

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Pearl's House of Fashion once occupied library building

The Ripon Public Library, built in 1973, is undergoing a complete renovation. The library originally was located at 401 Watson St. The historic library building, built in 1905, is located in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

After 68 years in the same location, the library moved to its present building found at 120 Jefferson St. Its former building, on the south end of the Watson Street commercial area, became the home of Pearl's House of Fashion. A 1994 advertisement for Pearl's found in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* stated that the store featured "sweaters, jogging suits, slacks, handbags, jewelry, cologne, dresses, blouses, sleepwear, scarves, hankies, hand lotion, coordinates, skirts, slips, belts and briefs."

The business was owned by Pearl Gneiser Beier (1931-2002), who was a 1949 Ripon High School graduate. Beier married classmate Ken Beier (1929-2024) in 1951, had a son and two daughters and lived at 864 Nordane Ave.

Beier started working at Kathryn's Dress Shop on Watson Street in 1947 and left the store after she married and moved out of town while her husband was in the military. Beier told the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* in January 1995, "Everything I know about retailing I learned from (Kathryn's Dress Shop owner) Kathryn Kissinger (1901-1989). She was a very good teacher." Beier named her youngest daughter after Kissinger.

The Nov. 22, 1962 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* stated that Beier and Eddes Noth Douglas Wesner Gallup (1912-1993) purchased King's Dress Shop at 213 Watson St. and renamed it "Royal Fashions." Beier co-owned and operated Royal Fashions for 11 years before opening Pearl's House of Fashion in November 1973. Beier retired in 1995 and closed the store after 22 years and 33 years of owning a retail business on Watson Street.

Kathy Beier Fredrick, member of the Ripon High School class of 1974 and Beier's daughter noted, "Salesmen would wheel their racks of buyers' samples down the ramp at the back of the store for Pearl to choose from for the store. One such salesman always greeted her 'P.P. PEARL, the gem of the ocean.' I was fortunate enough to be able to work with her through my last year of high school and my col-



PEARL'S HOUSE OF Fashion was located in the historic library building at 401 Watson St. from 1973 until 1995. The retail store was owned by Pearl Gneiser Beier (1931-2002). The Ripon Public Library occupied the building from 1905 until 1973, when it moved to its new location at 170 Jefferson St. submitted photo

lege years. She sold everything from cotton house dresses to mother of the bride dresses."

Beier told the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* in 1985 that she tried to purchase only three of each style of dress. She would watch to make sure women who were attending the same function didn't purchase the same dress.

The article noted that "Pearl's concern for customer selection is also reflected in the quality of service the customer received when they are in the shop."

Beier credited her sales staff, noting "The girls are great, I owe my success to them."

Deb Gohlke worked for Beier and recently stated, "Pearl was an amazing boss and special lady."

Laurie Sasda, whose mother worked at Pearl's, added that, "My mom loved working for Pearl. Those women were known as 'Pearl's Girls.'"

Judi Trampf recalled that every year her father would go to Pearl's House of Fashion to purchase a dress for her mother to wear for the formal New Years Eve party of the Ripon social group Pleasure Unincorporated.

"Pearl knew my mother's taste and colors and every year my dad would hit a home run with the choice," Trampf said. "Such beautiful clothing — pieces you wouldn't see anywhere else. Whenever my mother wanted a dress or blouse that wasn't from a catalogue or department store (where others likely bought things), she went to Pearl's. It was truly a lovely store

with individualized service."

Trampf, a member of the Ripon High School class of 1978, remembers shopping for school gym uniforms at Pearl's House of Fashion. At one time the school district required female students in middle and high school to have a uniform for physical education classes which were sold at Pearl's.

"A true sign of being 'grown up' was when you went to Pearl's to get your gym suit. You weren't a 'little kid' anymore!" Trampf said.

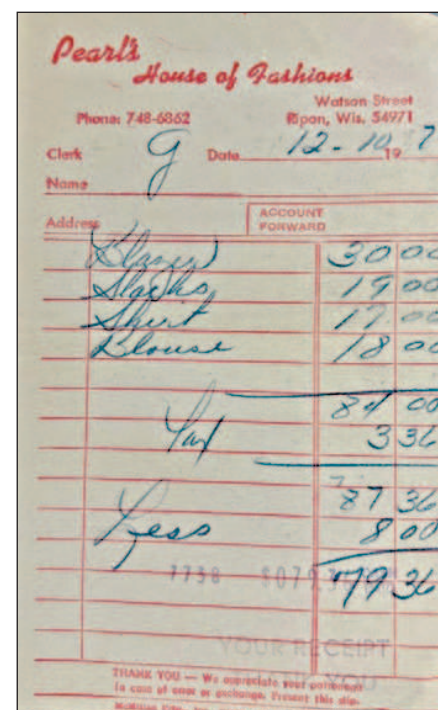
The store was remodeled in 1982 to make more room for clothing on both levels of the store.

"I used to work there in the lower level (juniors department)," Ripon's Pat Ehrenberg said. "If we needed an item or needed to try and match something that we thought they might carry upstairs, instead of running up and down the stairs, we put it on a 'dumb waiter' on a pulley, wiggled a rope and sent it to the upper level. Then the ladies would search the inventory up there and send it back down with any possible finds. What a unique system."

Beier's oldest daughter, Barb Beier Pretasky, remembers playing with the dumb waiter but getting in trouble with her mother for doing so.

Pretasky also recalls all the issues the store had with pigeons resting on the roof of the building and laughed, "They were messy. It was a constant battle to rid them."

This is why pigeons were mentioned in her father's obituary, which stated that besides having paying jobs



THIS RECEIPT FROM Pearl's House of Fashion is found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society. Pearl's operated in the historic Carnegie Library building at 401 Watson St. for 22 years and had two levels of shopping. submitted photo

Ken "assisted his wife Pearl, at Pearl's House of Fashion, as chief advisor, maintenance man and pigeon poacher."

It was Ken's job to come up with ideas to keep the pigeons away from the store roof.

After Pearl closed her retail shop in 1996, 401 Watson St. was taken over by Rogers Electric and Accurate Controls, owned by Tom Rogers and his son T.J. Rogers. Boca Grande Capital then purchased the building and in 2007 leased it to Ripon College for use as an administrative building.

The college purchased the building in 2011 and occupied it for 15 years until 2022, when Tom and T.J. Rogers purchased the historic location once again. It now is being rented as the offices of the Ripon Chamber of Commerce and Ripon Main Street.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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