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# Creating a *Woman's Place*: The Bonwit Teller Presidency of Hortense Odlum, 1934 to 1940

## ABSTRACT

*Dorothy Shaver is documented as the first female President of a major American retail firm and yet Hortense Odlum at Bonwit Teller (1934–1940) preceded her by ten years. Odlum came to position as President of Bonwit Teller when the country was in the throes of the Great Depression. With no work experience and little education, Odlum approached the business from the only perspective she knew, that of a customer who appreciated style, service and practicality. Through examination of Odlum's autobiography, newspaper and fashion reports, and other primary source material, it becomes clear how Odlum not only improved business, but more than doubled the volume at Bonwit Teller. Some of her strategies included pricing diversification, and the creation of departments for specific target markets including men and women in college. She also established a Consumer's Advisory Committee to better capture the female voices of shoppers. Odlum's approach pioneered the creation of a store by a woman for women.*

## KEYWORDS

Hortense Odlum  
Bonwit Teller  
Great Depression  
department store  
Salon de Couture  
721 Club

1. Donald Trump bought the Bonwit Teller location and erected Trump Tower, which is adjacent to Tiffany's New York flagship and across the street from Bergdorf Goodman.

## INTRODUCTION

From the nineteenth century onward, a myriad of new retail stores developed within the United States (Hendrickson 1979). These establishments provided shoppers, particularly women, assortments of fashion products that helped shape the American culture of consumption. Ready to wear flooded the marketplace and prompted the democratization of fashion (Kidwell and Christman 1974). Authors have explored the role that women played as consumers and entry-level saleswomen in stores in both America and abroad. However, less is documented regarding female management and leadership contributions in retail. Stories of legendary men such as Marshall Field, Harry Selfridge, John Wanamaker and James Cash Penney abound. Conversely, aside from scholarship regarding Dorothy Shaver and her career at Lord & Taylor, documentation of female contributions in retail is limited. Shaver is credited as the first female President of a major American retail company and the 'first lady of the merchandising world' (see Amerian 2011; Webber-Hanchett 2003). However, Hortense Odlum, who served as first President and then Chairwoman of Bonwit Teller from 1934 to 1944, preceded Shaver by ten years (Anon. 1970). Furthermore, although Bonwit Teller operated for close to 100 years, 1895 to 1990, the history of the store remains somewhat obscure.

The New York-based Bonwit Teller was founded by Paul Bonwit as a women's specialty store in 1895 (Crawford 1941). In the early part of the twentieth century, Bonwit's was known as a retailer that provided luxury goods to a discerning clientele (Keist and Marckett 2013). Mr. Bonwit was a merchant who demanded the finest of fashions for his customers and his passion for style and quality established his namesake business as a premier choice for New York's elite (Crawford 1941). A promotional catalogue produced by the store in 1928 stated: 'It was his [Paul Bonwit's] ambition to create the first great store devoted exclusively to the finest apparel and accessories for women and misses' (Anon. 1928). Bonwit executed his store with the focus of a specialty boutique yet on the scale of a department store. The store occupied several different locations until 1930 when the permanent flagship was established at 56th Street and 5th Avenue, an address in the New York retailing world that became synonymous with luxury fashion.<sup>1</sup>

However, once at the new location, the exclusivity that Bonwit's was known for vanished in a cavernous space previously occupied by A.T. Stewart and Co. department store, a larger and more diversified business. Moving exhausted financial reserves, and Mr. Bonwit was unable to sufficiently update the store interior or fill it with enough products. At the same time, sales had softened as a result of the Great Depression. Bonwit defaulted on his loans and Atlas Corporation, operated by Floyd Odlum, acquired the company in 1931 (Anon. 1940a). Odlum, a lawyer and venture capitalist by trade, was unsure of what to do with a women's store; however, he noted that the company in the years leading up to 1930 generated nearly 500,000 dollars in annual profits (Anon. 1934a). This previous financial success intrigued Odlum, and so he decided to ask his wife, Hortense, for advice as to what was wrong with the store (Figure 1).

What started as a casual enquiry from husband to wife in 1932 led to an exciting new career for Hortense Odlum. At first, she served as consultant from 1933 to 1934, then as President of the firm from 1934 to 1940 and finally as Chairwoman of the board from 1940 to 1944 (Farshall 2012). Without previous work experience, and little education, Odlum, at the age of 40, re-established



*Figure 1: Hortense Odlum c.1940. Image © The McQuarrie Memorial Museum, St. George, Utah.*

Bonwit Teller as an icon of the American retail industry (Mamp 2014). Her clear focus on customer service and stylish quality merchandise offered at diverse price points was in tune with consumer demands of the 1930s.

### **SHOPPING AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

During the Great Depression, as much as 25 per cent of the workforce was unemployed (Farrell-Beck and Parsons 2007). However, women continued to shop as evidenced by the products produced and sold by both private industry and government-funded programmes (Marcketti 2010). Shoppers of the 1930s balanced economic and social factors that affected their choices regarding apparel consumption. Shopping habits changed as women needed to maximize their clothing purchases. They achieved this through comparative shopping, evaluating similar clothing styles sold by different stores, and purchasing based on price in order to get the most for their money. Generally speaking, consumers chose to buy less expensive clothing rather than cease buying altogether (Barber and Lobel 1952).

As male unemployment escalated, more women looked for work to help support their families. While less than 20 per cent of the nation's adult women worked outside of the home, clothing remained a social identifier of 'status or desired status and a tool for finding and keeping work' (Srigley 2007). Department and specialty stores adopted diversified pricing strategies that capitalized on the availability and lower cost of mass manufactured goods. Class conscious, yet financially strapped women, searched stores for bargains but also found ways to repurpose and use second-hand items (Benson 2007). The Great Depression prompted consumption of apparel products focused on price and practicality (Srigley 2007).

2. See *Memories*, presented to Hortense Odlum on 17 June 1935 and retrieved from the McQuarrie Memorial Museum Archive (a collection of stories, oral histories, songs and poems).

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Hortense Odlum was born in 1892, the third of six children to Hector and Ella McQuarrie, in the small town of St. George, Utah, where her father was an elder in the Mormon Church and a farmer.<sup>2</sup> Her paternal ancestors converted to the Mormon faith while still in their native Scotland and immigrated to Utah in 1855 (*Memories* 1935). Hortense, who referred to herself as the 'homely sister of three beauties', was a precocious child who delighted in staging elaborate puppet plays for neighbourhood children and spent solitary hours in the attic dreaming of her future (Odlum 1939: 16). Her proclivity for shop keeping was evidenced at an early age, as she would make cornhusk dolls that she then sold to neighbourhood children in a makeshift store she had set up in her backyard in exchange for pins, matches or eggs (*Memories* 1935).

In 1915, Hortense met a lawyer from Colorado named Floyd Odlum. They were married that same year and the first of two children (Stanley and Bruce) was born in 1916. Their first year of marriage was one of scrimping and saving to support their new family on Floyd's salary of 50 dollars per month. Hortense said of this period, 'my budget ignored such needs as clothes and amusements. We were clothed in so far as the demands of decency required ... it didn't matter that we couldn't afford even a daily paper' (Odlum 1939: 32).

Floyd Odlum's company gave him a raise to 75 dollars per month and then asked him to relocate to their New York office. With two suitcases holding all their worldly possessions and new baby Bruce in tow, the Odlum's moved to New York via train, where their lives changed rapidly (Odlum 1939). Floyd ascended the corporate ladder to the position of Vice President and then started his own company in 1923 with 40,000 dollars that, by 1930, had grown into a value of over 120,000,000 (Anon. 1941). His company, Atlas Corporation, sold holdings before the stock market crash of 1929 and was then able to use that liquidity to acquire several new companies for a fraction of their value before the crash. In just fourteen years, Floyd Odlum became one of the ten wealthiest men in America (Anon. 1941).

In December 1932, Floyd told Hortense that Bonwit's was 'on the rocks' and asked her opinion regarding what was wrong with the store; she replied, 'I can't tell you anything about what's wrong with Bonwit Teller because I've never been in it' (Odlum 1939: 7). This was a powerful statement coming from a woman who had considerable disposable income and a keen interest in fashion. When her husband's persisted as to why, she replied, 'I suppose I never heard anything about it that made me think I'd find what I wanted there' (Odlum 1939: 7).

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 (Anon. 1938a). 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 approach to making a store that was in her own words, 'high class, but not high hat', meaning that style and elegance abounded but every woman, irrespective of income or social class, would feel welcome (Anon. 1934b: 14).

Following the holiday season of 1932, Odlum began her assessment of Bonwit's in an advisory capacity. She started by doing what felt natural to her, helping customers on the selling floor (Odlum 1939). She came to several conclusions that seemed to guide her for the rest of her career. Her observations

included: there was no sales help available when you needed it, the store was dismal and unpleasant to shop in, the merchandise was not desirable and there was certainly nothing for a woman on a budget, and finally a general malaise had fallen over the store. For the first few months of 1933 she went to the store every day, smiled incessantly at everyone, took copious notes and asked questions of anyone she came into contact with (Odlum 1939).

One of the first suggestions that Odlum made for Bonwit Teller was to relocate the millinery department to the first floor of the store. Paul Bonwit, who continued to serve as President of the firm until October 1934, and his executive team were against it. However, Odlum was undeterred and maintained that 'women know what women want in a store' (Anon. 1934b: 14). She instinctively knew that a hat was an impulsive purchase and that women on a budget could better afford a new hat to create a different look versus an entirely new dress. Odlum's instinct was correct; the new department opened and millinery sales tripled (Anon. 1934a).

In the summer of 1933 Odlum went on her annual pilgrimage to her native Utah for a few weeks (*Memories* 1935). When she returned to New York she found that an entire floor of the store had been blocked off to save money on utilities, displays were dull and the morale that she had 'worked her heels off to improve' had returned to its previous state (Odlum 1939: 48). It occurred to the Odlums that if Hortense's improvements to the store were going to have any real lasting impact, she needed to have more authority in the business. They developed a plan to gradually retire Paul Bonwit permanently from the business and to install Hortense as President. Hortense officially became President in October of 1934 and Bonwit publically retired for health reasons.

## **COOLER AND BIGGER**

Odlum quickly repainted and cleaned up the store but also went about cooling the store with air conditioning. In the 1930s air conditioning was not yet widely available. The first air-conditioned car was not manufactured until 1939, and only the wealthy had the pleasure of affording private residence air conditioning. Most businesses did not employ the technology until the mid- to late 1940s (Green 2012). The Great Depression initially stalled the widespread adoption of air conditioning and World War II further delayed progress of the invention first developed in 1902 to cool an overheating printing press (Scanlon 2004). However, in May of 1938 more than 1300 employees gathered to celebrate as Odlum 'cut a silver cord putting the motors into operation' (Anon. 1938b: 35). The store capitalized on this event and announced the innovation in an advertisement on the fifth page of *The New York Times*, which featured a quote from Odlum, 'we have air conditioned every inch from entrance to eaves. And that means a cool comfortable healthful summer for employees as well as pleasant shopping for all our customer friends' (Anon. 1938c: 5). A cool environment in May 1938 ensured good business for the summer, particularly as retail stores often experienced decreased sales in the hot months of July and August (Biddle 2011).

As business increased under Odlum's tenure, more departments were added to the store and additional space was required. In mid-1938, construction began at the store that would add two additional floors at a cost of 85,000 dollars. This added 12,000 square feet of space that according to Odlum would be used 'to handle increasing business and to permit

3. In two years from 1935 to 1937 under Odlum's leadership profits at the store increased from a deficit of \$108,929 in 1935 to a positive \$223,672 in 1937. Total volume grew during this same period from 5.8 million to 9.4 million.



*Figure 2: Bonwit Teller expansion. Odlum directed the addition of over 12,000 square feet of space in 1938. Image © Wurts Bros./Museum of the City of New York.*

reallocation of a number of selling departments as well as to provide additional space for service departments' (Anon. 1938d: 39) (Figure 2).

These additional departments and services allowed Odlum to gain market share and attract customers to the store. In the throes of the Great Depression, and within three years of becoming President, business dramatically increased and the sales staff grew from about 600 to over 1400 people (Anon. 1937a). Between 1935 and 1937 total sales volume at the store increased 62 per cent and profits grew an astounding 305 per cent (Anon. 1938e).<sup>3</sup> These financial achievements allowed Bonwit's to payback a 300,000-dollar bank loan in 1937 (Anon. 1938e). Additionally, *The New York Times* reported in 1939 'one of the largest realty deals consummated recently

in the 5th Avenue district' when Bonwit Teller acquired sole ownership of the building they occupied and purchased the space outright from the landlord (Anon. 1939a: 51).

## DIVERSIFIED PRICING, ASSORTMENT AND SERVICES

Diversified pricing prompted Odlum's creation of new departments in the store. It was her viewpoint that women of different economic means should all be able to feel good about how they looked. According to Odlum:

Shopping is a very important thing to a woman. And she should be given help, expert help, in finding just the right thing for her, regardless of her income. Stores ought to take more of an interest in her problems, not just let her wander around until she buys something in desperation.

(1939: 9)

As such, 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 catered to a diversity of clientele.

### *Salon De Couture*

Odlum focused, starting in 1934, on the development of a new department at the store that provided access to the finest fashions of Paris and custom designs called the Salon de Couture. The newly designed space occupied the entire fourth floor of the building and was decorated by a celebrated female interior designer of the time, Agnes Rowe Fairman, whose work for Bonwit Teller 'achieved an atmosphere of that described as a Parisian couturier's salon' (Anon. 1934c: 12). Odlum recognized, being a discerning woman of means herself, that Bonwit's was not offering exclusive enough products for New York's social elite. Competitors such as Saks Fifth Avenue's Salon Moderne, headed by Sophie Gimbel since 1931, were very successful, and Bonwit's was not effectively competing in this arena (Anon. 1969).

Fira Benenson, who went by the professional name of Countess Illinska, was hired as head designer for Bonwit's Salon de Couture and served in this capacity from 1934 until 1948 (Anon. 1977). Benenson created made-to-order clothes, and showed small customizable collections each season of her own designs to Bonwit customers (Figure 3).

The Salon de Couture also fulfilled requests for orders with Paris fashion houses such as Schiaparelli, Mainbocher, Lanvin and Chanel with the assistance of Gladys Tilden, Bonwit's liaison in Paris (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup>

The department hosted events that would appeal to a customer with a developed aesthetic such as a display of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French courtesan hand fans in April of 1934 (Anon. 1934d). Strategically, the Salon de Couture was also developed as a way to meet the needs of New York couture customers as the threat of war increased in Europe (Anon. 1977). Odlum recalled, 'I insisted that we have the facilities to create exquisite gowns which would always be remembered by their wearers' (1939: 116). The department was very successful and Benenson headed it for the next fourteen years (Anon. 1977).

4. Gladys Tilden Papers, BANC MSS 88/229 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. A letter from Paul Bonwit dated 26 January 1934 announced the establishment of the Salon de Couture to Gladys Tilden and instructed her to assist Fira Benenson with any requests she had. Telegram correspondence between Tilden and Benenson (whom signed all her notes with the singular 'Illinska') from 1934 and 1935 documented orders and requests from the most notable fashion houses of Paris for Bonwit's customers.



*Figure 3: Brown wool dinner dress by Fira Benenson for Bonwit Teller's Salon de Couture c. 1940. Embroidered gold fleur-de-lis accentuate the plunging neckline and end of sleeves. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.*

### **Rendezvous and Debutante**

Odlum was not just interested in meeting the needs of her wealthiest customers. Personally, she understood the needs of a woman on a budget. When she and Floyd first moved to New York they were invited to a Thanksgiving dinner at the home of a wealthy colleague. Floyd had no dark shoes so he painted a light pair with shoe polish. This was met with complaints of the smell of fumes during dinner. Hortense wore an ill-fitting dress that did not suit her because it was the only thing she could find on her limited budget (Odlum 1939). According to Odlum:

Because I had been one of them, I knew that there were countless women with modest budgets who knew and wanted to wear good clothes, good in the sense of design and fabric as well as practicality. Their numbers had been increased by the first years of the depression. There was an enormous market waiting for any merchant who would take the time and trouble to find out what its needs and preferences and financial limits were.

(1939: 95–96)



Figure 4: Advertisement for Schiaparelli Madonna Blue Linen Gown (Anon. 1935b: 61).

Odlum observed that the moderate dresses offered at Bonwit's were covered in decoration in order to compensate for the fact that they were poorly made or designed. She stated:

There isn't a dress in that department that a well-dressed woman would want to wear. I've never seen so many Christmas tree ornaments on clothes. Our moderate priced merchandise must be the best we could find in the markets.

(Odlum 1939: 72, 115)

It was Odlum's assertion that women would respond to dresses that were of better fabrication with clean line and minimal ornamentation that

**Bonwit Teller**  
**Rendezvous Shop**  
**for sizes 11 to 17**



**3 piece suit 39.75**

**Confetti  
Tweeds**

Classic three-piece suit—practically a wardrobe in itself. Exclusive with us in new heavy tweed. Brown or pine green with bright flecks that are the key to brilliant new accessory tie-ups. Yellow, Titian, Roman green—pick up each with scarfs, sweaters, gloves. Tailored for a long life on campus or in the suburbs. On the Eighth Floor.

**FIFTH AVENUE AT FIFTY-SIXTH STREET**

Figure 5: Rendezvous advertisement that featured a three-piece suit in practical tweed for \$39.75. Note that versatility is emphasized, 'practically a wardrobe in itself', and that the garment is good for a 'long life on campus or in the suburbs' (Anon. 1935c: 5).

would allow the wearer to be stylish yet practical, offering length of and versatility in wear. She worked and pleaded with her buyers and manufacturers (most of whom were men) to deliver this kind of merchandise. Despite their protests she insisted and finally a product arrived in spring 1934 and was presented in newly branded departments called Rendezvous and Debutante.

Both departments were for a younger, yet moderate-priced customer. Joan Klein of the *Jewish Bulletin*, who penned a regular column on shopping and fashion, wrote in 1934:

one of the bright spots of Bonwit Teller 5th Avenue is the exciting young Rendezvous fashion shop on the second floor ... all in down to Earth pricing and designed to make the most of your good points.

(1934)



From the New Debutante Coat Shop  
BONWIT TELLER, NEW YORK

*in Botany's*  
*Velvedeau*

Brilliant new fabric! Deep, velvety and elegant of a new trend in fashion, in Velvedeau, Botany anticipated the vogue for masculine textures that is sweeping Paris. Each fold has luxury and the smooth texture of Velvedeau hugs the figure like a double, graceful line. Hand-dressed with beaver, an owl, sage, wine, green. Sizes 12 to 20. 1937  
BOTANY WOODSTOCK HILLS, FARMING, N. Y. • NEW YORK SHOWROOMS: 1408 BROADWAY  
Specialists of Fabrics for Women's Wear and Men's Wear • Top-Notch Hats for Head-Dressing • Creations of the Botany "Co" • Makers of the Botany Rules for Men  
Velvedeau by the yard is available in the past goods departments of the country's leading stores.

Figure 6: Advertisement for coat from Bonwit's Debutante department made in Botany's Velvedeau (Anon. 1937c: 49).

A review of advertisements for the Rendezvous department illustrates a frequent focus on quality fabrication, simplicity of line and versatility of wear and styling through multiple pieces (Figure 5).

Items in the Debutante department were slightly more fashion forward and often featured in *Vogue* (Figure 6).

### **College Girls Department**

Another new department established in 1934 was dedicated to women in college (Anon. 1934e). Starting in the 1920s a broader access to higher education resulted in more than one million Americans attending college by 1930 (Farrell-Beck and Parsons 2007). By this time, more women than ever before achieved a high school diploma and subsequently female enrolment at co-educational and female-only colleges across the country increased (Blackwelder 1997). Under Odum's direction, Bonwit's began to market specific apparel products to these women. Advertisements for the new shop featured an adoption of masculine fabrications and casual silhouettes and

modest price points (Anon. 1935a). The College Girls Department proved to be a long-term success. Twelve years later, in 1946, a fashion show on the eighth floor of the store featured products developed by Bonwit's buyers and designers who had visited colleges such as Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Bennington and Vassar as inspiration for the collection (Pope 1946).

### ***Beauty salon***

Aside from improved assortment, a more attractive store, more engaged salespeople and a customer-centric attitude, Odlum also recognized the need for the addition of services. In October of 1934, one of the first additions made soon after Odlum's appointment to President was that of a beauty salon (Anon. 1934f). Other stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue already had salons; however, Odlum recognized that this service was distinctly lacking in a store that sold products only for women (Kopytek 2011). She stated,

I wanted to have eventually under our roof every convenience for women who were shopping. A beauty salon was certainly one of them. [...] I knew how weary a woman can get who's been shopping all day, and how thankfully she relaxes under the ministrations of a skillful hair-dresser.

(Odlum 1939: 110)

The salon was under the direction of Monsieur Leon, and featured a plush interior with individual booths for clients, specially designed wall murals and yellow draperies and furniture (Anon. 1934f). Agnes Fairman decorated the new space and Monsieur Leon held a reception for the press on opening day with models coiffed in his creations. This addition was long lived; from October of 1934 onward the store was never again without a beauty salon.

### ***721 Club***

Odlum realized that there was an opportunity to increase sales during the holiday shopping season. Women, who were most often busy shopping for others during the holidays, were also the recipients of gifts. In order to appeal to men shopping for women, the 721 Club originated in 1934 (Anon. 1937b). Odlum explained:

Another way we've tried to lighten the masculine gift burden is to have all through the Christmas season a department, which is for the exclusive use of our men customers. We call it the *721 Club* (our street number on Fifth Avenue) and we've tried to make the atmosphere there as much like a man's club as we could so that they'd feel more at home than they usually do in a woman's shop. They can settle back in comfortable chairs and sip refreshing drinks while they look at gift suggestions.

(1939: 223–24, original emphasis)

The club, advertised as the 'gift headquarters for men' (Figure 7) was located on the fourth floor of the store and hosted an annual cocktail reception to launch the beginning of the season, referred to as a 'stag' party (Anon. 1938f: 34).



Figure 7: Advertisement announcing the 721 Club for the holiday season of 1937 (Anon. 1937d: 37).

The club was very well received. What started during Odlum's first holiday season as President in 1934 with 100 members grew to over 500 members by 1937 (Anon. 1937b). In order to shop at the 721 Club you had to be a credit account holder or the husband of an account holder. Each season, Bonwit's would also hold a preview for women to get a glimpse of the new gift assortment. Women shoppers were able to leave behind a wish list that itemized their current sizes to make shopping for the men in their lives even easier (Anon. 1951). The club was staffed with attractive women in green dresses and maintained an air of exclusivity via a private entrance, red lacquered doors and a sign above the entrance that read '721 Club, For Men Only' (Anon. 1951). The club became one of Odlum's longest-lasting initiatives and continued annually until 1971, when pressure from the Human Right's Commission of New York persuaded several New York department and specialty stores to do away with male-only shopping services or clubs (Anon. 1971).

Bonwit's was the pioneer of the specialized Christmas shop for men. In 1952, Saks Fifth Avenue opened the male-only Stag Club, borrowing its name from the Bonwit's annual opening party (Anon. 1952). In 1954, cosmetics firm Elizabeth Arden also opened a male-only private shop called 1 East

5. Ira Neimark in conversation with the author. Mr. Neimark, now in his 90s, began his career in 1938 as a doorman at Bonwit Teller for the 721 Club. Neimark shared his recollections of Odlum's tenure as President of the store for this research. Neimark would credit early lessons learned at Bonwit Teller as a means to his own success as future famed CEO of Bergdorf Goodman.

Fifty-fourth Street, which was named after the store's address, copying Bonwit's 721 Club naming strategy (Anon. 1954a). Other retailers offered male-only shopping services in the form of specialized salespeople such as Lord & Taylor's Red Rose Shoppers and Bergdorf Goodman's Christmas Angels, but without a private club-like atmosphere with coffee and pastries in the morning and cocktails in the afternoon (Anon. 1959). Upon the closing of the 721 Club in 1971 a long-term patron lamented that it was 'the only place you can get a decent drink on Fifth Avenue' (Anon. 1971).

## CONSUMER AND EMPLOYEE COMMITTEES

Odlum's hiring decisions, merchandising strategies and personal transition from housewife and mother to business leader and champion of women in business evidenced a feminist approach (Figure 8).

*The New York Times* reported that she was 'assembling a staff of executives, almost entirely feminine' (Anon. 1939b: d4). To develop a holistic feminine point of view in her business, Odlum turned to the most important female voice, that of the customer. She did this first through the creation of an open-door policy that made her personally accessible to any customer who wanted to lodge a complaint (Anon. 1938g). By 1935 Odlum created the Consumer Advisory Committee. Ira Neimark described the committee as, 'Hortense Odlum's crowning achievement. Her leadership of the committee brought great public relations to the store and made a profound impression on her customers. To be on the committee was an honor and a privilege'.<sup>5</sup>

According to Odlum the premise of the committee was simple,

Let's be unprofessional and do things that were never done before.  
Let's be feminine and follow our hunches. Let's be cordial as we would be in our own homes. Let's know our customers ... their point of view and taste. Let's keep asking them what they'd most enjoy in a shop if it could be exactly as they wanted it.

(Anon. 1939c: 5)

In the beginning Odlum brought with her the uncomplicated point of view of a customer. She realized that to retain this perspective she would have to connect with customers on a regular basis.

The Consumer Advisory Committee provided Odlum and her team with valuable insight. The committee met on a monthly basis as Odlum would host a lunch in her office with a variety of both charge and cash customers, who, according to Neimark, received a gift for their participation. A *New York Times* advertisement from 9 October 1938 featured a summary of the committee's work and an illustration of Odlum at lunch with her customers (Anon. 1938g). As an offshoot of the customer luncheons, Bonwit's also held customer conferences for larger audiences that provided workshops for women on dressing and fashion trends. One such conference held at the St. Regis hotel in March of 1938 was so popular that over 1200 women were turned away (Anon. 1938h).

The consumer-focused committee was such a success from both a store operations and publicity standpoint that the concept was expanded in 1937 to store employees. Starting in 1937 Odlum met with salespeople who were elected by their co-workers for monthly lunches on a six-month rotation; the



*Just as I imagined it  
five years ago—*

**BONWIT—  
A WOMAN'S PLACE**

*Figure 8: Illustration from Bonwit Teller advertisement of Hortense Odlum with a cake in the shape of the store. This marked her fifth year as President and celebrated the achievement of what Odlum referred to as a Woman's Place 'Just as I imagined it' (Anon. 1939c: 5).*

following autumn a separate non-selling advisory committee was also formed with employees from non-sales functions. It is clear that Odlum appreciated her employees both in word and in action. In December of 1938 bonuses totalling 25,000 dollars were paid to employees based on their length of service and department managers were given a two-week paid vacation (Anon. 1938i). Odlum personally handed out the envelopes, which included the message, 'May you have the good Christmas you so richly deserve—to all a Bonwit New Year' (Anon. 1938i: 47).

### **GOALS ACHIEVED**

By January of 1940, Bonwit's achieved annual sales of over 10,000,000, a 190 per cent increase in volume since the beginning of Odlum's Presidency in 1934 (Anon. 1940b: 47). On the anniversary of her sixth year as President the store achieved this financial milestone, which was a record for the company not seen since the early days of the 1920s (Anon. 1940c). 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' (Anon. 1940d: 45). 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 1930s was the best high fashion retailer on Fifth Avenue. It was no doubt due to Hortense Odlum's vision'.<sup>6</sup>

After her retirement Odlum led a life out of the spotlight and made frequent trips to her hometown of St. George, Utah (*Memories* 1935). She divorced Floyd amicably in 1935, was married briefly to Porfirio Dominici in 1938 and married for a final time in 1954 to Angel Kouyoumdjisky (Anon. 1954b). Odlum passed away following a long illness on 12 January 1970 (Anon. 1970).

## CONCLUSIONS: WHO IS REALLY THE FIRST? FORGOTTEN WOMEN

In many ways the story of Hortense Odlum's merchandising strategies at Bonwit Teller is not unique. During the Great Depression, other retailers of the period were looking for ways to diversify pricing and attract customers with different services and promotions. However, hers is the story of a woman, who, with no previous training or work experience, applied a feminine perspective to her business and achieved a positive outcome. She fully embraced her role as President of the store and simply approached the job from a customer's point of view. She also appreciated the feminine opinions of her employees and customers. Her vast life and economic experiences up until her career at Bonwit Teller informed her understanding of what women of various walks of life needed and wanted from a store of their own.

The history of women in general is often abbreviated and in the case of leadership in American retail, practically ignored. Dorothy Shaver of Lord & Taylor remains a shining example of a pioneering businesswoman. However, future research must continue to explore the role of businesswomen in retail and their assuredly countless untold stories. Women were not just shoppers and saleswomen but some, like Odlum, were able to crash through the proverbial glass ceiling. For Hortense Odlum, a keen fashion sense, an understanding of what her customers wanted and a proclivity for hard work saved Bonwit Teller during the Great Depression. Her story, and many others of forgotten female leaders, is worth remembering.

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