



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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March 31, 1993

Mrs. Janice Williams
Post Office Box 3404
St. Augustine, Florida 32085

Dear Mrs. Williams:

As we discussed over the telephone, I enclose a list of questions regarding the background and history of the Morton Williams stores. Any information you and your family might provide would be helpful. I left some space for answers to the specific questions, but please feel free to add any other information you think might be important to record.

We have enjoyed looking through and copying the scrapbooks. They provide an invaluable dating guide for footwear of the 1950s and 1960s and an excellent overview of styles carried by a Florida store. This information will be useful for our collections and exhibit research. We photocopied each page on to 8 1/2 x 11 paper and organized them into a notebook. If there are any earlier scrapbooks available, we would also be interested in copying those, too.

On behalf of the Museum of Florida History, I thank you for allowing us to copy the scrapbooks and for sharing background information on the Morton Williams stores. I invite you to visit the Museum the next time you are in Tallahassee and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jeana Elizabeth Brunson

Jeana Elizabeth Brunson
Senior Curator
Museum of Florida History

Enclosure

MORTON WILLIAMS

1. FOUNDING

In 1934, J. Morton Williams opened a fine quality women's shoe business in Tampa, Florida as a leased department operator in Ernest Maas; at the time, Tampa's leading and most fashionable women's apparel store. In 1942 he opened his own store in Tampa at 607 Franklin St.; the name MORTON WILLIAMS, for the first time, went up in signage. In 1938 a leased shoe department was opened in Purcells in Jacksonville. Purcells quickly became the city's premier store for women's apparel and shoes. In 1942, he left Purcells to open a MORTON WILLIAMS shoe store "for fashionable women" at 127 W. Adams Street. In 1944 he opened a similar store in St. Petersburg, followed closely by another in Sarasota.

2. Operations in Florida began in 1934 and ended in 1992.

3. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

*J. Morton Williams was born December 30, 1901 in Charleston, SC. In 1917 he started in the shoe business with his father, Henry Williams, where he learned the first rule of how to help a lady try-on a pair of high-button shoes (the salesman's head must be turned so as to not get a glimpse of a lady's stockinged ankle). It was here that he also learned about orthopedics as it related to the fitting of shoes. All his future shoe businesses would be grounded and guided by his knowledge of orthopedics. Out of this grew a reputation of offering an extensive range of sizes and the ability to meet special fitting needs; vis-a-vis, personalized service. Comfortable fit would always remain the objective. He, his wife and their 3 children left Charleston for Tampa in 1934 with a total of \$3000 cash (realized from the sale of their residence). It was with this and the promise of \$2000 credit for 90 days from a shoe factory that the first business was opened in Tampa. He made literally hundreds of friends in the shoe industry who respected his expertise in shoe detailing and knowledge of last and patterns that gave the best fit. He retired in 1968 but remained on call for consultation. He now lives in St. Augustine and just celebrated his 92nd birthday. Dancing with his wife Theresa at the Riverview Club is now one of the important things in his life.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION continued

*Amelia G. Williams was born 1906 in Athens GA. She played an indispensable and pivotal role in the business of MORTON WILLIAMS. In the mid 20s long before it was common done, she introduced women's handbags in conjunction with shoes. Then she added gloves, hosiery, scarves and other accessories. In the late 50s she was responsible for adding a complete showing of women's apparel, to the extent that MORTON WILLIAMS became as well-known for women's fashion apparel as it had been for shoes. She served as the buyer and merchandise manager of dresses, sportswear, coats, formalwear, lingerie, handbags, hosiery, gloves, jewelry, and scarves. She was one of the first to create a shop stocked with clothes, shoes, and handbags exclusively for travel. An accomplished artist with a keen eye for color and design, she was responsible for display, both interior and exterior show windows. She designed store interiors and exteriors prior to construction and took an active part in decor to the extent that she had from time to time painted floor-to-ceiling murals on interior walls of the shops. She remained active in the business until 1968. She is now deceased.

*Edward Glaser, born Athens, GA in 1915 (brother of Amelia G. Williams). He was store manager and shoe buyer in Tampa and Jacksonville, beginning 1942 and ending about 1970. He was an essential part of the multi-store operation and was a skilled shoe buyer and merchandiser. He was also greatly loved by his employees and customers. He is now deceased.

*J. Morton Williams, Jr., born in Charleston, SC in 1927. He attended public school in Tampa; entered the University of Florida in 1944 and in 1945 was called to active duty with the US Navy. After discharge, he attended Tulane University until graduation. He began full-time with MORTON WILLIAMS in 1950 and eventually operated several MORTON WILLIAMS businesses in Jacksonville, including stores downtown and in Avondale, as well as various leased departments in and around the city. In 1972, he opened a restaurant in St. Augustine. After almost 10 years in the restaurant business he opened a real estate office and did a number of remodeling and restoration projects. He is now retired and living in St. Augustine.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION continued

*Henry J. Williams, born Charleston SC in 1929; he attended the University of Florida and the University of Miami. Beginning 1953, he operated for MORTON WILLIAMS a women's shoe department in Rosenblums, downtown Jacksonville. In 1954 he opened his own MORTON WILLIAMS business at 233 Peachtree Street, Atlanta, GA. This he operated until August of 1959. Along with others, the building which housed the store in order to build the Atlanta Merchandise Mart. Today, the address of the Atlanta Merchandise Mart is 233 Peachtree St. Following this, Henry left retail altogether and lived in the Virgin Island for 15 years as a building contractor and a real estate broker. He now lives in Winter Haven and markets computer systems to professionals and large corporations.

*Edward D. Williams, born Charleston SC in 1933; attended public schools in Jacksonville. He served 2 years in the Army Signal Corps after which he attended and graduated from Rollins College in Winter Park. He joined MORTON WILLIAMS of Tampa in 1960. At one point in time he operated 3 MORTON WILLIAMS businesses in Tampa. His operation became one of Tampa's largest and most highly regarded business of its kind. He moved to California in 1975 to begin an advertising business. He returned to Florida in 1985 and is now employed by Gayfers in Jacksonville.

4. STORES AND LEASED DEPARTMENTS IN FLORIDA

1934 to 1992, Total of 17 stores and 7 leased departments.

Tampa, Florida

1934 > 1937 : leased department Ernest-Mass on Tampa Street
1937 > 1942 : leased department Weil-Maas on Franklin Street
1942 > 1951 : 607 Franklin Street
1951 > ? : 314 Twiggs Street
? > 1970?: 602 Franklin Street
1959 > 1962 : 1707 Dale Mabry Hwy
1963 > 1978 : 1711 Dale Mabry Hwy
1965 > 1969?: Davis Island (2) some time during 1951 to 1965

Jacksonville, Florida

1938 > 1945 : leased department Purcells
1947 > 1951 : 127 W. Adams Street
1952 > 1969 : 120 W. Adams Street.
1957 > 1959 : leased department Beaufort Baum/Avondale
1953 > 1955?: leased department Rosenblums
1958 > 1962 : leased department Riverside Gown Shop
1957 > ? : leased department Boluns/San Marco
1957 > ? : 3564A St.Johns Avenue/Patio Sportswear Shop
1960 > ? : 3566 St.Johns Avenue/Travel Shop
1960 > 1992 : 3562 St.Johns Avenue
1961 > 1969 : 3589 St.Johns Avenue, Avenue Shop

St, Petersburg, Florida

1944 > 1947 : 405 Central Avenue
1948 > 1950 : 353 Central Avenue

Sarasota, Florida

ca 1945, 2 downtown locations, addresses unknown

5. MORTON WILLIAMS, OUT OF STATE

1954 > 1959 : Atlanta, GA 233 Peachtree Street.

6. MATERIALS SUPPLIED

Especially note Florida Times Union clipping of 8/22/52 describing 'modus operandi'. Also see photographs of interiors and exteriors of some stores.

7. BRAND NAMES, KINDS OF MERCHANDISE AND HISTORY

Prior to 1952 all MORTON WILLIAMS stores sold women's high grade shoes, handbags, and accessories. Beginning 1952, a complete showing of women's better fashion apparel was added.

a) As to the shoe business portion of the operation:

Over the years, some of the most popular shoe brands were Herbert Levine, Julanelli, Jerro, Rhythm Step, Florsheim, Laird Schober, Haymakers, Deliso Debs, Johansen, Penaljo, Barefoot Originals, Old Maine Trotters, Collela, Vaneli, Cardone & Baker, Amalfi, Bandolino, Thomas Cort, Jack Rogers, Adore', Bernardo, Deliso, Valley, Penopscot, Sbicca, Peacock, Caressa, Ferragamo, Margaret Jerrold, Andrew Geller, Cellini, Mademoiselle, Hill and Dale. While shoe fashions changed dramatically over time, nevertheless styles that gave the greatest amount of comfort were always long-term favorites; usually found in lower heel heights, supple leathers, flexible sole constructions, and good fitting lasts.

*A major event occurred when, in the 60s, American shoe manufacturers began producing in Europe using European lasts, materials, and construction. American women were quick to snap-up these imports because of their unique styling, colorful materials and the lower prices (due to the very strong dollar and, at that time, cheap labor in Europe). However, much to everyone's surprise European shoes did not fit as comfortably as American-made shoes; first and foremost because European lasts and patterns were created to fit European feet. Apparently, before that time no one realized there was a difference. It wasn't long before manufacturers and retailers began losing millions of dollars because of poor fitting imports; as a result it was decided to send American-made lasts to Europe. Because fitting was central to the operation, MORTON WILLIAMS' buyers saw this problem very early on. As a consequence, they initially bought only a limited number of imports. Eventually, however, American manufacturing was so negatively impacted by foreign competition that most American shoe factories closed and the U.S. shoe industry was brought close to extinction. The most conspicuous example is New England, that was once an American economic miracle as the preeminent shoe manufacturing center of the United States; the dissemination of New England shoe manufacturing is now a matter of history. With the massive loss of top grade U.S. shoe manufactures MORTON WILLIAMS found it increasingly difficult to find shoes that came up to its fitting standards.

*At the same time another dramatic change occurred: because of distance to the market, and a non-American trained labor force, the retailer almost completely lost his control of styling details. Usually, foreign-made shoes just couldn't be changed. This had harmful consequences for MORTON WILLIAMS for it could not longer design footwear for its customer's special needs or offer something that was unique to its operation.

BRAND NAMES, KINDS OF MERCHANDISE AND HISTORY continued

b) As to the apparel part of the operation:
Some of the most popular and best selling brands were Gino Paoli, Bleye, Goldworm, Caron, Country Set, Junior Miss, Anne Fogarty, Villager, Nahlii, Rafaele, David Crystal, Christian Dior, Oscar De La Renta, Oleg Cassini, Jonathon Logan, Carlye, Anne Klein, Jack Bloom, Evan Picone, Leslie Faye, Act III, California Girl, Glengarry, Talbot, Dalton, Jay Gould, Banff, Nardis of Dallas, Mr.Mort, Anita DeSola, Molly Parnis, Sweet William, Jack Winter. The showing in some of the stores was quite extensive and included coats, suits, evening gowns, junior and misses dresses, rainwear, bridals, furs, lingerie, swimwear, and sportswear of every description. Some of the stores specialized only in a few facets of the apparel business. However, overall, the stores catered to a wide range of clientele; from high fashion young women to couture and traditional women. The apparel business was always made more treacherous because of radical swings in fashions. One particularly traumatic time was when hem lines, in the course of a season, moved from mini (mid-thigh) to midi (mid-calf). In the face of this dramatic move, retailers everywhere had to quickly decide exactly what it was their own clientele wanted. MORTON WILLIAMS stores understood their clientele to be "southern traditionalist" (hemlines just above or just below the knee) and ran newspaper ads to announce, in no uncertain terms, exactly where it stood on the matter. The phone was ringing off the hook and letters were pouring in from people who, for the most part, agreed. A few retailers called to say that MORTON WILLIAMS was committing fashion suicide to take such a stand. That didn't happen; in fact, it served to strenghten MORTON WILLIAMS' image as an important factor in retail community.

8. SELECTION/BUYING

Selection/buying of shoes and apparel was done in completely different ways. Apparel buyers were only marginally involved in shoe buying and shoe buyers were involved in apparel buying mostly to get a forecast of colors and styles. Despite the fact that shoe buying mostly followed apparel, shoes required a far longer production period than apparel. Therefore it sometimes happened that shoes were not received in time to coordinate with apparel that had been received much earlier, or worse, sometimes the trend in apparel had already begun to change by the time the shoes were received. These were costly events that resulted simply because of unavoidable production differences.

a) Shoes were purchased from traveling salesmen who came to town with several bags of samples (initially size 4B only). Alternatively, shoes were bought at a few major markets (notably New York) or at regional or national "show shows" (a convention gathering of manufacturers) that were held in a number of major cities including Atlanta, Chicago, Miami, and Dallas. Although MORTON WILLIAMS buyers did some of their buying from traveling salesmen, every year at least 2 trips were made to New York in addition to 2 regional or national "shoe shows". In New York, entire buildings were occupied exclusive with lines of shoes (manufacturers) from all over the U.S. So it was possible to start at the top of a 20 or 30 story building and walk down one flight at a time, stopping on each floor to see several different lines, until one got to the bottom floor. And that's exactly the way it was done. It sometimes took 2 days from top to bottom.

*The New York market was extremely important because timing-wise it was the first in the country with the latest fashions and colors. Further there were many small, innovative New York City and Brooklyn factories that did not show their lines out of town.

*Taken into consideration with every shoe bought, was the fitting characteristics of the line. Since it was known that different parts of the United States produced shoes with completely different fitting dimensions, it was necessary to buy shoes made in a number of geographic locations; this so as to offer a diversified fitting selection. For example, New England always produced shoes with long foreparts, the mid-west (notably St. Louis) made shoes with shorter foreparts and precise arch dimensions, primarily made to fit "middle-American" feet. New York manufactured shoes fell somewhere in between and some routinely sacrificed good fit to innovative styling and said so. California too was in a class by itself. It produced mostly sandals in which the fitting dimensions were not quite as critical, with shorter, roomier foreparts and unsophisticated arch construction. But they were pretty and sometimes wild.

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS, ACTIVITIES, PRODUCTS continued

c) From the beginning, one of the most important accessories offered by MORTON WILLIAMS was handbags. Every operation had an extensive showing that included everything from tiny beaded evening bags to enormous, many compartmented travel bags. There were handbags in genuine alligator and genuine lizard; as well as gold or silver kidskins and imported brocades. Handbags were given added importance when the concept of "matching shoe and handbag ensembles" gained popularity. Although the coordination of the two might appear simple on the surface, it was no small task to accomplish it. One main stumbling block was that shoes and handbags were NOT manufactured by the same factories. Many times the shoe manufacturer was located in St. Louis, Miami, or New England and the handbag manufacturer was in New York. Even when distance was not a problem, it was frequently necessary for a shoe manufacturer to ship bundles of materials (it was using in the shoes) in order to make the matching handbags. To complicate matters, the production time required for shoes and handbags were quite different, and if that wasn't enough, most handbag manufacturers just simply refused to use shoe materials. The result was that out of the hundreds of handbag manufacturers in the United States, perhaps only a dozen or so made handbags to match shoes. Often after orders for shoes were placed, MORTON WILLIAMS' shoe buyer took swatches of materials as well as tannery names and color numbers to the handbag manufacturer. This practice of matching shoes to handbags began to lose its viability when imports replaced American-made shoes. From a production standpoint, it was just simply couldn't be done.

d) From the first day until the last, MORTON WILLIAMS was a family owned and operated business. Basically that meant that everyone in the family worked in all the many aspects of the operation, although some specialized in one job as opposed to another. There was no job too demeaning or too tough to tackle. When in his 70's, someone asked J. Morton Williams the co-founder, what he would say when they asked him in heaven to name something he had done well, he responded that he would tell them... "I did a very good job of putting out the garbage every night"; and in fact, he was never so high and mighty that he wouldn't do just that. After the doors closed for the day, it was not uncommon to see Amelia G. with a paint brush in her hand and fabric over her arm or around her neck as she did interior displays or trimmed the show windows. Her talent to make something beautiful out of nothing of great value was legendary. No one even bother to figure out how many hours were put in: whatever it took to get the job done properly. Of course, some family members have now been lost to the ravages of time. Those that remain are in differnt places doing different things ... and a unique time in the history of retailing is no more.

SELECTION/BUYING continued

b) Apparel was primarily bought in 3 key locations; New York, Dallas, and Miami. New York was far and away the most important of the 3 with MORTON WILLIAMS buyers. Almost every garment manufacturer in the U.S. as well as most foreign lines had a showroom in New York. In New York City itself there were hundreds of manufacturers whose production facilities were just behind the showroom. It was possible, and even desirable for buyers to be given a "tour" of the factory in order to buy, for immediate delivery, garments that had just been completed. Some factories sold the bulk of their production to major New York stores such as Saks 5th, Bloomingdales, Bonwit Teller, and Bergdorf Goodman. However, they would sell some of what they were already producing for the big New York stores to smaller retailers that were far from the New York area, using special house labels or the retailers labels for these garments. Unlike shoe buying, the buyer had almost no hand in styling what was bought. However, MORTON WILLIAMS always had a full-time seamstress (sometimes 2 or 3) that, aside from alterations for customers, modified garments to give them distinctive touches; such as adding a fur collar, unusual buttons, or a fine braid. Each garment manufacturer had its own specialty and therefore it was necessary to buy from many different manufacturers in order to have a completely rounded showing at retail. One of the other striking differences between buying apparel and shoes was that long-term personal business relationships developed with shoe manufacturers and salesmen whereas rarely did this occur in the buying of apparel. During the 60s, Dallas became a large market for apparel lines manufactured in the west. The first Merchandise Mart that was built had 5 miles of hallways. Later expanded to 10 miles, many eastern lines could no longer ignore it and decided to open show rooms in Dallas.

9. For a time, the MORTON WILLIAMS Jacksonville store at 120 W. Adams St. had a leased department that featured men's wear. Over the years, other merchandise offered included gifts, jewelry, small leather goods, millinery, and luggage.

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING

10. All newspaper advertising (layout, copy, type style) was created in-house by one of the principals, except art work that was done by a professional shoe or apparel artist (shoe artist did not draw apparel and vice-versa). Some guidelines used in creating the ads were 1) adequate white space in order to "showcase" the artwork, 2) copy grouped & zoned, 3) message simple, brief, and to the point. No ad was ever run until the newspaper submitted a "proof" before publication showing how the ad would look in print. Almost always the proof was considerably "corrected" by the ad creator, so much so that sometimes a second "proof" was required for more "fine tuning". Position of the ad in the newspaper was a constant concern since newspapers historically tended to give large volume advertisers "preferred" position. Once when MORTON WILLIAMS complained to the paper's advertising manager, he suggested advertising in the "other" newspaper if we didn't like the positions we had been getting. Of course, there was no "other" newspaper.

11. SCRAP BOOKS, HOW AND WHY COMPILED

a) After each ad was run it was pasted in the scrap book by whoever was responsible for advertising. In the early years, the newspaper supplied scrap books to advertisers free of charge.

b) The purpose of the scrap book was to create a planning tool for future advertising. This was a considerable benefit in regard to accuracy of seasonal timing as it related to the item or the idea advertised. Ads that proved very effective were repeated years later using different artwork. Daily sales reports always referenced any ad and noted weather conditions that may have influenced results one way or another.

12. SIGNIFICANT EVENTS, ACTIVITIES, PRODUCTS

a) It was a significant event every time a store or leased department was opened (or closed). It always entailed hundreds of hours of planning, buying, and pure physical labor late into the night. Holidays and weekends were especially good times for such intense activities.

b) Possibly one of the most dynamic events that occurred when, what had once been exclusively a business that operated in the heart of town (downtown), began operations out of downtown in the suburbs. Eventually as downtowns everywhere declined, suburban operations became primary, and finally, in time downtown operations were closed. This was a revolutionary development for the specialty retailer. It was in this period that apparel became a major factor in MORTON WILLIAMS business operations. In fact this change represented an adaptation in order to survive in the "new" world of suburban retailing. The old "two windowed shoe store" paradigm had become extinct and so had the community-centered social institution of "downtown shopping".