



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Enoch Steen Collection, 1888-1972

NMAH.AC.0206

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Enoch Steen Collection
Date:	1888-1972
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0206
Source:	National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Costume
Creator:	J.B. Simpson, Inc. (Creator) Steen, Enoch (Creator) Steen, Richard (merchant)
Extent:	1.6 Cubic feet (5 boxes)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Enoch Steen was born in Norway in 1888. His family moved to the United States and settled in Minnesota in 1890. In 1913 he began working with Meyer & Company, a tailor-to-trade business in Chicago. This company had acquired the American Woolen Mills Company from Sears, Roebuck & Co. in 1900. Meyer & Company also sold clothes under the names of Paragon Tailoring Company and the Lincoln Trading Company. Steen's principal duties were sales and advertising.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This collection was donated to the Smithsonian by Richard Steen(son of Enoch), president of Lewis and Thomas Saltz, Incorporated, in 1973. Transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Costume, 1995.

Separated Materials

The Division of Home and Community Life (now Division of Cultural and Community Life) holds artifacts related to this collection.

Processing Information

Processed by unknown. Finding aid revised by Franklin A. Robinson, Jr., archives technician, November 2008; supervised by Vanessa Broussard Simmons, archivist.

Preferred Citation

Enoch Steen Collection, 1888-1972, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Restrictions

The collection is open for research use.

Physical Access: Researchers must handle unprotected photographs with gloves.

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Biographical / Historical

Enoch Steen was born in Norway in 1888. His family moved to the United States in 1890, and he grew up on a farm in Minnesota. In 1913 he began working with Meyer & Company, a tailor-to-trade business in Chicago. This company, which had acquired the American Woolen Mills Company from Sears, Roebuck & Company in 1900, also sold clothes under the names of Paragon Tailoring Company and the Lincoln Trading Company. Steen's principle duties were sales and advertising.

Meyer & Company concentrated its business in the rural areas of the American South, where it specialized in the "Jazz Style Suit with Dip Fronts." The suits had a dip front coat and peg top trousers with strong, vivid colors and fabric patterns. The term jazz was actually a derogatory one and was used by Steen as a quick means of identification. Nifty, sassy, smart, and foxy were used as descriptors in letters and advertising. They were sold from 1900 through 1920, directly to the customer by salesmen on commission. Salesmen were recruited by the company through classified advertisements in magazines and newspapers. The company provided each salesman samples, a tape measure, self-measurement order blanks, and catalogues. All communication between the salesmen and the company was done by mail.

Steen purchased a list of 1,500,000 names of persons in small hamlets and rural routes in the South from a man who had used the names for liquor sales. A million circulars were sent to prospective agents on the list, and soon the American Woolen Mills Company became the leader in the field. From 1913 to 1921, Steen never saw a man wearing a jazz style suit, although thousands were shipped every month to the deep South. However, it seemed that Meyer and Company would have to go into bankruptcy. Steen formulated the idea of writing to each of the customers whose suits had been returned unclaimed even though they had already paid a five dollar deposit, and offer them the suit at a third off or a quarter the price. This strategy was a big success and brought in half a million dollars.

Steen used the name J.B. Simpson as the letterhead when writing to these customers explaining that he was a jobber in men's suits and woolsens. The name Simpson was that of a woman sharing a hospital room with his wife, and the initials J.B. belonged to the office manager of Meyer & Company.

Business was still bad and employees idle. Steen suggested that new customers would have to be drawn from the northern cities and towns where men were on the payrolls of factories and businesses. The South would never be the same and many people had moved north to work. He put an ad in the country edition of the Chicago Sunday Tribune looking for salesman to, "sell \$50 suits for \$29.50. You keep \$4., your comm. No exper. needed." Hundreds of answers were received and twelve new agents were selected to try sample test lines. It was at this point that J.B. Simpson, Incorporated was selected to be the name of the new company.

As the test agents brought in new business from northern communities, application forms went to all who answered. Orders were placed for 1,000 style books, order blanks, and other necessary supplies. These were sent to the agents in December, 1921. By the first week of January, 1922, the shops and workshops were working at full capacity, and at the end of six months a handsome profit had been made. There was no idle overhead, no advertising expense, almost no loss on unclaimed garments, no road men, no jobber expense, no retail cost and practically no selling expense for the \$6.50 sample line for each agent. This success continued for the next 18 months. By 1924 the depression was over and many agents returned to their old jobs. Steen had to work hard for business.

Gradually, Steen realized that it would be possible to succeed in Chicago or any large city. Starting with an agent in Chicago who sold many suits, more agents were hired and more orders came in. One of the agents suggested that it would be helpful if there could be a factory showroom in the building where they could meet their customers, write up orders and take delivery. This produced so much business that a manager was employed. A sales and service room was established in the Chicago Loop district which proved even more successful. New York City was the next

location for a factory sales and serve room and then Detroit. The Simpson creed, expounded by Enoch Steen in speeches and employee newsletters, was as follows:

Good, better best

Never stop to rest

Til the good is better

And the better, best

From 1922 on, Meyer & Company sold a line under the Simpson name through the Simpson sales organization. An increasing amount of the company's sales volume was secured under the Simpson name. In 1933, some Meyer & Company assets were transferred to J.B. Simpson, Incorporated. In 1937, a group of Chicago businessmen headed by Steen and George Kuh acquired control from the members of the Meyer and Strauss families and assumed active management of the company.

In an in-house newsletter of 1937, mention was made of the Lady Simpson division specializing in ladies tailor made clothes, accounting for seven percent of the company's volume by October 1952. In 1942, Simpson took over the A. Nash Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, its name, sales and manufacturing plant, and retained the Nash Golden Rule Clothes line. During World War II, Simpson Clothing Company manufactured uniforms for the Navy and Coast Guard.

By the middle of 1951, J.B. Simpson, Incorporated had 22 companies and owned branch showrooms in various large cities. From the beginning, the employees in the shops and workrooms were members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. All salesmen were paid a commission. A profit-sharing plan was put into effect in 1944 for managers, department heads, supervisors, and others who contributed to the company's success, but the result of whose work could not be accurately and separately measured. The payroll for shops and offices averaged 1,000 people. It was assumed that they produced about 150,000 orders a year.

In 1957, Enoch Steen became president of Edwards and Hill. This firm purchased Bullock and Jones, a San Francisco men's clothing store, in September 1947. It also owned Hill store in Chicago and two stores under the name of Lewis and Thomas Saltz in Washington, D.C.

Scope and Contents

The collection is organized into two series. The first series consists of material relating to early tailoring companies in existence before the establishment of J.B. Simpson, Incorporated in Chicago. Included are magazines, advertisements for salesmen, photographs of vaudeville actors endorsing the clothes, catalogues of several companies featuring, among the regular line, the jazz style suit. The second series includes articles, correspondence, and memos about the history and organization of J.B. Simpson, Incorporated from 1920 to 1972. In addition, there are measurement instructions and devices for measuring men for suits, manuals, memos and newsletters which were directed to showroom managers and to the salesmen.

This collection should be of particular interest to persons researching men's wear during the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century through the history of one company, J.B. Simpson, Incorporated of Chicago.

Arrangement

This collection is divided into two series:

Series 1: Tailoring Companies Before J.B. Simpson, Incorporated, 1888-1918, undated

Series 2: J.B. Simpson, Incorporated Records, 1923-1972, undated

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Clothing stores
- Fashions (men)
- Manufacturing
- Merchants
- Tailoring

Types of Materials:

- Correspondence -- 1930-1950
- Office memoranda
- Sales catalogs

Names:

- Lewis & Thomas Saltz
- National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Costume

Container Listing

Series 1: Tailoring Companies Before J.B. Simpson, Incorporated, 1888-1918, undated

Box 1, Folder 1	M. Born (tailor) magazine, 1908
Box 1, Folder 2	Advertisements for salesmen, 1888-1915, 1888-1915
Box 1, Folder 3	Hill Company clothes worn by vaudeville actors, circa 1914
Box 1, Folder 4	Paragon Tailoring and American Woolen Mills catalogues (Jazz Style suits), 1913-1918
Box 1, Folder 5	Hill Brothers Store, Chicago, Illinois, undated

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Series 2: J.B. Simpson, Incorporated Records, 1923-1972, undated

Box 2, Folder 1	History, correspondence and memorandums, 1927-1972
Box 2, Folder 2	Organization survey, 1943
Box 2, Folder 3	Profit sharing trust, 1944-1967
Box 3, Folder 1	Measurement instructions and devices, undated
Box 3, Folder 2	Patents, 1941-1952
Box 3, Folder 3	Measure taxing manuals, 1929-1951
Box 4, Folder 1	Manuals for salesmen, 1923-1941
Box 4, Folder 2	Salesmen magazine, articles and clippings, 1935
Box 4, Folder 3	Memoranda to salesmen, 1930-1940
Box 4, Folder 4	Business forms and miscellaneous records, 1927-1951
Box 4, Folder 5	5Pictures of branch sales office and sales staff, undated
Box 5, Folder 1	Company staff newsletters, 1929-1953
Box 5, Folder 2	Advertising, undated
Box 5, Folder 3	Selling orientation booklets for salesmen, 1927-1948

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