

Curator's Choice

Tool Check Tag

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Archaeological work done in advance of the Federal Reserve Bank construction in Baltimore in 1980 yielded the usual array of filled privies, wells and cellar holes. But under Barre Street, archaeologists discovered a twenty-foot long section of drainpipe containing thousands of early twentieth-century artifacts concreted into a solid mass filling the bottom half of the pipe (McCarthy and Basalik 1980). A little documentary research revealed that the contents of the pipe were associated with a Chinese-owned commercial laundry located nearby.

In addition to thousands of straight pins, buttons, safety pins, coins, pieces of jewelry and other clothing-related items from the pipe, the pipe contained an oval copper alloy disk stamped "B.C. & F. Co. 2050". This item served as a worker identification tag or as a tool check tag. Tool checks were used by factory workers to requisition tools; each tag bore the worker's identification number. If the tool had not been returned at the end of the day, the number would be used to track down the missing tool to the employee who had checked it out.

A New Jersey newspaper advertisement from 1908 revealed that "B. C. & F." were the initials of The Baltimore Clothing and Furnishing Company (Red Bank Register 1908), a firm that, in accordance with garment trade industry standards, produced men's suits, trousers, sport coats, and overcoats, as well as men's pajamas, hosiery, ties, underwear and shirts (Kahn 1989:xiii).

Figure 3. An advertisement from the July 22, 1908 Red Bank Register of Red bank, New Jersey showing the sale of clothing from the Baltimore Clothing and Furnishing Company.

This small item is a very tangible reminder of Baltimore's prominent position in the nation's garment industry. The manufacture of clothing was in its Baltimore heyday in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ranking fourth in the nation in 1900 (Stanger 1999). Large clothing production companies began to replace smaller sweatshops in the early 20th century to satisfy the demand for ready-made clothing. The mechanization and assembly-line nature of these larger operations maximized efficiency and profits, but resulted in a workforce that was less skilled overall (Argersinger 1991:86).

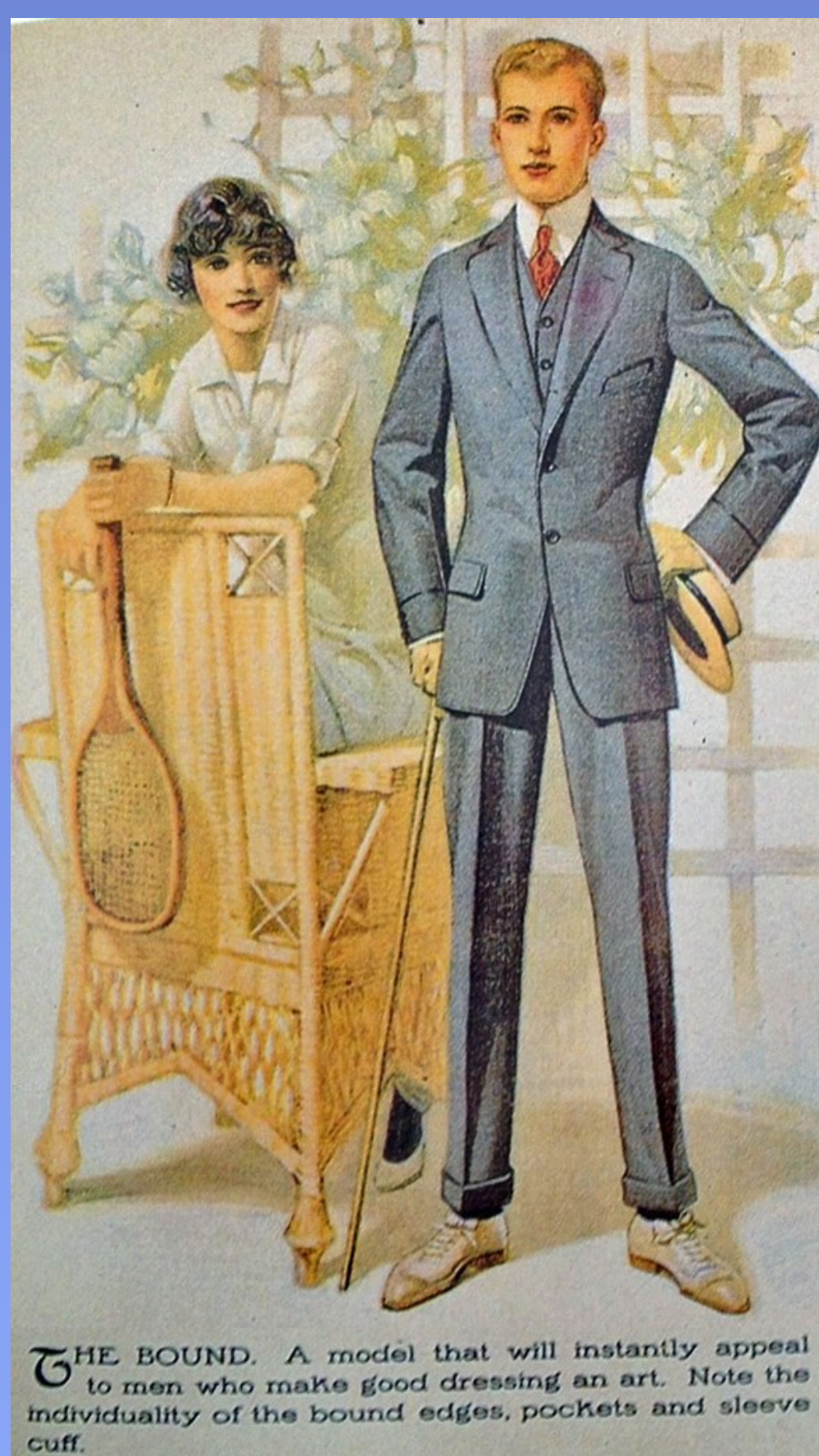


Figure 2. 1914 advertisement for L. Greif & Brothers, a leading Baltimore clothing firm. Photograph from Kahn 1989.



Figure 1. Tool check or worker identification tag from the Baltimore Clothing and Furnishing Company.

The industry provided jobs for recent immigrants to the city; with well over half of the employed being adult and teenaged females working in low-skill and low wage positions. Skilled positions—cutting, trimming and pressing—were reserved for men. Worker discontent over long hours, deplorable working conditions and low wages sparked a number of strikes, the first of which occurred in 1890 (Kahn 1989:80). Attempts to unionize the workforce were not long in coming and two competing unions, the United Garment Workers (UGW) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), struggled for control in Baltimore's men's clothing industry during the early twentieth century (Argersinger 1991:90).

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