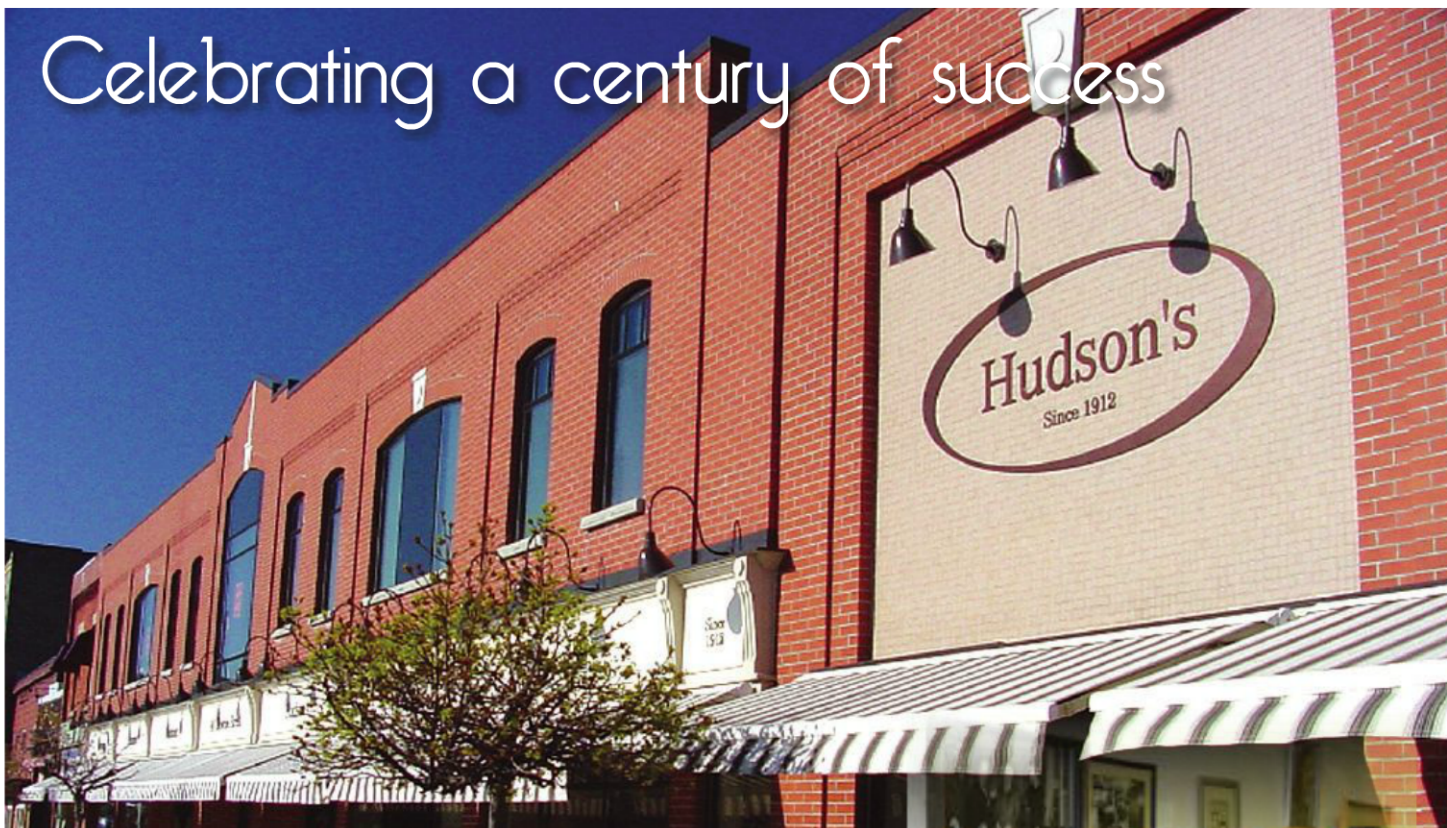


Celebrating a century of success



by **Tori Sutton**

Honesty is more important than money.

Making friends is better than making money.

To this day, descendants of Hudson's founder Harry Shapiro attribute their ongoing success to these two basic principles passed down to the businessman by his mother.

With the downtown department store marking its 100th anniversary this year, there's plenty to celebrate.

In 1911, Shapiro – who had emigrated to Canada from Russia, desperate to escape the poverty and racism so commonplace in that part of the world – started offering his wares to the people of Stratford, peddling pelts and dry goods off his horse-drawn cart.

The following year, Shapiro opened his first true location on Ontario Street, called the Stratford House Furnishing Company.

And though much has changed over the years – including locations, store offerings and the name itself – you could say the rest is history.

Within a few years, the store was moved to 141 Downie St. A wise businessman, Shapiro knew the importance of sticking close to his customers, and at that time, the hub of Stratford was the CNR shops to the south, and the downtown core to the north. The store was in the middle of it all.

Shapiro and his wife Jenny worked hard at the store, and were also busy starting a family. Soon, children Louis, Richard and Sylvia made five.

With their eyes set on expansion, the couple opened two more stores on Downie Street. Majestic Ladies Wear was in the Majestic Theatre – now the Stratford Shakespeare Festival's Avon Theatre – and Shapiro's Ladies Wear, in the building occupied by CIBC today.

The business continue to grow and soon, the main store doubled in size. But soon the Great Depression hit and Shapiro's shrewd business sense and his mother's sage advice kicked in, and he began allowing his customers to purchase items on relaxed credit terms.

The tough times did take their toll on the businesses, and Majestic Ladies Wear closed its doors.

In 1936, the family opened yet another store, this time in Woodstock, where Shapiro had lived briefly before coming to Stratford. Son Richard, then 17 years old, was sent to manage it.

By the time the Second World War rolled around, business was picking back up for the family. Richard and his brother Louis both entered the service.

After the war concluded, the entire family sat down to take a serious look at the steps that needed to be taken to ensure the business would continue to grow.

The family knew of a thriving department store in Detroit, Hudson's, and thought it was the perfect name with which to rebrand the business. In the late 1940s, the main store on Downie Street officially changed its name to Hudson's.

Not long after, in 1951, daughter Sylvia married Maurice Helperin, who had been working at the Crowley Milner department store in Detroit. The couple moved to Woodstock to manage the store there.

The following year, a large addition was completed in Stratford, adding about 60 feet of frontage, and making room for a larger selection of furniture. Around that time, Maurice and Sylvia moved to Stratford to manage the store, and brother Louis moved to Woodstock to take over the store there. Harry and Jenny transitioned to semi-retirement and moved to London.

Maurice and Sylvia started their family, and kept working at the store. In 1965, they undertook a major renovation and expansion, upping the frontage to 120 feet and gutting the interior. The new store had a grand opening on March 10, 1966.

A few months later, on September 21, Harry died in London. Jenny moved back to Stratford and continued to contribute to the business until Shapiro's Ladies Wear was finally closed in 1973.

Five years later, the London store was sold, eventually closing in 1985, which was also the year Jenny died.

By the time 1987 rolled around, Maurice and Sylvia's son Lee was ready to join the business. Today, he is the



Sylvia Helperin with daughter Judy and son Lee

store manager, while Sylvia continues to manage the ladies' wear department.

Lee's sister Judy takes care of all the advertising and marketing for the store.

Since Lee came on board in the late '80s, there have been many changes, including a complete revamp of the men's wear department, which remains popular today, especially its big and tall selections.

In July 1994, the family suffered a blow when Maurice died. But the family pressed on and four years later, in 1998, decided to take over the neighbouring building. Two years later, another major renovation took place that included the installation of an elevator and an overhaul of the interior.

With 100 years in business, the Helperin family doesn't think there's a secret to their success, but rather that good old fashioned customer service has helped them continue on all these years when so many other department stores have failed.

"I find we tend to go out of our way for people in a way the big box stores will never do," said Judy, in a recent interview at the store.

"We're grateful we're here because it's a tough market. But to say we've been here 100 years ... obviously we are doing something right."

The family has four principles they said have contributed to their success – selection, customer experience, price and convenience.

The store still offers delivery, and staff are more than happy to help a customer in any way they can, whether it be rushing an alteration or shipping an item out.

"We go out of our way much more than other stores," said Sylvia.

Unlike other stores, they make sure they have a large selection of items, not just rackfuls of the same offerings. They're able to keep their prices competitive since they don't have the high overhead like so many of their competitors.

But perhaps their biggest advantage is matriarch Sylvia, who Judy refers to as the store's "secret weapon."

Though very humble and would never boast about it, she's what brings so many customers back again and again, said Judy.

"She has this uncanny ability to know what will look good on people," she said, adding her mother has spent six days a week at the store for as long as she can remember.

There are groups of tourists who come back year after year to take in plays and shop, and a trip to Hudson's has become part of their Stratford experience.

Not only have they established long-time customers, including multiple generations of families, they've also got long-time staff members, which can be a rarity in the retail industry.

"They love us and we treat them well ... they stay forever," said Sylvia, with a smile.

The store also has bucked the Sunday shopping trend, and stays closed giving their employees a much-needed day off to ensure their resources are not stretched too thin.

Despite being hesitant to look too far into the future – Sylvia said they will continue to do their best – they're hopeful to continue to offer excellent service for years to come.

"We just keep going and hope we give our customers what they are looking for because that's what we're here to do – look after them," said Judy. "You are not going to get very far in this business, you're not going to be here very long if you're treating customers badly."

Sylvia knows retail has its ups and downs from her years of experience and watching stores around here close their doors. She is planning on sticking to their tested and true formula.

"My father always used to say, 'stick to what you know,'" she said.



Prior to major renovations



1950's



March 1966

From left, Maurice Helperin, Harry Shapiro, Mayor C.H. (Dutch) Meier and Sylvia Helperin cut the ribbon at Hudson's grand re-opening



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