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FEATURED

Local History

## Local History: A day in the life at Dunham Brothers

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1 of 2



The main entrance of Dunham Brothers at Cotton Mill Hill in Brattleboro.  
Provided photo

*Note: This week's local history is provided by Brattleboro Historical Society board member Carol Farrington. She remembers her days working at Dunham Brothers.*

Dunham Brothers came to Brattleboro in 1885, a branch of a company in Paris, Maine. Numerous advertisements appeared in the local newspapers, announcing the grand opening. The original office building was located at 91 Main Street – the Hooker Block – with the retail store on the first floor where the Shoe Tree is now located.

My association with this company goes back to my parents who both worked there; my father in the warehouse and my mother in the office. My mother left work to raise a family and my dad to run Hogback Ski Area until it closed. In the 1960s, the Dunham's office was moved to Cotton Mill Hill in the former cotton mill building.

The attached photograph shows the impressive main entrance. For a while, in the late 1960s, this was the entrance to my work place. You entered the front door, went up the stairs to the main hall connecting this building to the office and warehouse, punched in at the time clock, and continued into the main office area.

The large building to the rear served as office and warehouse space, with the loading docks on the first floor. On the south side are large overhead doors, where the trucks backed up to unload the cases of new items. Most boots and shoes were made in the United States, but others were imported from other countries, often, Italy. The cases were then transferred to the warehouse on the second and third floors and stacked on racks of shelves for eventual distribution to individual customers.

The building had been originally built to house a mill for turning cotton into finished cloth. One of the outcomes of this activity was that the warehouse floors were impregnated with oil. The oil-soaked floors trapped any dirt on the bottom of people's shoes. Over the years the oil had built up and no amount of cleaning could remove it.

Office workers, who might have to go from the office to the warehouse, had to have two pairs of shoes. Before entering the warehouse, you changed from your 'office shoes' to your 'warehouse shoes.' Woe betide you if you forgot to change back as the clear evidence of any return from the warehouse would appear on the office carpet in the form of oily smudges.

After graduating from Brattleboro Union High School, I was looking for a way to earn funds to attend college. The pickings were slim but Mother had returned to work at Dunham's and she was able to find me part-time work in the office, doing the exciting (not!) tasks like matching shoe and boot samples, filing, making copies, and putting together mailings. (Nepotism, anyone?) All of these manual tasks were done by the Mail Room staff, and involved a lot of standing. You stood at the copier, stood at the folding machine, and then might stand at the files. The one break from that routine was handling the mailings for stores. The individual pieces – an envelope with the customer's address printed on it, multi-colored fliers denoting men's shoes, women's shoes, children's shoes, and boots, order forms, and such, were combined into a packet which was then inserted into the envelope by hand (my job). This was the one task that allowed for sitting. Tedious work but necessary before the automation of such tasks.

In those days, traveling salesmen actually went on the road with sample cases full of one-half of a pair of shoes or boots. One of the most mind-numbing tasks was matching up the returned samples when the old models became outdated and the new ones were needed, which happened several times a year. The return sample area was on the third floor of the building, consisting of several large rimmed tables on which the old samples were piled when the salesmen emptied their sample cases. The rim was to keep the piles of shoes from falling on the floor. Each shoe had a number printed inside, showing the color, model and size, and my job was to help the sample person match up the two halves of each pair. It was sometimes difficult as not all the salesmen turned in their samples at the same time. I remember looking at the pile on my first day and wondering how we would ever match them up.

Taking one shoe, you moved around the table looking for one that was its exact match, in model, color, size, and most importantly, number. When you found a pair, it was put aside on another table. The matched pairs, if they were in decent condition, were then transferred to the 'Bargain Basement' at the Dunham store on Main Street and sold at a reduced price. 'Round and 'round the tables we went until what remained were unmatched shoes. If we were lucky, there were none left but sometimes a salesman would lose a shoe. I don't believe the tables were ever entirely empty but there was satisfaction in reducing the pile to just a few shoes.

One of the perks of working in a shoe warehouse was getting to see the new shoe and boot styles before they were released to the public. As the new shoes arrived, samples would be selected and people in the office were invited to try them on. Interestingly enough, women's average shoe sizes were 5, 6 and 7, and I wore a size 6. Needless to say, I got to try on lots of new shoes. Once, an Italian company produced some very elegant tall zipped boots for the fall line and it was discovered that the average women could not zip them up. The top of the boots went almost straight from ankle to top, and the only women who could wear them had no calves to their legs. Obviously, these did not get into the market that year. Where was the market research?

The main office was simply a large room with partitions on all four sides, except for the main hallway through which we traveled daily. On the left was the area where all the orders were proofread, mailing addresses checked and the envelope addressing machine lived. No labels were used — each envelope was stamped with the customer's information.

Then came the area for the order entry machines and the computer. These were separated by glass windows and contained the tele-type sort of machines at which the operators transferred the information from the order forms onto punch cards. Not a computer as we know them now, but an early IBM that did routine tasks like printing lists, and keeping track of inventory. The punch cards were then sorted (another one of my early jobs), then fed into the computer to create printed orders for the warehouse employees.

The wall farthest from the entrance — containing all the windows with views of the river — was reserved for the managers' offices — lucky them, or maybe not — as the offices faced southeast and could get very hot in summer.

The warehouse was entered through one of two entrances from the office. Both had large mats for wiping your shoes after visiting the warehouse and putting on your office shoes. Each warehouse employee took an order, and using rolling carts, located each box of shoes in the correct size and color, that were meant for a specific customer. These were then packed into large cartons, stamped with the customer's name and address and shipped, mostly by truck.

Dunham's provided my first introduction to computers. After graduating from college and a few months of part-time work, with no teaching jobs on the horizon, I was able to convince the Operations Manager that I would be a great asset. Then I was on my way – in 1973 I learned how to operate a main frame computer.

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