

Sales of the century

The shoppers and shop girls
of Bush & Bull Company

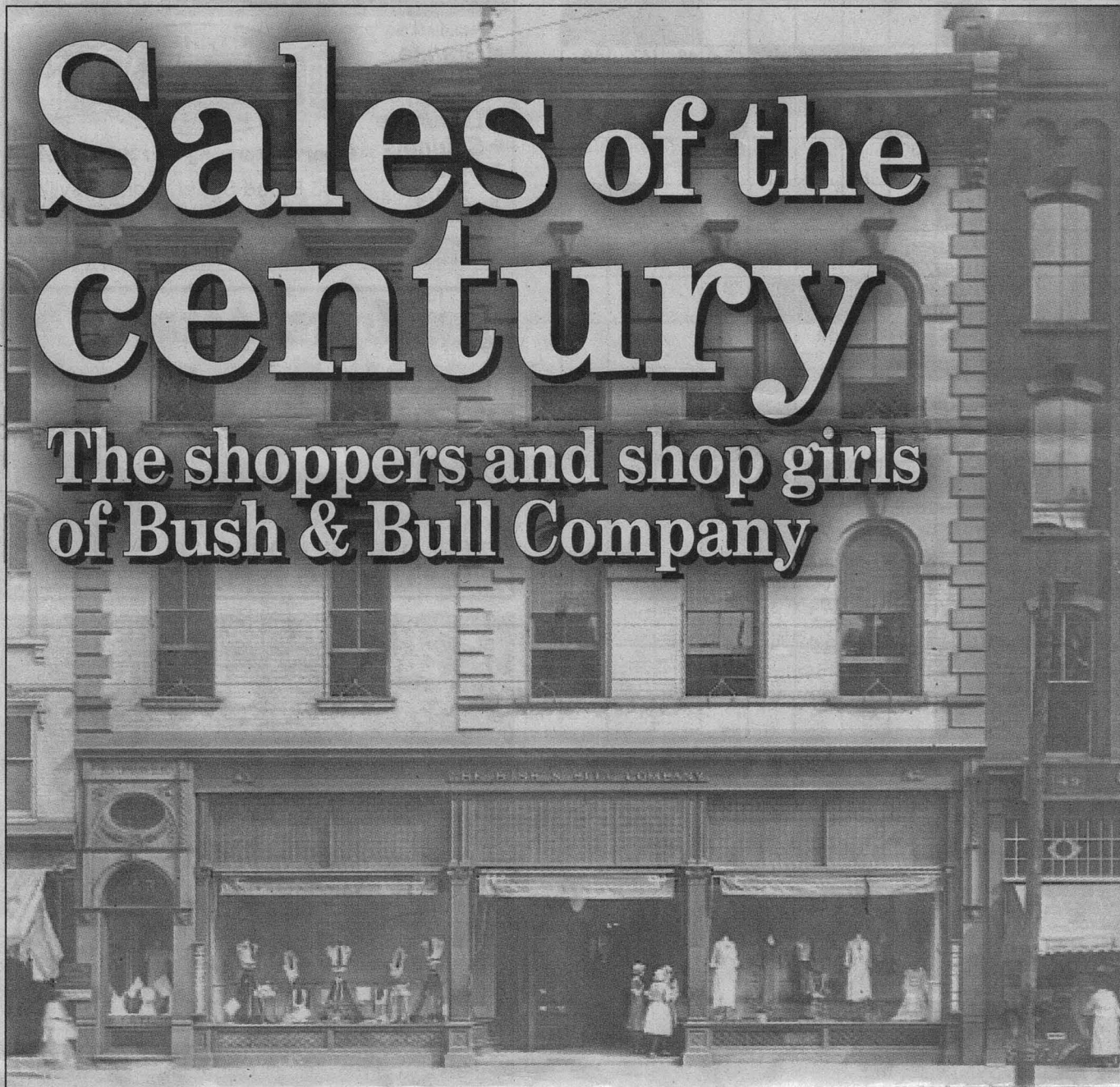




PHOTO PROVIDED

The Bush and Bull Company operated a store at 43-47 W. Third St., Williamsport.

By **JANET McNEIL HURLBERT**

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"We are not selling, but almost giving away ladies capes and jackets," reads a newspaper ad placed by the Bush & Bull Dry Goods store in 1896. The rise of department stores in the latter half of the 19th century was to contribute to some new life style choices for women.

Women as customers

Toward the end of the 19th century, ladies began to leave the protection of their homes to shop in establishments that offered merchandise in departments designed just for them. The Bush & Bull Company of Williamsport (originally known as Bush, Bull, and Diehle Company), which eventually expanded to 43-47 W. Third St., was one such store. This thriving business began in Easton in 1871. Plenty of advertising and good customer service were a recipe for success, and soon the store had spread to other cities, including Williamsport in 1884. A vast array of merchandise came from around the world, and shoppers wondered why they would ever again need to travel to New York City for their needs — or so the store proclaimed. Women could view merchandise as never before, as new ways of displaying products showed off the latest fashions attractively. Advertisements lured shoppers with one-day-only and half-price sales. What woman wouldn't want bargain napkins and the best line of dress goods? Middle-class women were experiencing a new kind of freedom as well as becoming an increasingly important consumer group.

Lycoming County Women

by MARY SIEMSKI, JANET HURLBERT



Respectable work for women

Women, many of them single, now had a new opportunity for respectable employment outside the family home. Bush & Bull would later claim that, in its employ, "girls have grown from youngsters to middle age." There was resistance from some customers to having female employees. Charles H. Eldon, a devoted Bush & Bull customer residing at 331 West Fourth Street, recalled that Miss Theresa Scott was the first female clerk in a dry goods store in this city. "I remember seeing her approach a customer and ask if she could wait on him. He replied that he preferred a man to wait on him."

Life seems to have been a congenial one for employees in the early 20th century. By 1903 The Grit was describing the store as "mammoth," with an army of clerks numbering 100. There was a voluntary staff association that planned all kinds of "outings." Happy faces were pictured traveling on train excursions, riding in sleds, paddling in canoes, attending picnics and even taking camping trips in Sylvan Dell and Nippenose Valley, where there was a heavy curtain separating the women from the men in the tent. Women also planned activities just for themselves, including a chicken and waffle dinner,

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The shoppers and shop girls of the Bush and Bull Company

(From Page C1)

games of gaige and euchre, and a hike organized by "the office girls."

Store Lore

A monthly publication called "Store Lore," "published in the interest of employees," was considered so valuable that the store offered a yearly binding service for a small fee, and many former employees asked to be placed on its mailing list. Like the management of the store, the male leaders listed at the top of the newsletter's masthead were all men, as were the editor and the assistant editor, but there were females filling the role of artistic editor and most of the department reporters were women. Some articles discussed store policy or inspired good customer service and work ethics. There were many

photographs of employees enjoying activities together, and the pages were sprinkled with humor and moralistic sayings. Happenings in the women's underwear department were always good for a joke.

The "gossip" column shared personnel updates about vacations, promotions, new employees, deaths, and other life events. Sometimes a woman would resign to go work in the mills or to get married. During World War I, articles stressed patriotism as well as encouraging the purchase of war bonds and promoting volunteerism with the local Red Cross. A few female employees left to train to become nurses. It seems that no health news was too insignificant or private to mention: "Miss Pearl Butler has pink eye," or "Miss Florence Edwards of the Hosiery section is confined at home with a general

breakdown."

The Bush & Bull Family

Men and women worked together in a "family" atmosphere—a term used frequently in the newsletter. The 40-year anniversary issue, entitled "Family Reunion," featured letters from past employees, many of them by then women with married names, who recalled fond memories of working and socializing while part of the Bush & Bull Company. Mrs. J. Fred Plankenhorn remembers when she worked at Bush & Bull from 1891 to 1892: "My department consisted of a small corset stock, ladies' muslin underwear assorted, children's caps, and some lace."

L.L. Stearns & Sons, a nearby competitor, remained in business

during the Depression, but Bush & Bull closed; it was no longer listed in the 1936 City Directory. Over the previous decades, women shoppers who had walked through the store doors had become increasingly confident and independent in most aspects of their lives. However, it must be kept in mind that for the most part these were women who had access to a middle-class or better income and some release time from household responsibilities. And store employment had a history of being open to women, but only if you were of a certain race.

Selected issues of "Store Lore" are available in the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. <http://digitalcollections.powerlibrary.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/alycc-wmhis>

Saturday's Cryptoquip: IF EEEYORE'S PAL WERE
A HORSE INSTEAD OF A BEAR, MAYBE HE