

M & A Shogren

By Helen Fedchak

The dressmaking business of M & A Shogren was Portland's haute couture house during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sisters May and Ann Shogren opened their shop in the mid-1890s, where for over twenty years they operated Oregon's most significant fashion house. At a time when it was unusual for women to own and manage businesses by themselves, they created dresses of exceptional quality and style for wealthy women in Oregon and on the West Coast. Independent and adventurous in both their business and personal lives, the sisters climbed Mount Hood in 1895 and were charter members of the Mazamas mountaineering club.

The daughters of Swedish immigrants, May and Ann Shogren grew up in Portland with their five other siblings. May was born in 1861, and Ann was born in 1868. May was apprenticed to local tailor Henry Litt, where she advanced to the position of forelady. She left Litt in 1889 to start her own dressmaking business. By 1893, Ann had joined her as a dressmaker, and within three years they were listed in the Portland City Directory as M & A Shogren. As their business developed, May handled most of the designs and clients, and Ann took care of the administration. They produced gowns with a level of craftsmanship beyond anything else available in the region.

At the time, American fashion was dictated by Parisian designers, and seamstresses and tailors such as the Shogrens copied or modified designs they saw in fashion plates—illustrations of women (and sometimes men) wearing the latest clothing styles. May and Ann also traveled to Paris and New York for inspiration and to source fabrics. Their customers included Emma Corbett, the wife of Henry W. Corbett, and members of the influential and wealthy Henry Failing family.

May and Ann Shogren were at the height of their success as dressmakers during the Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905. Mary Bidwell Carey, the wife of Judge Charles H. Carey, wore a Shogren dress to the opening reception, and Emma Corbett wore a Shogren dress of deep purple silk velvet with ornate black and ivory lace and beading on the bodice. The sisters also made a white cotton day dress with beautiful lace insertions for their niece, Gladys Hug, for her graduation from Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) in 1913. The dress is unusual because it does not have the Shogren label that they sewed into most of their commercially made dresses. All of these dresses are in the museum collections of the Oregon Historical Society.

The shop at Southwest Tenth and Yamhill hosted many of the West Coast elite for fashion consultations and fittings. The dresses were excellent examples of the prevailing fashion, with heavy use of lace appliques and insertions, intricate layered bodices, and extensive pleating and hand-beading. Many of them must have taken hundreds of hours of skilled labor to create, and M & A Shogren employed as many as a hundred women from 1900 to 1910. A 1915 business ledger reveals that prices for one of their dresses started at about \$100, with \$250 being a more typical price (equivalent to \$2,500 to \$6,000 in 2017).

The fashion industry was changing by the end of World War I, with women's fashions becoming simpler and less elaborate than the sculptured dresses of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. When department stores such as Meier & Frank and Olds, Wortman & King began producing good quality, fashionable, ready-to-wear dresses, there was less demand for custom-made dresses. By 1920, M & A Shogren was no longer listed in the Portland City Directory.

May and Ann Shogren retired to their house that their brother Fred had built near Mount Tabor Park. Neither woman ever married or had children, but they were close to their siblings and nieces and nephews. Their niece, Gladys Hug, lived with the sisters after her mother Maisie died. May Shogren died in 1928, and Ann Shogren died a few years later, in 1934.

Sources

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