



Trading Places: Women Offer a Different Take on Downtown St. Paul Business in 1939

Katalin Medvedev

This case study concerns the collaboration between a civic institution and local businesses. Bourgeois area homemakers launched the Women's Institute of St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1939, and held its first event, the biggest fashion show in the Midwest. Following the show's success, the Institute worked closely with St. Paul merchants to revitalize downtown businesses losing revenue to neighboring Minneapolis, which offered wider fashion choices, higher quality, and better services. Cooperation between the Institute and St. Paul merchants quickly turned commerce around, considerably improving sales. The Institute also initiated myriad social, cultural, and civic projects, which served its interests and those of the business community. Framing local growth and increased female consumption as a woman's civic duty and social responsibility created a bridge between women's private goals and communal objectives, leading to economic prosperity and societal progress. The Institute also significantly contributed to the rise of American fashion in the Midwest.

Despite being Minnesota's capital, St. Paul in 1938 was a sleepy city with an overwhelmingly provincial feel. Neighboring Minneapolis, in contrast, was a bustling, vibrant metropolis with almost twice as many residents. Because of a larger population and, therefore, higher demand, Minneapolis stores had a better selection and quality of goods. As a result, thousands of St. Paul women eagerly crossed the Mississippi River to patronize the more glamorous and better-stocked Minneapolis establishments, contributing an estimated \$200 million annually to that city's revenue.¹ The desperate attempts of the downtown St. Paul merchants to

¹ It was estimated that a dollar changed hands seventeen times in the area. So the \$12 to \$15 million spent by St. Paul women in Minneapolis actually amounted to over \$200 million worth of purchasing power a year; see Kathleen Ridder,

Katalin Medvedev <medvedev@uga.edu> is assistant professor in the Department of Textiles, Merchandising and Interiors at the University of Georgia.

restore female consumer confidence were anything but successful. Businesses such as Bannon's Department Store, the Golden Rule Department Store, Field-Schlick, Inc., the Emporium Department Store, and Schuneman's, Inc., among others, were bleeding financially.

In the same year, Bernard H. Ridder, a New York City newspaper publisher, and two of his brothers bought two fading St. Paul dailies, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *Dispatch*, hoping to turn them around quickly. Ridder knew that if he wanted his papers to prosper, the advertising revenue from the local business community would have to increase significantly. However, because of the exodus of female shoppers, St. Paul merchants did not have the financial resources to improve the downtown business district or to keep their shelves stocked with fashionable goods. As they had already failed miserably in their attempt to persuade St. Paul women to buy locally, they were of no help to Ridder in fixing the situation.

Coming from New York, where there were a lot of active female social clubs, Ridder was aware of the social influence and importance of women's social institutions. He also personally witnessed women's activism making significant contributions to the local community during the Depression. To draw on area women's social and cultural capital and to replicate the successful formula of the New York women's social clubs, he decided to underwrite a similar institution in St. Paul. He founded the St. Paul Women's Institute (WI) in 1939.² To ensure ongoing and open access to the WI, he also made Suite 302 in the Dispatch Building, where his newspaper offices were located, the WI's headquarters. The mission of the WI was to further the social, civic, cultural, and economic progress of St. Paul and to provide local and area women with a top-notch entertainment program, including numerous events related to fashion and female beautification.

Being a smart businessman, Ridder made sure that the WI board members had close ties with local retailers and thus had a personal stake in his business revitalization plans. However, the mostly white bourgeois homemakers, who were the wives and relatives of the local business community and professional elite, also embraced the WI for another reason. The activities related to the goals of the WI not only successfully

"Speakers, Style Shows, and 12,000 Shoppers—The Women's Institute and How It Revived Downtown St. Paul," *Ramsey County History* 32 (Fall 1997): 4-11.

² The existing literature on the St. Paul Women's Institute is minimal. My study is based on extensive archival research in the Minnesota History Center, including a thorough examination of local and national newspaper reports on the activities of the WI. I also carefully studied the WI's two large-print format scrapbooks that include original program leaflets, private letters, unsolicited letters from city officials, correspondence between members, lists of WI activities, minutes of board meetings, photographs of events, contemporary print advertisements, and documents such as the WI's pledge, logo, WI advertisements, and article clippings on various activities.

channeled their energies and ample leisure time into practical community projects, but furnished them with a new, useful identity as well. The activities kept them socially engaged and provided them with an important outlet to express their creativity and selfhood and to prove their capabilities outside the home.

Because of the prevailing gender conventions, women made the majority of household purchases at the time and thus were of paramount importance to economic success.³ Women also were socialized to cultivate their appearance, an activity that was a source of huge potential income for the business community. As a former New Yorker, Ridder was well aware of the role and economic significance of New York's Seventh Avenue—the unofficial capital of American fashion. He knew that fashion-minded customers would guarantee business growth for downtown St. Paul retailers, so his support for linking the goals of a women's organization to fashion is not at all surprising. This combination was likely to be financially beneficial for his newspapers as well, with their income largely dependent on advertising dollars from the local business community. For their part, the retailers also recognized fashion as a great ally—after all, fashion is about a desire for change, and by catering to the changing desires in styles and trends, they would be assured of a constant demand for their merchandise.

Given the advantages for both parties, it was not difficult for Ridder to orchestrate a mutually beneficial partnership between the local business community and the Women's Institute. The WI ensured that its Institute Day entertainment programs would cater to a vast array of feminine interests, providing local and area women with a compelling reason to come to downtown St. Paul. Once there, they would visit the shops.

The WI included fashion shows sponsored by local business owners in its program; in return, the retailers helped the WI further its social agendas, which included various educational and cultural programs, together with city beautification and landscaping projects—all typical female bourgeois endeavors. In the windows of local shops all over town large signs popped up in the WI's blue and white colors, stating: "We heartily endorse the Women's Institute of St. Paul and pledge our support to help promote the social, cultural and civic progress of this community."

The Biggest Fashion Show in the Upper Midwest

The Women's Institute was launched on September 20, 1939, with the largest fashion show ever held in the upper Midwest. It was referred to as a "fashion show of magnitude and beauty rarely achieved by such events anywhere."⁴ It was attended by Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of president

³ A private letter by Mrs. Monte Appeal, general "chairman" of the Women's Institute, dated 30 April 1940, estimated that women did 85% of the family's buying. WI scrapbook.

⁴ Lois P. Hatton, "Women's Institute Show to Highlight Biggest Week of Fashions in St. Paul's History." WI scrapbook.

Franklin D. Roosevelt; she was a keen supporter of the American fashion industry because of women's role in its growth. She was a founding member of the Fashion Group International (FGI), which to this day is one of the most important professional authorities of the global fashion business. The First Lady was very interested in the WI fashion show; in fact, it was the only such event she attended that year. The idea and need for such a grand event emerged when a WI survey of St. Paul women on why they chose to shop in Minneapolis found that their main reason for crossing the river was the unavailability in St. Paul of the fashionable items they keenly desired.⁵

The fashion show, held as part of the entertainment program, took place in the St. Paul Auditorium. It was attended by 12,000 St. Paul and area women who came to see "women's lovely apparel for every hour of the day, showing every phase of the fall and winter fashion story in style, fabric and color."⁶ June Hamilton Rhodes, a widely known New York fashion authority, directed a pageant that featured fifty professional models and young WI members, and included two hundred changes of dress. Duchess Marie of Russia, a fashion icon, cousin of Czar Nicholas, and one of the few members of the royal family to escape from Russia after the revolution, was asked to accompany a group of buyers from prominent department stores in New York to help them choose the latest styles from the Paris fall collection. The selection was first premiered in St. Paul, and only after that in New York, which was definitely a first in Midwestern fashion history.

The runway show started with a dance performance called "Fashion in Dance." This was followed by a fashion dramatization, "Grandmother—The Glamour Girl of 1890," showcasing late nineteenth-century styles. Switching gears, the fashions of the past were contrasted in "Glamour Girl of 1940," impersonated by Georgia Carroll, the most photographed model of the times, who wore a stylish, fur-trimmed black suit, with a flat fur muff, red gloves, and a red Chamberlain umbrella—the hot colors of the season. The program continued with junior and schoolgirl dresses, suggesting that fashion was not only a women's affair, but also a family affair. Next came misses' outfits, casual clothes, and coats for the older woman. The category after that was sportswear, showcasing suits and accessories for winter games, together with so-called spectator costumes, implying that a proper contemporary woman had to be physically active. To further underline the new expectation for fitness, an assortment of apparel presented as a "suitable wardrobe for a St. Paul lady," designed by Claire Potter, a famous sportswear designer, was also exhibited. Street and daytime clothing, including a basic dress showing three distinct changes

⁵ For example, local women widely complained about the lack of basic foundation garments in the St. Paul stores, for which they had to go over to neighboring Minneapolis. Not being aware that most women wore girdles at that time appears to have been a major oversight.

⁶ Lois P. Hatton, "Pageant and Throng Make Fashion History," WI scrapbook.

through the use of accessories, followed sportswear. Afternoon apparel, including hostess gowns and cocktail, tea, and dinner dresses, were presented next, after which came evening apparel, debutante dresses, and furs. The audience gasped when they learned that jewelry valued close to \$500,000, including a rare canary diamond worth \$200,000, was also brought in from New York. The show ended in a spectacular “orchid wedding,” in which Carroll, impersonating a bride, wore a sheer white wool dress. A bridal party dressed in muted shades of orchids and carrying real orchids accompanied her. Overall, the event suggested that it was a female responsibility to dress well and that a good woman had to invest in her looks and physical fitness. To “help” women with these gendered tasks, all the runway styles were made immediately available for purchase after the show at the Emporium, Bannon’s, Field-Schlick, Inc., the Golden Rule, Frank Murphy’s, Macy’s, Abrecht Furs, and Newmans, among others.

The Uses of WI Fashion Shows

Fashion shows became the anchors of the WI’s programs because they catered to, and stirred, women’s traditional feminine interests, as well as because they served local businesses. To make certain that women attending the Institute Day programs would transform into eager consumers of local goods and services in the first season, six fashion shows, sponsored by local merchants, were held daily. Later their number increased. Because fashion was seen as an important economic force, downtown St. Paul business owners were eager sponsors of the events. They also provided the WI “chairman” with elegant dresses for the evening performances or gave her a check to outfit herself from their stores. In the meantime, to whet the appetite of local women for the latest styles, the *Pioneer Press* gave a head-to-toe description of all local fashion leaders and fashion-forward WI guests. The staff writers and the fashion editor of the paper, Lois P. Hatton, also noted how much an outfit cost and where it was available for purchase, in case ordinary area women were interested in copying the styles of the local socialites.

The WI fashion shows varied in scope. Some were simple displays of fashion items involving models walking the runway, while others were grand spectacles that amounted to a sophisticated form of entertainment. These were often theatrical events that utilized expensive props and had specific themes such as “Fashions in Literature” or the “Psychology of Dress.” They also frequently included a touch of drama to trigger emotions or featured pantomimes to enliven the show. A popular genre was the “fashion tableaux,” which depicted different historical scenes in an elaborate frame in which the figures gradually came to life and then sauntered down the runway, to the delight of the audience.

The fashion shows were not only a feminine form of entertainment, but also important social and educational events. Through extensive commentaries and expert instruction, women were taught how to distinguish quality apparel, color-coordinate and accessorize their outfits,

apply makeup, or create a fashionable hairdo. The shows instilled urban culture among rural women and encouraged them to become informed consumers with impeccable taste. The programs also educated women about brands and were successful in creating a thirst for chic. During “fashion clinics,” women also learned practical skills, such as how to care for and mend clothing. Because the WI members were mostly homemakers, it was considered part of their wifely duty to dress their husbands as well, further boosting retail sales in St. Paul. All of the activities surrounding the fashion shows ultimately reinforced conservative stereotypes of womanhood and entrenched women’s traditional femininity.

On any given Institute Day, thousands of well-dressed middle-class women streamed into downtown St. Paul. The events grew so big that they began to disrupt the ordinary life of the city, requiring special travel arrangements to accommodate visitors. The WI luncheons held at the Hotel Lowry and the Hotel St. Paul became crowded to capacity. The luncheons, and the afternoon and evening programs necessitated different outfits, providing women with an opportunity not only to dress up, but also to be seen. The fashion thermometer was boiling. Nobody wanted to be outdone by her peers, prompting an infectious excitement for shopping, which was facilitated by inviting shop windows, eager sales staff, smart displays, and improved selections. To the delight of local business owners, store aisles were brimming with thousands of women, searching for the latest fashions that were meant to showcase both their taste and elegance and their class status and level of cultivation. Women who could not afford the apparel in the stores joined in as well; the window-shopping took them away from their daily chores. Institute Days also helped women escape the winter isolation. Even the chilliest winter days in Minnesota could not keep the women at home. The local merchants, with the support of the WI, thus successfully turned shopping from a utilitarian activity into an important gendered cultural event.

The fashion shows not only educated women about what was new, in vogue, and appropriate, but also encouraged them to be creative with their appearance. They suggested that women should find clothes that fit their personalities and accommodated their increasingly active, urban lifestyles. Women were trained not only to admire fashion and to submerge themselves in its fantasy world, but also to view it as a source of inspiration and a means of creating a somewhat independent modern self, which, undoubtedly, was a progressive notion for the time. Thus, fashion produced news, became a wellspring of economic success, and brought change; it became a powerful social agent.

The social role of the WI’s fashion shows was to convey visually the appropriate gender roles for women. For example, during World War II, fashion combined civic and patriotic duties and was presented as a morale

booster and a way to mitigate the devastating effects of the war.⁷ This is how it became possible for overalls, clamdiggers, clogs, and other apparel suitable for growing vegetables in the Victory Gardens to find a place in the fashion shows, which sought to glamorize everyday activities. Next to these utilitarian outfits, audience members were still shown formal gowns, although strictly with silhouettes mandated by the War Production Board. This juxtaposition had several advantages. It helped women keep up appearances, and thus demonstrate the country's resilience and defiance in the face of war, and it also bolstered the economy.

The Rise of American Fashion and the Decline of the WI

The WI activities helped American fashion gain national acclaim and prominence. Providing Midwestern women with stylish apparel had a number of benefits. After every Institute Day, visitors took back with them the latest fashion news to their communities. This facilitated the spread and democratization of fashion in the area. By experiencing the great potential of American fashion, Midwestern women, not just women on the East and West Coasts, also began to look outside Europe for fashion inspiration, even as they expressed patriotic sentiments. Their new habit of investing in their country's style trends and products during the war significantly contributed to the dynamic progress of the postwar American fashion industry.

Although the focus of the WI's entertainment programs changed over the years, reflecting the times, fashion shows, "style revues," and "fashion clinics" remained constant features of every Institute Day. The wide regional appeal of the Women's Institute can be attributed to its hugely successful fashion shows and fashion programs, which became highly anticipated events both for St. Paul and area women and for merchants. While the shows and programs created mass entertainment and sparked communal excitement, they also built and enhanced community morale. Fashion was not merely a source of inspiration: it was presented as a necessary component of cultivation and feminine appropriateness, and it was bestowed with an aura of sophistication.⁸ Fashion was a source of urban and cosmopolitan glamour. Local women began to regard it as not only a natural feminine pastime, but as an important social and gender obligation as well. Local merchants also wholeheartedly supported the shows because they provided a convenient venue to introduce novelties and prepare women for seasonal style changes.

At its inception, the Women's Institute played a crucial role in shaping the contemporary beauty culture and was an important fashion arbiter. It was also key in setting the parameters of female citizenship and was instrumental in shaping the modern, cultivated female Midwestern

⁷ For example, women prepared bond corsages made of stamps, which they wore in their hair as a form of decoration and an obvious sign of patriotism.

⁸ The local businesses used a lot of French words in their ads to make their merchandise seem more sophisticated.

consumer. It continued to remain an important social and cultural institution for two and a half decades. By the mid-1960s, however, the WI began to lose its social connection with the community. It could not relate to the goals of the civil rights, hippie, antiwar, and women's movements and rejected the social and lifestyle changes that accompanied them.⁹ It could no longer sustain its leadership role in the civic, cultural, social, and economic life of St. Paul. Ultimately, it completely lost its social and community-service cachet and became a conservative organization.

The WI members' fashion choices also reflected conservative values.¹⁰ Whereas the new 1960s styles had anti-establishment underpinnings, WI members favored classic or formal clothing. The WI's fashion shows highlighted luxury evening gowns with plunging necklines and strands of pearls, instead of functional and comfortable apparel for the modern woman. The WI's style and beauty experts did not encourage members to express their individuality and personality through fashion; instead, they recommended steering clear of fads or styles originating in the lower classes and among the young, and adhering to their traditional, grand dress styles. The fashion shows lost their artistic edge and educational value and became entirely tools for advertising new products and services. The WI ended its programs on May 25, 1971, after more than thirty years of programming, without much fanfare. Except for the core members, area women barely took notice of the closure.

Conclusion

Social institutions have been indispensable to the development of the capitalist economy because they were able to entice people, especially women, into taking part in business and civic engagement projects. The case study of the WI demonstrates cultural historian William Leach's point. About the early twentieth century, he wrote: "The new consumer direction of American culture was also the consequence of alliances among diverse institutions, noneconomic and economic, working together in an interlocking circuit of relationships to reinforce the democratization of desire and the cult of the new."¹¹ The WI not only brokered St. Paul's business revival, but it shaped its social relations for decades, as well. Its historical significance lies in the fact that, with the support of local merchants, it framed the city's business and consumption growth in economic, gendered, and civic terms.

This case study also supports the thesis of another historian, Angel Kwolek-Folland—namely, that gender has been an important force in

⁹ See, for an example, "Singers Good—But Loud," *Pioneer Press*, 15 Nov. 1967.

¹⁰ See, for a manifestation of this, "Clothes That Please Husband Is Institute Officer's Rule," *Pioneer Press*, 27 April 1962.

¹¹ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993), 9.

influencing how businesses approach markets.¹² The sexual division of labor in the first half of the twentieth century meant that men clustered around production and business, while consumption was the women's job. St. Paul business owners teamed up with area women to lure female shoppers back from Minneapolis. They continued to support the WI and its programs while it was helpful to their interests. However, as suburbia began to grow around St. Paul, the consumption patterns of women changed: women began to wear more casual styles to fit the informal lifestyles of suburbia, and they more frequently patronized suburban malls. The local retailers responded by limiting their financial and social support of the WI.

Fashion has always mirrored the social expectations of women. The WI's fashion shows were meant to create a need for retailers' merchandise. The shows also helped solidify the social and economic prominence of the fashion business. The WI played a prominent role in the history of American fashion. It made fashion front-page news. The WI was a style authority and a major arbiter of middle- and upper-class taste in the Midwest. It put on some of the biggest and most elaborate fashion shows in the country in its time. The shows significantly improved business growth, which in turn contributed to raising living standards and the quality of life in St. Paul.

The timing of the early WI fashion shows was also fortunate. After the lean years of the Depression, during which people were expected to be good stewards of national resources and curb consumption, women were enthusiastic about fulfilling their consumer desires. The shows legitimized fashion as a gendered, civic activity and made it an essential part of the appropriate gender script. The shows highlighted a middle-class female responsibility as well: being alluring and well-dressed were necessary conditions to keep marriages secure and, with that, the entire middle class. The activities of the Women's Institute connected gender, fashion, shopping, socializing, leisure, and civic activism; they are important to American business history, local history, fashion history, and women's history, as well.

¹² See Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930* (Baltimore, Md., 1994), and *Incorporating Women: The History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York, 1998).