

Farewell to Bonwit's

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Saturday's generation goes to Bloomingdale's, and so did Saturday's generation's great-grandparents in the last century. They also went to B. Altman's, Lord and Taylor's and Bonwit Teller's. The New York stores have had surprising longevity and durability in the fickle fashion world; when one of them closes, the occasion is noted with more than ordinary regret. And there have been closings — Arnold Constable, Franklin Simon and Russeks on Fifth Avenue, McCreery's and Stern's on 34th and 42d Streets, as the carriage trade moved uptown and the subway trade moved out.

Now it is Bonwit Teller (New York store only) for whom the bell tolls. The reasons, in the highly competitive retail merchandising field, are less in the fashion stars than in business management. But it is a time of nostalgia for all those women who bought their first evening dress at Bonwit's in one of the most mystical and wonderful rites of puberty. Or for the "college men" who did their Christmas shopping "stag" at the 721 club when sexism was in flower.

Bonwit's lost its suave image when trendiness took over. Some stores survive their golden moment. Bergdorf Goodman, which has retained its status for three quarters of a century, continues to attract patrons with the sinfully luxurious aura of its "kept woman" days, when that innocent sex role was in style.

Some stores succumbed to the success of their images. Best's and Peck and Peck were built on tweed suits and matching hats for ladies from the country; they were killed by suburban shopping and freaky fashion. Abercrombie & Fitch, sporty to the end, passed away of old-jock stuffiness. When it closed, New Yorkers paid it the homage of block-long lines for bargain elephant-foot umbrella stands and yachting glasses.

In this day of the boutique, a department store must know its onions — or its caviar — as well as its leather jeans, and, like Bendel's, out-boutique all the rest. Bonwit's helped make the area around 56th and Fifth the shopping mecca of the world. But real estate values are less ephemeral than fashion.

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