

©2005 Elizabeth Thalimer Smartt

All Rights Reserved

THALHIMERS DEPARTMENT STORE: STORY, HISTORY, AND THEORY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

ELIZABETH THALHIMER SMARTT  
Bachelor of Arts, Wake Forest University, 1998

Directors:

Dr. Catherine E. Ingrassia, Professor and Director of the MA in English,  
English Department

Dr. James Kinney, Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies,  
English Department

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
December, 2005

## Acknowledgement

First, my most profound thanks go to my husband Ryan for his tireless patience and support as I've worked on this project. So many people have provided me with significant help, including Emily Rusk, whose meticulous research on the Thalhimers story continues to amaze me, Alexandra Levit, who guided me through early drafts of this thesis, and Mom and Dad, who have always encouraged me to pursue my passion. I'd especially like to thank Dad for laying the groundwork for this project, and sparking my interest in studying Thalhimers and our family genealogy many years ago. I appreciate the support of Charlotte Morgan and all of the Nimrod Hall "writer women" who workshopped with me to improve my thesis writing and organization, the personal interviews granted by Mr. Leroy Bray, Mrs. Elizabeth "Betty" Bauder, and Dr. Allix James, and the assistance and direction of my four very accommodating thesis committee members: Dr. Catherine Ingrassia, Dr. James Kinney, Dr. Elizabeth Hodges, and Dr. John Kneebone. My research would not have been possible without the help of staff members at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond Times-Dispatch, Valentine Richmond History Center, Library of Virginia, VCU's James Branch Cabell Library, and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. I cannot help but thank my employer Play for allowing my Masters work to coincide with my job, and special thanks to my associate Catherine Strotmeyer for gently reminding me of my priorities. All of my friends and

family, including Jerry and Dan Smartt, “Mimi and Pop” Brush, Katherine, John and Katie Adamson, Christie Thalhimer, Jeremy and Sarah Smartt, and Jason and Jamie Smartt, have been very tolerant and supportive of me as I’ve worked on my degree and thesis.

Finally, I am ever grateful to Gram and Grandpa Thalhimer. In so many respects, they are the reason why this project exists. Writing my thesis gave me a special opportunity to say goodbye to Grandpa and honor his contributions to Thalhimers, our community, American and Southern history, and our family. This thesis is dedicated in honor of Grandma and in memory of Grandpa.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	v
Abstract.....	vii
Chapter	
1 Introduction.....	1
2 Store and Story.....	7
The Beginning of the End .....	7
A Family and their Store .....	9
Growing Up with Thalhimers: My Story .....	35
3 History and Theory .....	41
The Master Narrative of the American Department Store .....	43
Symbolic Convergence around the Thalhimers Brand.....	64
4 Conclusion .....	79
Wrapping it Up: The End of the Department Store Era .....	79
A Personal Goodbye.....	81
Bibliography .....	89
Vita.....	97

## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: William Thalhimer .....	9
Figure 2: Thalhimer Brothers store. Richmond, Virginia at 501 E. Broad Street. Circa 1883.....	14
Figure 3: Gramps (William B. Thalhimer Sr.) at his desk.....	18
Figure 4: Thalhimers selling war bonds in 1942 .....	24
Figure 5: Ruth Tinsley being dragged away from Thalhimers by police. 1960. Courtesy Library of Congress. ....	28
Figure 6: Grandpa and other retailers meeting with President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. June 4, 1963.....	30
Figure 7: Thalhimers at Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh, North Carolina. 1970s.....	32
Figure 8: The author (center) with her mother and sisters visiting Thalhimers' Snow Bear. 1984 .....	38
Figure 9: Thalhimers bustles with activity during its Centurama 100-year anniversary celebration of 1942 .....	50
Figure 10: AMC meeting at Thalhimers. L to R: Charles G. Thalhimer, Steven L. Osterweis, William T. French, Joseph L. Hudson Jr., C.R. McBrier, Ralph Lazarus, William B. Thalhimer Jr., Richard H. Rich. 1967 .....	53
Figure 11: Elizabeth "Betty" Bauder and associates in Thalhimers' advertising	

department.....57

Figure 12: Snow Bears, shopping bags, and other Thalhimers memorabilia .....69

Figure 13: Thalhimers “Old Timers” party for employees with more than 10 years of  
service. 1980s.....72

Figure 14: In loving memory of Grandpa, William B. Thalhimer Jr. (1914 – 2005).....88

## ABSTRACT

### THALHIMERS DEPARTMENT STORE: STORY, HISTORY, AND THEORY

By Elizabeth Thalhimer Smartt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005.

#### Directors:

Dr. Catherine E. Ingrassia, Professor and Director of the MA in English,  
English Department

Dr. James Kinney, Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies,  
English Department

This thesis looks at Thalhimers department store through the lenses of story, history, and theory. It first introduces the intertwining narratives of the author's paternal family and the store's history, then shares the author's personal story of Thalhimers. The second half outlines the master narrative of the American department store then applies "fantasy-theme analysis" and the symbolic convergence theory to stories and artifacts related to Thalhimers. A conclusion discusses the end of the department store era including a deeply personal goodbye from the author.



## **CHAPTER 1 Introduction**

I am the recipient of a magnificent gift; a story has been given to me by my ancestors. The story begins in 1842 when my great-great-great grandfather founded Thalhimers, a store headquartered in my hometown of Richmond, Virginia. Growing from a one-room dry goods shop to a chain of twenty-six department stores, it enjoyed a successful one-hundred and fifty-year run featuring four generations of family leadership. When May Department Store Company made the decision to fold Thalhimers into their Hecht's chain in 1992, Thalhimers' fate aligned with that of many other hometown department stores. That year, the story ended.

I represent the sixth and the last generation of my family to have known Thalhimers first-hand. I feel both passionate about researching the store's history and responsible for preserving its stories. I want to understand its place in the era of the American department store, which seems to be nearing its end, and analyze the powerful impact of these stores on our culture and society. I want to know why, even years after department stores close, they continue to evoke powerful memories and plentiful stories.

Unwrapping each piece of the Thalhimers story with insatiable curiosity, I continue to sift through long-forgotten newspaper clippings and photographs, search obscure library and government records, hunt through attics and antique shops, research

hundreds of other stores' histories, visit old Thalhimers store sites, and conduct interviews with family members, past store employees, and customers.

After my father, William B. Thalhimer III, left the business in 1991, he began researching our genealogy and the history of Thalhimers then sharing that information with me. For years, he and I interviewed my grandpa, William B. Thalhimer, Jr., the longtime Chief Executive Officer of Thalhimers who oversaw a significant part of its growth.

Through those interviews with Grandpa, I hoped to gain an intimate knowledge of Thalhimers' origins and understand how it was able to endure wars, floods, economic hardships, and family feuds. I wanted to know why it prevailed for a century and a half when so many other stores like it failed. I wanted to know why the store touched so many people in a way that made them so loyal and sentimental about it. But Grandpa could not answer these questions. He spent his life running the business, not studying its history or pondering communication theories. Like the consummate shopper, I must continue searching, researching, and trying on new theories and information to find what fits perfectly. I want to uncover the "true history" of the store and the stories of the people who created it, built it, and made the community part of its family. I want to define its role in the drama of the American department store.

Thalhimers has become a genealogical, archeological, and rhetorical artifact. The word "Thalhimers" no longer means a place to shop, but it can still be found in the vernacular of certain communities across the South. Its meaning still bears special significance to those who recognize it.

In Richmond and the other locales where Thalhimers existed, a mention of the store frequently evokes an emotional response and elicits storytelling. Stories of a bygone era when shopping downtown was a social and cultural event. Stories of visiting Santa and Snow Bear. Stories reflecting the “American Dream.” Stories of hometown department stores from Richmond and across the country. Stories from a time when stores embraced philanthropy, education, culture and community. Stories about shopping during the holidays with brothers and sisters, eating buttery popovers with grandparents in the Richmond Room, picking up black-and-white checkered bakery boxes for birthdays, and carrying shopping bags imprinted with a big blue script “T.” Why do Thalhimers’ artifacts – like hatboxes, shopping bags, signs, and branded merchandise – still have perceived value, selling in stores and on eBay? Why do these things continue to carry symbolic meaning? How was a store, a provider of goods, able to generate such enduring ethos?

Thalhimers was by no means unique in accomplishing these things. Even in Richmond, it was one of two major downtown retail institutions that became beloved shopping icons. Its friendly rival and downtown neighbor Miller & Rhoads, which declared bankruptcy and closed in 1989, continues to have an equally devoted following and hold deeply sentimental meaning in the community. The two stores continue to appear in the media from Richmond television shows like Downtown Richmond Memories<sup>1</sup> to local newspaper and magazine articles, but appear most frequently in personal conversations. Beyond Richmond, thousands of other department stores share similar

---

<sup>1</sup> Downtown Richmond Memories, narr. Charley McDowell and Harvey Hudson, writ. Judith Warrington, prod. Paul Roberts, WCVW Richmond PBS, Mar. 2002.

histories and spur sentimental stories. These stores and their stories have become a part of the American cultural fabric.

This thesis looks at Thalhimers department store through the lenses of story, history, and theory. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the intertwining narratives of my paternal family – especially Grandpa – and the store’s history. In my mind, it is impossible to separate Grandpa from Thalhimers or Thalhimers from Grandpa, so he plays a large role in this broad biography of the store’s history. Chapter 2 includes my personal story of growing up with Thalhimers. Like many others, I cherish my memories of visiting the store and participating in its many traditions.

Chapter 3 delineates the master narrative of the American department store and gives some perspective on how Thalhimers history fits into the bigger picture. A great number of other hometown stores share remarkably similar roots. When we step back and consider their stories together, it becomes clear how the stores simultaneously progressed and learned from each other while maintaining independent identities. The story of the hometown department store is emblematic of our country’s history, and from it we can see the rise of consumerism and how it became an inextricable part of American life. There is much to explore with regard to the history of the department store in this country, and this thesis offers only an overview.

Many department stores had long life spans, and they developed deeply loyal customers spanning generations. This allegiance and devotion set the stage for the creation of a shared reality that, even after many stores have ceased to exist, continues to foster relationships, establish a sense of belonging, and allow people to relive nostalgic

memories together. The second half of Chapter 3 looks at this phenomenon using the rhetorical lenses of symbolic convergence and fantasy-theme analysis. Many people still talk about stores as individuals or families, and this personification provides insight into the relationships between stores and their internal and external audiences.

From my perspective, the personification of Thalhimers seems most salient within the Thalhimer family. When I think about the store, I rarely think about making purchases. I think about the employees: the late Abbot Lambert, one of the state's first African-American executives, the ladies sketching newspaper illustrations in the advertising department, the late Joseph Cotton who delivered our packages in his big, blue Thalhimers truck, a salesperson we called "Bunny" who helped us buy our school clothes, and many, many others. My mother, Sallie Brush Thalhimer, compares the closing of Thalhimers to "losing a favorite uncle. Someone who we loved and who loved us." She says, "When the store closed, we lost a part of the family."

Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of my research, then shares my deeply personal story of saying goodbye to Thalhimers and Grandpa at the same time. On many levels and across the country, I am not the only one who mourns the loss of a hometown department store and the civic-minded "merchant princes" who built it. Now, unfortunately, symbolic convergence draws communities together around the demolition, closing, or sale of their local department stores.

Although many department stores have closed their doors, abandoned their downtown hubs, merged with larger companies, or changed their names due to the ever-shifting retail tide, their rich stories live on. These stories piece together to help us

understand the era of the department store and its impact on our economy, culture, and society. Through these narratives, we connect with the past, with our communities, with the ideals of the American Dream, and with each other. Through my own store stories, I connect with my passion for preserving history, my childhood, my genealogy, and my Grandpa.

## **CHAPTER 2 Store and Story**

### **The Beginning of the End**

As I approach the Medical College of Virginia Hospital, where Grandpa awaits a blood transfusion, the light turns red at the corner of Broad and Seventh Street. The old Thalhimers downtown department store, closed for the past twelve years, looms over me with a stark melancholy it never held before. I gaze skyward at the aluminum-clad behemoth haunting downtown Richmond with memories of its vibrant past. Its windows shattered or boarded up, some of them with a residue of the old checkerboard motifs from the bakery, the building appears broken, fatigued and ready to succumb to its death. Down its side, a phantom trace of the Thalhimers name lingers where a sign used to be. From the seventh floor roof sprouts a solitary tree – the only intimation of life. A car honks behind me; the light has turned green. I accelerate past the decrepit giant and proceed to the hospital. There lies Grandpa, the once dynamic and seemingly indomitable man who helped build Thalhimers into one of the most successful department stores in the South.

Grandpa's eyes are closed, and I don't want to disturb him. I tiptoe across the floor and slide into a chair beside the hospital bed where he lies, frail and quiet. The room smells sterile and foreign; I feel like a stranger surrounded by its solemn walls. For the first time, I notice that the skin on Grandpa's hands looks almost translucent, exposing the

fine network of purplish red veins underneath. His thin grey hair has been carefully brushed across the top of his head – probably by one of the nurses scurrying about the halls. I hardly recognize Grandpa without his glasses, shiny black wingtips, and trademark gold chain dangling from his front belt loop to his pocket. I barely know this man in the bed. *He can't die*, I think to myself. *Surely he is bigger than death*. But his beloved Thalhimers always seemed bigger than death, too, and it has been gone now for over ten years. I reach out and gently touch his hand, and his eyes open. “Lizaboo,” he says in his inimitable throaty, reverberating voice. “I’m glad you’re here.”

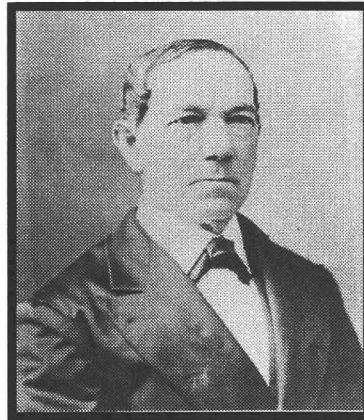
For two years following that day, I watched as Grandpa and the Thalhimers flagship store disappeared from life. At some point, blood transfusions become futile and old stores are torn down; bodies and buildings are temporal. As my grandfather and the longtime family business encountered the last stages of their lives, I began to explore why their concurrent demise seemed both a beginning and an end for my family, for downtown Richmond, and for retailing in America. I began to research and explore their stories.



## A Family and their Store

A handful of business documents, a wedding contract, several signed checks, an elaborately engraved silver *Kiddush* cup, a letter from family in Germany announcing the death of his father, his passport, his portrait – mysteriously revealing that he wore a small hoop earring in one ear – and a single photograph of him as a middle-aged man.<sup>2</sup> Aside from a gravestone in Richmond’s Hebrew Cemetery, these are the only vestiges left by William Thalhimer (originally Thalheimer), my great-great-great grandfather and the founder of the small dry goods shop that would become Thalhimers department store.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: William Thalhimer**



---

<sup>2</sup> These business documents, checks, letter, passport, and photograph are held in the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III. The wedding contract is on display in the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives. The *Kiddush* cup is held privately by Adam R. Thalhimer. The portrait is in the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Thalhimer.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of clarity, the store will be referred to as “Thalhimers,” although it had several names throughout its history including Wm. Thalheimer Dry Goods and Clothing Store, Wm. Thalhimer and Sons, and Thalhimer Brothers, Inc.

As the story goes, William traveled from the Port of LeHavre, France, to New Orleans on the passenger ship Lorena in 1840 along with three friends, Edgar Kaufman, Lewis A. Rosenstock, and Lewis Stern. All four men began their careers as peddlers along the Mississippi River. Due to their poor grasp of English, they “headed for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by way of the Mississippi, but landed in Petersburg, Virginia instead.”<sup>4</sup> Kaufman was the only one of the four to reach Pittsburgh, where he opened Kaufmans department store. Rosenstock stayed in Petersburg where he opened Rosenstocks, which thrived for a century. Stern went on to found the famous Stern Brothers store in New York City. And Thalhimier traveled up the road to Richmond where he founded the store that would bear his name for a century and a half.

After much research, no concrete evidence of this story exists. According to the histories of those stores, they were started much later and their founders had not yet arrived in 1840. However, the dramatic tale continues to be a part of the Thalhimier family’s oral history, and appears in personal letters, books, newspaper articles, speeches and business documents throughout the last century. Fact or fiction, it became an integral part of the Thalhimiers saga.

William Thalhimier could not speak English when he arrived, but oral history indicates that he had a strong background as a Talmudic scholar and a reputation as a respected teacher of Hebrew and German. Stories suggest that he had been a professor at

---

<sup>4</sup> Philip J. Reilly, Old Masters of Retailing (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1966) 189.

Heidelberg University prior to immigrating to America, although the university has no records supporting this claim.<sup>5</sup>

Through peddling goods in America, William was able to learn the English language and somehow save enough money to start his own store in 1842. This elevated his social status from itinerant peddler to established retailer, the distinction between these careers being “an artifact of the life cycle: peddling was a life for young single men, shopkeeping one for older married ones.”<sup>6</sup> William established a one-room dry goods store in Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom near the Farmers’ Market. The store would move several times in that area, even opening a branch store for a brief time on Main Street, before relocating to the Broad Street shopping corridor.

Some of the earliest proof of the original Thalhimers locations can be found in Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia insurance records, Richmond city directories, Richmond merchants’ license records, and anecdotal evidence from family letters, personal items, and business documents that my father kept after the store closed. The first commercial substantiation of William Thalhimer’s store is an advertisement found in an 1855 edition of the Richmonder Anzeiger, a newspaper for the German-speaking population in Richmond. Translated from German to English, the advertisement reads,

---

<sup>5</sup> Based on author’s contact with Heidelberg University archivist in 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Strasser, Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash (New York: Henry Holt, 1999) 80.

Wm. Thalheimer's  
Dry Good and Clothing Store  
17<sup>th</sup> Street at the Old Market

Stop at the complete store for all seasons for a beautiful selection of dry goods and clothing for farm workers, white and multicolored shirts, underwear, stockings and socks, neckwear, scarves, suspenders, casual and straw hats at the lowest prices.<sup>7</sup>

Creditors' records reflect that the early store faced anti-Semitism, which was not new to William Thalheimer. In his hometown of Thairnbach, a small village nestled in Germany's Black Forest, Jews were considered second-class citizens. There, as in other parts of Bavaria, Jewish families were granted the privilege of adopting last names in 1809, due to an edict of Napoleon. William's family selected the last name Thalheimer meaning "home in the valley." He presumably emigrated to escape widespread religious persecution and other economic and social hardships in the town of Thairnbach. Eleven years after he left, there were only one hundred and forty-nine Jews left in his hometown. In 1875, there were thirty-five. By 1895, not a single Jew resided in Tairnbach.<sup>8</sup> Much like William Thalheimer, many young Jews immigrated to America in hopes of starting new lives and embracing opportunities they never had before.

In September of 1845, William married a fellow German Jewish Richmonder named Mary Millheiser. According to a brief biography written by their son Jacob

---

<sup>7</sup> William Thalheimer's Dry Good and Clothing Store advertisement, Richmonder Anzeiger, 25 Aug. 1855.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Höflin, Historische Streiflichter aus Tairnbach und seiner Umgebung (Tairnbach, Germany: Heimatverein Tairnbach, 1985) 73.

Thalhimer, “My father did the cutting out of the goods for Jumpers and Overalls, and giving out the work and my Mother sold most of the merchandise.”<sup>9</sup> Mary’s family, the Millheisers, also ran businesses in Richmond, so she surely benefited from their experience and advice. From 1844 to 1845, William partnered with Mary’s brother-in-law Abraham Smith, and the store was called Thalhimer and Smith for a year.

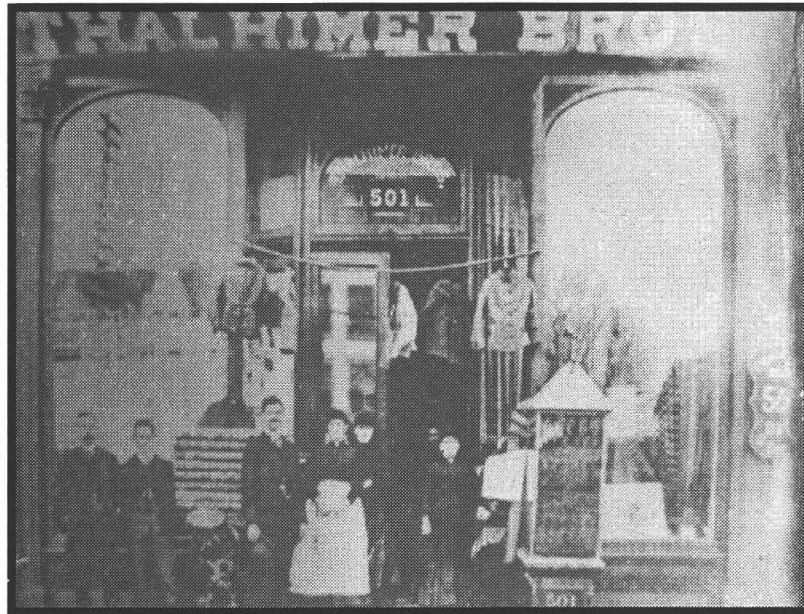
Together, William and Mary set in place the foundations for a business that would grow much larger than the their original one-room store. Part of that expansion was due to the family’s growth. William and Mary had seven children: Gustavus, Charles, Jacob, Amelia, Isaac, Moses, and Bettie. The family lived above their store until 1880 when they bought their first home at 400 East Clay Street in Richmond’s Jackson Ward, at the time an area where many German Jews resided.

In 1869, the eldest sons Gustavus and Charles joined their father in the family business, and the name of the store became "William Thalhimer and Sons." Jacob and Gus moved to California in 1873, but both eventually moved back to Richmond and worked for the store in limited capacities. In 1877, William Thalhimer gave the business over to his three sons who had elected to stay in Richmond – Charles, Moses, and Isaac. At this point, the store became known as Thalhimer Brothers. Charles became involved in a variety of other business ventures including his own liquor store “Charles Thalhimer & Co.,” then returned to Thalhimers as a clerk and buyer. From 1878 to April 2, 1917, Moses worked steadily at Thalhimers, both in merchandising laces and trimmings and

---

overseeing store credit accounts. At the age of sixty, Moses retired and sold his interest in the business to his brother Isaac Thalhimer and Isaac's son William B. Thalhimer, Sr.

**Figure 2: Thalhimer Brothers store. Richmond, Virginia at 501 E. Broad Street. Circa 1883.**



Isaac emerged as a natural leader of the family business. He excelled in merchandising, traveled often on buying trips to New York and overseas, and eventually earned the esteemed moniker “Dean of Richmond merchants.” He recognized the popularity of ready-made clothing including cloaks, suits, and dresses. Isaac’s merchandising expertise combined with his wife Amelia's good taste (and that of two

---

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Thalhimer, “A Biography of My Mother Mary Thalhimer,” 12 Jan. 1933. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.

other female employees, not yet called buyers) built a reputation for Thalhimers as a purveyor of fine, factory-made clothes.

Isaac and Amelia had five daughters and two sons. Due to the family policy of “no [family] women in the business,” none of the sisters were involved with the store. Ike, the younger of the boys, died at the age of two years old when his hobbyhorse caught fire. The eldest son William, known to my family as Gramps<sup>10</sup>, went on to be a powerful leader in Thalhimers’ history.

After working for two years as a yard goods salesman at Carson Pirie Scott & Company in Chicago, Gramps joined Thalhimers in 1905 as a stock boy. In 1915, 27-year-old Gramps purchased a part interest in the business from his father Isaac and his uncle Moses, who opted to retire. On April 15, 1917, a newspaper advertisement read:

Thalhimer Brothers...Announcing a celebration sale of this 75 year old store...The oldest new firm in Richmond...To celebrate the proudest moment of my life and to honor the advent in the firm of a new member, my son, William B. Thalhimer...Making the third generation to dedicate his best efforts to the upholding and maintaining the business ideals of this store as enunciated by the founder, my father, three quarters of a century ago...signed by Isaac Thalhimer.<sup>11</sup>

He learned quickly from his father Isaac, and when the business incorporated in 1922 Gramps became the first Vice President of Thalhimers. One of only thirty employees, his responsibilities included buying two-thirds of the store’s merchandise.

---

<sup>10</sup> William B. Thalhimer, Sr. will be referred to as “Gramps.”

<sup>11</sup> The Richmond Virginian, 15 Apr. 1917.

From 1930 to 1947, Gramps served as President and General Manager of Thalhimers, succeeded for a brief time by his first cousin Irving May.

When the stock market collapsed and the Great Depression took hold, Thalhimers suffered along with the rest of the country. Business was tough. Banks closed, even prior to Roosevelt closing banks across the nation in 1932. One by one, Gramps met personally with each Thalhimer employee at a card table in his yard. He evaluated each person's job and their effectiveness, then made difficult decisions to downsize in order to balance the reduced sales numbers. Due to this effort, Thalhimers barely eked out a profit of \$9,000 in 1929.

Grandpa often told a story about the darkest days of 1932, when Thalhimers realized it could no longer afford to pay employees or buy merchandise. He said, "We couldn't go to banks and we had no money." Consequently, in an uncharacteristically helpless moment, his father called a family friend in New York and asked for a \$100,000 loan. Graciously, the friend obliged. In order to safely transport this large amount of money during such desperate times, Grandpa – then an eighteen-year-old boy working in New York – was asked to hand deliver the cash to his father in Richmond. He carried it in brown paper bags on the train ride from New York to Richmond. "I put the bags under my pillow in the berth. I did not move until that train hit Broad Street Station."<sup>12</sup> The store survived due to the money in those bags, and the debt was repaid in several years.

Aside from minding his store, Gramps found time to make many philanthropic contributions on local and national levels. One of his most visible local contributions was



establishing a permanent wildlife park in the city of Richmond. The park, fourteen years in the planning, would initially be known as the Thalhimer-Virginia Wildlife Exhibit in Maymont Park. It later became called Maymont Park, and continues to grow and thrive today.

In his autobiography Days of Grace: A Memoir, tennis legend and local hero Arthur Ashe recounted the following story about his father, Arthur Ashe, Sr., who worked as a personal driver for Gramps.

My father saw clearly that even great wealth did not save the Jews of Richmond from bigotry. He liked to tell the story of driving William Thalhimer to see a man about a piece of land that Thalhimer wanted to buy. The man hated to sell the land to anyone, but he hated above all selling it to a Jew. As Daddy listened, the man insulted Thalhimer in every way he could. Thalhimer said nothing. The deal was concluded. Driving back, my father asked Thalhimer why he had meekly taken those insults from an inferior.

“Arthur,” Thalhimer said, “I came out here to purchase that piece of land. I got the piece of land. It belongs to me now, not to him. That man can go on cursing me as long as he likes. I have the land.”<sup>13</sup>

This story helps define Gramps as a man with strong convictions, a stern countenance, and a steadfast commitment to his store and his beliefs. Combined with a passion for merchandising, these attributes equated to retail success.

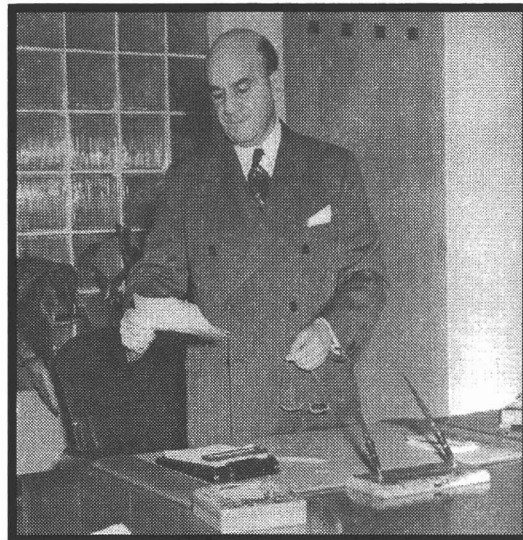
Gramps wanted to bring the world to Thalhimers, and in many ways he did. From Japanese kimonos to African decorative arts, the key to success was staying ahead of the

---

<sup>12</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 18 June 1998.

fashion curve. Keeping a close eye on affluent rival Miller & Rhoads across the street, Thalhimers was scrappy but competitive. When Miller & Rhoads expanded, Gramps knew it was time to expand his store, too. So in 1922, under his careful supervision, Thalhimers moved its entire inventory a block eastward to its final downtown location on Broad between Sixth and Seventh Streets.

**Figure 3: Gramps (William B. Thalhimer Sr.) at his desk.**



Although his primary devotion was to the store, Gramps' most notable social contribution occurred in 1936. That year, Gramps and his cousin, realtor Morton G. Thalhimer, bought fifteen-hundred-acre Hyde Farmlands in rural Burkeville, Virginia, to create a refuge for young German Jewish students escaping Nazi persecution. To leave Germany, Jews had to prove they had relatives or owned land in the United States.

---

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Ashe and Arnold Rampersad, Days of Grace: A Memoir (New York: Alfred A.

Wisely, Gramps and Mort incorporated the farm, enabling German Jews to dodge filled emigration quotas and obtain American citizenship. Although they signed hundreds of affidavits for young German Jewish students to immigrate to America, only thirty-six of them were able to escape Germany. Once they arrived on the farm, the students lived and worked there in a self-sufficient rural microcosm based on a similar farm created by Professor Curt Bondy in Gross-Breesen, Germany. At Hyde Farmlands, residents learned how to grow their own food, work diligently, develop marketable skills, and successfully immerse themselves in American culture and society.

When the United States entered the war in 1941, Hyde Farmlands disbanded and many refugees enlisted in the armed forces, some of them even returning to Germany to fight as Americans. Several students became Thalhimers employees, although they received a lukewarm reception at the store due to undercurrents of anti-Semitism and fear during that time. One survivor still has his dog tags that list William B. Thalhimer, Sr. as next of kin, since he had lost his relatives to concentration camps. After the war ended, the young residents of Hyde Farmlands continued to keep in touch, hold reunions, and lead their lives as American citizens.

Tragically, Gramps' health began to fail him at age thirty-seven when he suffered his first heart attack. Sensing the urgency of the situation, he began grooming his eldest

son, William B. Thalhimer, Jr.,<sup>14</sup> to take over the business. Gramps remained Chairman of the Board until 1969, but Grandpa took the reins as its leader in the late 1940s.

In a recent interview with Grandpa, he recalled, “As an early kid, I’d go to Sabbath Schol on Saturday and afterwards I’d go downtown to beg my grandfather – who spent the morning in temple – to let me go down to work. And he’d say ‘all right.’ So I’d go downtown and work. I didn’t do much, but at the time I thought I did a lot. And I’d get paid a quarter. I loved to wrap packages or put things on shelves, or whatever needed doing.”<sup>15</sup> He spent many afternoons playing in the store, counting goods for inventory, and helping his grandfather Isaac with reeling in the suspended basket that carried customers’ money from the first floor cash register to the second floor accounting desk. In 1930, at the age of sixteen, Grandpa wrote the following words to Isaac:

My only desire is to follow in your path and accomplish the many thoughtful deeds that you have in your seventy-five years of progress. Ever since we moved to Seventh and Broad St. and since I have been old enough, I have been very much interested in the firm and have noticed the wonderful achievements that you have performed, in business and private life. All of this inspires me, Grandpa, and makes a very high apex to my ambition.<sup>16</sup>

At the advice of his father’s trusted friend Douglas Southall Freeman, Grandpa chose not to attend college but instead to dive head first into an experiential retail

---

<sup>14</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr. will be referred to as “Grandpa.” He is one of six William Thalhimers in my paternal family since our arrival in this country.

<sup>15</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 13 Feb. 2002.

education. He headed to New York after high school to seek work away from the family business. After unsuccessful interviews at Macy's, B. Altman, Saks Fifth Avenue, Lord & Taylor, and others, he finally landed a \$15-a-week job as a stock boy in the marking and receiving department at Stern Brothers in New York City. Two years later, in 1934, a job opened up for an Art Needlework buyer at Thalhimers. He felt ready to assume a role at the store bearing his family name, so he took the job. Over the next twenty years, one promotion led to another and in 1950, at the age of thirty-six, Grandpa became one of the youngest corporate presidents in the country. In 1955, he opted to float stock, and Thalhimers went public.

As the leader of the store, Grandpa not only impacted the business but also served on over thirty boards around the city of Richmond. It's a challenge to name a current Richmond organization that he did not affect in some way. From St. Mary's Hospital to the Science Museum of Virginia to the local committee of the United Negro College Fund, Grandpa's philanthropic impact spanned the community. One highlight of his endeavors includes heading up Virginia's chapter of Radio Free Europe, which sent information behind the Iron Curtain in an attempt to allow western and eastern Europeans to communicate freely during the Cold War.

Although he practiced his religion quietly, Grandpa contributed time, energy, and financial resources to the Jewish community for many years. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather Isaac, he served as President of Congregation Beth Ahabah and served as a

---

<sup>16</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., letter to Isaac Thalhimer, 1930, private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.

trustee of the temple for more than forty years. Together, he and Grandma funded the building of the Beth Ahabah religious school that I attended for eleven years worth of Sundays.

Charles G. Thalhimer, Grandpa's younger brother, helped build the business and also contributed to the community through civic means. After graduating from Washington and Lee University and serving in the Merchant Marines, Charles joined Thalhimers in 1947. Six years later, he had risen through the ranks to become Vice President and Director of Sales. Charles became President of Thalhimers in 1973, and was known throughout the business and the community for his pleasant, easy-going style, likeable personality, and enormous generosity. After thirty-eight years with Thalhimers, Charles retired when he turned sixty-five. Without public statement, his sons Charles and Harry left the business at the same time.

Charles' family impacted many organizations including the Jewish Community Federation, Maymont Foundation, Downtown Retail Associates, the Boys' Club of Richmond, the Virginia Retail Merchants' Association, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Virginia Commonwealth University. When employees were laid off due to the closing of the downtown Richmond store in the early 1990s, Charles reacted with both sympathy and genuine compassion. He established the Charles Thalhimer Family Emergency Equity Assistance Program, a million-dollar fund distributed to employees with tenures of ten or more years at the store.

Through various philanthropic activities, the Thalhimer name touched many different parts of the community. It became associated with social responsibility, and this,

of course, positively affected the reputation and success of the company. All Thalhimers executives were encouraged to participate on community boards and contribute to various organizations.

Beginning in 1937, Thalhimers further built its reputation by joining the buying offices of the esteemed Associated Merchandising Corporation (AMC). At the time, the organization included twenty-six other independent store chains, including Bloomingdale's, Lazarus, Rich's, and Filene's. As a member of the AMC, Thalhimers and its counterparts enjoyed "continuous representation in the central markets, quantity purchasing, private brands [...], comparison of operation, and a friendly spirit of rivalry between stores for efficiency and progress."<sup>17</sup> In the 1930s, the AMC had buying offices in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, London, Paris, Hong Kong, and Florence, Italy.

Thalhimers backed many wartime efforts during World War II, spanning four years from 1941 to 1945. According to Grandpa, "We were instrumental in selling bonds for the U.S. government during the war. We were also named supplier for the Pinks and provided thousands of uniforms for all Second Lieutenants in the Quarter Master Corps. We had weekend events at the 'Parking Lot Canteen' created in [Thalhimers'] parking lot. There were parties with dancing – it was all chaperoned. It was very popular with the Fort Lee boys. We encouraged everyone to live within their allotted coupons and cooperate with U.S. government rules."<sup>18</sup> In addition, the employee newsletter took on the patriotic

---

<sup>17</sup> Thalhimers Welcomes You (Thalhimer Brothers, Inc., 1956) 8.

<sup>18</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 28 May 2002.

title “TBI Fights,” Thalhimers sponsored an Army Air Force aviation show, and “Camp Co-Thalia” was established to give employees and their families a weekend retreat at Richmond’s Swift Creek Park. A significant number of Thalhimers employees, including Grandpa, left work to serve time in the armed forces.

**Figure 4: Thalhimers selling war bonds in 1942.**



In 1949, Thalhimers opened its first branch store in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.<sup>19</sup> Over the next thirty years, Thalhimers department stores spread across the Southeast. Eventually, the chain would include Virginia stores in Petersburg, Danville, Lynchburg, Roanoke, Hampton Roads, Virginia Beach, and Norfolk. North Carolina store

---

<sup>19</sup> With the exception of an early branch store that existed on Main Street in Richmond from 1868 to 1869.



locations included Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Durham, Raleigh, High Point, and Fayetteville. Thalhimers' only operations outside of Virginia and North Carolina were its Memphis location in Tennessee and two stores in Charleston, South Carolina.

Beginning in the 1950s, Thalhimers declared their mission on the back of an annual report. It read,

We have always believed that a store should be a part of the lives and hopes, part of the growth and future of the people who share its fortunes. For that reason we have always endeavored to contribute more than our function of supplying goods and services. We have built, and we intend to keep on building, a store that will make the vast area we serve a better place in which to live by our earnest effort to add to the pleasures, the accomplishments, the cultural achievements, the education, the higher standards of living of every person who crosses our threshold.<sup>20</sup>

With these firm commitments to bettering the lives of its employees and customers, the store established a reputation as one of the finest retailers in the South.

Perhaps the most pivotal era of Thalhimers history occurred during the early 1960s. A personal recollection of its story has been told in our family for many years. It begins with Grandpa coming home from work for lunch one Saturday, as he often did, and receiving a frantic phone call from someone at the store. The voice said, "Mr. Billy, we don't know what to do. Negro students are sitting at the lunch counter reading books. They won't leave."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> From a photocopy in the private collection of Mrs. Elizabeth B. Bauder.

<sup>21</sup> William B. Thalhimers Jr., personal interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

Thalhimers had already quietly integrated its employee lunchroom and beauty salon, but its policies still barred blacks from sharing a dining space with whites or using the same water fountains, bathrooms and dressing rooms as whites. As elsewhere, segregation based on skin color was embedded in the culture. On this cold day in early 1960, thirty-four Virginia Union University (VUU) students set out to change that inequality. These students orchestrated a sit-in protest to fight racial discrimination and change Thalhimers' segregation policy.

In response to the panicked phone call from the store, Grandpa immediately contacted his legal counselor, Alexander Parker, who didn't know what to advise. So he returned to the downtown store to assess the situation first-hand. Although the restaurant protests were peaceful and orderly, mostly involving well-behaved students quietly reading books and asking to be served tea or coffee, the store had called the city police. The protesters refused to vacate the premises, so police removed them from the store. As protesters walked out with police escorts, "they emerged from Thalhimers carrying American flags. Before the students were placed into police vans, they received emotional and verbal support from five hundred supporters."<sup>22</sup> The students were charged with trespassing and many of them were held briefly at the city jail. Dr. Allix James, past president of VUU, said in a recent interview, "They [the students] had our backing one-hundred percent. In fact, [Mrs. James] and I put up our house, down at the courthouse, to

---

<sup>22</sup> Lewis A. Randolph and Gayle T. Tate, Rights for a Season: The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Richmond Virginia (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003) 182.

bail anybody out who didn't have bond."<sup>23</sup> Dr. James' action symbolized the firm commitment and spirit of alliance that made the Civil Rights Movement so powerful and effective.

Although they were freed almost immediately, the jailing of the thirty-four VUU students angered the black community and a protracted boycott of Thalhimers followed. Protesters encircled the downtown store for months; volunteers marched with homemade signs reading phrases like, "Turn in your Charge-a-Plate" and "Don't buy where you may be arrested."<sup>24</sup> The boycott targeted Thalhimers, but also included Richmond businesses Miller & Rhoads, People's Drug Store, W.T. Grand, G.C. Murphy, Sears and Roebuck and Woolworth's.<sup>25</sup> A disturbing image of police with guard dogs dragging Ruth Tinsley, an older, well-respected black woman, away from the Thalhimers store gained national press. This image made the boycott appear more violent than it actually was, and truly threatened to put Thalhimers out of business.

---

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Allix James, personal interview, 28 Oct. 2005.

<sup>24</sup> From photographs in the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.

<sup>25</sup> Randolph and Tate 185.

**Figure 5: Ruth Tinsley being dragged away from Thalhimers by police. 1960.  
Courtesy Library of Congress.**



Grandpa deliberated how to respond to the boycott in the most compassionate and just manner, balancing his considerations with their impact on the business. Should he fully integrate the store and risk losing the majority of his white clientele or continue enforcing the segregation policies that the rest of the region's retailers observed? Adding to the tension, he experienced much personal fear and stress at home; during the boycott, his family received death threats and menacing phone calls. A policeman set up camp in the family's dining room and escorted my father and his siblings to school.

Ultimately, Grandpa made the decision to do what he felt was right. More than fifty years later, he said, "If I could go back in time, I would integrate it earlier. But ninety-five percent of our business was white. Had we single-handedly integrated on our

own, we would have gone broke. We knew the right thing to do, but it was a delicate situation.”<sup>26</sup>

Although he never acknowledged it outright, Grandpa alluded to feeling a personal connection to the discrimination of minorities. Perhaps Thalhimers was targeted for protest because a Jewish storeowner might be more likely to hear the message of the protesters and respond empathetically. Maybe this was a good assumption; maybe this communication implicitly took place. Complete integration occurred eighteen months after the VUU students’ sit-in strikes and the subsequent boycott of the store. Other Richmond retailers followed suit. No longer were any parts of Thalhimers and its counterparts “separate but equal” – a legally supported mandate in our country since 1896.

Grandpa invited black leaders from the community to dine with him and Grandma in the Richmond Room as a symbolic gesture to invite all people to shop and work at the store as equals. Miller & Rhoads, the department store across the street, did the same. Several of the original protesters received jobs at Thalhimers, including Richmonder Leroy Bray. Following his participation in the sit-in strikes as a college student, Bray recalls, “I realized I needed a job. I went to [Thalhimers]. That was only a year later. I can’t say a bad thing about Thalhimers.”<sup>27</sup>

Soon after the integration of the store, again on a Saturday when his secretary wasn’t working, Grandpa received a call from a woman saying, “Hello, Mr., Thalhimer.

---

<sup>26</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 28 May 2002.

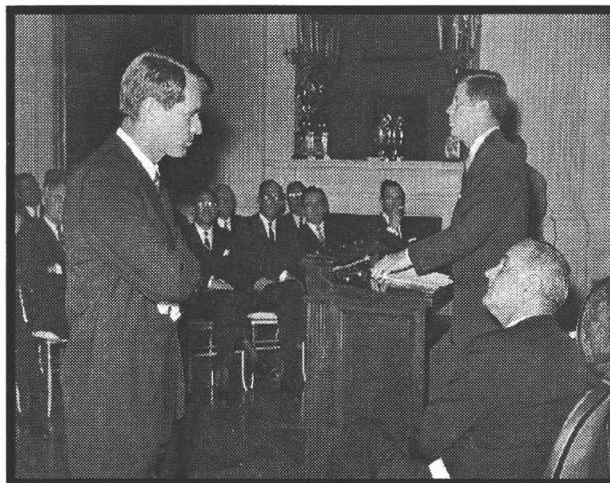
<sup>27</sup> Leroy Bray, personal interview, 30 July 2004.

The president would like to speak with you.” To this, he responded curtly, “The president of what?” Then he heard a familiar voice on the phone – that of John F. Kennedy.

President Kennedy expressed interest in how Thalhimers had responded to the sit-in strike and boycott, and asked Grandpa to visit the White House to participate in a meeting of businessmen from across the country.

On June 4, 1963, Time Magazine included a picture of Grandpa, seated among approximately one-hundred other leaders of hotels, chain stores, theaters, and stores, in the East Room of the White House with President Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy to discuss integration of businesses.<sup>28</sup> Thalhimers participated in these meetings as an example of successful integration that had already taken place.

**Figure 6: Grandpa and other retailers meeting with President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. June 4, 1963.**



---

<sup>28</sup> “The Nation,” Time Magazine, 14 June 1963.

In the years that followed, Thalhimers continued to experience exponential growth. It emphasized being “The Fashion Store of the South” in Richmond and across the Southeast. Thalhimers continued emphasizing innovation in retail, and took many calculated risks to improve its technology, infrastructure, operations, and services. To stay competitive, Grandpa befriended retailers across the country, including Stanley Marcus of Neiman-Marcus, Donald C. Dayton of Dalton’s, Richard “Dick” Rich of Rich’s, Webster Rhoads of Miller & Rhoads, Ralph Lazurus of Lazurus, J.T. Pirie, Jr. of Carson, Pirie, Scott, and Oscar Weber and J.L. Hudson of Hudson’s.

In 1967, the National Cash Register Corporation (NCR) installed one of its first storewide computer systems at Thalhimers. The central computer took up an entire room in the downtown store. NCR ran several ads featuring Thalhimers in national publications including Newsweek, Forbes, Business Week, and Time Magazine. In one ad, Grandpa is quoted as saying,

Our interest in computers dates back to the early 1950s when we participated in an extensive computer research and testing project. Backed with this experience, we began a study to design our system, and this led to our choice of the NCR 315 Computer as one of the best suited to our specific needs. Our 315 was delivered in May 1962 and we made the first customer billings for our Danville store one month later. Each month we added one or more stores to our computer system, and are now completely processing all the customer accounts for our 12 stores in Richmond and Danville, Virginia, Greensboro, Winston-Salem and Durham, North Carolina.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> NCR advertisement, 1967, private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.

Like many other stores, Thalhimers enjoyed its status as an “anchor” at many shopping malls in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of Thalhimers’ trademark items were born during these years, including the holiday mascot Snow Bear, and many of the epicurean delights, such as six-layer chocolate cake, popovers, and chicken salad, sold in the store’s restaurants, delis and bakeries. The Thalhimers workforce expanded to over six thousand employees. At the height of the store’s growth, it boasted twenty-six stores in four states.

**Figure 7: Thalhimers at Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh, North Carolina. 1970s.**



Due to its success, conglomerates including Federated, Associated Dry Goods, and Allied Department Stores approached Thalhimers with buy-out offers. Finally, on August 14, 1978, Grandpa made one of the most critical decisions of his life and the life of the



store. He decided to sell Thalhimers to Carter Hawley Hale Stores, Inc. (CHH), thus ending family ownership. CHH provided greater opportunities for growth and, surprisingly, allowed Thalhimers' executive team to continue providing management and leadership. They asked Grandpa to join the board of CHH, which was unusual even for a friendly take-over.<sup>30</sup> Grandpa often mused that if his father had still been alive when the deal with CHH was made, he would have stood up and clapped. Gramps had wanted to sell the store many years earlier, but Grandpa waited until he knew time was right. His decision was yet another factor that saved the store from the tragic fate of many other family businesses.

The first non-family leader in Thalhimers' history, Stewart M. Kasen, succeeded Grandpa in 1984. Following Kasen, Michael Weisberg, and Robert J. Rieland (former CEO of Miller & Rhoads), alternately served as Thalhimers' CEO, but Grandpa remained Chairman of the Board.

In the late 1980s, CHH encountered financial difficulties and filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. It sold Thalhimers, one of its most profitable department stores, to May Company in order to make quick cash and remain solvent. Grandpa retired almost immediately following May Company's purchase of the Thalhimers chain.

Since May Company's Hechts division had corporate offices in Washington, DC, only one hundred miles north of Thalhimers' headquarters in Richmond, they merged the two chains to increase efficiencies and reduce expenses. Unfortunately, this transition led

---

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Marcus, CEO of Neiman-Marcus, was also asked to join the CHH board after the take-over of his stores.

to Thalhimers losing its traditions, its heritage, and many of its loyal corporate employees. By February 1992, the flagship downtown Richmond store was closed and all Thalhimers stores operated under the Hechts name and brand identity.

In retrospect, Grandpa said, “May Company did what any good businessman would do. [...] That’s the way we built *our* business. They combined [Thalhimers’] most profitable stores with a recognized chain – Hecht’s. You can’t make money on memories. Business-wise, I have great respect for their decision. Emotionally, well, that’s different. Sure, I’m sensitive to the family tradition. But the business ultimately was a success.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 23 Apr. 2002.

## **Growing Up with Thalhimers: My Story**

My two younger sisters and I dressed up in matching smocked dresses, black patent leather shoes, and woolen coats with velveteen collars to shop the downtown Thalhimers store on wintertime Saturdays. Most shoppers also visited Miller & Rhoads to see the “real” Santa and visit the Tea Room, but we weren’t allowed to cross the street and support our competitor. Dad playfully referred to Miller & Rhoads as “Brand X.” I regret that I never broke the rules and ran inside “Brand X,” but I never experienced that thrill like so many other Richmonders did.

During the chilly months, we didn’t see our Dad as often since the retail business consumes its employees between the end of summer and the holidays. As Executive Vice President of Stores and Visual Presentation, he worked to keep all stores fully stocked with merchandise and ensure that everything looked attractive and ready for sale. Since he worked long hours, we would visit him at his office in the downtown store.

Our day began when Figgus, a jovial parking attendant who continues to be a familiar downtown character, parked our car in the garage at the corner of Grace and Sixth. We tumbled past Figgus, shouting our hellos, and scurried over to the corral by the garage entrance to pet the majestic police horses. With our Mary Janes tapping the pavement and our white tights slowly slipping and bunching around our ankles, we paraded across the street like ducklings behind our mommy. Shoppers with their bags and boxes bustled all around us, many of them lingering awhile to admire the festive animated

window displays. Each visit to the downtown Thalhimers store was filled with giddy anticipation and lots of sisterly laughter. We had to hold hands in a chain as we crossed the busy street.

The minute we walked through those big glass entrance doors, breathing in the familiar, sweet combination of perfume and mahogany and clean linen, we were showered with attention. The sales clerks knew our names and would pat us on our heads while telling us how much we had grown. To our delight, the bakery workers gave us samples of yummy chocolate leaf-shaped cookies. Usually, we could only manage two or three of the sugary treats before our attention diverted to the stylishly displayed gloves, scarves and handbags. I dreamed of someday owning such grown-up accessories. In the perfume department, the smiling salesladies would give us vials of flowery perfumes. Sometimes, while the ladies selling specialty evening dresses in the French Room were greeting Mom, my sisters and I would crawl under the racks of wedding gowns and pick up pearly beads and rhinestones that had fallen off so we could make bracelets with them later. A little box of these shimmering treasures still sits in the top drawer of my childhood desk at my parents' house.

The old-fashioned downtown store offered a wide variety of departments for shoppers. One visited there not only for the standard fare of home furnishings, clothing, accessories and shoes, but also to enjoy collectors' stamps and coins, exotic oriental rugs, luxurious furs, the international specialties of the smoke shop, and silver items engraved by hand. But it wasn't only about buying goods; you could plan a trip, visit the optometrist, get a haircut, fill a prescription, revamp your style with a personal shopper, or

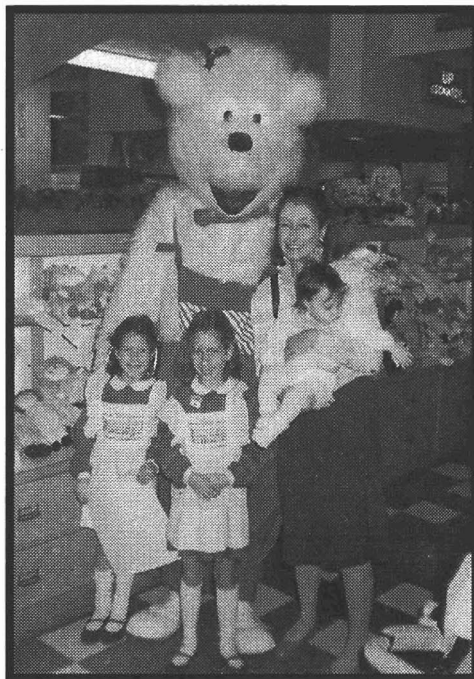
design your dream wedding. Downtown Richmond's Thalhimers store boasted several in-house eateries: the traditional Richmond Room, the mezzanine Soup Bar (called the Men's Soup Bar until a feminist mini-uprising), basement restaurant Angelo's with its table-top jukeboxes and "famous hot dogs," and Thalhimers' own delicatessen and bakery. We rarely left the store without a mouth-watering six-layer chocolate cake with a caramelized cherry on top. One of us usually snuck into the box and swiped the cherry before we even got home.

We met our dad at his office on the fifth floor, just past the vintage Thalhimers delivery wagon on display. If Dad still had work to do, we played with the cuddly Snow Bears, the store's trademark holiday stuffed animal, and other toys he kept in his closet to entertain us while he worked behind his big, mahogany desk. The secretaries let us sit at their desks and play with their typewriters. After the store closed for the day, while the security guards were locking up, we ran up and down the escalators. As a child, running up the down escalator provided a rebellious thrill. Sometimes I imagined myself as Corduroy the Bear, one of my favorite storybook characters, roaming around the department store after all the customers had gone home.

Thalhimers sets the scene for my childhood from birth through adolescence. It was where my father, a men's furnishings buyer, met my mother, who worked briefly at the store after graduating from college. Many salespeople remember watching me grow up, shopping at Thalhimers for everything from Madame Alexander dolls to my first pocketbook. Thalhimers' employees gave us baby gifts, built our swing set, and arrived

dressed as Snow Bear and different cartoon characters at our birthday parties. They were extended family. Thalhimers was our second home.

**Figure 8: The author (center) with her mother and sisters visiting Thalhimers' Snow Bear. 1984.**



I loved lying on the floor in the Durham store's suitcase department and staring up at the clouds painted on the ceiling. I spent hours sitting with the security guards in the downtown store's loss prevention room with all of its miniature televisions, and once I helped nab a thief in the hosiery department. Hundreds of employees cheered when I opened the first charge account before they cut the ribbon to open Thalhimers at

SouthPark Mall in Colonial Heights, Virginia. It was my first credit card, and I felt so grown up.

When I entered my teens, I took an interest in working at the store. I shadowed the ladies drawing newspaper ads in the advertising department, and helped set up stock and entertain customers at store openings. I tagged along with Dad as he traveled all over the South from store to store, checking up on management and operations. Right before the grand opening of Thalhimers in Charlotte, North Carolina, I proudly set up a colorful display of soap dishes, toothbrush holders and tissue boxes in the Housewares department with my younger sister Katherine. I knew what SKU numbers were before I knew about Social Security numbers.

I viewed the store as my past, my present, and my future. Following the five generations before me, I wanted to become a part of the Thalhimers story. But it was not to be.

When the store became Hechts and many Thalhimers employees were let go, I was heartbroken. My sixteen-year-old psyche instructed me to express my disgust immediately. On youthful blue and white stationary, I wrote an impassioned letter chiding the president of May Company for ruining Thalhimers, firing devoted employees, and making my Dad miserable. I addressed the letter to May Company's corporate headquarters and marched it up to our mailbox before school one day. Somehow, Dad intercepted the letter before the mailman came, and after school he explained to me that nothing could be done.

That day marked the end of many things. My dream of being the first female store president vanished. Thalhimers' corporate employees lost their jobs. The downtown Richmond store slowly became an eyesore. Other stores became Hechts and hired new, unfamiliar salespeople. My family had to figure out where to shop; we had never really shopped anywhere else. I cried myself to sleep more than once. It was like dealing with a death without having a funeral. A one-hundred-and-fifty-year story had ended, leaving only stories and artifacts behind.



## CHAPTER 3 History and Theory

*“The story of a department store is the story of people who work in it. It is the story of inanimate things – the pictures and parasols, the rubies and rugs, the sables and sands, which fill its shelves and line its floors. It is the story of ideas, of creative talents, of imagination and daring and hard practical common sense. It is a fascinating story of many chapters and many facets, and to pin it down in words is to risk making prosaic and everyday a business that deserves the talents of a master story-teller.”<sup>32</sup>*

Thus far, two stories have been shared. The former is a brief biography of a department store chain recounting its birth, life and death; the latter a personal and sentimental anecdote by the author. Although these particular stories are unique to Thalhimers department store, they serve as paradigms for two notable, larger trends.

First, when comparing Thalhimers’ story to those of many other department stores, the similarities are astounding. The history of the department store mirrors that of our country, and each store found ways to both respond to current events and shape them. Understanding the overarching history of the department store enriches Thalhimers’ story by putting it into a grander perspective, and showing its place among its American retail counterparts.

Second, many people cling to personal stories about and artifacts from their hometown department stores. These verbal and physical symbols continue to draw people together and perpetuate connections between favorite stores and shared memories of the

---

<sup>32</sup> Frank M. Mayfield, The Department Store Story (New York: Fairchild, 1949) 249.

past. The second part will explore both of these phenomena, beginning with the master narrative of the department store.

## The Master Narrative of the American Department Store

Most department store histories begin with a “rags-to-riches” tale of a self-motivated immigrant ascending from the depths of poverty to the height of commercial and personal success. A store founder is typically portrayed as a single man setting foot in America with only a small suitcase, a few dollars in his pockets, and little to no familiarity with English. Many of these men emigrated from Europe in the mid-to-late 1800s, a notable number of them either German Jews or Presbyterians.<sup>33</sup> Often starting as peddlers with sacks full of goods, they lived “strenuous, lonely and hazardous” lives as they walked or rode on horseback from one town to the next.<sup>34</sup> Eventually, the most driven peddlers found the means to start small dry goods shops or general stores either alone or with other merchants. Little did these “founding fathers” of retail know that their surnames would become household brands in the coming century.

Although “firsts” in the realm of department store history are difficult to prove, the first one in America was most likely started by immigrant Alexander Turney Stewart. Stewart came to New York City from Northern Ireland, and in 1848 he opened the Marble

---

<sup>33</sup> Robert Hendrickson, The Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History of America’s Great Department Stores (New York: Stein and Day, 1980) 347.

<sup>34</sup> Tom Mahoney and Leonard Sloane, The Great Merchants: America’s Foremost Retail Institutions and the People Who Made Them Great (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 5.

Dry Goods Palace, the biggest store the world had ever seen. The Marble Dry Goods Palace appears to have initiated the one-price policy here in the United States.<sup>35</sup> Many other retailers (including Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads) also claimed that they initiated fixed retail pricing, and they may have been among the first in their geographic regions. But it appears that Stewart was the American pioneer of this practice, following the lead of Aristide Bouçicaud, founder of the famous Bon Marché in Paris, France.<sup>36</sup>

In the 1830s, a young German Jew named Adam Gimbel arrived at the port of New Orleans with no money. He learned English by working as a dock boy and listening to the tales of rivermen and peddlers, eventually filling a backpack full of goods and heading up the Mississippi River as a peddler himself. In 1842, the same year that Thalhimers was founded, Gimbel procured a horse and wagon and started The Palace of Trade, later known as Gimbels department store. He married a German Jewish young woman and they had fourteen children, many of whom entered the business. Gimbels remained under family management for four generations.<sup>37</sup>

Other notable early merchants include Rowland Hussey Macy, Simon Lazarus, Morris Rich, and John Wanamaker. Macy, who opened the dry goods store in 1851 that would become Macy's, initiated the cash-only sales policy that quickly caught on across

---

<sup>35</sup> Robert Spector, Category Killers: The Retail Revolution and its Impact on Consumer Culture (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2005) 12-13.

<sup>36</sup> Hendrickson 28.

<sup>37</sup> Reilly 163.

the country.<sup>38</sup> Lazarus left Germany for America in 1850, and opened a humble store in Ohio.<sup>39</sup> There, several generations of his family built the Lazarus retail empire, culminating in Fred Lazarus Jr.'s development of the powerful conglomerate now known as Federated Department Stores. Arriving from Hungary in 1867, Morris Rich started a shop that would become Rich's department store, the largest of its kind in the South. In 1861, John Wanamaker and his brother opened the clothing shop in Philadelphia that would become Wanamaker's, one of the most distinguished retailers in the country.

These early merchants struggled through times of war, outbreaks of disease, money panics, natural disasters, and family hardships, all the while tending to their tiny stores. Oftentimes, their families lived above the stores, thus combining the business and personal lives of storeowners. For many such families, their store was a livelihood, a social environment, and a home. This undoubtedly affected the personality of the store itself, which eventually translated into the concept of a store as an extension of home and family.

The personal qualities of the most successful shopkeepers often reflected "integrity, industry, and imagination," and they possessed "the determination that established stores that have endured."<sup>40</sup> Many of these traits carried through to their trade, and established these men as trustworthy, respectable, and hardworking community leaders. Establishing an honorable reputation became a focus of early advertising, and many store founders

---

<sup>38</sup> Spector 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> Reilly 163-4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid xi.

created mottos or mission statements – some of which will be shared later– expressing their commitment to value systems.

Although many businesses did not survive, the most resilient stores endured unprecedented inflation and economic turbulence during and after the Civil War. Some stores stayed afloat by supplying uniforms or other wartime goods to soldiers, and many stores – including Thalhimers – created their own currency notes known as “shinplasters,” which were essentially IOUs.<sup>41</sup> Often, wives of storekeepers maintained stores while their husbands and sons were away at war.

Following the Civil War years and the Reconstruction period, “dramatic changes in the production and marketing of clothes allowed the multitude of city people to enter the fashion cycle.”<sup>42</sup> These changes triggered the rise of ready-to-wear clothing, which allowed stores to accommodate and sell a larger volume of wares. The economy improved, and people had more money to spend on luxury items as well as necessities.

From the 1860s onward, retail stores began selling merchandise organized in distinct departments. Thus, the “department store” was officially born. Once this trend took hold, combined with the growth of cities and populations, “hundreds of department stores popped up all across the country, including many that would become famous names such as Rich’s in Atlanta; Hudson’s in Detroit; Dayton’s in Minneapolis; Lazarus in Columbus,

---

<sup>41</sup> A Thalhimers shinplaster can be found in the William B. Thalhimer Jr. Corporate and Family Archives: 1862-1992 at the Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew R. Heinze, Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 91.

Ohio; Zions Cooperative Mercantile Institution in Salt Lake City; and Frederick & Nelson in Seattle.<sup>43</sup> Every geographic region had prevalent department stores that teemed with vibrant activity. Despite their efforts to do away with the department store, many smaller businesses folded, especially following the depression of 1893.

In the 1890s “Attractive packaging came into vogue [...] along with colorful circulars and trademark labels for national corporate brand goods and for locally sold retail commodities alike. Such labels, in effect, committed businesses to producing and selling standardized products.”<sup>44</sup> Thus began a revolution in advertising and branding that continues to this day. Products became manifestations of certain brands instead of simply necessities. Advertising permeated society, and department store advertising in particular became a main source of newspaper revenue.

By the early 1900s, most retail stores had mastered the art of selling ready-to-wear and adopted the department system. Over time, innovations in technology, communication, transportation, urbanization, and general convenience impacted every element of business. Electricity replaced gas lamps, plate glass store windows literally changed the face of retail, telephone orders became commonplace, radio – and later television – expanded marketing reach, and automobiles made home delivery a breeze. By World War I, the department store was “such a thoroughly American institution that it began appearing

---

<sup>43</sup> Spector 83.

<sup>44</sup> William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Pantheon, 1993) 45.

frequently in poems, plays and novels.”<sup>45</sup> The department store seemed to touch every aspect of American life.

In the 1920s, chain stores began to appear. Compared to other lines of business, like grocery stores and pharmacies, department stores were fairly slow to organize into chains. However, many of them – including Thalhimers – had branch locations as early as the mid-1800s. By 1929, “more than 60 percent of the 4,221 department stores in this country were chain stores.”<sup>46</sup> Now, in 2005, that number is close to one hundred percent, with most stores now existing under the newly merged Federated-May Company conglomerate.

During the Great Depression, businesses strained to get by as the economy tumbled. Stores laid-off employees, tightened operating budgets, and reduced marketing efforts. During this economically challenging time, the discount store emerged to meet the needs of penny-wise consumers. Department stores responded with sales and deeper bargains, but discounters continued to thrive and spread to the suburbs, “where department stores had neglected to include their traditional bargain basements in suburban branches.”<sup>47</sup> Discount stores forced department stores to make changes like opening on Sundays and carrying a wider array of brands to appeal to a greater audience of buyers. Although

---

<sup>45</sup> Hendrickson 58.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 260.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid 189.



discounters would ultimately prevail, department stores met their challenge with a burst of energy, personality, and flourish.

No longer simply suppliers of individual dry goods and notions, department stores could deliver large quantities of fine, mass-produced merchandise. As society increasingly embraced a culture of consumption, the experience of shopping and its impact on shoppers changed dramatically. The concept of shopping for leisure instead of necessity swept across the country and made an enormous impact on American life – from fashion to domestic economics to establishing a sense of personal identity.

Now that production and distribution of goods were much less time consuming, storekeepers had the opportunity to focus on aspects of their businesses other than simply the provision of goods. Marketing crept into every crevice of the marketplace – from postcards to full-page newspaper ads to buses to fashion shows to philanthropic efforts. Educational endeavors, fine arts exhibitions, sporting events, and holiday festivities drew customers to their favorite stores for reasons beyond shopping. Buyers, and storekeepers themselves, traveled to Europe several times a year in search of exotic and worldly merchandise, and it became popular for stores to hold international-themed events promoting individual countries and cultures. Through these sociocultural offerings and different types of outreach, stores could “attract customers, educate them to a desire for new merchandise, and create goodwill.”<sup>48</sup> And this, of course, translated into more action

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid 297.

at the cash registers. Department stores became not only retail institutions, but also buzzing centers of social life, cultural advancement, and civic involvement.

**Figure 9: Thalhimers bustles with activity during its Centurama 100-year anniversary celebration of 1942.**



Department store leaders steered their ships with poise and pride. It was an unspoken directive that the head of the store “should be a good citizen and should be actively interested in everything which makes his community a better place in which to live and work.”<sup>49</sup> In many cases, department store names appeared all over town as founders or major supporters of museums, symphonies, charities, hospitals, parks, and educational institutions. This benevolence both served the greater good and put stores at the center of community life. At the time, the keys pieces of advice to retailers were “Get involved, express interest, be concerned, educate, uplift, mirror the aspirations of

---

<sup>49</sup> Mayfield 65.

customers.” One retail expert summarized this well when he said, “Businesses must be public service institutions and reflect the character of their regions. We must be an integral part of life.”<sup>50</sup>

Stores shaped the personalities of their communities, and communities in turn became associated with particular stores. The following quote from the book Store provides examples of this phenomenon:

We must keep the Texas-ish-ness in Neiman-Marcus.

Saks anywhere must be Very Fifth Avenue.

It’s unconscionable for some foreign company that probably doesn’t even know Chicago to run Field’s.

When CHH approached Marshall Field & Co. in 1977, a Christmas Day article quoted one Chicagoan as saying the takeover would be received ‘as warmly as might be a bid by New Jersey to take over New York City’s Broadway or an effort by the Grinch to steal Christmas.’<sup>51</sup>

As metropolitan city centers became shopping destinations, stores became tourist attractions for many travelers.

Customers took pride in their favorite stores and flocked to them with high expectations for the shopping experience they would encounter there. The allure of the local stores had much to do with the style and manner in which they sold goods, not simply the goods themselves. According to marketing expert Pierre Martineau, department stores offered customers “symbolic values,” and shoppers based their idea of a store “partly by its

---

<sup>50</sup> Leach 135.

<sup>51</sup> Nan Tillson Birmingham, Store (New York: Putnam, 1978) 344.

*functional* qualities and partly by an aura of *psychological* attributes.”<sup>52</sup> These psychological attributes often stemmed from a creed declared by each store’s founder.

John Wanamaker inscribed the following words on the cornerstone of his store: “Let those who follow me continue to build with the plumb of honor, the level of truth and the square of integrity, education, courtesy and mutuality.”<sup>53</sup> The philosophy of Adam Gimbel was “If anything done or said in this store looks wrong or is wrong, we would have our customers take it for granted that we shall set it right as soon as it comes to our knowledge. We are not satisfied unless our customers are.”<sup>54</sup> Founders’ creeds such as these eventually boiled down to basic values reflected by individual stores.

As one of the main department stores in Tucson, Arizona, Jacome’s preached, “friendliness, customer satisfaction, and honesty.”<sup>55</sup> Originally called Golden Rule Stores, J.C. Penney’s was firmly rooted in the four principles “honor, confidence, service, and cooperation.”<sup>56</sup> Spanning across generations, Thalhimers reiterated the values “integrity, quality and service.” Miller & Rhoads’ philosophy stated, “An abiding friendship is valued

---

<sup>52</sup> Sharon Zukin, Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004) 215.

<sup>53</sup> Reilly 197.

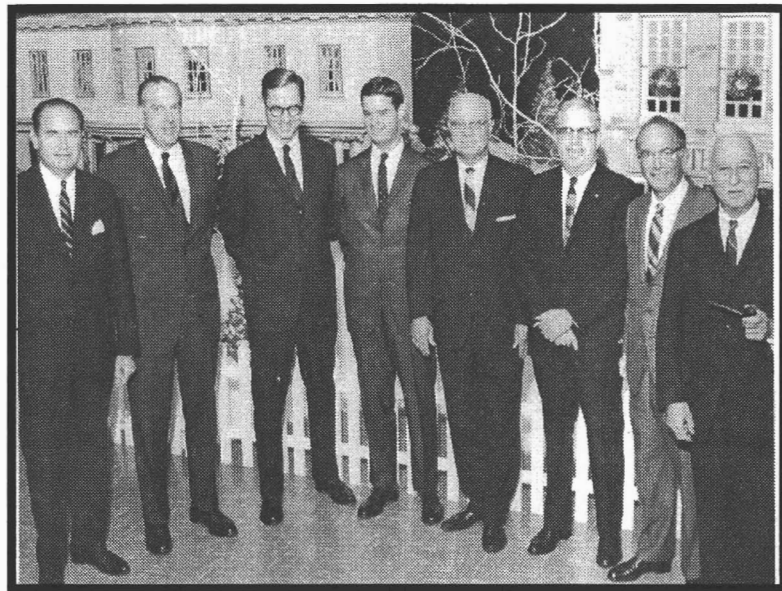
<sup>54</sup> Hendrickson 19.

<sup>55</sup> June Webb-Vignery, Jacome’s Department Store: Business and Culture in Tucson, Arizona, 1896-1980 (University of Arizona, 1985) 46.

<sup>56</sup> Mary Elizabeth Curry, Creating an American Institution: The Merchandising Genius of J.C. Penney (New York: Garland, 1993) 322.

far above profit.”<sup>57</sup> In the 1920s, Bullock’s department store put huge signs around Los Angeles advertising simply the words “Happiness,” “Imagination,” and “Hospitality” in large print beside the Bullock’s brand insignia.<sup>58</sup> These value statements helped establish trust, gain respect, personalize customer service, create a familial atmosphere, and characterize department stores as honorable corporate citizens.

**Figure 10: AMC meeting at Thalhimers. L to R: Charles G. Thalhimer, Steven L. Osterweis, William T. French, Joseph L. Hudson Jr., C.R. McBrier, Ralph Lazarus, William B. Thalhimer Jr., Richard H. Rich. 1967.**



Customer service, a longtime characteristic of the finest stores, became a retail mantra. The concept of always putting the customer first developed “an almost grandiose

---

<sup>57</sup> Hendrickson 135.

<sup>58</sup> Leach 340.

character” and even the most respectable businessmen used it “to mollify their own employees and to give the impression of public benevolence and goodwill.”<sup>59</sup> Marshall Field’s famous statement, “Give the lady what she wants!” embodied the primary mission of department stores from Alexander’s to Zions. Over the years, stores broadened their definition of customer service to include both “concrete commodity services – returned-goods privileges, free delivery, and easy credit – and also what could be called contextual services, that is, those services intended to provide the public with a sense of well-being and comfort.”<sup>60</sup>

Obviously, quality customer service can only be achieved if employees are happy. Department stores went to great lengths to ensure employees’ comfort, safety, health, and satisfaction at work as well as in their personal lives. Retailers established “probably the most elaborate employee welfare programs in the country,”<sup>61</sup> and included on-site medical clinics, libraries, loyalty organizations, profit-sharing plans, pension plans, sports clubs and teams, spas, camps, newsletters, and more. For example, Thalhimers had an infirmary, an employee Credit Union, the “Old Timers’ Club” and annual dinner party for employees with ten or more years experience at the store, the newsletter “TBI Talks,” bowling, softball and other sports leagues, employee cafeterias and sundecks, a sizable employee discount, and a great number of other perks.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid 112.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 122.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 118.

During the Second World War, the U.S. Treasury urged department stores nationwide to sell war bonds and stamps to finance the war. Stores responded with fervent patriotism, and raised billions of dollars. Bonds were even advertised by many stores as Christmas presents. Although the war caused much strife, it also led to an unprecedented economic boom in the United States.

The *raison d'être* for the department store is, and has always been, to make money by offering fashionable goods that people want. Regardless of time, place, or circumstance, fashion sells. Jerome Koerber, the decorator and display manager at Philadelphia's Strawbridge and Clothier once said, "Fashion! There is not another word that means so much to the department store as *Fashion*."<sup>62</sup> Each store strove to be more in vogue than the next, and stores joined merchandising associations to leverage their buying power, improve margins, and expand their ability to import international goods.

The intent of selling fashionable goods was, "to make women (and to a lesser degree men) feel special, to give them opportunities for playacting, and to lift them into a world of luxury or pseudo-luxury, beyond work, drudgery, bills and the humdrum everyday."<sup>63</sup> Female customers participated in customer advisory boards, opened credit accounts, attended fashion shows, volunteered for store-sponsored charity functions, and, essentially, made department stores a commercial success. In 1949, a Department of Commerce calculation determined that seventy percent of American wealth was in

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 91.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid 91.

“feminine hands,” so clearly female shoppers were the primary target audience of the department store.<sup>64</sup>

As a result, many a department store owner thought, “who better to find stylish goods than other women?” Even as early as 1915, a third of all retail buyers were women.<sup>65</sup> Department stores gave many women their first jobs, a great number of them involving world travel to select and buy merchandise. Over time, a significant number of women rose through the ranks to become store managers and senior level executives. Following in the footsteps of Mary Ann Magnin, the first woman to start her own department store, several other women founded their own stores.<sup>66</sup> Ehrich Brothers of New York, Boston Store of Chicago, and Lane Bryant specialty shops were all started by women in the first half of the Twentieth Century.<sup>67</sup> Thalhimers saw quite a few female senior level employees, including Katherine Tevepaugh as Vice President of Public Relations, who joined Thalhimers in 1928, and her successor Elizabeth B. “Betty” Bauder as Senior Vice President of Sales Promotion. Mrs. Bauder recalls that Thalhimers had more women executives than any other store in Richmond when she started her job. In retrospect, she says, “One of the things that enchanted me about the store was that there

---

<sup>64</sup> Tom Mahoney and Rita Hession, Public Relations for Retailers (New York: Macmillan, 1949) 73.

<sup>65</sup> Leach 95.

<sup>66</sup> Hendrickson 162.

<sup>67</sup> Leach 95.



were no barriers [for women]. That's why I joined Thalhimers in 1950 when I graduated from college."<sup>68</sup>

**Figure 11: Elizabeth "Betty" Bauder and associates in Thalhimers' advertising department.**



The 1950s saw enormous growth, and department stores enjoyed “providing middle-class urban shoppers with a convenient place to buy a wide selection of superior goods at affordable prices, under one roof, in buildings noted for their inviting ambience, ornate architecture, grand scope, and sharp and courteous customer service. By definition, these stores had virtually everything.”<sup>69</sup> Department stores had become part of our culture, our geography, and our daily lives.

---

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth B. Bauder, personal interview, 2 Oct. 2002.

<sup>69</sup> Spector 83.

Although the 1950s brought much opportunity for expansion, the department store began to feel the pressure of urban decentralization. Suburbs expanded and shopping centers cropped up by the thousands. More and more people drove their own cars, and limited downtown parking became a huge problem. It was much easier to park and shop in suburban shopping centers, which in most cases were closer to home. Interstate highways, too, changed the face of urbanization. According to R. Dean Wolfe of the May Department Stores Company, “When Eisenhower put the highway in place, he didn’t realize he was destroying downtown.”<sup>70</sup> And with the demise of downtown, the future of department stores looked very different.

With the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, many department stores – especially in the South – suddenly found themselves in the middle of a very important struggle. In February of 1960, a group of students organized a sit-in protest at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Thus began a series of similar protests and boycotts across the nation, many of them targeting department store restaurants and soda fountains. Based on the non-violent approach of Mahatma Gandhi, “the movement spread across the nation, forcing the desegregation of department stores, supermarkets, libraries, and movie theatres.”<sup>71</sup> Following President Kennedy's assassination, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 under Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. This bill prohibited racial discrimination or segregation in all public places including department stores. Department

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>71</sup> Britannica Online, Mar. 1997, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 29 Oct. 2005  
<[http://www.britannica.com/nobel/micro/129\\_80.html](http://www.britannica.com/nobel/micro/129_80.html)>.

stores that had not already done so experienced rapid integration, most of them without incident.

In 1962, Sam Walton opened his first independent Wal-Mart Discount City in Rogers, Arkansas. That year also saw the beginnings of mega-discounters Kmart and Target. Department stores still thrived, but the discounters continued to creep up from behind. By 1965, the number of U.S. shopping centers exceeded ten thousand, further watering down once-powerful downtown business districts.<sup>72</sup> However, most department stores would still enjoy at least a decade of prosperity and popularity.

A big boost for department stores came in the 1960s when designer brands came into vogue. Denim pants were no longer called jeans, they were called Levis. Women didn't shop for mere dresses, they shopped for Emilio Pucci and Yves St. Laurent. Teenage girls wanted coordinated Villager and John Meyer outfits to wear with Weejuns loafers. More than the objects themselves, brands became the main commodities. Buying certain product labels not only gave shoppers a sense of style, but it allowed them to "satisfy [their] cravings for individual identity, social status, and a sense of membership in a national culture."<sup>73</sup> Shopping became an aspirational activity; it allowed people to choose how they wanted to express themselves.

As brand labels translated into sociocultural labels, department stores marketed their own private label brands, offering everything from imported cashmere sweaters to

---

<sup>72</sup> Mahoney and Sloane 16.

<sup>73</sup> Zukin 15.

coffee to toilet tissue. This attached each store's name to more than just building façades and shopping bags by permeating the daily lives and routines of its customers. It enhanced the shopping experience by further connecting customers with their hometown stores, and giving the appearance of being a designer brand. In fact, "the best retailers [could] market and merchandise their own private labels so well that the consumer [believed] them to be national brands."<sup>74</sup> For the retailer, private labels increased profit margins by eliminating middlemen and providing an opportunity to set their own prices for goods.

The 1970s through the 1990s could easily be dubbed the "Pac-Man" decades for department stores. Giant holding companies and conglomerates rapidly absorbed and homogenized independent department store chains. According to Robert Spector, who has analyzed the modern consumer marketplace in great detail, "In the United States, consolidations and mergers have extinguished much of the excitement that was once a part of the department store experience. Shoppers are bored with what they see, which is often a sea of sameness, a lack of variety in merchandise, because buyers, under pressure to deliver margins, are not in a position to be adventurous."<sup>75</sup> The trend of consolidation has continued into the twenty-first century, where sharks gobble up any remaining little fish. In the realm of department stores, "sameness" prevails.

Recently, Marshall Field, Rich's, and Hecht's were acquired by Federated and, if things go as planned, all three of these venerable stores will assume the Macy's nameplate

---

<sup>74</sup> Spector 69.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid 96.

in 2006.<sup>76</sup> When Federated merged with May Company in August, 2005, it became the largest department store chain in history with over one thousand stores in its colossal collection. For a company of this magnitude, homogeneity of goods, services, and operations seems the only solution for keeping things running in an efficient and manageable manner.

Additionally, conformity is replacing individualism as the “‘dream palace’ of department stores is replaced by the faceless discount chain.”<sup>77</sup> Shoppers have become accustomed to shopping in large, architecturally uninspiring stores. These stores are indistinguishable across the country – they entirely lack geographic features or local flavor. As my grandpa once said, “People wanted a shopping cart and a big discount store, and that’s what they got.”<sup>78</sup>

At an AMC meeting in Minneapolis in the mid-1950s, Grandpa unknowingly witnessed the beginnings of the superpowers that would overtake the department store. He recalled, “The boys at Dayton – Donald, Bruce, Doug and George – invited us to see 3 things at Dayton’s. First, an enclosed mall. Second, a mock-up model for B. Dalton bookstore. Third, the first presentation of a discount store called Target.”<sup>79</sup> Little did the

---

<sup>76</sup> “Federated Completes Merger with May Company,” Federated Department Stores, Inc. – May, 30 Aug 2005, 22 Oct. 2005 < [http://www.federated-fds.com/ir/maymerger/template/pressrelease.asp?item\\_id=750420](http://www.federated-fds.com/ir/maymerger/template/pressrelease.asp?item_id=750420)>.

<sup>77</sup> Zukin 17.

<sup>78</sup> William B. Thalheimer Jr., personal interview, 28 May 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

“boys” know that Target would eventually become the corporate name of their business, and one of the biggest retailers the world had ever seen.

Today, most shoppers seek the deep discounts and vast offerings of the big discounters, or “category killers,” including Target, Wal-mart, and Kmart. The era of the discount chain began with the likes of Korvette’s and Woolworth’s, but really thrived with the birth of Toys ‘R’ Us, which “presented to consumers big-box stores with an emphasis on self-service, big selection, low prices, and lots of parking. It conditioned baby boomers to a different kind of retail experience.”<sup>80</sup> Now the remaining department stores try to recreate that experience to draw the masses back through their doors.

Another major competitor of the department store is the specialty store. Catering to tightly targeted demographics, these stores offer a niche environment for buying particular categories of products. Engaged couples used to complete a wedding registry at their favorite department store, now they go straight to Williams-Sonoma for upscale kitchenware. Suburban families flock to Best Buy for electronics, groups of girls head en masse to Bath and Body Works for specialty bath products, and college students head to The Gap and H&M for fashionable clothes at affordable prices.

With the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, buyers can shop anonymously and without leaving home by purchasing goods online through Internet companies like Amazon.com and eBay.com. Thus they cease to associate goods with a sense of place, pushing the concept of shopping as social interaction even closer to becoming obsolete.

---

<sup>80</sup> Spector 31.

The majority of consumers appear to find the benefit of convenience more valuable than an enjoyable shopping experience; they no longer desire the social and cultural environment that department stores once provided.

Having served as “time capsules [reflecting] our history, heritage, and regional differences” for many years, most department store names now serve as symbolic reminders of us of what shopping and downtown used to be.<sup>81</sup> As people are drawn from the personalized experience of the department store towards the anonymous convenience of category killers, Internet sites, and specialty stores, a quintessentially American tradition continues to fade. By 2005, most hometown department stores have been reduced to artifacts, stories, histories, and memories. For the first time, their impressive master narrative can be told from beginning to end.

---

<sup>81</sup> Birmingham 19-20.

## Symbolic Convergence around the Thalhimers Brand

In 2002, the premier issue of Virginia Living magazine ran a piece about my research on Thalhimers department stores and included an email address I set up for readers who wanted to share their stories.<sup>82</sup> I received a variety of interesting responses, including the following:

I remember the store fondly. My sister, Doris Bradby, was the first African-American hired at the downtown store in a professional position. She was hired fresh out of Smith-Madden Business College in 1963 as a secretary to Morris Goldstein, one of the Vice-Presidents. As a teen-ager [sic] during the 1960s, I remember the struggle to integrate downtown businesses.<sup>83</sup>

My grandfather, Sidney Barker, was the credit manager at Thalhimers on 6<sup>th</sup> and Broad for more than 20 years. I have many memories of visiting him at his office. He would take me around the store and introduce [me] to people from all departments. He loved his career at Thalhimers, and he had a very high regard for the Thalhimers family. I remember especially the great variety of fine foods on the first floor. It was a 'big deal' to have lunch with him in the Richmond Room. Once I traveled with him on a business trip to the Thalhimers stores in Danville and Winston Salem, NC. We took Mr. Walter Fisher's air conditioned Cadillac! When my grandfather died in 1969, a member of the Thalhimers family was at the funeral home to console my grandmother.

---

<sup>82</sup> Sande Snead Fulk, "Thalhimers Tales: Elizabeth Thalhimers Seeks Story Behind the Shelves," Virginia Living Nov.- Dec. 2002:7.

<sup>83</sup> Greg Giebel, email to the author, 14 Nov. 2002.



I've always had the impression that the Thalhimers treated their employees as family members.<sup>84</sup>

My earliest memories of Thalhimers is [sic] my dad bringing me a barbecue every Friday night from the Broad Street store. He worked downtown and Friday was payday. I can remember sitting on the front porch waiting from [sic] him to come home with that checkered black and white bag. I really miss the store and especially the wonderful employees!<sup>85</sup>

When I share findings of my research on Thalhimers, most Richmonders feel compelled to share a story like those quoted above. A serviceman who came to repair a telephone last week said, with a huge grin on his face, "Oh, I loved Thalhimers! My mom used to take my brother and me downtown to shop every Christmas. I miss the chocolate cake," then told stories of his family's holiday shopping adventures. At an interview over lunch in his home, Dr. Allix James said, "The china we're eating on came from Thalhimers. The silver service is from Thalhimers. The rugs under our feet are from Thalhimers. Thalhimers is all around us." And, to my delight, his wife seated Thalhimers' Snow Bears around the dining room table to join us for lunch, and spoke about how much she enjoyed collecting these bears over the years. The most unusual response I heard was from renowned author Tom Robbins, whom I met following a presentation he gave at the 2002 James River Writers Festival. He said, "I almost died at Thalhimers. I started choking on an Almond Joy, and a saleslady gave me the Heimlich maneuver."

---

<sup>84</sup> John H. Barker Jr., email to the author, 13 Nov. 2002.

<sup>85</sup> Wanda L. Phillips, email to the author, 20 Nov. 2002.

Regardless of their content, department store stories provide an evocative medium for expressing memories and emotions. Through storytelling, we identify with others, revel in our recollections, and discover shared experiences. As Robert C. Rowland says, “Narrative form is well adapted to keeping the attention of an audience, creating a sense of identity between the rhetor and the audience.”<sup>86</sup> This connectivity energizes the “audience” of listeners, creates a sense of kinship, and takes the group’s consciousness to a different time and place. The telling of such stories usually occurs in groups, with one person’s story spurred by that of the previous narrator. In group settings, a theme can circulate for a prolonged period of time, stirring emotions and causing participants to lose their inhibitions and become enraptured in one another’s stories.

“Fantasy theme analysis,” developed by Ernest Bormann in the 1970s, provides a particularly relevant lens for analyzing department store stories. Here, the word fantasy does not mean something unrealistic or whimsical, but “the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need.”<sup>87</sup> Fantasy-sharing typically involves a dramatic narrative which, when told to a small group of people, spurs other narratives building on the same

---

<sup>86</sup> Robert C. Rowland, “The Narrative Perspective,” The Art of Rhetorical Criticism, ed. Jim A. Kuypers (Boston: Pearson Education, 2005) 137.

<sup>87</sup> Ernest G. Bormann, The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 5.

theme. Bormann dubbed this phenomenon “fantasy chaining.” When fantasy chaining occurs, a sense of inclusion, communal belonging, and loyalty results.

Fantasy themes provide “a way for people to present or show to the group mind, to make visible (understandable) a common experience and invest it with an emotional tone.”<sup>88</sup> Often, sharing a fantasy theme becomes a powerful emotional experience for both the speaker and his or her audience. People sharing a fantasy, “have jointly experienced the same emotions; they have developed the same attitudes and emotional responses to the personae of the drama; and they have interpreted some aspect of their experience in the same way. They have thus achieved symbolic convergence about their common experiences.”<sup>89</sup> Symbolic convergence causes individuals’ experiences to overlap and connect, thus creating a social reality, a common language and a shared consciousness around a series of symbols.

In an organization like a department store, its environment and culture generate what Bormann calls “shared norms, reminiscences, stories, rites, and rituals that provide the members with unique symbolic common ground.”<sup>90</sup> Upon

---

<sup>88</sup> Ernest G. Bormann, “Symbolic convergence: Organizational communication and culture,” Communication and Organization: An Interpretive Approach, Eds. Linda L. Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983) 108.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid 104.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid 100.

the stage of the department store, shoppers enacted similar dramas. For example, many department store reminiscences revolve around holiday memories of visiting Santa Claus, viewing decorative display windows, attending fashion shows, enjoying cultural events, meeting friends “under the clock” or at other department store landmarks, eating particular culinary treats, getting dressed up and going “into town” to shop with one’s family, and visiting Tea Rooms and store restaurants.

These dramas created characters, language, and emotions associated with shopping at particular stores. Store-specific symbols correspond with events in our lives, drawing life experiences into the drama of the department store. According to Nan Tillson Birmingham, “Memories of a morning, a day, a shopping trip trigger memories of the events that followed – the christenings – the graduations – the weddings.”<sup>91</sup> At Thalhimers, symbols that trigger such memories include the script “T” on shopping bags, hat boxes with the trademark fleur de lys symbol, black and white checkered bakery boxes, the Richmond Room, popovers, six-layer chocolate cake, Snow Bear and his stuffed animal friends, the perfume fountain on the first floor of the downtown Richmond store, and the clock at the corner of Richmond’s Sixth and Broad Streets. These symbols still bear meaning for many people, and they often serve as the common ground for telling stories about Thalhimers.

Thalhimers artifacts continue to appear in auction houses, on ebay.com, and across the South in thrift stores, antique stores, attics, and closets. In 2005, old

---

<sup>91</sup> Birmingham 341.

shopping bags and boxes, which were complimentary only fifteen years prior, sold at a Richmond antique store for approximately fifteen dollars apiece. On September 28, 2005, an article from Richmond's Style Weekly told of a man named Bill "Raheem" Chatman who salvaged an unopened Thalhimers coffee tin as it was being thrown into a dumpster. The article features a picture of the smiling man proudly holding the coffee tin. He says, "To find a can of Thalhimers coffee – that's just unreal."<sup>92</sup> Clearly, people continue to converge around the brand name that Thalhimers built for itself.

**Figure 12: Snow Bears, shopping bags, and other Thalhimers memorabilia.**



Most likely, this kind of convergence originates with deeply personal connections to things. Involvement in people's lives created relationships between stores like Thalhimers and their customers. During the height of the customer

---

<sup>92</sup> Melissa Scott Sinclair, "Thalhimers Treasures Unearthed," Style Weekly, 28 Sept. 2005.

service era, stores knew their customers and participated in their lives. As Birmingham describes in Store, her ode to department stores, “The infants’ department knows when the babies are born. They hardly begin to walk before they meet and know the drivers on the delivery truck that comes to their home. They may use the store throughout childhood; the brides’ bureau will take care of the wedding, the home planning bureau or interior decorating department will develop the new home, and so on throughout life’s cycle.”<sup>93</sup> According to Grandpa, “[Thalhimers] used to open the store for people to get outfits to wear to funerals if they needed something and the store was closed.”<sup>94</sup> When personal customer service exceeds one’s expectations, this seeds the beginning of fantasy themes that share the setting of the department store. It gives meaning to symbols associated with stores, fuels fantasy theme chaining among groups of shoppers, and creates intense loyalty.

In order to extend a sense of store loyalty to shoppers, employees had to feel they belonged to something important. From early in Thalhimers’ history, employees began to associate with the store and consider themselves part of its “organizational saga.” According to Ernest G. Bormann,

A saga is a detailed narrative of the achievement and events in the life of a person, a group, or a community. I use the concept of organizational saga to include the shared

---

<sup>93</sup> Mayfield 254.

<sup>94</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 28 May 2002.

fantasies, the rhetorical visions, and the narratives of achievements, events, goals, and ideal states of the entire organization. The common symbolic ties that bind the participants to the organization and provide the symbolic aspects of the organizational culture and customs are furnished by the saga. To function, the saga, much as a fantasy theme, must be shared.<sup>95</sup>

It becomes self-defining and professionally motivating to participate in such a history, and incites active participation in achieving group success.

A study conducted by Bormann and others found that a way to create organizational commitment and make employees feel involved in the big picture is by “generating an organizational saga (triggering the necessary fantasy chaining) in which the major portion or all members share.”<sup>96</sup> This was done time and time again at Thalhimers by sharing the rich tradition of the store’s history, recalled in Part One. Through storytelling, dramatic presentations, display windows, advertising, rewards and recognition programs, and internal communications, employees embraced this history and became a part of it.

---

<sup>95</sup> Bormann “Symbolic convergence” 116.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid 121.

**Figure 13: Thalhimers “Old Timers” party for employees with more than 10 years of service. 1980s.**



Once a store established an organizational saga, achieved widespread symbolic convergence, and made fantasy theme chaining commonplace, a rhetorical community emerged. Members of this community considered themselves insiders and, over time, developed a prevalent rhetorical vision. From a rhetorical vision, Bormann says one can “detect a ‘master analogy’ that ‘pulls the various elements together into a more or less elegant and meaningful whole.’”<sup>97</sup> With regard to the department store, this master analogy could be summarized as “department stores are extended families.” But how did this phenomenon originate?

In a cultural trend that developed from the late 1800s into the 1900s, corporations began to be perceived as people in society. This concept probably

---

<sup>97</sup> Qtd. in Thomas J. St. Antoine, Matthew T. Althouse, and Moya A. Ball, “Fantasy-Theme Analysis,” *The Art of Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Jim A. Kuypers (Boston, Pearson Education, 2005) 215-16.



came about due to the 1886 Supreme Court ruling wherein it was “voted unanimously that corporations were ‘persons’”<sup>98</sup> for legal reasons. Department stores, like individuals, developed identities defined by history, reputation, appearance, fashion sensibilities, how they treated and assisted customers, and – as discussed earlier – the personalities and value systems of their founders. During the prime of the department store era, it could be said that, “All the stores have definite personalities. If you doubt this, ask the first ten persons you meet about any given store. You will find a decided similarity in their descriptions.”<sup>99</sup>

This kind of distinct personification led to figures of speech that made stores come alive. In Birmingham’s Store, the author declares, “Stores are born and take on life. They pulse with the energy of their management, employees, and customers. They develop personalities.” And just as customers became involved in the life of a store, they were equally concerned with its death. Says Birmingham, “The death of a store is painful, for it takes with it bits and pieces of our lives.”<sup>100</sup>

Like an individual, a company must create authentic connections with people in order to build loyalty. Through building and sustaining relationships, each store leveraged the idea of shopping as a social experience and made people want to be a part of its store family. A major factor that contributed to department stores being considered families was

---

<sup>98</sup> Herbert I Schiller, Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression, (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 47.

<sup>99</sup> Mayfield 189.

<sup>100</sup> Birmingham 20.

that many stores were, in fact, family businesses passed from father to son. Stores that thrived with family ownership for three generations include Strawbridge and Clothier from Philadelphia, Sakowitz's in Texas, Nordstrom's, and Livingston's in San Francisco – not to mention Thalhimers, which experienced four generations of family leadership.

“Quite aside from the owner-families in the store, there was a time when the store itself became the family. Management was like the parent and the staff was akin to children. It was all one big happy family.”<sup>101</sup> An example of this metaphor can be found in Thalhimers' 1956 employee handbook, which begins with a letter from Grandpa stating, “I think you will enjoy being a part of our big Thalhimer family. I believe you will feel a pride in the store's growth and success, and enjoy your opportunity to grow with it.”<sup>102</sup> This made employees feel they had a family at Thalhimers and a personal investment in the store's success.

Signifying how Thalhimers developed a personal connection with its employees, saleslady Anna Belle Beasley felt inspired to write the following poem for publication in the Thalhimers employee newsletter T.B.I. Talks <sup>103</sup>:

In the year of 1842  
 Our store was small  
 Its family few.  
 On merit and principle  
 Our store has grown

---

<sup>101</sup> Birmingham 37.

<sup>102</sup> Thalhimers Welcomes You (Thalhimer Brothers, Inc., 1956) 1.

<sup>103</sup> TBI stands for Thalhimer Brothers, Inc.

Until over the country  
 Its name is known  
 A wonderful home,  
 A wonderful store,  
 We owe so much to  
 The Thalhimers Four.  
 And we shall never forget  
 Our "Mr. May,"<sup>104</sup>  
 He's helped make us  
 What we are today.  
 Boost our store – YOUR store  
 Wherever you go.  
 That will make us  
 CONTINUE TO GROW!<sup>105</sup>

The family metaphor appears many more times in communications with employees and customers. In a 1970 TBI Talks article about Jim Savage, a Thalhimers employee for fifty-one years, it said, "he feels that Thalhimers is his home and part of his family. So much so that he has continued to come in regularly since his retirement in 1953 to help out during the busy seasons of the year."<sup>106</sup> Now, it seems difficult to conceive of someone working voluntarily for a business after retirement. Thalhimers, and many other department stores, built ties so strong that they did not dissolve even after employees had left and the store had closed.

In 1993, a year after Alexis Kennett lost her job as Vice President of Human Resources at Thalhimers, she planned a "family reunion" for former Thalhimers

---

<sup>104</sup> Irving May was William B. Thalhimer Sr.'s first cousin and served briefly as President of the store.

<sup>105</sup> TBI Talks, (Thalhimer Brothers, Inc. 1940) vol. 1:1.

<sup>106</sup> T.B.I. (Thalhimer Brothers, Inc. 1970) 7.

employees. She said in a newspaper article, “People feel we were a family. [...] No matter where they have gone, they have missed their family.”<sup>107</sup> Again on August 23, 2002, ten years after Thalhimers closed, employees convened for a “family reunion” at a local Holiday Inn. Over two hundred attendees signed up for the event, and reunion organizers requested that Grandpa speak to his “family.” Due to Grandpa’s failing health, I offered to attend and speak on his behalf. I read the following letter, entitled “Hail, Hail the Gang’s All Here!” written by Grandpa, Dad and me, to uproarious applause.

Although I wish this celebration could be held in the Richmond Room, it pleases me to know that the energy and camaraderie of the Thalhimers team still thrives. Tonight’s get-together is a reflection of the spirit that helped run the company for 150 years. Each one of you is the reason our store was a success. And these are not just words. It’s a fact that teamwork over the years held us together to achieve our goals, meet the needs of every customer with partiality to none, and make us number one. No one person could have done what we did together, and that should make all of us proud. It certainly makes me proud even to this day.

It’s so meaningful to know that in this year 2002, which would have been our 160<sup>th</sup> year in business, that the family you have assembled here tonight continues to celebrate in true Thalhimers fashion. I regret that I can’t be here with you to enjoy the party, but have a fabulous time together just like we always did. I’ll be there for the next one! God bless each one of you and your families.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Gregory J. Gilligan, “Retailer’s Ex-Workers to Reunite: Thalhimers ‘Family’ Missed Camaraderie,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 1 May 1993.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Thalhimer Smartt, William B. Thalhimer III, and William B. Thalhimer Jr., “Hail, Hail the Gang’s All Here!” On the occasion of Thalhimers’ ten year reunion, Holiday Inn Boulevard, Richmond, Virginia, 23 Aug. 2002.

Grandpa knew that the power to succeed rested not in his own hands but in the hands of people like Anna Belle Beasley, Jim Savage, and Alexis Kennett. Salespeople, warehouse workers, visual display artists, buyers, and other employees had to feel a personal connection to Thalhimers in order to build a similar relationship with customers. This was accomplished through many different means – all of them making the store feel more like a home. One of the last things John Wanamaker ever wrote before his death in 1922 was, “You have got to run a store that people will feel at home in!”<sup>109</sup> And in a store that felt like a home, employees and customers felt like family. Thalhimers was able to create this kind of warm, homey, and welcoming environment.

Even into the 1980s, when Thalhimers employed over six thousand workers, Grandpa and his brother Charles made an effort to reach out to each individual employee during the holidays. Additionally, they placed much emphasis on giving employees plenty of time to spend with their own families. In a 1976 speech to other AMC store principals, Grandpa said, “As I returned from a vacation [...] I realized just how much it means to people to have time off to enjoy life and be with our families. As a result, I proposed, and our management group heartily approved, the idea of giving every employee a one-time, extra week’s vacation with pay to be taken during the next 18 months as a tangible sign of appreciation for a great team effort [...] The response

---

<sup>109</sup> Tom Mahoney and Leonard Sloane, The Great Merchants: America’s Foremost Retail Institutions and the People Who Made Them Great (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 11.

to this gesture was simply overwhelming.”<sup>110</sup> Acts like this prompted employees to write letters and make phone calls thanking their management team. As a result, employees felt even more loyal to Thalhimers.

In 2002, more than twenty years after she had retired from Thalhimers’ Credit Union, Mrs. Emmie S. Waller penned a five-page letter to Grandpa. In it, she thanked him for the thirty-two letters he had written her over the course of her career that acknowledged her contributions to the store’s Credit Union. She thanked him for the pension and medical benefits that had provided her and her late husband with much-needed support through the years. Mrs. Waller concluded with, “I want you to know how much I appreciate these benefits, but most of all the confidence you had in me during my 35 years with Thalhimers.”<sup>111</sup>

This letter encapsulates the many sentiments expressed by Thalhimers employees to Grandpa. These expressions are testament to the powerful rhetorical community established by Thalhimers department stores, and the widespread sense of inclusiveness that the store successfully nurtured over the course of its history.

---

<sup>110</sup> “The Thalhimer Story as of April 1976 updated to October 1978,” presented by William B. Thalhimer Jr. to AMC store principals at The Greenbrier resort, Apr. 1976, private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.

<sup>111</sup> Emmie S. Waller, letter to William B. Thalhimer Jr. 17 Nov. 2002.

## CHAPTER 3 Wrapping It Up: The End of the Department Store Era

Thalhimers is gone. The downtown Richmond headquarters has been torn down, the management has moved on, and shoppers have found other stores. But people have not forgotten its name or the tradition it established.

In 2000, I wrote a book as a gift celebrating Grandpa's eighty-fifth birthday and Gram and Grandpa's sixtieth wedding anniversary. My mother Sallie Brush Thalhimer, created beautiful watercolor illustrations of family photographs taken at Thalhimers over the years. While making photocopies of the book at a local printing store, several other customers saw it and requested copies. Due to this public interest, we decided to publish it and donate all proceeds to TheatreIV, the children's theater that now serves as the home of Thalhimers' Snow Bear. Our Snow Bear Scrapbook: Recipes and Memories from Thalhimers, marketed locally on a grassroots level, sold more than five thousand copies. People still feel a connection to the store they once knew and, apparently, still love.

The modern shopping experience has devolved to a point where, as a society, we do not profess this kind of "love" for stores. Department stores are no longer seen as personified entities or families; they are simply stores. The concept of a large store with soul, individuality, and local flavor has lost its cachet as the department store species becomes extinct. Many of the survivors are indistinguishable, and only the high-end and specialty department stores, such as Neiman-Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf

Goodman, Henri Bendel, and Nordstrom's, maintain distinctive personalities. For the most part, mainstream stores including Macy's, Belk, and Dillard's sell the same lines of merchandise, look alike, feel alike, and place little emphasis on their geography, community, or heritage.

However, nostalgic feelings for Thalhimers and the hometown department stores of old continue to thrive after their doors and cash registers have closed forever. The power of their presence is not lost; they made a lasting impact on America. Their stories will live on through a strong storytelling tradition that reflects history, embraces community, brings people together, and allows us to converge around shared experiences and symbols. Like folklore, department store stories and artifacts will be passed down to future generations as defining examples of American life and culture during the last century and a half.



## **A Personal Goodbye**

In June of 2004, a lively Broad Street carnival commemorated the demolition of the Thalhimers building to make way for a planned performing arts center. Although the center should revitalize downtown Richmond, which has been empty and decaying for too long, to me the carnival felt more like a death than a birth. My family and I were invited to the stage to sit with various local government representatives and arts center folks. Strangely enough, the day coincided with Grandpa's ninetieth birthday.

I looked out from the event stage at the throngs of people gathered to celebrate progress. A juggler entertained a circle of children, some young Performing Arts Center volunteers donning matching red shirts shook hands with guests, and faces tilted up towards the old building and the huge illustration plastered on its side depicting what would soon replace it. Similar crowds of people had gathered outside the entrance of a very different Thalhimers in previous years. The annual Thalhimers' Christmas Toy Parades. The Bravo Britannia festival wherein crowds of people poured into the store from double-decker buses. The dramatic revealing of the once-new aluminum front that thousands of people gathered to observe. Now, we gathered to say goodbye to those days and welcome the future.

In an interview I once did with Grandpa, he discussed the energy, time, and innovation behind the store's aluminum façade that he designed in 1955 with Richard S. Reynolds, Jr., then the president of Reynolds Metals Company. As the story goes, they came up with the idea while sipping cocktails on the beach in Jamaica. It was the first aluminum-clad structure of its kind, designed to modernize, beautify and rejuvenate downtown Richmond. Grandpa recalled,

Going down Broad to work back in the 50s, I remember agonizing over the aluminum front and how it would affect the character of the company. I remember scraping together the money to expand. I remember every growing pain and every moment of the way. God, how we worried about every little detail. We worried about presentation, quality, performance, image. I know it's best for the city to tear down that building, but it makes me emotional.<sup>112</sup>

I think the demolition event was most moving for my father. After the closing of the store, he never really had the chance to say goodbye. I could sense the emotions stirring behind his composed and unwavering façade as a velvet sheath was pulled from atop the massive clock that used to hang above Thalhimers' entrance at the corner of Sixth and Broad Street. Everyone clapped as we accepted the clock as a gift from the Virginia Performing Arts Foundation. It looked lonely and incongruous sitting naked on the street, its hands still and its pulse no longer ticking. I thought of all of the events it had witnessed since the 1930s when it was installed. I thought of how sad it looked. I thought about how we would get the clock home; it was bigger than my car. We decided to donate it to the Virginia Historical Society to be preserved to tell time for the city, not just for us.

---

<sup>112</sup> William B. Thalhimer Jr., personal interview, 23 Apr. 2002.

Dad always said he couldn't go back to the downtown Thalhimers building after it closed because he didn't want to see it without customers bustling about. "It wouldn't seem right," he said. To him, the store was more than just a store; it was his second home, his lifelong career, his family, and his social circle. When I saw the clock sitting there on the street corner, I finally understood how he felt about not going back to the store. Sometimes it's best to remember things at the peak of their glory. Later that day, for the first time, Dad spoke to the media about the store closing. In the Channel 12 news report, he said softly but with resolve, "It's a bittersweet moment in the Thalhimer family's history." And, with his usual tact and composure, he publicly said goodbye.

I went back to the store several weeks later to satisfy my curiosity about what it looked like inside. No one in the family accepted the offer to join me. "Too painful," they said. "Too sad." It was a sweltering summer day, and the kindly workman who unlocked the delivery dock door for me informed me that it was over 105 degrees inside the old store. "You still wanna go inside?" he asked me. "Yes," I replied. "It's my way of saying goodbye. Like a funeral."

The heat made me weary and even more anxious as I slowly climbed five floors of stairs, camera in hand. I wanted so badly to visit that old office where we played with Snow Bear and the secretaries' typewriters. My mouth was dry, sweat dripped down the back of my neck, and I felt dizzy and sick to my stomach. When we finally reached the fifth floor landing, we were met with a large blue plastic tarp that blocked the entrance to the old offices. "Asbestos removal," the workman said. "It won't kill you just to walk through, but be quick." He lifted the plastic and I ducked under.

My eyes watered from the dust and the emotions swirling through my sweat-laced head. Then I saw it: the barely recognizable doorway to Dad's office. A few assorted plastic letters remained legible on a sign in the hallway, but they didn't spell anything. I quickly ran to peek into the past. I don't know what I expected, but it was just an empty cement chamber with sagging roof tiles – a box of nothingness unworthy of even a photograph for memory's sake. Upset by the void and nauseated by the combination of extreme heat and overwhelming loss, I turned around and ran up two flights of stairs to the roof of the store, the baffled workman following close behind. I stepped over a partially decomposed pigeon, mostly a pile of skeletal remains and sticky feathers, before bursting out the door for fresh air. To my dismay, the air was hot and heavy as I gulped it in and looked out at the skyline of my city. *It's going to be more beautiful when this place is gone*, I realized. *It no longer has a purpose*. That was the last time I would ever visit Richmond's downtown Thalhimers.

One day, on my way home from work, I decide to take a different route home. I drive down Broad Street to see what has become of the downtown store since the painfully slow demolition began several months prior. I brace myself as I see the hole in the sky where Thalhimers used to be. Now it's just a huge sandbox; a block's worth of dirt. Like a mantra, I keep repeating to myself *one-hundred and fifty years...one-hundred and fifty years*. Dust to dust, I suppose.

I continue on, as if the car were driving me, to Gram and Grandpa's house. When I arrive, Gram greets me at the door and takes my coat. We walk together to the sunroom, and she tells me that Grandpa has not awoken yet. It is late afternoon. The sun droops over

the James River beyond the trees. We sit together and chat about the family news of the week, and I sneak a few sesame sticks out of the blue and white ginger jar on the coffee table.

There is a pause in the conversation.

“Can I see him?” I ask her. She and I walk back to their bedroom, where Grandpa lies inert on the bed with his nurse standing beside him. He looks at me and says simply, “I don’t feel so happy.” Gram turns to me, shaking her head, and whispers, “He says that every day now.” I hold his hand, which feels slightly awkward for me. Although our relationship has been close, it has not been particularly affectionate. I recall a conversation with him when he said to me, “I was teary at Ike’s funeral, but I don’t know why because I was scared of him. He wasn’t the kind of person where you’d want to say, ‘Gee, Grandpa, let me sit on your knee.’ Come to think of it, none of you ever sat on my knee.” And he was right. Until just recently, Grandpa instilled a combination of fear, awe and respect in me. Now he has softened. I can talk to him now.

I tell Grandpa, “I’m writing a paper about you and the store.” His eyes open wider, and he says in his deep voice, “Please bring it by. Read it to me.” This is the most interest he has shown in anything for months now.

I return the following week, paper in hand, and sit facing him and Gram in the sunroom. Joanne, a home-care nurse, rubs Grandpa’s legs, which no longer provide his body with sufficient circulation. He complains that he is cold and tired and not hungry for dinner. Gram warmly welcomes me and pours me a glass of red wine. “I brought my paper,” I say nervously. “Would you like for me to read it to you?” Grandpa rubs his eyes

and looks agitated. Joanne leaves the room to allow us privacy. Gram replies, “Yes, of course we would.”

I timidly begin reading – avoiding the parts about Grandpa’s poor health and the death of the store – and after several paragraphs, he stops me. I shudder, expecting him to grumble that he’s tired and I should go home. Instead, he says, “Read louder.” So I do. In the corner of my eye, I can see Joanne hovering behind the door to the dining room, listening intently. It feels so good to read to Gram and Grandpa the words I have written; each one seems to hang in the stillness between us.

When I have finished reading, I breathe deeply and raise my head. Gram smiles. Grandpa looks me directly in the eye and says, “Beautiful. Wonderful. Bring me a copy tomorrow.” I breathe a sigh of relief. He does not know how much his approval means to me. Through the store, he did so much for so many people. I feel fulfilled that I have finally channeled some of that joy back to him by telling Thalhimers’ story. *Things have come full circle*, I think to myself.

Not long after that day, Grandpa passed away on the morning of May 28, 2005. Earlier that week, an article in the Richmond Times Dispatch referred to “the cemetery-like section of East Broad Street where Thalhimers died.”<sup>113</sup> When Grandpa died, an editorial from the Richmond Times-Dispatch stated, “surely Billy Thalhimer is trading stories *in re*

---

<sup>113</sup> Mark Holmberg, “Will council agree it’s ‘put-up or shut-up time’ for center?” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 22 May 2005.

honesty, quality, and service on the loftiest heights of all.”<sup>114</sup> Now, Grandpa and his store rest together eternally.

I had the honor of delivering a eulogy at Grandpa’s funeral, which allowed me to express my respect and love for him to the hundreds of people who gathered in the pews of Congregation Beth Ahabah. From the podium, I looked out at the diverse sea of faces looking back at me. Most of us shared two things in common: relationships with Grandpa and Thalhimers. As I spoke through unexpected tears, we all raised our tissues in unison. In that moment, I understood why Thalhimers symbolizes something much greater than a store. It has become a dearly departed loved one in its community. It has become thousands of stories that eulogize the shopping experience of years past. Along with its fellow hometown department stores, Thalhimers has become a shared memory that we continue to treasure in its absence.

---

<sup>114</sup> “William B. Thalhimers Jr.,” editorial, Richmond Times-Dispatch, 29 May 2005.

**Figure 14: In loving memory of Grandpa, William B. Thalhimer Jr.  
(1914 - 2005).**





## **Bibliography**

## Works Cited

- Ackerman, John. "The Space for Rhetoric in Everyday Life." Towards a Rhetoric of Everyday Life: New Directions in Research on Writing, Text, and Discourse. Eds. Martin Nystrand and John Duffy. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.
- Ashe, Arthur and Arnold Rampersad. Days of Grace: A Memoir. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
- Barker, John H. Jr. Email to the author. 13 Nov. 2002.
- Bauder, Elizabeth B. Personal interview. 2 Oct. 2002.
- Birmingham, Nan Tillson. Store. New York: Putnam, 1978.
- Bormann, Ernest G. The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1985.
- "Symbolic convergence: Organizational communication and culture." Communication and Organization: An Interpretive Approach. Eds. Linda L. Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983.
- Bray, Leroy. Personal interview at Virginia Historical Society. Richmond, Virginia. 30 July 2004.
- Britannica Online. Mar. 1997. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 29 Oct. 2005  
<[http://www.britannica.com/nobel/micro/129\\_80.html](http://www.britannica.com/nobel/micro/129_80.html)>.
- Brummet, Barry. Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1991.
- Chaney, David. "The Department Store as a Cultural Form." Theory, Culture and Society. Vol. 1 No. 3. London: Sage Publications, 1983.
- Covington, Howard E. Jr. Belk: A Century of Retail Leadership. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Curry, Mary Elizabeth. Creating an American Institution: The Merchandising Genius of J.C. Penney. New York: Garland, 1993.

Downtown Richmond Memories. Narr. Charley McDowell and Harvey Hudson. Writ. Judith Warrington. Prod. Paul Roberts. PBS. WCVW Richmond. Mar. 2002.

“Federated Completes Merger with May Company.” Federated Department Stores, Inc. – May 30 Aug. 2005. 22 Oct. 2005 < [http://www.federated-fds.com/ir/maymerger/template/pressrelease.asp?item\\_id=750420](http://www.federated-fds.com/ir/maymerger/template/pressrelease.asp?item_id=750420)>.

Foss, Sonja K., Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp. Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1991.

Fulk, Sande Snead. “Thalhimer Tales: Elizabeth Thalhimer Seeks Story Behind the Shelves.” Virginia Living. Nov. – Dec. 2002.

Gargiulo, Terrence L. Making Stories: A Practical Guide for Organizational Leaders and Human Resource Specialists. Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2002.

Göbel, Greg. Email to the author. 14 Nov. 2002.

Gilligan, Gregory J. “Retailer’s Ex-Workers to Reunite: Thalhimer’s ‘Family’ Missed Camaraderie.” Richmond Times-Dispatch. 1 May 1993.

Heinze, Andrew R. Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.

Hendrickson, Robert. The Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History of America’s Great Department Stores. New York: Stein and Day, 1980.

Höflin, Gerhard. Historische Streiflichter aus Tairnbach und seiner Umgebung. Tairnbach, Germany: Heimatverein Tairnbach, 1985.

Holmberg, Mark. “Will council agree it’s ‘put-up or shut-up time’ for center?” Richmond Times-Dispatch. 22 May 2005.

Iarocci, Louisa M. “Spaces of Desire: The Department Store in America.” Boston University, 2003.

James, Dr. Allix. Personal interview at Dr. and Mrs. James’ residence. Richmond, Virginia. 28 Oct. 2005.

- Leach, William. Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture. New York: Pantheon, 1993.
- Lears, Jackson. Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Leiss, William. "The Icons of the Marketplace." Theory, Culture and Society. Vol. 1 No. 3. p.10-21. London: Sage Publications, 1983.
- Mahoney, Tom and Rita Hession. Public Relations for Retailers. New York: Macmillan, 1949.
- Mahoney, Tom and Leonard Sloane. The Great Merchants: America's Foremost Retail Institutions and the People Who Made Them Great. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Mayfield, Frank M. The Department Store Story. New York: Fairchild Publications, 1949.
- Morris, Meaghan. "Things to Do with Shopping Centres." The Cultural Studies Reader. Ed. Simon During. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, New York: Routledge, 1999.
- "The Nation," Time Magazine, 14 June 1963.
- NCR advertisement. 1967. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimier III.
- Phillips, Wanda L. Email to the author. 20 Nov. 2002.
- Randolph, Lewis A. and Gayle T. Tate. Rights for a Season: The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Richmond. Virginia. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.
- Reilly, Philip J. Old Masters of Retailing, New York: Fairchild Publications, 1966.
- The Richmond Virginian, 15 Apr. 1917.
- Rowland, Robert C. "The Narrative Perspective." The Art of Rhetorical Criticism. ed. Jim A. Kuypers. Boston, Pearson Education, 2005.
- Sinclair, Melissa Scott. "Thalhimer's Treasures Unearthed." Style Weekly. 28 Sept. 2005.
- Smartt, Elizabeth Thalhimier, William B. Thalhimier III, and William B. Thalhimier, Jr. "Hail, Hail the Gang's All Here!" Read on the occasion of Thalhimer's ten-year reunion. Holiday Inn Boulevard. Richmond, Virginia. 23 Aug. 2002.

- Spector, Robert. Category Killers: The Retail Revolution and its Impact on Consumer Culture. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2005.
- St. Antoine, Thomas J., Matthew T. Althouse, and Moya A. Ball. "Fantasy-Theme Analysis." The Art of Rhetorical Criticism. ed. Jim A. Kuypers. Boston, Pearson Education, 2005.
- Strasser, Susan. Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999.
- TBI Talks. Vol. 1, No. 1. Thalhimer Brothers, Inc. June, 1940. William B. Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Archives: 1862-1992. Library of Virginia.
- T.B.I. Thalhimer Brothers, Inc. December 1970. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.
- Thalhimer, Elizabeth. Our Snow Bear Scrapbook: Memories and Recipes from Thalhimers. Richmond, Virginia: Dietz Press, 2000.
- Thalhimer, Jacob. "A Biography of My Mother Mary Thalhimer." 12 Jan. 1933. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.
- "The Thalhimer Story as of April 1976 updated to October 1978." Presented by William B. Thalhimer Jr. to AMC store principals at The Greenbrier resort. Apr. 1976. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.
- Thalhimer, William B. Jr. Personal interviews. 1996-2005.
- Thalhimer, William B. Jr. Corporate and Family Archives: 1862-1992. Library of Virginia.
- Thalhimers Welcomes You (Thalhimer Brothers, 1956) Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.
- "The Thalhimer Story as of April 1976 updated to October 1978" presented by William B. Thalhimer, Jr. to AMC store principals. The Greenbrier resort, Apr. 1976. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.
- Waller, Emmie S. Letter to William B. Thalhimer Jr. 17 Nov. 2002.
- Webb-Vignery, June. Jacome's Department Store: Business and Culture in Tucson, Arizona, 1896-1980. University of Arizona, 1985.
- "William B. Thalhimer Jr." Editorial. Richmond Times-Dispatch. 29 May 2005.

William B. Thalhimer Jr. Letter to Isaac Thalhimer. 1930. Private collection of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thalhimer III.

William Thalheimer's Dry Good and Clothing Store. Advertisement. Richmonder Anzeiger. 25 Aug. 1855.

Zukin, Sharon. Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture. New York: Routledge, 2004.

## Works Consulted

- Appel, Joseph H. The Business Biography of John Wanamaker: Founder and Builder. New York: Macmillan, 1930.
- Baker, Henry Givens. Rich's of Atlanta: The Story of a Store Since 1867. Atlanta: University of Georgia School of Business Administration, 1953.
- Beasley, Norman. Main Street Merchant: The Story of the J.C. Penney Company. New York: Whittlesey House, 1948.
- Benson, Susan Porter. Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997.
- Bryant, James. Department Store Disease. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977.
- Doubman, J. Russell and John R. Whitaker. The Organization and Operation of Department Stores. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1927.
- Ewen, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen. Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Ezeziel, Herbert T. and Gaston Lichtenstein. The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917. Richmond, Virginia: Herbert T. Ezekiel, 1917.
- Falk, Pasi and Colin Campbell. The Shopping Experience. London: SAGE Publications, 1997.
- Ferry, John William. A History of the Department Store. New York: Macmillan, 1960.
- Freeman, Mark. "From substance to story: Narrative, identity and the reconstruction of the self." Eds. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh. Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's, 2001.

- Guilford, Martha G. ed. From Founders to Grandsons: The Story of Woodward & Lothrop. Washington, DC: Rufus H Barby, 1955.
- Hower, Ralph M. History of Macy's of New York 1858-1919. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1946.
- Lancaster, William. The Department Store: A Social History. London: Leicester UP, 1995.
- Pasdermajian, H. The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution and Economics. London: Newman Books, 1954.
- Rosteck, Thomas. At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies. New York: Guilford, 1999.
- Schorman, Rob. Ready or Not: Clothing, Advertising, and Gender in Late Nineteenth-Century America. Indiana University, 1998.
- Sibley, Celestine. Dear Store: An Affectionate Portrait of Rich's. Atlanta: Peachtree, 1967.
- Stillar, Glenn F. Analyzing Everyday Texts: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Social Perspectives. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998.
- Traub, Marvin and Tom Teicholz. Like No Other Store...The Bloomingdale's Legend and the Revolution in American Marketing. New York: Times Books, 1993.
- Twitchell, James B. Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Wendt, Lloyd and Herman Kogan. Give the Lady What She Wants! Chicago: Rand McNally, 1952.
- Wood, James M. Halle's Memoirs of a Family Department Store 1891-1982. Cleveland: Geranium Press, 1987.
- Zulker, William Allen. John Wanamaker: King of Merchants. Wayne, PA: Eaglecrest Press, 1993.



## VITA

Elizabeth Thalhimer Smartt was born on November 29, 1975 in Richmond, Virginia, and is an American citizen. In 1994, she graduated from The Collegiate School in Richmond, Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1998 and subsequently moved to New York City where she worked at Curious Pictures, FutureBrand and Landor Associates. She currently runs Smartt Ideas, a freelance corporate and product naming consultancy, and works at Play, a creative consultancy in Richmond, Virginia.