



*Frieda Mueller*  
*1873-1962*

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Memorialized by  
The Frieda Mueller Fund in  
The New York Community Trust  
909 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022

**B**efore the terminology was coined, there were New Women—women who crossed the prairie in covered wagons, homesteaded, pioneered and sometimes, as in the case of Frieda Mueller, built an empire. Like many of the heroines before her, Frieda was driven not by personal ambition, but by the simple need to provide for her family. In all probability, had life not dealt her a stunning blow, she would have been content with the role of wife and mother. Instead, she created an industry.

Frieda Mueller was born in October of 1873. While she was still a child, her family moved from Hoboken, New Jersey, to Cincinnati, Ohio. It was in Cincinnati, when she was about 19 years old, that she met Charles Loehmann, a flutist who played with John Philip Sousa's band. They married in the early 1890s, established their household in the city's Clifton neighborhood and raised their family of three children—Charles, Marjorie and William—each born within two years of one another. Life seemed settled and serene.

Then tragedy struck. Paralysis of the lip brought Charles Loehmann's career as a flutist to a cruel end. He opened a haberdashery in the outskirts of Cincinnati and Frieda joined him in the business. Frieda brought resourcefulness, courage, determination and a genius for organization to her new career. She was an innovator whose concepts of merchandising formed the basis for the discount fashion industry.

Frieda's success, summarized in glowing tributes in later years, makes it seem that her path was straight up. In reality there were setbacks and disappointments. At first the haberdashery did well. Frieda introduced a line of women's skirts and blouses at discount prices. The sales curve rose. Encouraged, Frieda and Charles were prompted to expand and relocate in downtown Cincinnati.

This proved to be a disastrous decision because the established retail stores complained to the manufacturers who, in turn, refused to sell to Loehmann's at discount prices. Ultimately, Loehmann's went bankrupt and Frieda traveled to New York City to look for work. In 1916, she accepted a job as a buyer for a New York City department store and the family moved from Cincinnati to Brooklyn, New York.

Again Frieda was called upon to capitalize upon misfortune, when one day, the merchandise she had ordered for a storewide sale failed to show up. In desperation Frieda rushed to Seventh Avenue and bought hundreds of samples. The public snapped them up. And Frieda began thinking. Why not start her own business, selling designer samples and end-of-the-season surplus apparel at discount prices?

Frieda took the plunge. In 1920, the first Loehmann's store opened and operated out of Charles and Frieda's home in Brooklyn. Every morning Frieda headed to Manhattan to purchase apparel. The children, Charles, Marjorie, and William, stayed at the store to sell the merchandise "Mama" had purchased the day before.

The popularity of Loehmann's store grew rapidly; customers did not mind crowding into the small space in order to buy fine designer clothes at low prices. The discount fashion business was born.

Frieda soon found it necessary to expand her operations and moved to a basement store on Nostrand Avenue, which was furnished with only clothing racks and a table. By 1930, another expansion was called for and a larger store was opened at 1476 Bedford Avenue.

Frieda and her husband lived in an apartment above the store, guarded by two watchdogs. The business continued to grow and eventually became a \$3-million-a-year enterprise. Frieda's original customers from Brooklyn continued to shop at the new store along with bargain hunters from as far away as Staten Island and the Bronx, who came by subway; and luminaries of New York society and Broadway stage, who arrived in chauffeured limousines.

The store's physical plant began to reflect its fiscal success as well as "Mama's" taste. She furnished it with unusual antiques and gilt furnishings which made her customers feel that they had entered a very special environment.

A *New York Herald Tribune* columnist wrote that:

*"Hundreds of racks of clothes failed to dim the theatrical splendor of Loehmann's, inside."*

Describing the interior, *The New York Times* spoke of:

*"Ranks of chandeliers, dripping prisms, enormous paintings, Venetian columns festooned in gold, huge lanterns and torchieres . . ."*

As accessible as the famous store was to the public, the woman behind it remained an enigma. Reporters, eager to tell the story of Frieda Loehmann, could not persuade her to grant an interview. She was, depending on whose opinion you sought, either too shy or simply disinterested. Perhaps it was a combination of the two.

On her annual buying trips abroad and during evenings out in New York, she dressed elegantly. One acquaintance described her appearance at a New Year's Eve party as stunning, in a white cape and dress with her hair coiffed into a high pompadour. Another recalled the time that two fashion editors visited the store on Bedford Avenue and were greeted by Frieda, poised at the top of her marble staircase, in a long velvet dinner skirt. This sense of elegance



*Frieda sailed to Europe on annual shopping trips for Loehmann's store. Here, dining aboard the R.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, she is surrounded by members of her family and other passengers.*

and regalness was a dramatic contrast to her everyday working outfit, a long black button-down dress, black cotton stockings and black oxfords, set off by her silver white hair, a circle of rouge on each cheek and an occasional flourish of bright red lipstick.

Frieda's style of buying was as no-nonsense as her outfit. Early on, she paid only in cash that she carried in thick wads inside her stocking. Eventually she carried a checkbook, but "bill me" was not part of her working vocabulary. Frieda shunned the showrooms, preferring to work behind the scenes in the stockrooms, among the shipping clerks and stockboys. They all appreciated her courtesy and integrity and she showed her gratitude for their assistance with armfuls of gifts at Christmas time.

For more than forty years, the men and women of the fashion district—from shipping clerks to manufacturers—admired "Mama" Loehmann for her uncanny ability to predict trends in style, for her shrewdness as a business woman and, most memorably, for her generosity.



*At a shipboard party, Frieda appears elegantly coiffed and dressed in the latest fashions.*

Famous designers like Norman Norell and Adele Simpson also appreciated and admired Frieda for her ability to buy and sell creations which often languished on the racks of fancy Manhattan stores at the end of a season. Manufacturers, too, benefited, for as one explained, "Mama' provided an outlet for our mistakes."

One indisputable fact about the elusive Frieda Mueller Loehmann was that she enjoyed her work. Two designers once traveled to Brooklyn on a Sunday to look at the famous Loehmann's store. When they peered inside they saw a woman on her hands and knees cleaning the plate windows. It was Frieda. "I'm having a wonderful day," she greeted them warmly, inviting them inside. "My children have gone to the country and I can do just what I want."

Charles Loehmann died in the 1940s and shortly after this Frieda began to turn more of the operations of the store over to her children. However, she continued to be the buyer and guiding spirit behind the scenes. Her son, Charles, decided to establish his own company (which became a national chain) but Frieda elected to operate the Brooklyn store and did not join her son.

Frieda died at Long Island College Hospital on September 22, 1962, one month before her 89th birthday. She had made her daily rounds, in a wheelchair, until two weeks before her death.



*Frieda and her daughter Margie enter the dining room aboard the R.M.S. Queen Mary.*

Since the neighborhood had become increasingly less fashionable, the family decided to sell the Bedford Avenue store after Frieda's death. The furnishings were sold at an auction attended by antique dealers as well as loyal customers who came to find one last bargain at the original Loehmann's.

Pausing to pay her tribute, one long-term business associate said, "She was a great lady. She could see more with her eyes half-closed than others with their eyes wide open." Another said, quite simply: "She was loyal—always a friend."

To memorialize Frieda Mueller's generosity and kindness, as well as her pioneering spirit, The Frieda Mueller Fund was established by her granddaughter at The New York Community Trust for public educational and charitable uses and purposes.



*The New York Community Trust is a publicly supported community foundation that provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for The Frieda Mueller Fund is United States Trust Company of New York.*