

More Than 100 Years and Going Strong

By Susan Elzey

In 2006, Rippe's celebrated its 100th anniversary of clothing Danville's women in the finest of fashions.

The business is now in its third generation of ownership with Ben Rippe, grandson of the founder, at its helm.

Rippe's began in 1907 when Benjamin Rippe, a native New Yorker seeking his fortune in the South, and his wife, Annie Allen, the daughter of a retail merchant in Hillsborough, N.C., selected a location in the heart of Danville's booming tobacco warehouse district for a clothing store. "Gibson Girl" fashions were the rage with neck-high shirtwaists, frilly petticoats, hats, high-top lace-up shoes, and parasols. Business at the store was brisk.

In 1919, Rippe's relocated to uptown Main Street to larger quarters.

Benjamin died in 1934 and left the operation to his wife. Their son, Murray, joined her after college graduation but soon left to fight in World War II. Returning from the war, they built a new, modern building in 1947. By 1965 they had added an adjoining downtown building and expanded to almost 10,000 square feet.

In 1978, Ben left a career in agronomy and agricultural economics to join Rippe's. Nine years later, Ben earned an MBA at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business while managing Rippe's.

In 1992, Murray and his wife, Esther, sold all the stock to Ben, and the third generation now owned the store.



"Dad passed away June 23, and people have asked what we are going to do, but Dad actually retired 18 years before he died, although he came in part-time for several years to take care of the coats after his retirement," Ben said. As you would expect with a growing business, the last 18 years have been the best by all measurements.



Photo Top: Rippe's opened to great success in 1947 as a modern, new-from-the-ground-up store.

Photo Bottom: Lisa Kerr, general manager and general merchandise manager, and Ben Rippe, owner of Rippe's, work hard to keep their customers dressed in the latest fashion as the store continues more than 100 years of fashion success.

During its 100th year of business, Rippe's confirmed its commitment to the future by opening a separate shoe store—Rippe's Shoes—in the adjoining building. In 2008, Rippe's responded to continuing customer requests for fashionable sportswear separates in women's sizes and began offering Rippe's Woman fashions from 14W and up.

Success Through the Years

Rippe's has been a success story throughout its history. In fact, Ben knows of only one year when the business didn't thrive, and that was during the wage and price controls of President Richard M. Nixon during the 1970s.

Even during the economic downturn of the last two years, Rippe's has done well, Ben said.

"Two years ago when every other 'better' store went on sale, we went on sale faster. Then the stimulus gave us a little boost, and we had a boom in business during January through

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April of this year," he said. "We could feel a pent-up demand. Business flattened a little during May and June, but it's been up in July and August. Customers are shopping for fall fashion now, and we predict an even better rest of the year."

Rippe's success is good for the community. A study done by the Longwood University Small Business Development Center, concluded that over the past 17 years Rippe's has had approximately a \$50 million economic impact on the Danville area economy.

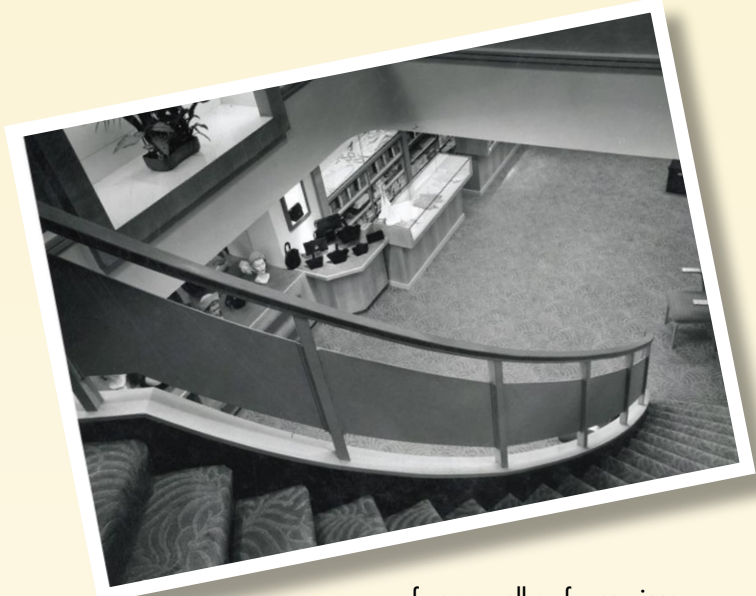
Continuing to Succeed

Ben attributes Rippe's enduring success to several reasons:

"I've remained a student of the business through the years, trying new things. We continue to offer honest value at every price point," he said. "We have decided which businesses we have wanted to be in and have a broad size range spectrum from 0-20 Misses and from 14 to 24 Women's, shoes 5 to 11 and 35 to 42 (European), with upper moderate to better and designer merchandise."

The store stocks approximately 5,000 items from more than 250 manufacturers at any given time. Ben and his buyers, including general manager Lisa Kerr, travel throughout the world to find fashions to satisfy the needs and wants of the modern woman.

"The income level we serve is from the lower moderate level to the top 2 percent, and we draw from a 60 mile radius from Lynchburg and Gretna south to Reidsville, Greensboro, N.C., Winston-Salem, N.C., and west from Stuart, Martinsville to South Boston, Clarksville on the east," Ben said. "Eighty percent of our business is from that region and the other twenty percent from New York to Florida."



He also credits Rippe's success to "wonderful employees" and finding fashion niches to fulfill, such as their lines of sportswear, accessories, shoes, boots, suits for careers and occasions, and coats and furs at value pricing.

Although it's too early to speak about a fourth generation in the business—Ben's dad retired at 77—Ben said, "This business will have some line of succession. There will be continuity."

Serving the Customers

He said customers use many options to purchase from Rippe's.

"Some put their purchases on layaway, some charge, some buy a lot, some buy a little," he said. "The ideal customer comes often because we have new merchandise coming in every day."

That's not the only reason people continue to shop at Rippe's, though. The store also offers personal attentions from Rippe's professionals in a relaxed atmosphere, custom alterations, store charge accounts, no-fee layaway, free gift wrapping and delivery in the United States and Canada.

Rippe's is known also for its wide selection of value priced

furs as well as fur services, including a cold storage vault and fur conditioning, repair on site, and restyling options.

Community Involvement

The store is also proud of its continuing community involvement. Education endowments, the Arts and some of the United Way charities have been Rippe's greatest

focus. A special interest is raising money for the Danville Cancer Association, which provides services for local cancer patients. Ben's mother is a breast cancer survivor.

The store holds an annual Benefit Fashion Show for Breast Cancer each October with 100 percent of the ticket price going to the DCA.

This year's benefit will be from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on Oct. 21st at the store. Last year's benefit raised more than \$12,000.

Rippe's is located at 559 Main St, Downtown, Danville, VA and is open year-round Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. For more information, call (434) 792-6822 or go to www.rippes.com.

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