Up Front

Curator’s Corner
By Emily Ruby, Assistant Curator

Azen Fur Bouquets

Fur has drawn interest in this region since the first people arrived, when abundant wildlife provided skins for warmth and for trade. That trade encouraged Europeans to settle the region and generated wealth that sparked both the competition to control the forks of the Ohio and investment in other enterprises. Centuries later, the history of the fur trade in Western Pennsylvania continues to be written.

Recently an unusual piece came into the Heinz History Center museum collection that adds a new chapter to this story: a bouquet of mink flowers from Max Azen Furs. Pittsburghers might remember Azen’s; some might even have an Azen piece hanging in their closet. Azen’s, a downtown institution founded in 1906, supplied the region with fine fur until 1981. The mink flower bouquet, donated by Christopher Milne, dates to 1968 when Milne’s uncle, Dr. Clifford Lee Wilmoth, went to Azen’s to choose a fur coat for his wife as an anniversary gift. Wilmoth was a surgeon at Shadyside Hospital. The company sent him home with a bouquet of its various mink colors. Accompanying the bouquet was a “Happy Anniversary” card signed by Harry Azen, with instructions to “nurture these flowers and soon they will grow into a full length mink coat.”

It is unclear whether this floral gift was a one-time sales pitch for a special client or a regular enticement used by Azen to cultivate customers in the 1960s. Helen Azen, the wife of Harry Azen (Max’s son), remembered wearing beautiful mink flowers on her uniform during special sales at Max Azen’s Furs, but she did not recall the use of fur bouquets to promote sales.

Guy Herrmann of Carl Herrmann Furs recalled that accessory manufacturers made those types of bouquets in the 1960s and...
1970s to generate conversation and interest in the office. Fur manufacturers also sent elaborate samples to retail stores, but those were rarely sent to customers’ homes. Perhaps the Wilmoths were special customers of Azen’s and were given this extra consideration by Harry Azen.

Maximilian Azen came to Pittsburgh with his wife, Bessie, and their eight children in 1906 from the city of Daugavpils (Dvinsk) in present day Latvia, where he had been a traveling fur salesman. After a few months selling dry goods in Pittsburgh, he returned to selling furs. The first Azen’s location was at 1023 Fifth Avenue in the Upper Hill. After several moves and expansions, the business ended up in a large former bank at the corner of Wood Street and Liberty Avenue. Max and Bessie had four more children in the United States; many of the children helped to carry on the business after their father’s death in 1943. The Azens were a vital, active part of the Jewish community in Pittsburgh, especially Congregation B’nai Israel.

In addition to donating the fur bouquet, the family recently donated a portrait of Max Azen and some photographs and papers to the History Center’s Rauh Jewish Archives. These materials preserve the story of Pittsburgh’s 20th century fur trade and a local family who made its mark in that business.