

FREEM'S LTD. OF THE WALDORF-ASTORIA
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Author's Note: I am submitting this piece as part of the 90th anniversary of the Waldorf-Astoria. My grandfather's store, Freem's Ltd., the first men's store on Park Avenue, opened on November 14, 1931, and stayed in operation for 25 years until my grandfather's death in 1956. I submitted a version to the Waldorf-Astoria Archives a number of years ago, and continue to refine it as new information comes to light. A Powerpoint presentation accompanies the piece. It covers my grandfather's business career, first as a haberdasher in the garment district, and then in both the Waldorf and in the Roney Plaza in Miami Beach, Florida.

On May 29, 1934, *The New York Times* ran a page one article recounting a harrowing transatlantic flight by the French aviators Paul Codos and Maurice Rossi, whose equipment trouble the previous day had foiled their attempt to set the world record for a nonstop long-distance flight. Their original destination from Paris was San Diego, but they ended up at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn. The headline read:

FRENCH FLIERS LAND HERE
WITH A TREMOR IN WING;
FLY OCEAN IN 38 1/2 HOURS

Even though they failed to reach San Diego, this was the first successful nonstop flight from Europe to New York. 1,000 people had gathered for their unexpected landing. A

ten-car procession with a motorcycle escort took them to the Waldorf-Astoria, “where Oscar met the airmen in their rooms on the fourteenth floor.” “Once in their rooms the fliers asked first for a bath and a barber and then for champagne and sandwiches. They refused more elaborate food and both said that they would like to sleep.”

Other details were supplied by *The Daily News Record*, the national menswear daily published in New York, which ran this piece on *its* page one the same day:

Freem’s, Ltd., Outfits

French Fliers Here

Waldorf Shop Reports Both

Take Same Sizes and Same

Types of Furnishings

To Freem’s, Ltd., men’s furnishings shop in the Waldorf-Astoria, fell the distinction yesterday of outfitting the French aviators, Maurice Rossi and Paul Codos. The exhausted Frenchmen went to bed soon after their arrival at the Waldorf, but they had neglected to bring their pajamas along, and so they ordered some white silk pajamas. Each wore a size C.

They also bought a selection of white shirts, and again each man wore the same size, 16. Likewise, new white silk underwear, shirts, and shorts, called for the same size, 42 x 36, and French lisle socks size 11 1/2, also figured in the purchase. Black cravats also were selected, and the furnishers said the outfitting was easy, with each of the birdmen going for the same types of furnishings and in same sizes.

When they later sat for their interview in their suite at the Waldorf, Colonel Rossi was photographed wearing white silk pajamas, a fact noted in the *Times*. A couple of days later, the *Times* reported on the fliers' meeting with President Roosevelt in Washington, where they likely wore their new furnishings purchased from Freem's.

It was the depths of the Depression, but the new Waldorf-Astoria, America's Palace, which had opened three years earlier in 1931, had quickly become the dynamic center of the City. Where else but the Waldorf would world-famous aviators stay on a(n unexpected) visit to New York. And where else would they shop but at Freem's of the Waldorf, which was owned by my maternal grandfather Lou Freedman.

Lou Freedman's shop was an institution in the Waldorf from November, 1931, shortly after the hotel opened, until his death in 1956, when my family closed Freem's. The shop was located at the gateway to the hotel on Park Avenue right next to the main entrance. Freem's was the first men's store on Park Avenue.

In 1936, Lou Freedman opened a second location in the Roney-Plaza Hotel in Miami Beach. That store closed after the 1949 season. In 1948, he leased space in oilman Glenn McCarthy's new Shamrock Hotel in Houston, but never opened that store because of illness.

My grandfather had been a haberdasher in the garment district on Broadway for 15 years when he was chosen from 150 applicants to open a shop in the new Waldorf-Astoria, in what was arguably the best location in the world for a retailer of luxury apparel.

Lou Freedman was born and grew up in Detroit, one of the middle children of a successful junk dealer. My great grandparents immigrated to Detroit from Poland by way of England in around 1875. The 1880 federal census shows my great grandfather's occupation as "rag peddler".

Lou's first career was in the sales promotion business. The sales promoter brings capital, expertise, and excitement to the sale at the retailer's location. The objective of a promotional sale is to move a lot of merchandise quickly. This was the business the family that founded Neiman-Marcus was in before they opened their store in Dallas. And that is in fact who my grandfather worked with before he left that firm and opened his own sales promotion firm, Lou Freedman & Co., which he operated until 1916, when he opened a mens furnishings store at 49th and Broadway.

Lou Freedman had the qualities that distinguished his operation from his competitors and that appealed to the promoters of the new Waldorf, which they fully intended would be the greatest hotel in the world. A piece in the April, 1923 *Men's Wear* magazine describes my grandfather's store:

In answering a question as to how large a shop must be before it can afford to send a buyer to Europe, most merchants will visualize [sic] large department stores and other sizable institutions, but Lou Freedman, a New York furnisher, believes that a men's furnishings shop no larger than 20 by 40 feet can send a buyer abroad to scour the markets of Europe for the unusual kind of merchandise and make the trip pay. That is about the size of his store at 1606 Broadway and he is now in Europe backing his belief that the exclusive kind of merchandise produced for the English gentleman is the kind of product that will sell on Broadway. This trip to Europe by Lou Freedman is typical of the kind of merchandising that has made his shop one of the most distinctive, in its way, in New York.

Planting his business seven years ago in the midst of competition, Freedman resolved that the way to get business was to operate along lines that were different from those followed by the earlier contenders for the neighborhood's patronage. He believed that where many merchants stumble . . . is in their attitude toward competition. They . . . try to convince the customer that they have the same merchandise as the other fellow, but

at a lower price. The Freedman method is to convince the customer that he does not have the same merchandise that the other fellow has. He has different merchandise at the Freedman price.

The shirtings used in this shop are in patterns that are confined to it, and their exact duplicate will not be found elsewhere. Novelty effects that are sufficiently unusual to give them distinction, yet not extreme enough to impair their good taste, is the kind of merchandise featured in this shop, which numbers in its clientele some of the best known names in business, professional and theatrical circles. . . . Many customers and the store's employes [sic] exchange first names, and these include the names of some very well known individuals.

My grandfather's years on Broadway coincided with the peak of live musical theater in 1927 and the economic boom times which ended with the stock market crash two years later.

Lou developed a wide acquaintance and engaged in what in retrospect appears to have been effective self-promotion and reinvention. He belonged to the Grand Street Boys Association, a fraternal group that mirrored the demographics of the City, initially made up mostly of the sons of eastern European Jews who had grown up on the Lower East Side, but which also included politicians and luminaries from all walks of life. Membership included men such as Irving Berlin, Albert Einstein, Nelson Rockefeller and Franklin D.

Roosevelt. In a “roast” held for my grandfather and his friend jeweler Bert Satz before a trip to Europe in 1924, the dais included among others Governor Al Smith, U.S. Senator Royal Copeland, James J. Walker, who was to become NY Mayor, and Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Cecil B. de Mille bought an ad in the booklet. That year Al Smith won reelection against Theo. Roosevelt Jr. for NY Governor.

My grandfather made 20-some buying trips to Europe in the years between World Wars I and II. A 1927 piece in the *New York Times* lists my grandfather among passengers returning on the Leviathan, others of whom included Charles M. Schwab and H.H. Westinghouse.

Lou Freedman didn't generally advertise in the newspapers, he didn't generally run sales, and mass media and mass marketing didn't really exist in the 1920s, especially in luxury apparel. However, for nearly 30 years, he sold his excess merchandise to a store that did these things: Filene's Department Store in Boston, which ran a bargain basement--the *original* Filene's Basement. Filene's bought the overstock of high-end New York stores at a deep discount--usually 33 cents on the retail dollar--and sold it at half off retail. The labels and price tags had to stay in. The agreement was made at the beginning of the season on a handshake. Until the advent of national retail operations, Boston and New York were largely separate markets and a retailer such as Saks Fifth Avenue or Freem's could effectively deeply discount its merchandise in one market without cheapening its image in the other.

In late 1925 Lou Freedman opened a second shop at 38th and Broadway. A couple of years later, in 1928, he closed his shop at 49th and Broadway and sold his overstock to Filene's. The copy from the display ad in the *Boston Daily Globe* told the story:

In New York in the heyday of Rector's and Churchill's --- Lou Freedman opened up a men's specialty shop at 49th Street and Broadway.

This shop carried exclusive lines of men's furnishings, high-grade famous brands, custom-made shirts, etc., and for years catered to New York's wealthy men, prominent business men and actors.

Every year Mr. Freedman went abroad to purchase fine silks, etc., from which many of his shirts, neckwear, etc., were made--some custom made abroad, others made to order in this country.

It is said that the best dressed man in America shops at Freedman's --- and their clientele includes prominent New York City officials --- one of the world's most famous songwriters --- a nationally known radio artist --- famous actors and other celebrities.

The individuals referenced in the last paragraph included Adolph Menjou, an actor voted the best dressed man in America nine times, New York City Mayor James J. Walker, and.

others about whose identity I can only speculate. Adolphe Menjou was also a customer of Bert Satz, whose jewelry store was next to my grandfather's store on Broadway. Menjou purchased a gold cigarette case from Bert Satz with the following inscription: "To Adolphe Menjou from his greatest admirer—Adolphe Menjou".

In his first 15 years in the men's furnishings business, Lou Freedman established himself as New York's premier men's furnishings retailer. His only serious competitors were Sulka and Charvet. Only Charvet survives today. It appears he was the most gregarious of any of them and had the most glamorous clientele. It was only natural that the promoters of what was to be the greatest hotel in the world wanted both Lou Freedman and his customers in their establishment.

The opening of Freem's in 1931 was noted in a few newspaper articles. The following short piece appeared in *The New York Times* on September 12, 1931:

Freem's Leases in the Waldorf

A shop in the Park Avenue front of the new Waldorf-Astoria Hotel has been leased to Freem's, Ltd., for an English haberdashery shop. The lease is for ten years beginning Oct. 1 and was announced yesterday by Lucius Boomer, president of the Waldorf-Astoria Corporation. Brown, Wheelock, Harris & Co. acted as brokers in the deal.

In early October, nationally syndicated columnist Louis Sobel provided a little more information: “The swanky man’s store opening in the Waldorf-Astoria, which will carry a hi-falutin’ English label, is really owned by Lou Freedman, Mayor Walker’s haberdasher.

Another piece appeared in the *Daily News Record* on November 16, 1931. It starts as follows:

**FREEM’S, LTD., OPENS
IN NEW WALDORF**

“Park” avenue welcomed its first men’s furnishing store last Saturday. That is that part of it that isn’t snooty about such things welcomed Freem’s, Ltd. Freem’s, operated by Lou Freedman, was visited by an enthusiastic parade of customers during the first day. It’s an event for Park avenue to stumble over the leashes of its own canines and fall right into a neighborhood store. Besides, doesn’t it take courage to open a store anywhere these days, and in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, of all places!

...

Every item of merchandise is made specially for the store and all of it is imported and custom made. The ties will range in price from \$2.50 to \$5; shirts from \$4 to \$6 and dress shirts at \$5 and \$6. Pajamas will be \$5 and up. It is possible hats may be included in the store stock later.

This story had it right. Lou had made a boatload of money in his business, but like many others bought stock on margin and lost everything when the market crashed. So when my grandfather opened Freem's, he was almost certainly broke and taking the risk of his life.

Things apparently went very well for my grandfather. In 1937 he obtained a trademark on the Freem's name and mark, which while common now wasn't in the late 1930s.

In 1936, he opened a second shop in the Roney Plaza hotel in Miami Beach in the first heyday of South Beach. If the Waldorf was the best retail location in the world, the Roney was among the best resort locations. Miami Beach before World War II was the playground of the rich and famous. His sign read: "Freem's Ltd. of the Waldorf-Astoria". That connection benefitted everybody--the Waldorf, the Roney, but most of all Freem's--and if someone tried that today, the trademark lawyers would go nuts. He served much the same clientele in different locations. Many of the same guests, notably J. Edgar Hoover and his assistant Clyde Tolson, stayed in both hotels. Miami Beach before the war was a magnet for film stars and entertainers. It was also a gambling destination.

A 1940 piece in the *Daily News Record* recounted what may have been the high point of Lou Freedman's career. The long headlines read: "Lou Freedman's Shop in Miami Beach Is Realization of a Dream Come True. Owner of Freem's Ltd., in Men's Furnishings

Business for Years, Continues Enthusiastic Over Ideals as Exponent of Individuality and Quality in Selling Men's Attire". Lou must have impressed the writer:

When a person enters Freem's Ltd., shop here he is sold, as was the case with this writer, who merely went in for a business and personal call, but who remained long enough to deposit a few dollars in the cash register, and gladly, so attractive is the merchandise. . . .

Mr. Freedman, whose courage in developing "forward styles" is commended even by his nearest competition

Mr. Freedman's shop is a visiting place for many men's wear merchants from all parts of the country, and he has been the recipient of almost countless congratulatory messages. His clientele reads like a listing from the blue book.

The article also listed Lou's opinion on the ten best dressed men in Miami Beach, which included Sailing Baruch, a broker and the brother of financier Bernard Baruch, J.M. Studebaker, automobile manufacturer, and various hotel and club managers.

Things changed in Miami Beach in the months following Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Most of the hotels on the beach were taken over by the armed forces for barracks. The

era of Miami Beach as the great resort was interrupted. Freem's stopped selling exclusive merchandise for a couple of years in favor of uniforms, as reported in a January, 1943 piece in *Men's Wear* magazine:

Lou Freedman, of Miami Beach, who had plenty of agility when the services took over and, as previously recounted, dropped the exclusive stuff and went over to uniforms and accessories, is doing, we are told, over the million mark. We had the pleasure of meeting Lou Freedman recently, and his worried look invited inquiry, "What if the war should stop and leave me loaded to the guard with uniforms?" he asked. "I'd be better off buying from the Government as needed, at a 20% mark-up." A reason why the military boys flock to Freedman's may be his daughter (picture) Lucille, who started as bookkeeper and is now general factotum.

The article earned the woman who was to become my mother at least one offer of a chaperoned date from the apparently smitten son of a West Virginia mens wear merchant who was to be stationed in Miami Beach.

Freedman's/Freem's was one of those places in the City that Mayor Walker, J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Costello, and Walter Winchell might be in the same place at the same time. There was a large photograph of Mayor Walker in the Waldorf shop, which came down abruptly in 1932 when Walker was forced out of office in disgrace. In period photos of celebrities, chances are very good their apparel came from Freem's. It didn't hurt that in

the late 1930s, Hoover and Tolson were voted the best dressed men in America. The stories that survived included who paid their bills (reputed gangster Frank Costello was very punctual), who didn't (a member of a famous industrial/political family), and which Broadway star had bad breath or bad complexion. Norman Rockwell's Freeman's shirt collar is part of his archive and an item from Freeman's is included in the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute.

As kids we heard about my mother's friendship with Milton Berle and her blind date with Clark Gable. Her photo album contains a February 1936 snapshot of 18-year old Lucille Freedman with Berle on Miami Beach. In January 1946, three months before my parents' marriage, she wrote my father:

Milton Berle just came in yelling "Lucille" and started his shenanigans on me--I've known him for years and he loves to embarrass me--of course he did--in front of everyone--the store is mobbed and they're all hysterical now, and I'm back hiding in the office blushing from my toes up.

My grandmother died in April 1945 and my grandfather sent his two unmarried daughters--my mother and her older sister--to New York for several weeks. They lived in the Towers at least part of that time. My parents met at the Waldorf on Columbus Day that year. In June, a hotel staff member invited my mother to the secret rail terminal underneath the hotel, where she was one of the handful of witnesses to General Eisenhower's return to the U.S. after VE Day.

The Republican governors held their 1947 convention in Miami. New York Governor Thomas Dewey came into Freem's looking for a swimsuit. Dewey had not yet announced his candidacy for president but there were rumors. My grandfather insisted on waiting on Dewey, greeting him: "Hello, Mr. President", to which Dewey responded "Not yet." On occasion, my grandfather's quips made the national news.

Those of us who watched *Mad Men* knew of the fictional relationship between Don Draper and Conrad Hilton, owner of the Waldorf. Some of this was true. Ownership of the Waldorf changed in 1949 when Hilton bought management rights from the original ownership group for \$3 million. Fast forward to 2016 when Anbang Insurance Group, bought the Waldorf in 2016 for nearly \$2 billion). Apparently the greatest hotel in the world had only modest financial success under original ownership. Lou was both a commercial tenant and a resident of the Waldorf at that time.

In 1950, Freem's Ltd. was among the subjects of an article in *Social Forces*, a scholarly journal, entitled "A Form of Class Epigraphy", better described as "what's in a name", which examined the names of stores in the shopping areas in midtown Manhattan.

In 1958, my mother wrote to J. Edgar Hoover, who had just released *Masters of Deceit*, to buy an autographed copy for my dad's birthday. Hoover sent the inscribed book with a return letter, in which he told my mother that he "well remember[ed] [her] father". I recently came across the FBI correspondence related to the book release which had been

obtained under the FOIA. It included my mother's letter and enough annotation to the file that it appeared my grandfather may have had an FBI file for the privilege of being Hoover's haberdasher.

My grandfather's success as a businessman, merchandiser and self-promoter transformed him from a Detroit junk dealer's son to an "English haberdasher". By the end of his life, there was even some suggestion that our family had come from England, although my great grandparents had only lived there for a short time. My aunt and uncle's marriage, my oldest cousin's birth, my grandmother's death, and various other events involving my grandfather made Ed Sullivan's syndicated column in the *New York Daily News*. In 1974 on the way to my post-college graduation European trip, I met James A. Farley, an old friend of my grandfather. Farley had been a Freem's customer, a card-playing friend of my grandfather and a fellow resident of the Waldorf. He was an important figure in New York democratic politics, was Franklin D. Roosevelt's first postmaster general, and had a falling out with Roosevelt when he challenged Roosevelt for the 1940 presidential nomination. He wrote me that my grandfather knew everyone of prominence in the City and all respected him.

My grandfather died at the end of February 1956. My family decided to close Freem's. No one was left living in New York. My grandfather had been such a commanding presence that it would have been difficult for any of the sons in law to work for him (the one who did didn't last long), and the daughter who really understood the business, my mother, was living in Nebraska and busy having and raising children. The space was re-

rented to Dobbs, a hat retailer (little did anyone know that President John F. Kennedy would kill the mens hat industry just a few years later by refusing to wear them).

My grandfather's obituary in the *Daily News Record* referred to him as one of the "deans" of the quality mens furnishings business:

Mr. Freedman was in the retail men's furnishings business for more than 50 years and was generally recognized as a "dean" of the quality field here.

When he opened his Waldorf store, Mr. Freedman became the first haberdasher on Park Avenue, and established a reputation for quality furnishings. He designed and helped create many of the garments he sold, and he traveled abroad seeking new styles for his stores. . . . Mr. Freedman was a strong advocate of individualism in business, and when he sold his merchandise, he sold his name.

My grandfather understood merchandising, but he really understood the American gestalt of self-reinvention by immigrants, their children and their grandchildren, in much the same way as the American film industry. It's no surprise that many of the pioneers in that business were also his clientele. And his subtle focus on glamor and celebrity as America dug out of the Depression created an image that continues to this day among his descendants in the fashion industry.

My grandfather and Freem's have been gone for 65 years. Vintage Lou Freedman and Freem's merchandise is rare. What endures is his courage, his legacy, his example for the current leaders of the quality menswear field, and his place as a well-loved footnote in the history of a great era in New York.

As is now apparent, this is the story of the life and career of my grandfather, Lou Freedman, and as such is a personal one. I decided to make this my presentation not only for that reason, but because my grandfather's story is one that touches on a particular slice of American history, principally the early and mid-20th century in New York, and some of the people and events of that era that made history. This is also the story of a man who was a pioneer in the successful marketing of luxury apparel, who through design, creation and effective promotion, tapped into the American gestalt of self reinvention, who designed and sold dreams and ties with polo players long before the current leaders in the field. He was clearly a forebear to the celebrities who now grace the apparel industry, and as such is entitled to mention as a footnote to this history. I've thought about this for some time and collected some things that might give life to my presentation.