

Marshall Field's Stylish

Modeling career began with a quick color change and a dime-store photo.

A picture taken in an F.W. Woolworth store's photo booth tells the story of how I started a 12-year modeling career with Marshall Field & Company of Chicago.

Mrs. Louise Levitas, who ran the models room at the Marshall Field's store in downtown Chicago, told me at a March 1944 audition for models that she was looking for a blonde.

My background as a newspaper reporter for The Indianapolis Times had taught me the lesson "Never give up." Accordingly, just before the April audition, I invested in a big bottle of hydrogen peroxide and some ammonia, poured them in a bucket and dunked my head in it. Wow! She wanted a blonde, and she was going to get one!

I had neglected to tell my darling husband of my plan, however, and that evening, he had chosen to bring home a fellow Time magazine worker to meet me.

When I heard keys inserted into the lock, I was on the other side of the door waiting for "Wellsie" (nickname for my husband, Sturgis). He opened the door and said, "Bill, I want you to meet..." A long silence followed as he stared at his resplendent blonde, his keys dropping from his hand.

Blonde worked, however, and I was hired by Marshall Field & Company, the premier fashion headquarters of the Midwest. Two further little complications followed. I didn't have a picture of myself, needed for the store files, but not to worry. Across State Street was a huge Woolworth's with a photo "studio," a self-operated one, of

course.

The other complication was less easily solved—my walk. Mrs. Levitas (once mistakenly called Mrs. Lavoris by an unlucky auditioning model) said I had an unfortunate tendency. Sternly, she said, “Ladies do not wiggle their behinds when they walk.” She promised to get me over that, and so she did (to this day, I think!).

Each girl chosen was also given a little heart-to-heart talk, advising that she was now a “face” for Marshall Field’s and that if she wanted to stay, no scandal must ever be associated with her name—ever! We were also expected to dress well, even while out in public on nonworking days. We were aided by a 20 percent discount on all purchases.

Marshall Field’s paid scale, even to child models; my son, John, earned his precious Black Phantom bicycle and his electric train layout that way. I began modeling because I could make more in 1 hour than I made for a full week at the newspaper.

In the 1940s and ’50s, Marshall Field & Company was noted for, among other things, its extravagant evening fashion shows held several times a year to benefit such Chicago organizations as the Opera Guild and the Art Institute.

Marshall Field’s also had more in-store fashion shows than any other department store in the United States. Neiman Marcus even sent its fashion coordinator on a 3-day study of our models room and shows.

We models appeared in so many shows that customers would tell us, “I feel like I know you.” Our widespread exposure by the store even resulted in my receiving a screen-test offer from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but I didn’t pursue it.

The models room was just behind one of the six tea rooms and grill

rooms that occupied most of the seventh floor. Fashion shows were held for their patrons almost daily, and on Saturdays, a show was held for employees so they could talk intelligently about the clothes to customers. The models rarely ate in the tea rooms, preferring the Stouffer's restaurant across the street, where I could get my favorite concoction, a prune whip.

Stockings were mandatory, but women were finally able to shed the wool, silk or lisle stockings for those sheer, light miracles called nylons! They still had a seam up the back that had to be kept absolutely straight, and oh, how those little devils wandered. Then came the seamless nylon, and our joy was complete.

Marshall Field's sponsored a lot of early Chicago TV. Among the many TV commercials I did was one on the Don McNeill TV Club show introducing the Barca chair, a full-length lounge shaped like a dental chair. I was supposed to approach the chair and position myself on it elegantly, but when I sat down, the chair flipped over backward. There I was, legs skyward, my feet flailing to get upright.

Cameras for the show, broadcast live from Chicago, were hastily shifted. I was rescued and had to crawl on all fours to stay out of camera range. I remember thinking, Well, so ends this career. But my boss, Larry Sizer, the promotions director, laughed and said, "Katie, promise me you'll do that every week!"

My modeling career ended when my husband was transferred to San Francisco, but I'll always remember Marshall Field's as a wonderful place to work.

—Kate Wells, Delray Beach, Florida