

# Father, son duo remembers Fell's

CHRISTOPHER PETERSON, Staff Writer

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As Winnetka bids farewell to the Fell Company, residents are reminded of afternoons sifting through formal jackets for special occasions and summers spent earning an extra dollar alongside the Fell family.

After eight decades in Winnetka, the clothing store will close its doors at the end of the year. New Trier Partners bought the Fell Company site in September.

For the good part of a century, the business stocked the North Shore with specially tailored name-brand business suits, tuxedos and other formal wear.

And for many Winnetka adults and teens, the store served as a lab for learning the ins and outs of customer service.

One father-son duo recalled years of Fell Company business -- both from outside store walls and behind the check-out counter.

Walter H. Sobel, of Wilmette, designed buildings for the Fell Company -- including an award-winning design for the Winnetka location.

His son Richard, a visiting professor at Northwestern University, sold sports coats at the store when he was a teen-ager.

Designing an institution

Walter Sobel, an architect, was no stranger to the Fell legacy. He met Abe Fell, a son of founder Sam Fell, at the company's former location on the west side of Green Bay Road.

Abe Fell helped start the Winnetka store and made friends with many of the locals.

"After returning from service late 1945, I needed clothes, so I naturally went to the Fell store," Sobel said.

Sobel's relationship with the Fell family grew, and eventually, he and his architecture firm were asked to design new stores and renovate the old ones.

"For over 20 years, my firm and I had a very warm and professional relationship with many of the Fells and their families," he said.

The firm designed the second-floor addition to the Highland Park location and the Fell Shoe Shop. It remodeled the Glencoe location several times, and in 1971 designed the current store at 511 Lincoln.

He said the building was designed for expansion, with the possibility of adding up to three additional floors for apartments. However, since the building was constructed, the family never chose to build upward.

But the design concept is significant for Sobel.

The Institute of Store Planners and the National Association of Store Fixture Manufacturers awarded him for his planning and design of the junior department store.

Sobel said working with the Fells was always a rewarding experience.

"During construction, I visited the project two or three times a week," he recalled. "When Abe would meet with his brothers at (former restaurant) Indian Trail for lunch, he would invite me and always introduced me as 'Wally Sobel, our architect. He has been at the Fell Company trough for umpteen years.'"

Sobel's firm also designed a home for Sam and Ida Fell and remodeled a home for the mother-in-law of Sam's son, Red.

Like father, like son

Richard Sobel may not have had the same hands-on experience as his father -- although he accepted his father's award in New York -- but he was one of many Winnetkans who has the Fell Company to thank for a dose of teen-age work ethic.

"Practically everybody on the North Shore worked at the Fell store for a summer," he said. "It's like a rite of passage for kids."

Sobel remembered being a teen-ager during the spring of 1967, peddling sports coats and pants, and directing customers with questions at the previous Fell store location in Winnetka. Repeat customers, he said, kept him busy, and the Fells saw to it that shoppers always came back.

"It's always been a nice local store where people can go in and get good clothing," he said. "If you go in more than once, people know who you are."

Sam Fell, a Russian immigrant, opened the first Fell Company store in 1913. His sons Abe, Fred, Jake and Red helped the business expand, and 13 grandchildren later carried on store operations.

New Trier Partners said it will re-open the site for retail, but it did not specify any long-term goals for the area.

Fell Company's Highland Park location closed in 2001, but the family still owns that property, where Borders bookstore is now the tenant.

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