

Morton, Mary

Remember when ...

Monday, July 24, 1995

Intelligencer

Wedding gowns sold for \$25

Nowadays, it is hard to imagine buying a new dress for only \$3.

But, when Mary Morton opened her dressmaking shop on Bridge Street in the late 1940s where Century Place now stands, that is exactly what she charged.

Her interest in dressmaking is lifelong.

"When you were a little girl, you laid your doll down and cut around her. When it didn't fit you screamed and your mom came and helped you out," Morton humorously explained.

From this humble beginning, she learned to make her own clothes. After having five

daughters of her own, Morton was more than experienced. She went into business.

"It was just a shop where we did dressmaking and alterations."

But, she adds, "it was the only shop between Toronto and Ottawa that was an actual shop."

Most dressmakers at the time worked out of their homes.

Morton's daughters, however, were at school in town, and rather than work in the country Morton wanted to be closer to her girls. So, she opened shop in town.

"We made dresses for \$3,

then it went up to \$8."

Morton received \$15 for bridesmaid dresses and \$25 for the wedding gown.

"It was a lot of work for what you made," she recalls.

Her customers supplied the thread, material and patterns. Often, especially with wedding gowns, patterns were not available.

"We would take pictures of wedding dresses and copy them and do any changes that the girls wanted. It was far cheaper to have it done than to buy in those days."

Morton not only made the dresses, she helped the brides organize their weddings, from



Mary Morton

going to the church to choosing a photographer.

She relied on Mrs. Wheeler, who had a hat shop upstairs, to provide the head dresses.

Other businesses near her store at the time were the Pappas poolroom upstairs, a barbershop, a grocery, an investment firm and a liquor store. To attract customers, Morton had Bruce Neal — who designed window dressings for Eaton's in Toronto — help her out.

"We used to put old frames in the window with fabric hanging through them. 'Give the old frame a new look,' was my saying."

Because she specialized in preparing weddings, Neal drew an old church, which sat in the corner of the window. "We put a walk on it with a small bride and groom on it."

After about three years downstairs, Morton decided to move to the second storey "because it wasn't so public."

Publicity may seem to have been key to business, but when it comes to trying on clothes, most women didn't want to be on street level, she recalls.

"We did not cater to men at all. This was a ladies' store, they didn't want men around."

Her shop did, however, do alterations for men's clothing stores in town.

She was especially busy at Christmas and New Year's when evening gowns were all the rage and alterations were usually required. At those times, Morton added another girl to her staff to help out. Though she was often busy, never did she need more than two helpers.

Correction:

In last week's Remember When..., the article "Wedding gowns sold for \$25" incorrectly identified Ralph Neal as Bruce Neal. The two are brothers; Ralph, a window decorator; Bruce, a minister. Remember When... apologizes for the error.

Still Remember When
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In 1956, Morton closed her shop to instruct dressmaking and tailoring at the Ontario School for the Deaf. As well, prior to this, she instructed night school at Belleville Collegiate Institute and Vocational School for 15 years.

Shortly after she closed her shop, a devastating fire destroyed the block.

Over the years, Morton has seen dramatic changes in fashion — some of which she approves of, others she does not.

She still makes much of her own clothes and enjoys improvising patterns to suit her own tastes.