

Charles F. Berg Company Fashion Show

By Columbia Commercial Studio, Inc

This 1923 photograph depicts three young women modeling Charles F. Berg Company coats and dresses at a stock show booth in North Portland. Charles F. Berg Company began as an umbrella specialty store in 1921 and grew to become one of the city's most prominent women's apparel stores by 1975, when it merged with Rusan's, a Washington-based women's specialty store.

Proprietor Charles F. Berg first gained retail experience at his mother's neighborhood bakery and notion store in San Francisco. After graduating from grammar school in 1885, Berg continued to work in San Francisco retail establishments for seventeen years, first as a "cash boy" at a department store and later as manager of a women's glove shop. Around 1902, Berg left California for Minnesota, where he ran a branch of the San Francisco glove firm. In 1907, a former boss in San Francisco, A.J. Lennon, invited Berg into a partnership, and Berg moved to Portland to take charge of a new umbrella and glove shop on Morrison Street called Lennon's, which prospered under his direction. In 1921, Berg purchased the store and changed the name to Charles F. Berg Company.

Berg's son, Forrest Berg, joined the company in 1922 to manage the store's new Ready-to-Wear department. The younger Berg immediately recognized a market in Portland for youthful fashions, and the store experienced extraordinary growth under his guidance. In 1924, the store established a board of college students--possibly the first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest--to help identify the latest trends. Board members, who were selected in part for their popularity, worked in the store during August. While at school they made periodic reports with suggestions about merchandising based on trends at their representative campuses. The store added a similar board of high school students in the early 1940s to help with promotions and charity events.

In 1930, Charles Berg moved the store to a larger space. He leased a three-story building on S.W. Broadway and significantly updated the front facade with art-deco detailing. The move facilitated space for further growth and departmentalization. When the downtown location sold to new owners in 1983, the store closed to make way for smaller retail shops and offices. Although the sale in 1983 marked the end of the Berg store, the building continues to be known as the Charles F. Berg building. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as one of the few remaining examples of the art-deco style in a Portland commercial building.

Further reading Oral History Interview with Forrest Talbot, SR 9412, Oregon Historical Society Research Library Written by Sara Paulson, © Oregon Historical Society, 2007.

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