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In Love With Clothes of the 30's and 40's

By PENNY SINGER JUNE 12, 1994

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SOCIAL notes from all over: The bride wore white satin, a copy of a 1930's wedding dress. The bridesmaids wore original 1930's bias-cut long velvet gowns. The ceremony took place under a canopy fashioned from an antique white lace bedspread. The bridal table was decorated with well-preserved old bride-and-groom wedding cake tops from the bride's extensive collection.

"I will be living out my fantasy: I love the 30's look," said Stacey Winnick, describing the scene of her wedding later this year to Robert Pushkin. Ms. Winnick, a 34-year-old who started out as a

collector of vintage clothing, has managed to turn her extensive collection into a business. Four years ago, she started her company, Vintage by Stacey Lee. It sells clothing, shoes and accessories from the 1880's through the 1950's to designers who then copy the pieces or use them as an inspiration to create new lines.

Ms. Winnick's showroom, on the second floor of a building on Central Avenue in White Plains, is crammed with dresses, coats, shirts, old knitting and crocheting books, Montgomery Ward catalogues, Vogue magazines from the 1930's, hats and shoes, including P.F. Flyers and plaid sneakers from the 1940's, which, Ms. Winnick said, were suddenly in demand.

"Canvas sneakers from the 40's and the 50's are having a big comeback," she said. "And manufacturers are looking for the originals in order to best duplicate the fabric and the closures." Anonymous Customers

Several of the bias-cut chiffon, silk and linen evening dresses from the 30's, which Ms. Winnick calls her movie star gowns, were recently bought by a high-fashion designer who intends to copy them line for line for a new collection.

"Isn't this beautiful?" she said, holding up a slinky, halter-neck

dusty rose creation. "The designer who bought it is so crazy about it that she said she is going to keep it in her own archives."

Ms. Winnick's customers include 30 well-known manufacturing houses, "who buy from me all the time but insist on remaining anonymous," she said. But, she continued, Liz Claiborne, her first client, had no such stipulations.

"Actually, it was a designer for Liz Claiborne who gave me the incentive I needed to go into business. She was in a beauty salon where I had some of my things on display, and she liked them so much she asked me to bring several of them up to the showroom. It turned out they bought everything I had. And they were especially enthusiastic about the men's plaid shirts from the 30's and a patterned sweater from the 40's." Vintage Clothing Heaven

Ms. Winnick said that she began canvassing thrift shops looking for vintage clothing when she was a student at Edgemont High School.

"I was always drawn to the styles of the 30's, and I was intrigued by the fabrics and the workmanship," she said. "At first, I started buying dresses to wear myself, but gradually, my collection grew and grew. Later, when I went to college at Syracuse in upstate New York, I found I was in vintage clothing heaven. People stay put -- their houses have big attics that are crammed with things.

"The garage sales there were fabulous. Often people would just ask me to take the old clothes away. I started working as a 'picker,' reselling my finds to dealers."

But, she said, her first job after graduation had nothing to do with vintage clothing; it was in the public relations department of Nestle's in White Plains where, she recalled: "One summer I appeared on every local TV station in the Northeast. My assignment was to show how to cook in a dormitory room. I demonstrated such things as grilling a cheese sandwich with an iron.

"And then I joined a P.R. agency in Manhattan, which had several fashion accounts, and I worked on those.

"Eventually, I opened my own public relations firm, also in Manhattan, where I specialized in fashion accounts. And I did well enough in the business to employ three people."

But, with the onset of the recession in 1989, she said, "the growth of the retail P.R. field was over. I sold off my remaining accounts and then decided to take six months off to think about what I was going to do next." The Great Gatsby Look

But before the six months were out, on the strength of the Liz Claiborne account, she became "the vintage clothing source for fashion designers."

"I couldn't be happier," she said. "I knew I was meant to do this. I get a big kick out of seeing many of the pieces I sell to designers copied and on sale to stores all over the country. An almost exact copy of one of my favorites, a 30's printed linen evening dress with a bolero jacket, is going to make a splash in one top designer's line in the summer of 1995. And another name designer recently paid \$425 for what I call the Great Gatsby look, casual but elegant, a long T-back linen dress from the 20's. He said he couldn't resist it because he so admired the detail and the workmanship."

Ms. Winnick finds her vintage clothing with the help of referrals from estate lawyers, real estate brokers and moving companies. She buys her stock directly from customers like Edith Foley, 89,

and her sister, Gilda Conti, a former concert singer, who have lived in the same house in Yonkers for 45 years.

"Recently, I bought Mrs. Foley's 1938 organza and lace wedding gown," Ms. Winnick said. "It's in beautiful condition. Even the wax flower treatments are intact. I also bought a green satin evening dress and a trove of beautifully preserved velvet flowers of the same era from her."

As for the hot items now, she said, they are princess-line coats, especially those trimmed with Persian lamb collars and cuffs, men's outdoor jackets like the red plaid hunting jacket and the North Fork velvet number from the 30's, knitted bathing suits, women's and children's play outfits from the 30's and anything embroidered or beaded. Ms. Winnick's markup is 100 percent.
Books Also in Demand

"Designers will buy a dress or a jacket just for the beading and send it to China or India for duplication," Ms. Winnick said. "My old knitting and crochet books are also very much in demand. One 1920 pattern was recently used for a crocheted hat, and the prototype was sent to China where a line of hats was made by hand. And the 1940 hair combs I sold to a designer are a large part of their summer line."

Customers are welcome in Ms. Winnick's showroom but only by appointment. She said she often takes her finds directly to designers' offices whenever she feels she has something appropriate for them.

"For instance, I know that Jeffrey Kurland, who is the costume designer for Woody Allen, is always looking for 1920's hats," she said. "Whenever I get them, I show them to him, especially the cloches." The Thrill of the Chase

Ms. Winnick says she studies old-fashioned publications and visits museums and costume institutes to learn more about the history of clothing. "I belong to the Costume Society of America, and their meetings and conventions are a terrific source of information."

But what she said she likes most is the thrill of the chase. "You never know what you are going to find, and that is so exciting," she said. "I go faithfully to garage sales every Saturday morning, but the best estate I ever found came from a referral from a friend of my mother's in Florida. It was the wardrobe of a former designer, a woman over 80. There, I uncovered eight closets of vintage clothing in beautiful condition. What a great day that was!"

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