



The Sophisticated Style of Elwood Flynn

Tall, impeccably dressed, with an open face and friendly manner, Elwood Flynn is passionate about the men's apparel industry. The industry is pretty fond of him, too. Story: Beverly Fast Photography: Sean Francis Martin, DHS Communications

"He's basically a legend in our field," says son Barry, who followed his father into the menswear business. "I go to a lot of fashion shows with him and we don't make it down many rows without stopping and talking. When you've been around for 50 years, you know, they talk about him in the same breath with Harry Rosen and Henry Singer."

In 1995, the retail Council of Canada recognized Elwood Flynn for Men with a Retail Excellence Award – one of only 7 awards given that year.

Elwood Flynn has carefully crafted his reputation. "I have to believe in something before I can sell it," he says. Over the past 47 years, his store has become a brand unto itself. "Our style is investment clothing, it's quality, style and performance without compromise. Good taste is an intangible essential that identifies all of our merchandise. We have exclusives on some of the leading names in men's fashion: Warren K. Cook, Paul & Shark, Signum, Allen Edmonds, Arnold Brant as well as excellent selections of Hugo Boss, Jack Lipson and many other famous brands."

Getting behind the latest looks is something Flynn has never been afraid to do. Born in Kindersley, he moved to Saskatoon in 1944 to attend Nutana Collegiate. He got his start in men's apparel while still in high school, working for Jack Mallin. Later he partnered with John McAskill and Ken Fenwick before opening his own store in 1956.

"Those were some real glory years, seeing the business grow, making lots of good friends," he says of his early days in the store. "I remember when we started the store, we had a sign underneath that said 'The Ivy Shop.' Anybody that went to Harvard and Ivy League schools, this was the philosophy of dress. Natural soft shoulder suits, narrow ties, striped ties, tweedy jackets, no pleats in the pants. It introduced us to a certain level of sophistication, and we were leaders in it. We were one of the few stores in western Canada that understood it and got behind it."

Flynn smiles when asked about some of the memorable trends he's seen over the years. "There are few things more unpredictable than the constant changes in style and fashion. I've witnessed the 14" drape pant bottoms to the wide bell bottoms, skinny fitting clothes to the oversized relaxed look, extremely wide suit lapels to the very narrow, short length to very long length suit jackets. I could go on and on."

He thinks for a moment, then goes off to fetch some examples. He returns with two men's ties – one narrow and one so wide it could only have come from the 1970s. "When this was in fashion [holds up the narrow tie] we thought it was the greatest thing, when this was in fashion [holds up the wide tie] we thought it was the greatest. Just call it the eye of fashion." He pulls out a tape measure. "Yeah, this one's two inches and this one's five inches. So that's what I've seen in my day. You accept the wide diversity of

styles and modify them to fit your personal choice."

Flynn has always adapted the latest fashions to the tastes of his customers; it is one of his strengths. "We adapt our store to our customers, to where we live, to what we believe in. We match things up to each personality but we let them be themselves. We have an eye and a taste level, so sometimes we'll push them to the next level. If it's the right thing, we'll do it, but it has to be in character with the person."

His memory for customer purchases is another strength, it's even a little bit uncanny. Most men only go clothes shopping once or twice a year. Yet Flynn knows his customers by name, knows their tastes, what they bought and whether he's got something new to go with that pair of shoes or jacket or suit they bought last time. It has become part of the Elwood Flynn charm.

But Flynn is quick to credit his success to those around him. "I have many people to thank for their support and mentorship: my early employers, a multitude of wonderful sales reps and many groups of people involved in the fashion industry. Good staff – that's how you build a clientele. And Joan's been with me all the way."

Joan Flynn is Elwood's wife and one of Saskatoon's first ladies of fashion. They married in 1955 and have two grown sons: Barry who runs Ultimo Euromoda next door to Elwood Flynn for Men, and Jeff, whose company produces decals for leading North American corporations.

"Joan has been a great supporter and friend," Elwood says. "We were both involved in the Town Cobbler shoe store and then Joan got into the ladies fashion. We were busy, but we travelled to shows and went on buying trips. It worked out well. And both having the same common interest, well, we understood if somebody had to come home late or go out of town on business."

Many of Flynn's trips took him to New York City, where he was able to indulge his other grand passion: jazz. "Yeah, I'm a big jazz fan. I've seen Duke Ellington many times, Wynton Marsalis three or four times. My favourite jazz player is Clark Terry. He's played with Ellington and Basie, he's just wonderful. I just saw



Joe Sealy in Toronto. I've been to the Montreal International Jazz Festival many times."

He's also been a supporter of the local jazz scene, though he's modest about his contributions. "People talk to me, maybe they seek my opinion and I'll tell them what I think. I've been really lucky in the people I've had the pleasure of hearing. And many of them have become friends, too. I'm really comfortable in that world."

Flynn has met a lot of interesting people in his travels. He's known Joni Mitchell for many years. "Joni's dad has been a customer almost since the day we opened the store," he says. "When she's in town, which isn't too often, we have coffee. I've got a CD from her that says to 'the best

dressed man in Saskatoon' or something." He smiles at the thought. In his store, he's catered to the needs of visiting musicians and entertainers: Harry Belafonte, Red Skelton, Mike Keenan and members of the Team Canada hockey team, Fred Davis and Dave Broadfoot.

Flynn's roots run deep in the community.

The store throws its support behind a number of charitable causes, and Flynn himself has been a proud Rotarian for over 25 years. "We Rotarians quietly go about our journey, supporting needy projects around the world as well as many local community services," he says. "But I still work about six days a week, so it's difficult to do all the things I'd like."

Most days, you'll find Elwood working the floor, tending to customers. Something he may not have expected when he started was just how far flung his clientele would become. There are Elwood Flynn customers across the province, especially in Regina, as well as in Ottawa, Calgary, Vancouver, the United States, England, Mexico, Singapore and New Zealand. "One Singapore customer has a high power job in London, England and he just blows the people he works with away. They can't believe there's a store out

here that has this quality and sense of fashion and sophistication."

Most of the expatriate customers have some tie to Saskatoon, but they also share an appreciation for the service they find here. "The people who really seem to appreciate his reputation are from big cities," son Barry says. "You get a level of service and selection here that you'd probably have to spend a whole day in a big city to find."

"And dad's always been a real gentleman, that's one of the reasons people like and respect him. He's got an excellent reputation. You know, not every son can work with his dad, not every dad can work with his son, but if you can and it does work, it's the best situation possible." 🍀