

It's Still Smart



To Be Thrifty!

Inside . . .

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH \$50?

Show Us for a Chance
to Win Cash Prizes!

4

THRIFT SHOPS

The Untold Story

6

JOIN THE CAUSE!

Bring Back Thrift Week!

30

CAN A \$400 PHONE BE A THRIFT TOOL?

With Our iPhone
App It Can Be!

32

Introduction

Maybe it's the thrill of hunting for bargain priced treasures . . . maybe it's the utilitarian value of meeting the needs of your family on a strict budget . . . maybe it's just a love of the unique, of the quirky, of the special, funky, one-of-a-kind things you can't find in a department store or a big-box retailer—whatever the reason, we love thrift stores and chances are, if you're reading this, so do you.

This booklet is a celebration of thrift stores and of the virtue of thrift in general. We're giving it out for free to encourage thrift-savvy individuals like you to join our movement to revive a long lost American tradition called National Thrift Week. Observed every year up through the 1960s around the January 17th birthday of Benjamin Franklin, National Thrift Week was a coast-to-coast celebration of responsible consumerism. It was organized primarily by community groups, government agencies, professional organizations, financial institutions, and places like your local thrift store.

In 2012, we want you to join the festivities! Go online and enter our thrift store fashion contest to win cash prizes and show off your style (page 5). Download our Thrift Challenge app and make your responsible habits into a game (page 34). Bring a friend to the thrift store the next time you go and show them the ropes.



As you'll see in these pages, thrift has a great history in this country, but we hope you recognize that it's not *just* an old fashioned idea. In fact, it may be exactly what our country needs in the years to come. After all, the word itself does find its root in word "thrive."

So join us and spread the gospel of thrift! Fight the prevailing winds of our reckless consumer culture and dispel the many misperceptions about what it means to be thrifty! Despite what the ever-present commercials, billboards, advertisements, catalogs, and glossy magazines tell us, thrift can be fun and it should always be in style.

For more information on National Thrift Week, please visit

WWW.BRINGBACKTHRIFTWEEK.ORG

Show Us Your Best Thrift Store Finds!



**WIN ONE OF FIVE
\$100 CASH PRIZES
PER MONTH.**

Anyone can be fashionable if they are pulling in a movie star salary, but to be fashionable *and* thrifty takes real talent. Think you've got it? Prove it! Put together a runway look for less than \$50 and hit us with a pic to be eligible to win one of five \$100 cash prizes per month.

Eligibility:

Entrants must be eighteen years of age or older to enter and a legal resident of the United States. .

Rules:

- There is a spending cap of \$50 per entry.
- You need to submit a picture of your receipt(s) along with the picture of your outfit in order to verify the prices of the various components of your look.
- You can incorporate existing items that you already own, but you will be judged mainly on the items that are on your receipt(s).

- You can enter as many times as you want, but you can only win once.
- By “thrift store” we mean any second-hand retail venue. This can mean consignment shops, online auctions, classified ads, flea markets, etc. Just be sure you have a way to photographically prove to us how much you spent on the transaction.
- All entries will need to be approved by a moderator before appearing on the site. Please stick to “PG-13” standards of decency or better. Entries that do not meet these standards will not be approved. Entries may also be rejected for other reasons such as low image resolution or file size problems. We will inform any contestant of the reason for rejection.
- By entering, you grant the contest sponsors ownership of the content and the right to use it for promotional purposes.

Judging:

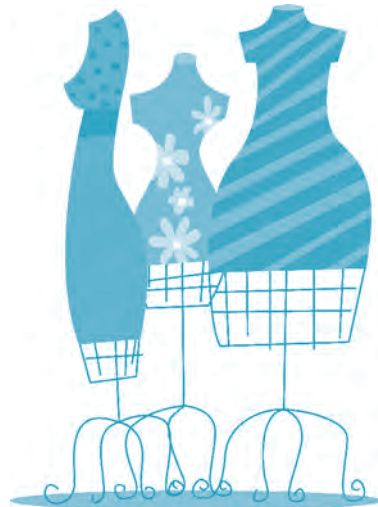
The primary consideration in judging will be your personal style and the degree to which you make use of the \$50 spending limit. At the end of each month we will have a different fashion insider review the entries from the past few weeks and pick his or her favorites.

Prizes:

Every month there will be five new winners selected. Winners will each receive \$100. Because a properly understood concept of thrift includes an element of generosity as well (make all you can, save all you can, give all you can), we will also donate \$100 to a charity of each winner's choosing from a specified list.

Deadline:

The deadline for consideration each month, will be midnight EST, on the last day of the month. Winners will be selected within two weeks of each month's deadline.



For more information on the contest, please visit

WWW.BRINGBACKTHRIFTWEEK.ORG

A Century of Thrift Shops

Alison Humes

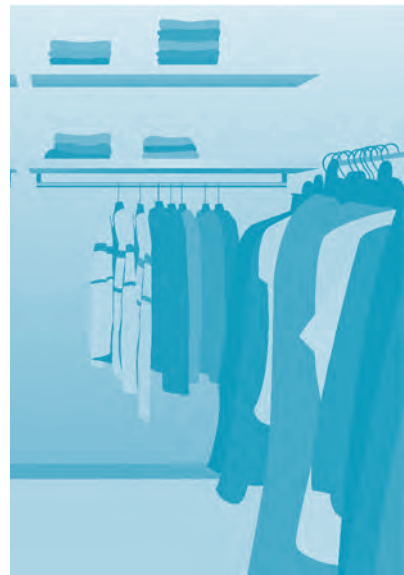
“Oh, look, a thrift shop!” Muriel said.

“My biggest weakness.”

—*The Accidental Tourist* by Anne Tyler¹

THRIFT HOPS EMERGED in the United States a little more than a hundred years ago. From that time to the present, their social function, the values they represent, and the attitudes we hold about them have changed significantly. Tracing their history and our opinion of them shows how our cultural beliefs about thrift and generosity, about denial and indulgence, about altruism and acquisitiveness have changed. Indeed, our notions about thrift shops have always been enmeshed with our notions about philanthropy (or giving) and conservation (keeping). Over its still robust lifetime, the thrift shop (generally nonprofit and connected with a charity) has modeled the American social ethic—the importance we give to diligent work and wise spending, to remediating waste, to helping others, to the pleasures of the material world, and to equal access for all. As other institutions and initiatives that promoted an explicit ethic of thrift have faded away (savings and loans, the Housekeepers’ Alliance, thrift curricula and school savings banks, National Thrift Week), the thrift shop is still going strong.

My own relationship with thrift shops is longstanding; I have been a habitué for forty years. From an early age, I appreciated pretty things, and I learned to appreciate them even more if they were a bargain. My appreciation was cultivated by the examples of my mother and grandmother, who tutored me in the ways of acquisition and thrift. I am also interested in the meaning of the things one acquires, what they



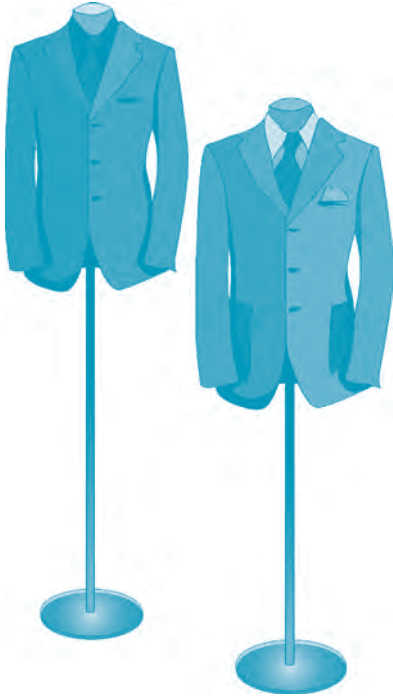
signify to oneself and to others. I love luxury as well as thrift, and I love confounding expectations. I appreciate design and fashion, but they are not fetishes of mine. I like glamour, but I think it is a lot of work. I am constantly trying to save money, but I constantly have the urge to spend it as well. Overall, I can admit, I love to shop, but I hardly ever buy retail. The only way to do, and have, what I want is by being thrifty. And so, thrift shops—junk shops, second-hand stores, tag sales—have played a significant role in my life as a consumer, as have other kinds of discount shops. Being generous is my vanity, and I am occasionally extravagant. Like many of my generation, I like to mix it up.

ONLY AMERICANS BUY RETAIL

My grandmother Luba, the youngest daughter of a prosperous and devout Jewish merchant, was born in Riga, Latvia, between, I believe, 1900 and 1902 (she would not say). Tiny and willful, she believed in glamour, charm, and seduction—part of which was the exchange of presents and the pleasure that comes with them. She became a designer of dresses and linens, an entrepreneur. Beauty and lavishness were her calling cards, but though she might be flirtatious, she was nobody's fool. She left Russia in the 1920s for the Philippines and then, in March 1941, came to the United States on a business trip, accompanied by her nine-year-old daughter; as World War II threatened to engulf the Philippines, she decided to stay put. An immigrant and a single parent, she was shrewd and hyperaware of the value of a dollar. The goal was always to get something better for less. She cultivated her trade relationships for favors, insider prices, and deals. In her view, the ability to behave like the princess she thought she should be required being a hard-nosed bargainer. She insisted on top service and value: people should work hard and be grateful for what they could get, and things should be made to last and then carefully used until they were beyond creative repair.

My mother, Anna Lou, recently told me what she referred to as “the famous story of the ham.” She must have been around eleven when Luba sent her to buy a half-pound of ham. When Luba saw the ham, she thrust it under my mother's nose, saying, “You call this ham?” Anna Lou was to go back to the shop, pronto, and return it. The butcher was to replace it with good ham. My mother said she would rather die. Why couldn't they just forget it, or if need be, buy other ham elsewhere? A confrontation would be both embarrassing and humiliating. But my grandmother insisted: getting one's money's worth—practicing thrift—required vigilance and if need be, aggression. “Watch what you're given, and pay attention where your money goes. You can't afford to waste money to save someone's feelings, even your own.”

The corollary was that thrift and saving money permitted the Über Luba, as she was dubbed by a waggish friend, to shower those she loved with treats of all kinds. In my family, treats often came in the form of food—being taken out to dinner for



butterfly shrimp, being fed chocolate cake, receiving (among other things) pomegranates and persimmons for Christmas. Though personally thrifty, my grandmother could not bear to be considered mean. Plus, generosity was exciting and fun.

My grandmother paid sharp attention to the parsing of social status. She considered herself educated and her background privileged but realized that these distinctions might be lost on Americans, who she feared noted only her foreignness. She admired what she perceived as the breezy entitlement of the American upper middle classes, into which she wished to assimilate. (Think Katherine Hepburn to Jane Wyatt.) Unapologetically elitist, she scorned the uneducated, the unpolished, and anything that looked “cheap.” An advocate of self-improvement through gracious living, she cared deeply about presentation and taste and championed the importance of quality and appearances. Her Europeanized view of the good life meant that everything should look like a Fabergé egg.

Her visits to thrift shops in New York City were certainly nothing to publicize, but she was thrilled by her “finds.” She liked to fix things up so that they looked fancy and substantial—she “antiqued” furniture and sewed Alençon lace onto plain silk lampshades. One of her projects, and eventual gifts of which I am the beneficiary, was a small bedside lamp. Somewhere she found, along Ninth Avenue perhaps, a battered white painted metal lamp with a rather nice scalloped base. What, if anything, was on the base when she got it I do not know; in its place she glued a graceful Chinese lady in white porcelain with a lotus blossom on her shoulder—one of a pair. To top the bulb, she hand-stitched a shade out of softly gathered white cotton around which she sewed the inevitable lace in the color she called “ecru.” The other lady she glued to a small round wood base painted gold. The two of them stand on my dresser, swaying in opposite directions and nodding at each other, just as they used to at her house, fifty years ago.

SPIRITUAL RESCUE

The concept of thrift shops emerged in the United States at about the same time that my grandmother was born in Latvia. Here, the Industrial Revolution was causing social upheaval in terms of the move to wage labor, urbanization, and the loss of the extended family, difficulties that increased with the U.S. economic depression of the

1890s. Cities developed slums filled with the unemployed, widows and orphans, and the elderly—many of whom had come to the cities and factories to work but who, nonetheless, could not support themselves. Thrift shops grew up in this atmosphere, before the advent of socialism and the increased responsibility of the state for public welfare.

Thrift shops grew primarily out of a desire to provide men with employment. Although they were built on charity—the generosity of the “haves” who gave their time and activism or used items to help the “have-nots”—and were nonprofit, what the original thrift shops provided was not charity but the opportunity to work. They also provided the working poor with an opportunity to purchase goods at accessible prices. Started by idealistic men with strong religious conviction, these programs provided a way for social reformers to model the values of thrift, education, and hard work for those downtrodden by poverty, alcoholism, or indolence. The philosophy was to care for others by promoting diligence and industry while making new use of what would otherwise be discarded—in line with the traditional and long-standing thrift ethic.

Thrift shops were spiritually inspired institutions; like savings banks, they were an expression of a belief in the rightness of helping the poor. Indeed, this is still true today: the Mennonite Central Committee runs numerous thrift shops around this country and in Canada to support its charity work, as does the Catholic Society of St. Vincent de Paul and many others. Today, thrift shops are also run to benefit health institutions, hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, local PTAs, and community programs.

The idea for Goodwill Industries, which runs one of the country's best-known chains of nonprofit thrift shops, with \$1.63 billion in retail sales in 2005, came to Edgar James Helms, a Methodist minister, in Boston in 1902. Helms, who grew up in Iowa, was a strong supporter of the temperance movement, having written editorials and worked in local politics in support of Prohibition. At age thirty-two, with a background in journalism, politics, and the study of Methodist theology, he accepted a ministry at the Morgan Chapel in Boston's South End, at that time an immigrant slum. A year later, in 1903, to help supply his mission—which included the first church-sponsored day care center and residences for some of his struggling parishioners—he started to travel around rich neighborhoods of Boston, collecting donations of clothing and household goods. Then, in 1902, he devised a plan whereby he put his community to work, repairing and recycling these castoffs to sell at low cost. The scheme was a success: soon he was collecting goods with a horse and wagon and, by 1909, a truck.

His ambitions were grand—not to build an empire but to eliminate poverty. “We have courage and are unafraid,” he wrote. “With the prayerful cooperation of millions of our bag contributors and of our workers, we will press on till the curse of poverty and exploitation is banished from mankind.”² He believed that individuals could

improve their lot when given the opportunity to do so. His motto was “a chance, not a charity.”

At about the same time that Helms took up his mission, the Salvation Army set up its first “salvage brigade” and opened its first “industrial home” in New York City, forerunners of its rehabilitation facilities for the unemployed, homeless, or disabled. Since its early days, the army had maintained shelters for men, but the aim of these new institutions was to be self-supporting as well as to create meaningful work opportunities through collecting and repurposing discarded items. Salvation Army founder and evangelist William Booth had suggested such an idea, which he dubbed the Household Salvage Brigade, in his 1890 manifesto *In Darkest England*: “We shall not have far to seek before we discover in every town and in every country the corresponding element to our unemployed labourer. We have waste labour on the one hand; we have waste commodities on the other.”³ These brigades were to collect household waste, from food to bones and fat, to broken stoves and instruments, old shoes and boots, broken umbrellas, empty tins and bottles, newspapers and books, rags and paper. That which could not be immediately used would be the stuff on which the poor would be put to work, sorting, repairing, and repurposing. And so it had come to pass: although rags and paper were the main source of income for the industrial homes up through the 1920s, the idea of refurbishing used goods and selling them had found a footing.⁴ The Salvation Army opened its first thrift store in 1897 in Chicago.⁵ By 2004, as stated in its annual report, it had 1,526 thrift shops around the country, which support its current rehabilitation efforts, addiction-recovery programs.

The organizations that set up the original thrift shops and promoted thrift more generally were, like other social activist movements of the day, inspired by religious teachings about the importance of saving souls, and they attracted middle-class women who were looking for meaning outside the private sphere. Saving souls meant ministering to and helping the poor and, as a result, grappling with a prevalent belief that poverty was the result of moral turpitude and personal failure. As noted by social historian Louise Tilly, “One set of connections between middle- and working-class women on both local and national levels is that of respectability and domesticity. Working-class women were seen by middle-class opinion leaders as the key—if they themselves could be taught order and virtue—to male personal conduct.”⁶ The participation of women was central, for instance, to the second flowering of the temperance movement in the late nineteenth century. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union, established in 1874, feared alcohol as the instigator of moral, financial, and physical failure in their men, and thus in their families and themselves. Women, who did not yet have any legal or political rights, saw temperance as a fight to protect the home. The thrift movement had a similar appeal.

The thrift ethic provided a potential remedy to poverty, one that women embraced as a solution that they could prescribe (as social workers) and implement themselves

in their own families. In a paper that tells the interesting history of how poverty lines were established, Gordon M. Fisher, a former researcher at the Department of Health and Human Services, traces the evolution of social activists' thinking about charity: In the 1870s, charity organization workers "thought that the causes of poverty lay entirely within the individual. . . . They went to poor applicants for charity as 'friendly visitors,' investigating their cases but seeking mainly to regenerate them as individuals and get them to practice self-reliance rather than seeking the demoralization of material relief." Yet in coming face to face with the actual conditions of the poor, "shortly after 1900, [they] began to realize that much of the poverty they were investigating was due . . . to external social causes."⁷ Many of these workers were women, as social work became a field in which women could develop independent professional careers. Indeed, Evangeline Booth became the commander of the Salvation Army in the U.S. in 1904. For thirty years, the outspoken daughter of founder William Booth led a major expansion of the army's social services, its fund-raising, influence, and property, until she became the organization's first woman general in 1934.

A PENNY SAVED

By the 1920s, as the consumer economy grew, belief in the power of the thrift ethic was in full swing. Presidents endorsed it. Warren Harding talked about the importance of saving money; and then, when Calvin Coolidge took the job, he received so many letters requesting his imprimatur on the importance of thrift as the route to progress that, in 1923, he wrote what became a form response. It stated, in part: "No man is so poor that he cannot begin to be thrifty. No man is so rich that he does not need to be thrifty. The margin between success and failure, between a respectable place in life and comparative oblivion, is very narrow. It is measured by a single word, THRIFT. The man who saves is the man who will win."⁸ Banker and real estate mogul Simon William Straus preached the value of thrift in his 1920 book *History of the Thrift Movement in America*. Thrift, he argued, was about much more than saving money: the practice of this virtue early and often would mold character to survive practically any adversity. He advocated that schools teach the value of thrift in all things. "Thrift is essential as the guiding principle of the individual because it imparts poise, moral stamina, courage, ambition, independence and efficiency."⁹ He exhorted the masses to improve their lot by bootstrapping and increasing their savings to help advance their family and society.



Although Straus acknowledged “it requires just as much moral stamina to conquer the temptations of opulence as it does to combat the onslaughts of calamitous circumstances,” he sounded like a bit of a scold.¹⁰ “Thrift is submission to discipline, self-imposed. Thrift is denying one’s self, present pleasures for future gain. Thrift is the exercise of the will, the development of moral stamina, the steadfast refusal to yield to temptation.” In his view, this was a challenge facing not just the poor but American society as a whole:

To-day we are recognized throughout the world, as the most thriftless nation among the great powers. We must get back to the ways of Benjamin Franklin. Want and waste, extravagance, debauchery, riotous living, artificial social and business practices must be eliminated; in a word, the nation must be remade, not only by talking thrift but by teaching thrift and practicing thrift.¹¹

Of course, the purpose of this thrift was to build wealth and thus be better able to provide for others.

A VIRTUE OF THE DOMESTIC DOMAIN

Women were the soldiers on the front line in the war to advance thrift. Unsurprisingly, they were already well aware of the importance of practicing thrift at home. As Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer wrote in 1919 in “A Program of Thrift for New York State,” a home reading course put out by the Home Economics Department at Cornell University, “The best way to begin a thrift movement is by studying simple household problems.” After all, the word *economy* comes from the Greek *oikos nomos*, or the law of the house. The household was still perceived as a center for the creation of wealth, though responsibility for its financial management had largely passed to women within it. Embedded as they were in the domestic sphere, women were already allocating resources in terms of running the household and making purchases and worrying about how to make it all work.

In 1923, Benjamin R. Andrews, a professor of home economics at Columbia University, published *Economics of the Household: Its Administration and Finance*. He understood the importance women played in the domestic economy, and he thought that the application of scientific principles to household management—home economics—could only improve the home’s efficiency and its ability to create wealth



(essentially, he admitted, the result of women's labor). Although "experience indicates the wisdom of relying exclusively upon the man as money-earner," Andrews accepted that some women want to work earning wages outside the home—not a problem as long as she did so "in the light of her responsibilities." However, he thought it worth pointing out that (a) "there is an opportunity for income-producing inside the home . . . which for all but exceptional women, is equal at least to that of outside wage-earning" and (b) "housekeeping and homemaking are too demanding a task . . . , too interesting in their variety and freedom, too productive of values by which the family benefits, to be dropped for the lure of eight-hours a day and the pay envelope."¹² Part of the challenge, it is clear, was not only reducing waste and helping her husband make his business profitable but also making sure that her family got as much value as possible for its money. Her success at these endeavors, she was instructed, depended on her skills at thrift.

Such cultural assumptions often fell hard on poor women: Gordon M. Fisher, in another discussion of poverty lines, writes, "if a (working-class) family with an income equal to the cost of a standard budget was unable to provide for itself an actual level of living as good as the theoretical standard . . . some argued that the family—and particularly the wife—was not a sufficiently 'efficient' spender or manager."¹³ These attitudes reveal a continuing tendency in some quarters to understand poverty as a moral failure.

SORRY SECONDS

But twenty years and more into the twentieth century, the emphasis on thrift did not yet extend to purchasing goods second hand. One reason might be that many goods (clothing and linens, for instance) were still produced at home, "made from scratch" rather than bought as consumer items. Still, Andrews, for instance, commends donating to thrift shops, noting that extending the useful life of an item is socially responsible. It is interesting, however, that he never suggests shopping there:

Articles of clothing, no longer of use to one family, can usually be passed on so as to give service elsewhere, either privately or through a church or charitable organization or through the second-hand clothing trade. There is a social responsibility for such further utilization of clothing and every reason why the economic values represented by the partly worn garments should be recovered for the original owners if possible, or at least that they be utilized socially. There are in several cities clothing bureaus that solicit gifts of worn clothing and sell them at reasonable values, the proceeds going to charities, such as the Clothing Bureau and Everybody's Thrift Shop of New York, and such enterprises could be copied elsewhere.¹⁴

The stigma of poverty in the public mind still meant that those who were afflicted by it were fundamentally different from those who were not. Thrift shops were considered a service for the poor, which meant that, almost by definition, they were not a realistic solution for the middle class. Donations were commended, but society was still struggling to accept actually purchasing used items, particularly clothing. Anne Rittenhouse, in her 1924 book *The Well-Dressed Woman*, gives over three chapters to Jean Worth, son of the great designer Charles Worth. He associates buying second hand with showiness, as if that meant dressing above one's social station. He writes:

Within the last few years, too, there have arisen establishments where second-hand frocks are sold, and to such places women flock who want to dress showily, heedless of the fact that their mothers and grandmothers would have spurned the mere suggestion of wearing cast-off clothing, as unworthy the contemplation of gentle-folk.

Even the so-called smart woman is now not above selling her once-worn frocks, or of wearing at a public place, such as a fashionable resort or race-meeting, a gown that has been lent her free for the day to advertise a new "creation." This is wholly unworthy of a lady and cannot be too sincerely deplored.¹⁵

After Rittenhouse takes back the narrative, she acknowledges the difficulties confronting the social woman of little means. This woman often finds herself accepting clothes from her richer friends, even if it means being faced with the nightmare of imperfect alterations. "No, the path of a clothes beneficiary is not a pleasant one. Yet rugged as it is, it gives a woman a chance to appear correctly dressed in the society to which she is accredited."¹⁶ She writes that it is hard for the rich woman to give away clothes to friends: "Rich women have often regretted that friendship and not judgment should govern the disposal of their clothes. An affluent woman rarely finds a friend who can wear her discarded clothes with brilliant effect, one who does not have to struggle frantically to make them pleasing, to whom they give joy without anxiety." The solution she proposes to the donor is that she give away her excess clothing while it is still fashionable, inviting friends to come take their pick while tea is served, her maids are present to help her friends, and she is absent—so as not "to embarrass her friends by her presence or advice." To the woman of little means, Rittenhouse suggests serious and early planning of fashion solutions to avoid the risk of rushed and unwise last-minute purchases.

TURNING TRASH INTO CASH

Even if thrift shops were not yet popular places to shop, by the late 1920s, charities and social activists started to realize that thrift shops could be profit centers, the source of funds to support various social services. The tagline of The Thrift Shop, which in one month during 1927 or 1928 raised four thousand dollars in Washington, DC, to benefit four children's health organizations, was "We turn your trash into cash." The chairpersons and board members were all women, forty-seven of them listed by name on the shop's letterhead stationery. In a letter to the membership, the chairperson requests that each board member donate ten articles a month; she reports also a new marketing scheme to spur sales, inviting prominent local women to help sell in the shop.

The Red Cross Chapter in Montclair, New Jersey, reported in the February 15, 1928, issue of the *Red Cross Courier* that for almost five years, it had run a thrift shop that

sells partially used clothing, household goods, and other articles contributed by members of the community, distributes books and magazines to "shut-ins," students, and prisons, and arranges for the "rehabilitation" of toys to be given away at Christmas. . . . The profits on sales over and above all expenses are sufficient to support two scholarships and aid the visiting nurses' service.¹⁷

For the Salvation Army, too, the stores were becoming more important. In the 1920s, clothes started being separated out from rag piles to be hung on hangers for display. According to the army's thrift-shop managers, who "emphasized the sale of old pictures, lamps, vases, household items that were known as 'bric-a-brac,' and especially of furniture," these items were more expensive to collect, but they brought in significantly more money per

sale than bulk rag and paper sales. By 1929, its thrift stores east of the Mississippi were enjoying more income than its paper sales and were covering half the annual budget.¹⁸

Thought started being given to merchandising, location, and salesmanship. By 1935, large Salvation Army thrift shops in New York and Philadelphia, which were making more than 75 percent of their income from store sales, were displaying nice items together in a particular area in an effort to attract antiques dealers and collectors. The first jobs that men in the program were assigned changed, too—from helping in the baling room and unloading trucks to sorting, repairing, and pricing.



Patronizing second-hand shops was still done at arm's length, socially speaking, although clearly someone was shopping there. In April 1931, the *Journal of Home Economics* included an item on using second-hand furniture for a first apartment or home. The article, submitted by two authors from Columbia University's Teachers College, discusses an exhibit at the Homemaking Center's annual meeting in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in which several rooms were furnished "for initial housekeeping" with refinished second-hand furniture at a cost of \$100—"well within the reach of a very modest income"—as well as a student's project successfully rehabilitating the living space of a Harlem family almost entirely with second-hand items.¹⁹ Shopping for second-hand items was acceptable for some but still not pitched as a thrift strategy for everyone.

By the 1950s, the Salvation Army stores were being redesigned to make shopping more convenient and appealing. In Petaluma, California, in 1957, Captain George Duplain came up with a new slogan for the more stylish store: "A place where good neighbors may shop with dignity." Gains continued to be made in revenue, with stores passing the million dollar mark in the 1960s. The biggest change was a consistent new sophistication in merchandising. The army produced a manual on rules for store operation that dealt with customer relations, inventory control, pricing policy, and display.²⁰



THE TRANSGRESSIVE THRILL OF A BARGAIN

The thrift shop was developing a more nuanced personality. When Straus exhorted the nation to "get back to the ways of Benjamin Franklin," he did not grapple with the fact that Mr. Franklin—in his later years, at least—had little taste for eliminating "waste, extravagance, debauchery, riotous living, artificial social and business practices." Benjamin Franklin, source of many pithy aphorisms about life, appreciated that, in the wrong hands, thrift could be a bore, a vice as much as a virtue. Franklin did not make a fetish of thrift, but he did love irreverence. His sophistication was such that he could appreciate that, like all ideals, thrift is in the eye of the beholder. From one point of view, thrift shops were mean places where downtrodden people could make limited choices from the leavings of others; an emerging alternative was that thrift shops were mysterious places that allowed people to subvert the system, subvert

meaning about what things were worth, where something could be made out of nothing or undeserved treasure could be found.

The promotion of thrift and the value of saving made great inroads in society in the first half of the twentieth century. My grandmother Luba, a total capitalist, was constantly on her guard to be frugal; meanwhile, she did her best to have everything look glamorous and abundant and to lavish treats on her grandchildren. She saved everything. Fear of scarcity played in her mind; savings and thrift were ways of propitiating the abyss. And she loved finding a bargain.

According to my mother, Luba perused thrift and second-hand shops for a number of things, from bed jackets to dishes. She kept an eye out for a particular kind of terrycloth slippers that she favored—popular at the time, unused pairs made their way frequently enough to thrift shops. When she bought clothing or linens, she paid close attention to the quality of the fabric and examined the seams—double-stitched showed that a garment was well made. Even when buying retail, thrift was important. As my mother was growing up in New York City, my grandmother would take her to Saks or Bloomingdales to buy clothes. My mother remembers one winter coat that was on sale, really warm, very good quality, and to my mother's mind, appallingly ugly. My grandmother purchased it one size too big so that my mother would be able to wear it for more than one season. Then she took her out to dinner.

Luba loved to find furniture that been left on the street for the Sanitation Department to dispose of. So as not to be seen recuperating discards, she would hail a taxi on the avenue close by and tell the driver that she had a chair to take for repair but could not carry it herself. Then they would stop outside her "house," pick up the chair, and take it to a furniture repair man she knew on Amsterdam Avenue. She found her antique bedroom set at an apartment estate sale. If someone asked about the chair or the chest, she thought it socially preferable to say that she had bought it at auction. Buying something from somebody's apartment was the bottom of the shoppers' social order, even if a little better than rescuing furniture from the street. Getting something that cost little but looked as though it cost a lot provided a thrill: not only was the object pleasing but it allowed her to play in very much the way that horrified Jean Worth. Years later, in the same way, the local thrift shop provided old ball gowns for my sisters and me to play dress up.

SECOND-GENERATION THRIFT

My grandmother passed her hawk eyes on to her daughter, my mother, who distinguished herself from her mother by having no interest in glamour or appearances whatsoever but who, nonetheless, likes to acquire things that are unique and undervalued and to give presents. My mother, Anna Lou, has lots of possessions and very high standards—cotton must be 100 percent, frying pans should be cast iron, chocolate

can only be dark, furniture should be wood, pillows can only be down, jewelry should be old, and silver can only be silver. She is an Olympics-caliber thrift shopper—a connoisseur not only of thrift shops but also of garage and yard sales, junk shops, second-hand stores, factory outlets, discounters, and dollar stores. If she has to buy something not available in one of these establishments, getting a deal is still paramount. In extremis, she will frequent an outlet. She likes to buy only things that are on sale, are discounted, or used.

As a shopper, my mother disdains anything that is expensive or disposable. In her view, people who buy retail are either rich or fools and most likely both. She does not give a fig about what others think of her consumption habits, even though her children and friends have given pet names to some of her more outlandish items—“the wimple,” for instance, was a hat/headress she wore against the cold. The white hat promoting Coca-Cola that she unselfconsciously wore practically daily one summer to the Wadawanuck Yacht Club in Stonington, Connecticut, was so non-U as to defy parody. A former bank vice president, she is proud that most of her extensive wardrobe and possessions have been found at thrift shops or their equivalent. Finding something that has been used but is “perfectly good” is as worthy a pursuit as any other kind of productivity. Even better is finding treasure—Art Deco silverware, say—mixed in with the dusty jumble in a junk shop and rescuing it at low cost to grace a daughter’s dining table. Whereas my grandmother’s presents always came in elaborate packages festooned with ribbons, lace, and baubles, my mother’s presents often are presented in the paper bag she was given at the shop.

My mother, militantly generous in her own way, also sees thrift in moral terms. She installed a swimming pool to delight her son-in-law and grandchildren, but she had the heater taken out because she feels that a heated pool is profligate. She is appalled that her grandchildren do not really pay attention to which clothes are dirty and which are clean but just throw them all in the wash, resulting in wasted water. When I suggested that the children do their own laundry, she objected because they would use the dryer and waste electricity rather than hang their things carefully out to dry. Also, I suspect, properly spoiled grandchildren should not have to do their own laundry when at grandma’s house. She does not see any real purpose in paper towels or store-bought garbage bags. To her, these are luxuries so useless that they do not even deliver pleasure—in other words, true waste. Even though her family is the object of her generosity, she does not trust any of us to be thrifty. Even as she worries that I am wasting money left and right, she offers me cashmere sweaters (“only 25 cents!” she crows), brings me two chandeliers (so I can choose the one I like best), and pays close attention to the lists of perishable electronics that her grandchildren feel are “les musts,” as the Cartier people say.

THRIFT GOES MAINSTREAM

In the second half of the twentieth century, against a backdrop of growing consumption, increased immigration, and loosening social strictures, thrift shops became a more acceptable and familiar location for domestic activity. Thrift shops became places where one could acquire quantity (for instance, costumes for the school play), learn how to evaluate the quality of goods, and find items of value that had been overlooked. They began to be frequented by the middle class.

After World War II, the quantity of things available to Americans increased exponentially. More and more finished goods were purchased on the market rather than built and crafted at home. Choices, even for those of low socioeconomic status, became abundant. Low-priced goods made overseas were being imported, and people started to find that possessing lots of stuff did not free them from the desire to accumulate more. As mass-produced goods proliferated, the status of “new” grew. To take in the new, at some point one had to get rid of the old, even if it was not used up. There was more and more that could be donated to the thrift shop, and the variety and quality of goods one could find there increased just as well. The willingness of thrift shops to come and collect the stuff one wanted to get rid of was a huge service—a convenience presciently promoted by the Salvation Army as early as the 1930s, under Evangeline Booth’s command.

The discovery that one could find items of high quality in thrift shops was powerful enough that this information was passed back to lower-class women, who had inherited the idea that these were dubious places to shop. For instance, in an article that Rosemary Specian published in 1969 in the *Journal of Home Economics*, about training women on public assistance in Philadelphia for jobs as homemaker aides, she describes an assignment the women were given in comparative shopping. The students were to purchase items of children’s clothing at a diverse array of shops, including large department stores, neighborhood shops, and discount and thrift shops:

Each group returned with children’s clothing they had purchased and compared prices, color, quality, and construction. Several of the women in the class took these garments home for their children to wear during the ten-week class period. A record of wearing times, washings, and mending or repairing was kept. . . . The students were surprised to find that the clothes from the most expensive stores did not always wear well and that neighborhood stores did not always provide the best buy. Although they were not too pleased with the idea of shopping in a secondhand or thrift shop, in the final evaluation it was obvious to them that the thrift shop selections were the best buys of the group.²¹

THE HIPPIE ECONOMY

Thrift shops benefited hugely not only from the popular rejection of conformity, materialism, and standardization in the 1960s but also from broadening notions of what constituted good taste. In his history of the Salvation Army, *Somebody's Brother*, E. H. McKinley acknowledges that in those years “the Army gladly cashed in on the public demand for nostalgic and bizarre clothing.”²² And, indeed, when I was about fifteen, wearing second-hand fur coats became very popular in my set. None of us, of course, could afford to buy a new fur coat, and even thinking about doing so seemed ludicrous and stuffy. But the style of the day among the girls my age was hip-hugger bellbottom jeans, frayed at the hem, over well-worn Frye boots, and all covered in the cloak of an old fur. These we obtained from grandmothers’ and mothers’ closets or from thrift shops. I remember going to a shop in the East Village, in an unfinished, undecorated warehouse space on the second floor of a shabby quasi-commercial building, and finding racks of old fur coats, with worn patches and even in some cases rips. Of course, we wanted to find ones that had the fewest rips and were in the best shape, but since the designs of all these coats from the postwar years were capacious, it was more important to find ones that offered a semblance of fit, so you could move without being swamped by material.

These were beloved but not honored items; we would wear them sitting on the floor in the corridors of our high school or lie wrapped up in them in the meadows around Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain or, when they had become too hot or unwieldy, leave them in heaps in the nearest available corner. Besides being warm, part of the pleasure they imparted was at once the luxury of the fur with all its expensive high-society allusions and the fact that they were very cheap to acquire and often in bad shape, so they did not need to be taken care of like some really valuable item. But then, as the fashion spread, used fur coats started becoming too expensive, even second hand, and so we gave them up as dated and also as a false projection of femininity. As one girlfriend shockingly remarked, “Women who wear fur coats don’t know how to use their own fur to keep warm.”

By the mid-1970s, when I was in college, “vintage” shops became popular, particularly in areas traversed by college students. The clothes in these places were inexpensive—used leather jackets, old jeans and party dresses, housedresses from the 1940s, and stilettos from the early sixties. There were also more expensive pieces—really well-preserved and cared-for cottons and linens that had been undergarments or night-clothes when people routinely wore many more layers of clothing than we did. I remember many beloved items that to this day remind me of how I felt at the time and who I thought I was—one short-sleeved dress with a full skirt, bias cut, that fell beneath the knee, found in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in, probably, 1971. It was made of a shiny, soft, somewhat frayed, white polyester, with swirling patterns of

bluish flowers, in the style of a 1940s suit dress. Though it was really a little too big for me, I nonetheless wore it throughout the summer for years. At the same shop, I also got a hefty brown suede bomber jacket lined with red wool, padded and frayed at the cuffs and the collar (also too big), that made me feel as invincible as Snoopy, the World War I flying ace. The line between dressing and playing dress-up was happily fuzzy. I have been invited to only one explicit garden party in my life, and it was in those years, but I knew exactly what to wear: an old chemise of muslin and lace, over a full slip, which I cleverly held together with a lilac grosgrain ribbon. Whoever wore it originally may have thought of it as underwear, but to me it screamed “garden party.”

Vintage shops were really edited versions of the stuff available in thrift shops, and as fashions dated, style avatars returned to the source to revive other forgotten garments. In *Spree: A Cultural History of Shopping*, Pamela Klaffke identifies Woody Allen's Annie Hall (1977) as the first character to bring thrift-shop style to the national stage, followed in the 1980s by Madonna and her edgier bustier-anchored look, and then, in the early 1990s, by grunge god Kurt Cobain and his consort Courtney Love's styling of the kinderwhore.²³

THRIFT 2.0

Shopping in thrift shops continues to suggest thrift, originality, and chic. No longer just stopgaps for the financially challenged, thrift shops have become the terrain of the savvy shopper. It is no longer shameful to buy secondhand. Even the *New York Times* agrees: on the “Personal Business” page of the June 24, 2006, edition, the headline of a full-page article declares, “Savings Outweigh Any Stigma at Upscale Consignment Shops.”²⁴

According to the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops—which promotes resale as “recycling”—there are more than twenty thousand resale, thrift, and consignment shops (profit and nonprofit) operating in the United States today. While overall U.S. retail sales grew 24 percent from 1997 to 2002 (to \$3.1 trillion), the Census Bureau reports that, over the same five-year period, used-merchandise stores grew by 29 percent to \$7.8 billion in sales. In 2002, the bureau listed 18,207 used-merchandise establishments, with a combined total of 117,776 paid employees and an annual payroll of \$1.7 billion.²⁵ These numbers suggest that, from the consumer's point of view, the stigma of buying secondhand is fading.

For many, the message that “used” (let's say, “pre-owned”) delivers is no longer “shabby” but “open-minded,” socially flexible, and “good value.” “Shabby chic” has become a style category of its own. Our feelings about the value of old things have changed somewhat: something does not have to be a rare antique or a family heirloom to have a history on which meaning accrues. Even short of becoming serious collectors, people unaccountably develop affection for certain objects or classes of

objects—old books or tools or china—that increase their value. Look at what has happened to Fiesta ware and kitchen furniture from the 1950s.

Today's thrift shoppers may have a multitude of motives: a desire to express individuality, a lack of interest or concern in matters of class, a wish to acquire designer labels for less and to appear of higher class than one can afford, an unwillingness to be counted among those co-opted by corporate capitalism and power branding, the ability to spot treasure overlooked by others, and a willingness to get by with less. Accordingly, thrift shopping is promoted in various forms and venues from the mainstream magazine *Real Simple* to the web site *The Dollar Stretcher* (www.stretcher.com/menu/first.cfm) to the pseudoreligious Reverend Billy, who preaches for "local economies and real—not mediated through products—experience" through his Church of Stop Shopping (www.revilly.com).

Some are using the thrift-shop idea as a way of building communities around the ideal of sustainable living and in counterpoint to a culture perceived as wasteful, insatiable, superficial, and uncaring. Wanting to "stay true to the charitable spirit of thrifting," Thethriftshopper.com is a web site for thrifters looking to help nonprofit causes as they shop. Its founders and designers, Michael and Cookie Gold, have compiled a searchable database of 8,400-plus charity-driven thrift shops around the country. Michael thinks the list will top out at ten thousand shops, perhaps even twelve thousand. The Golds distinguish between charity-driven thrift shops and resale or consignment shops, listing only the former because they want to promote nonprofit thrift shops, not-for-profit businesses that may seem to be charities. "[D]onors . . . are misled by the fact that the business has the word *thrift* in [its] name. Now anyone who wants to support a charity by shopping or donating can use our directory and be sure that their [*sic*] monies and donations do indeed support those charities."

Buying secondhand fits nicely with current ideals about environmental conservation. Thrift shops actively appeal to those interested in recycling, who see thrifting as an antidote to wasteful consumption and overflowing landfills. One page of the Salvation Army's Canadian web site is headed "Recycling since 1890."²⁶ Some individuals are bypassing the idea of purchasing altogether with clothing swap events, such as ThriftOn and Swap-O-Rama Rama, which are organized and publicized via the Internet and hosted at different locales in cities across the country.²⁷ Often considered a community service, these efforts are motivated by a desire both to recycle and to move away from our highly consumerized contemporary culture. (Of course, in a footnote of postmodern irony, mass-market clothing manufacturers like Urban Outfitters, Abercrombie, and Aeropostale are getting hip to the trend and are designing and selling clothing that aims to look like thrift-shop finds—vintage T-shirts, team jackets, etc.)²⁸

THRIFT IS GOOD BUSINESS

Over time, the goals of the many charities running thrift shops shifted from their original purpose of lifting up the poor in their own communities by providing employment to making money to support their mission. Suzanne Horne, in her book *Charity Shops: Retailing, Consumption & Society*, analyzes English thrift shops—she calls them “charity shops”—as having four main functions:

to provide a method of raising unallocated funds that can be used for any purpose . . . to provide a social service, offering cheap goods to those customers who cannot afford to shop at commercial retail outlets . . . to raise awareness of its particular charitable cause . . . [and] the recycling of goods, or the “green” function. . . .

She writes that “as the economic potential of the shops became evident, commercialization and profit making became a main reason for selling goods. Most charities go into retailing in order to make money, which will in turn enable them to carry out their individual primary purpose. . . .”²⁹

With the potential of becoming more profitable, thrift shops upped their profile by moving to better locations that could attract more shoppers with more money. (This is not a new idea. Indeed, the Salvation Army store management noted the importance of this as early as the 1930s.³⁰) Housing Works—a group of New York City charity shops that raise money for people with AIDS—has a stylish edge, stores in popular neighborhoods, attractive window displays, and an auction site on the Web. Its various enterprises in New York City—thrift shops, a secondhand bookstore and café, a catering business—are stylish and sophisticated, designed to be profitable businesses that fund the organization’s efforts as well as provide meaningful work for clients of its services. Thrift is not an explicit part of its values, which it publishes and which involve not passing judgment on others, direct action, and human rights. Housing Works’ shops choose the secondhand objects they sell for quality and style. Much thought goes into the arrangement and chic of objects displayed in the shop windows, which are auctioned online—for instance, a barely worn light-camel-colored pair of Bruno Magli open-toe, pebbled sling backs, lined in gold leather in my size, minimum bid \$35, was auctioned off on September 5. Of course, they will not go for that, I think. I bid \$60 online and am surprised to get them for \$38.50. (Housing Works, in an indication of its seriousness, suggested I donate the difference.) They will make a good Christmas present for one of my sisters.

The Internet has taken on an increasingly important role in the thrift-shop marketplace, allowing charities as well as others to sell secondhand goods to the highest bidder. Goodwill Industries claims to have started the first nonprofit Internet auction site, in 1999. The site, shopgoodwill.com, allows the organization to offer its

donated goods to a much larger public. Similar to the way that thrift shops were able to play a role in a neighborhood almost a century ago by encouraging community and bringing people together to share, swap, or recycle goods, Craigslist.org has multiple community-based message boards where individuals can barter, buy, or get free goods and services, recycle objects, find work, and help one another. The idea of the thrift shop has evolved into eBay and the like, where bargain seekers with a credit card can anonymously join the mass-market hunt for both the cheap and the precious. (Pierre Omidyar, founder of eBay, the pioneering and hugely successful world-as-thrift-shop community, became a millionaire many times over. Simon Straus would find in his story the perfect example of the thrift ethic: inspired to create a worldwide local network, community, and market, Omidyar created enormous wealth and now has retired to be a philanthropist, setting up the Omidyar Network—as has his engineering partner, Jeff Skoll, who runs the Skoll Foundation.)

TOO MUCH OF A MUCHNESS

The problem with my thrift-shopping habits is that they are outmoded—reflexive instead of effective. I do not need more stuff. For example, I have a trunk full of fabrics—all shapes, sizes—that I keep for the curtains, upholstery, and repairs I intend to make someday, along with a sewing machine that I use about once every three years. The reality of my life is that sitting down to the family sewing is at this point pure extravagance. Time is the most costly commodity: it is far more efficient to pick up a pair of jeans for one of my kids from practically anywhere than to sit down and sew up a pair. And, frankly, watching a TV show with my son is of greater value to me. Despite my awareness of this, I continually ponder more potential projects and finds. This habit may be part of the reason my mother does not really trust me to be thrifty.

My thrift and saving are expressions of sentimentality toward the past and uneasiness about the future. For example, I keep not only my own sewing box, given to me by a friend of my grandmother's when I was about twelve, but also my grandmother's own sewing box. Both these objects hold a history of personal thrift, although neither is frequently useful. They are like keepsake boxes that reassure me from time to time that not everything has changed. Inside are buttons, zippers, ribbons, bobbins, spools of thread, remnants, snaps, pins, pieces of string, the odd unattached key, skeins of wool, a yard of lace, some emery boards, bobby pins: I am prepared for any kind of couture emergency. I do not think I fear scarcity as my grandmother did, but I fear not being prepared. Mostly I hate the idea of not having them.

In addition to all the stuff I have, there is a seemingly infinite abundance of more available, for sale at any price point. If I want to save money on clothing, I am not limited to the thrift shop. I can get designer items at sample sales or designer knockoffs at department stores, Isaac Mizrahi at Target, or Karl Lagerfeld at H&M.



In New York City, the cost of fashions worn by women on a bus is very similar to the pricing of airplane seats—you might have bought your handbag retail when it just came out, the woman in front of you may have purchased it overseas at a discount, the woman across the aisle may have picked it up for a song at Daffy's (which brands itself as offering "bargains for millionaires"), and the students up front got theirs from street vendors hawking copies in the West 30s. Our notions of value have changed. Clothing, furniture, stuff can be forever, or it can be disposable. In my New York City neighborhood, which is largely made up of immigrant families from the

Caribbean and Central America, there are dollar stores that sell a lot of household merchandise off brand (from shampoo to notebooks to phone jacks) and department stores that sell overage or seconds from big-name labels (for instance, Diesel or Sevens jeans at twenty-five dollars a pair). The young ladies at 157th and Broadway are just as fashionable as their peers in Soho.

What I end up buying is a mix—sandals at an outlet for \$19.99, a Norma Kamali gown at a designer's sample sale for \$500 (and then tailoring for \$150), a pair of tennis shorts at a thrift shop for \$1.50, a well-crafted sofa for \$3,000 (50 percent discount for a floor sample), old wood bookcases for \$25 each from Craigslist.org. There is such variety to play with that my spending is not restricted to a particular aesthetic or class. The current "look" is playing an ever-greater role in all of our lives, yet I am constantly calculating how to get whatever I want to buy for less.³¹ And insofar as I am able to create wealth in my household while engaging with others, I try to get rid of the stuff spilling out of closets and corners—outgrown toys, clothes, sports equipment, furniture made redundant by moving, curtains that have been replaced, kitchen equipment never really used (ice cream and popcorn makers), insufficiently appreciated gifts—by selling what I can, giving some as presents, and donating to thrift shops. The last resort is putting stuff out with the trash, although, frankly, I sometimes suspect that that would be the most sensible thing to do.

Thrift and luxury are entirely intertwined, for one cannot exist without the other. In any circumstance, people routinely make judgments on where to scrimp (or if not scrimp, get value for one's dollar) and where to indulge, whether on the level of deciding to have a turkey for a Sunday dinner or of making sure you are not being overcharged by the five-star restaurant. As managers of their families and households, women are continuously making these choices—which purchases can wait, who has a birthday coming up, who needs shoes—constantly balancing necessity and pleasure.

But the tendency to see thrift and luxury as opposites still endures. Generally, we are likely to be more critical of others' choices than we are of our own. In *The Economics of the Household*, Benjamin Andrews acknowledges this human frailty:

Indeed it would be well if we gave up entirely our present concept of luxury, which is largely an envious criticism of others who have things which we do not possess. We might better check each his own spending in terms of individual welfare and the results of our spending on social welfare. In the smallest income family there is some margin of spending for tobacco, drink, unwise selection of food, clothing, and other commodities, poorly chosen recreative and cultural goods, that bring to the family less of satisfactions that it might secure on a better regulated scheme of spending.³²

While it is true that everyone sometimes makes poor choices, making a place for the giving and receiving of pleasure is also, after all, what the practice of thrift allows one to do.

THE LUXE AND VOLUPTÉ OF THRIFT SHOPPING

Finally, in this age and culture of surfeit, luxury today is about time, not stuff. Because successful thrift shopping requires browsing, thrift shops require time. So for me, thrift shopping at its best is a leisure activity to do with women I love. Unless you are in search of a very basic item—t-shirts, say—you do not go to a thrift shop with specific expectations. In that way, thrift shopping is very different from the home economics principle of making a list and buying only what you need. You do not go to a thrift shop for the service because, unless you have a personal relationship with the store personnel, there is not any. You go with the idea of browsing, spending time, and being open to finding anything from the practical to the frivolous.

Although thrift shops were originally organized by men who aimed to help their downtrodden fellows, the keeping of thrift shops (excepting the big chains) has turned easily over to women, who support the hundreds of small shops around the country. Their patronage not only as shoppers but also as volunteers and employees benefits various charities. In many small towns, these independent thrift shops are a gathering place for women in the community.

I visited one, near White River Junction, in Vermont: I do not remember its name and the town currently has at least six. It was on the main square. As a couple of local elderly female clerks tended the cash register, folded donated linens, and chatted companionably, I browsed the racks and shelves. My finds: a red-straw boater, a leather

change wallet I have never used, old kid gloves (for my mother, who repurposes them for gardening), and a pair of L. L. Bean thick, khaki trousers.

Because thrift shops are not conducive to directed shopping, they can be frustrating to the goal-oriented. Perhaps this is one of the reasons you do not often see men hanging out there. Indeed, none of the men I have ever known has suggested stopping in at a thrift shop. Occasionally, one has accompanied me when we have been looking for, say, a dresser or a dining room table. Not that they do not exist, but not one man I have ever known personally has ever been caught up in the spell of undirected wandering and looking over what the shop has in store.

Thrift shops are great places to explore possibilities not only of thrift but also of generosity, gift giving, and pleasure. They are places to practice the arts of discretionary spending, unique in the invitation they offer to indulge one's acquisitive desires and feel virtuous at the same time. One of the things my mother really loves about thrift shops is knowing that, when she walks in, if she finds something she really wants, chances are she will be able to afford it.

In his book *A Theory of Shopping*, Daniel Miller, who studies material culture and, in this case, the shopping habits of women in North London, posits that a woman's routine shopping behavior is one way she expresses the importance of her relationships. Shopping is a ritual of devotion to her family, behavior by which she tends the relationships that matter to her. In her purchases, she creates who she thinks these people are and who she wants them to be, considering what she gauges to be necessities and treats for her loved ones as well as how she can make economies. Thrift is central to how she chooses to spend her money, when to scrimp, when to spend.

Recently, while I was spending a summer weekend at my mother's house, she took me on a tour of local thrift shops—to assess the wares, as it were. Our first stop was the COMO, the thrift shop in her Connecticut town. The COMO, which started as a local community center in 1946, supports a variety of local programs, among them a preschool, low-cost meals for the elderly, and recreation and pottery classes. Its thrift shop is a place where you can find all manner of old stuff, from furniture to coffee pots, the odd dish, sunglasses more or less from the 1980s (my mother buys all her sunglasses here because, as she points out, they always get lost), and lots of clothes for suburban women and children. We cruised for awhile but did not find too much. We picked over the china offerings—I considered some old plates, which I rejected when my mother told me they were junk. I got a plastic wall plate and a brown suede box. I passed up a cat carrier as too heavy and unwieldy and later regretted it when I needed to take our family kitty to the vet in a picnic basket.

We moved on to the Mystic Women's Club Thrift Shop, which is a smaller store staffed by volunteers. They were having a three-dollar-bag sale—all the clothes you could fit in a brown grocery bag for three dollars. There was a skirt I liked, but it was too small; I settled for two pairs of shorts—not enough to fill the bag—and a

phone answering machine, never used, \$7.99. I told my mother to forget the pants she wanted to buy my fifteen-year-old son. First of all, they did not fall into the fairly rigorous category of what he considers jeans; and, second, the label revealed that they were originally marketed to women—the kiss of death for any garment's hope of joining his wardrobe.

What this relaxed and easy Saturday was all about was not really getting stuff cheap or even the stuff itself, although I am wearing the shorts and using the phone machine. The satisfactions of our thrift-shopping experience were perhaps the values of thrift itself—spending time with my mother, talking through possibilities of profit and loss, recycling used things, thinking about others, knitting an experience together in support of our joint enterprise of family and community. This was mother–daughter quality time, the quality being in our creating meaning together and for each other, exploring our shared and separate tastes, values, and judgments, feeling out where the boundaries are. Although we can practice thrift at thrift shops, for me and mine, they also offer the thrill of profligacy, the luxury of browsing, and a connection to where we came from and where we still want to be.

NOTES

1. Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 182.
2. Goodwill Industries, International, Inc., “Our History,” <http://www.goodwill.org/page/guest/about/whatwedo/ourhistory> (accessed October 2, 2007).
3. William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: The Salvation Army, 1980), part 2, chapter 2, section 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 87.
5. E. H. McKinley, *Somebody's Brother: A History of the Salvation Army Men's Social Service Department, 1891–1985* (New York: The Salvation Army, 1986), 42.
6. Louise A. Tilly, “Women, Women's History, and the Industrial Revolution,” *Social Research* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1994).
7. Gordon M. Fisher, “From Hunter to Orshansky: An Overview of (Unofficial) Poverty Lines in the United States from 1904 to 1965,” paper presented October 28, 1993, at the Fifteenth Annual Research Conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, in Washington, DC (revised August 1997), U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/povmeas/papers/hstorsp4.html>.
8. Undated statement by Calvin Coolidge, enclosed in letter from C. Bascom Shemp, secretary to the president to Mr. Earl R. Obern, *Evening Herald*, Los Angeles, September 22, 1923; Images 6 and 7, Calvin Coolidge Papers, “Thrift—Encouragement, 1923–29” (http://memory.loc.gov:8081/cgi-bin/query/D?cool:24:./temp/-ammem_IgTT); Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921–1929, (<http://memory.loc.gov:8081/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>), American Memory, The Library of Congress, [http://memory.loc.gov:8081/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=amrlm&fileName=mc18page.db&recNum=6&itemLink=r:ammem/cool:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(mc18\)\)::&linkText=8](http://memory.loc.gov:8081/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=amrlm&fileName=mc18page.db&recNum=6&itemLink=r:ammem/cool:@field(NUMBER+@band(mc18))::&linkText=8)

and [http://memory.loc.gov:8081/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=amrlm&fileName=mc18page.db&recNum=5&itemLink=r?ammem/cool:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(mc18\)\)::&linkText=8](http://memory.loc.gov:8081/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=amrlm&fileName=mc18page.db&recNum=5&itemLink=r?ammem/cool:@field(NUMBER+@band(mc18))::&linkText=8). In the same collection, there are letters showing that Shemp sent this same statement to others, including on April 29, 1924.

9. Simon William Straus, *History of the Thrift Movement in America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1920), 97.
10. *Ibid.*, 131.
11. *Ibid.*, 134.
12. Benjamin R. Andrews, *Economics of the Household: Its Administration and Finance* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 39–40.
13. Gordon M. Fisher, “Poverty Lines and Measure of Income Inadequacy in the United States Since 1870: Collecting and Using a Little-Known Body of Historical Material,” paper presented October 17, 1997, at the twenty-second meeting of the Social Science History Association, Washington, DC, appendix, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/papers/since1870.htm#appendix>.
14. Andrews, *Economics*, 419.
15. Anne Rittenhouse, *The Well-Dressed Woman* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 48.
16. *Ibid.*, 192.
17. “Miscellany, Books and Periodicals,” *Journal of Home Economics* 20, no. 4 (April 1928): 295.
18. McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, 88.
19. B. R. Andrews and Lucy F. James, “Second-Hand Furniture for Beginning Housekeeping,” *Journal of Home Economics* 23, no. 4 (April 1931): 351–53.
20. McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, 181.
21. Rosemary T. Specian, “An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Homemaker Aides,” *Journal of Home Economics* 61, no. 5 (May 1969): 347.
22. McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, 181.
23. Pamela Klaffke, *Spree: A Cultural History of Shopping* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003).
24. Hillary Chura, *The New York Times*, June 24, 2006, C5.
25. U.S. Census Bureau, “Statistics of U.S. Businesses: 1999 Used Merchandise Stores by Employment Size of Enterprise,” <http://www.census.gov/epcd/susb/1999/us/US4533.HTM#table1> (accessed October 2, 2007); U.S. Census Bureau, “Used Merchandise Stores: 2002 Economic Census” (U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2004), Table 1.
26. <http://www.salvationarmy.ca/2006/06/08/salvation-army-thrift-stores%E2%80%A6recycling-since-1890/>.
27. Melanie Rysik, “Walk a Mile in My Shoes (and My Shirt),” *New York Times*, “Sunday Styles,” July 9, 2006, 2.
28. Russ Baruffi '04, in an essay in the Brown University *The College Hill Independent* (2003), makes this point and also writes, “And while critics would say that thrift-shopping has largely become as trendy as the mall, there remains a certain inevitably creative element to assembling an outfit that is indeed unique to you, not mass produced. For these reasons, thrift stores have been beacons for people trying to avoid the general plague of consumerism or seeking something different that you can't find in the strange cloned netherworld that is the American mall.” http://www.brown.edu/Students/INDY/alpha/article.php?id=22&issue_id=184.
29. Suzanne Horne, *Charity Shops: Retailing, Consumption & Society* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2002), 25.
30. McKinley, *Somebody's Brother*, 105.
31. Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).
32. Andrews, *Economics*, 79.

The History of National Thrift Week

IN 1916, WITH THE First World War looming imminently on the horizon, the leaders of America's major civic organizations launched an ambitious education campaign designed to ready the American public for a wartime economy. Dubbed "National Thrift Week" and sponsored primarily by the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.), the campaign became a recurring celebration, beginning each year on January 17, in honor of the birthday of Benjamin Franklin, the "American apostle of thrift."

The activities of National Thrift Week were guided by several specific principles and behaviors and each was given its own day. Hence, Americans joined together every January in celebrating "Have a Bank Account Day," "Invest Safely Day," "Carry Life Insurance Day," "Keep a Budget Day," "Pay Bills Promptly Day," "Own Your Home Day," and "Share with Others Day". Then, as today, critics often maligned thrift as simple hoarding, but these principles demonstrate how the founders envisioned Thrift Week as so much more—they saw it not as a way to encourage miserly behavior, but instead to cultivate responsible consumerism and civic progress. Rather than self-denial, the goal was self-control. The word, "thrift," after all, finds its root in the phrase "to thrive," so it should come as no surprise that the slogan for Thrift Week was "For Success and Happiness."

Even after the war had ended, the relatively prosperous decade of the 1920s witnessed the peak celebrations of National Thrift Week. By that time, the Y.M.C.A. had lined up a broad array of cosponsors, ranging from the Girl Scouts and Boy



Scouts to the American Red Cross and the U.S. Postal Service, totaling some fifty partnering organizations. Thrift Week celebrations were held in cities and towns across the nation. In a testament to their popularity, President Calvin Coolidge's secretary, C. Bascom Slem, rather wearily wrote in response to yet another request from some local thrift leaders, "Among the most frequent [requests for a comment from President Coolidge] are requests for statements to be used in thrift campaigns." Coolidge, himself, was seen by his countrymen as a paragon of thrift at the time, due in some measure to his political agenda (which included paying down the national debt and lowering taxes), but also in large part to the public perception of him as a frugal New England farmer.



At the community level, banks were usually more than happy to work with their local Y.M.C.A. to promote Thrift Week—especially Have a Bank Account Day—and merchants often ran special Thrift Week sales (wise spending, indeed). On the national level, the American Bankers' Association, the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World, the Association of Life Insurance Presidents, the Farm Mortgage Bankers' Association of America, and the Retail Credit Men's National Association all did their part to encourage responsible spending and investing. The enthusiasm for National Thrift Week carried over from the public sphere into areas of national government as well, drawing sponsorship from the U.S. Bureau of the Budget, the U.S. Department of Commerce, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

True to the nature of their campaign, Thrift Week organizers were prodigious in their output of programs, speeches, publications, and educational initiatives such as institutionalized thrift curricula in public schools and wide-reaching essay contests. There were even public spectacles like thrift parades. By some estimates, the efforts of some town thrift committees cost less than \$100, but they reportedly inspired behaviors that would grow many hundreds of dollars in wealth for participants.

So what happened to National Thrift Week? Where did it go? Who wouldn't want to partake in activities that would grow their wealth by several hundred dollars? Especially when one considers that several hundred dollars in the 1920s would have been the rough equivalent of several thousand dollars today!

National Thrift Week fizzled out in 1966, after being passed from one sponsor to another. Around that same time, thrift as a national virtue seems to have faded from the collective public consciousness as well. As the ensuing decades passed, our nation entered more wars, endured periods of economic downturn, and watched

complacently as both personal and national debt ballooned exponentially, seemingly without ever feeling any urgency to revive thrift as a cherished value.

Now, more than ever, as we face harsh economic times once again, we should turn back to our old friend, thrift. It may be just the thing to drag us out of this recession, and once the economy rebounds and enters the next cycle of growth, our newfound appreciation of thrift will be crucial in keeping us on the right track. We will need to teach our children once more how to spend prudently, save abundantly, invest wisely, and give generously. These lessons need to be instilled in them not just in the classroom, but also by example from the supermarket to the stock market floors to the halls of power in our nation's capital. We've already lost a few decades, so the sooner we start, the better. Let's do it. Let's commit ourselves to the task in front of us the way earlier generations did. Let's bring back Thrift Week!

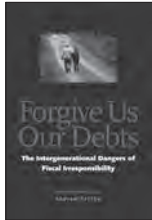
Take the Thrift Challenge!



How thrifty are you? Take the Thrift Challenge to see how you measure up! Earn points for thrifty behavior—the more points you earn, the more levels you unlock. More importantly, as you hone these thrifty behaviors over time, you're sure to also notice a positive impact in your real-world finances.

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/templeton-press/id329379330>

Books on Thrift



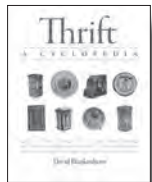
***Forgive Us Our Debts:
The Intergenerational Dangers of Fiscal Irresponsibility***

Andrew Yarrow
ISBN: 978-03001-2353-1



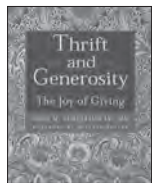
Franklin's Thrift: The History of a Lost American Virtue

David Blankenhorn, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead,
and Sorcha Brophy-Warren
ISBN: 978-1-59947-148-8



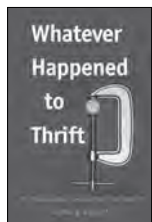
Thrift: A Cyclopaedia

David Blankenhorn
ISBN: 978-1-59947-142-6



Thrift and Generosity: The Joy of Giving

John M. Templeton Jr., MD
ISBN: 978-1-932031-71-3



***Whatever Happened to Thrift?
Why Americans Don't Save and What to Do about It***

Ronald T. Wilcox
ISBN: 978-03001-2451-4

Informational Links

For a New Thrift

<http://newthrift.org>

Save for America

<http://www.saveforamerica.org>

Thrifty Fun

<http://www.thriftyfun.com>

Challenge the Leadership in Washington!

With a few adjustments in our own personal financial habits, we can all renew a sense of thrift at the individual level, but a nationwide culture shift that reestablishes thrift as a core value can only be achieved in the context of a broad-based, well-sponsored, and government-backed social movement.

The Commission on Thrift, in conjunction with the Institute for American Values, released a report entitled “For a New Thrift: Confronting the Debt Culture” wherein they offer several thought-provoking policy recommendations that go hand-in-hand with our efforts to revive National Thrift Week. Below, you’ll find a sampling of some of their challenges to our nation’s leaders:

- Reestablish an On-Going, Year-Round Public Education Campaign
- Create a Thrift Savings Plan Available to All Americans
- Support Credit Union Expansion and Innovation
- Expand Community Development Finance Institutions
- Repurpose the Lottery

- Reform Usury Laws
- Keep Credit Card Companies off Campus
- Establish National Opt-Out Savings Regulations
- Establish Matched Savings Accounts for Low-Income Adults
- Establish Matched Savings Accounts for Children
- Establish More and Better School Savings Programs
- Create State Commissions on Anti-Thrift Institutions
- Create a U.S. Financial Products Safety Commission
- Help Banks Reach the Unbanked
- Question “More Consumer Spending” as a Main Solution to Economic Problems

You can find more fully developed treatments of these ideas in the full report which is available at www.newthrift.org.

