fairchild, 2007).

⁸ “Record Sales Set by Bonwit Teller, Total for Year Ended Jan. 31 put at \$10,006,325 by Hortense M. Odlum,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1940, 47.

⁹ “Holmes Elected by Bonwit Teller, Becomes President of Store, Succeeding Mrs. Odlum, Who is made Board Chairman,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1940.

¹⁰ Ira Neimark, in discussion with the first author, October 2013.

¹¹ Sara Pennoyer, *Polly Tucker Merchant* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1937): X.