

American Yesteryear

Recollections of Gimbels

Going to Gimbels was a little like going to Wanamaker's. Both stores had apparently lost the interest of the public and much of their volume. It was during the shortage of merchandise after world War II when Fitz moved from Wanamaker's to Gimbels. She started with stockings of nylons of which every store was out of stock except Gimbels. This shortage of merchandise of refrigerators, washing machines, nylons, Scotch whiskey, and all electrical appliances was true of almost every big store in America, except one: Gimbels, New York. Stores all over the country began running ads about offering sharply limited amounts of scarce merchandise. "This precipitated my famous campaign, probably the best in my whole career--Gimbels HAS." Fitz mentioned in her book. (Fitz-Gibbon, 1967) They taunted competitors with their limited offerings and feeble promises. When Macy's was running ads on scarce items, which read: "When will Macy's have it? Day after tomorrow!". Fitz bided her time with the layout: "When will Gimbels have it? Gimbels HAS it!" (Bauer, Hambla. 1946)

After those promotions, Gimbels had been named The Brand Name Department Store of the nation. Needless to say, Gimbels was the most discussed department store in the nation. The Hearst treasure sale in 1941. It was the casual, informal way Gimbels talked about priceless treasures that made the sensational success of the sale. "Handling the Hearst collection was perhaps the most exciting promotion of my fourteen years at Gimbels." (Fitz-Gibbon, 1967) In 1945, Fitz coined another famous slogan "Nobody, but nobody, undersells Gimbels".

The most sensational advertising Fitz ran was her famous manure ad at Gimbels when she thought up some Christmas gift that a lot of people who already have everything would like to get, but for some reason never get.

"No Bossy But So Bossy Has Finer Manure Than Gimbels" was the headline.

In 1941, the second year Fitz took over Gimbels advertising director, her income was about \$90,000. During her first five years with Gimbels, sales increased ninety-six percent. It was also fact that Gimbels hired only Phi Beta Kappa as its advertising copywriters.

By 1986, 36 stores were closed or sold by the national chain. Gimbels was owned at the time by BATUS Inc., which also operated Saks Fifth Avenue and other chains from its Louisville, Ky., headquarters. The three-dozen Gimbels stores were less successful than some of the other operations. Three of the stores were sold to May Co., which converted them to Kaufmann's locations.

The Century III Mall store was able to operate as the last Gimbels in the country until January 1988, but as a discount store under different ownership.

Gimbels dominated Smithfield Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues in downtown Pittsburgh, and its window displays were an integral part of many cherished holiday memories. (1960s photo)



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