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ACROSS THE ISLAND

City Tailor Shops And Prices Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON

IT WAS back around the middle 1920's, I believe, that I purchased a tailor-made, blue serge suit from Murdock Ross of Charlottetown. The price was \$50, which was a lot of money then. But, "you'd be lucky to get it today for anything less than \$200, if you could buy that type of cloth," Herbert (Bert) Johnston told me recently.

The Summerside man is a patient in the Provincial Sanitorium building at present so I drop in on him occasionally when I am visiting Mrs. Matheson who is in the "Special Care" section in the same building.

That serge was the 21 ounce type – 21 ounces to the square yard – and it was a popular cloth for many years, though I never seem to see it now.

Bert learned his trade at S.A. MacDonald's near the turn of the century. He started in 1905 and had completed the four-year course by 1909.

There were many tailors in those days. Gordon and MacLellan had a shop on the corner of Grafton and Queen with 40 tailors. I should explain here that my reference is to the word "tailor" but in the trade the term was "Coat maker". The men made coats, the pants and vests were made by the women.

Back in the days when Bert was learning his trade the coat-makers got \$3.00 for a single-breasted coat, he got 50 cents more for making a double-breasted one. He would make about three coats a week. The women got 60(?) cents for making a pair of pants, or a vest.

Many Large Tailor Shops Then

THERE WERE many other large tailor shops in Charlottetown at the time. John T. MacKenzie came from Hartsville and he had 40 men working for him. D.A. Bruce had a similar number in his establishment on Victoria Row, as Bert recalls. Dan MacLaren and Jimmy Calder were others. Another man had an establishment on Prince Street. Bert learned his trade at S.A. MacDonald's shop.

There must have been around 250 coat-makers in Charlottetown at the time, he told me. And there were other shops all over the province. I recall men telling me of learning their trade at Crapaud, for example. I believe there was one also at Stanley Bridge. Callbeck had a big tailor shop at Bedeque. There were shops all over the province.

Bert was more or less an errand boy in his first year. He had to be at the shop at six in the morning to "get the irons hot" for the men who came at seven o'clock. He swept the floors and did other odd jobs.

Goes 'Upstairs' In Second Year

HIS SECOND year saw him "go upstairs" where the tailoring, or coat-making was done. That year the youngster learned to make different parts of the coat. You might be

working on a sleeve, for example, he told me. And of course the “pressman” – that was the term used – kept a close eye on the chaps who were learning.

In the third year, “you got a coat by yourself, though the ‘pressman’ was telling you what to do and how to do it, as you went along.

“In the fourth year you were on your own. The only time the instructor would look at it was when you went down for the buttons. The cutter would examine it to see that it was alright.”

The cutter was a senior man, a man might work at the trade all his life and not become a cutter, Mr. Johnston told me.

After the fourth year you went on piece work by yourself.

\$10.50 For A Coat After War

AFTER THE First Great War, Mr. Johnston recalled, a man got \$10.50 for making a single-breasted coat. You could make three to four coats a week – I gathered he made four – and that was pretty good money at that time.

But extras cost more money. Bert recalled the “pinch-back” coats that were in style in the latter years of the First Great War. They took more time to make, so there had to be an extra charge.

The learner got a dollar a week in his first year. He’d be lucky to get two dollars in his fourth year, it was recalled.

But back in 1905, \$9.00 to \$11.50 a week for a coat-maker was not so bad. You’d buy a ton of coal for two dollars then, Mr. Johnston told me, and that illustrates the value of a dollar in those far-off days.

Houses rented at \$10 a month, fairly good houses at that. There were no apartments then.

The best suits – they had good cloth and were tailor-made – sold for \$21 to 22.00 each. The cheaper grades sold about \$18.00. There were few of the cheaper grades because people “wanted the weight” in their cloth.

Approximately one-half of the suits would be tailor-made at that time. Generally speaking a man’s good suit would be tailor-made. They would be for church, or some other special occasion. A man would have a “stock suit” for working, if you had to be fairly well dressed on the job.

The best stock suit S.A. MacDonald had – The Campbell clothing – sold for \$18. The run-of-mine stock suits “would sell at anywhere between \$10 and \$12 or something like that.”

Talking of wages for a few minutes, Bert recalled that the senior clerk at S.A.’s – he was also book keeper – got nine dollars a week.

Those Suits Cost \$5.95

RECALLING A boat went aground on the north side of the Island in 1905, he said that the crew came in and bought home-spun suits for \$5.95 a suit. Imagine that for a suit, he laughed.

And that was a retail price, what the people got who made the suits would be something else. What the people got for the cloth would be very much less again.

The irons used to press the suits were huge things. They weighed anywhere from 18 to 21 pounds, he told me. Handling such heavy instruments hour after hour was a brutal job, or it would have been had not the men known how to handle the instruments. You used your entire body, he recalled, and then demonstrated how the legs and most muscles in the body were brought into play, otherwise a man's arms would go dead in less than a hour.

I asked Mr. Johnston who is a cousin by marriage, how come the tailor-made coat industry died out. He told me it was perhaps a combination of the fact that the stock suits became considerably better, and that fewer men were learning the trade than were dying out.

There were few trained after I finished in 1909, he told me.

(Explaining that cousin business, Bert is married to Catherine MacLennan whose mother was a sister of my father.)

Unusual Suit Trends

OUR CONVERSATION touched on some of the highlights of the unusual trends in men's suits. Bert recalled the "pinch-back" suit when I mentioned it. Here are some of the others he recalled. There were the padded shoulders, the loose-hip pants, the peg-leg pants and the long coats among other things.

Lauchie MacDonald started making women's suits in Charlottetown, Bert believes. And that could be around (?).