



Don't Say Underwear - Say Munsingwear

Video Podcast Transcript

Minnesota Historical Society

The Munsingwear Company operated for nearly 100 years on the strength of the innovations that began with the company's origins in 1886. The company "firsts" are documented in the collection of Munsingwear records and products now at the Minnesota historical society's collections. These include patented garments, fabrics, and specialized machinery.

Known as Northwestern Knitting for its first 35 years, the knit underwear produced by this company carried the name of its founder and knitwear inventor, George Munsing. Munsing's patents for plating silk and wool created an itchless knit fabric that was constructed into men's and women's knit drawers and undershirts to improve underwear comfort and fit. The Munsing brand union suit became the company's signature product from its introduction in 1890 until it went out of production in 1969.

A successful advertising slogan helped to distinguish the Munsing brand - "Don't say underwear, say Munsingwear". This phrase encouraged the nation to ask for Munsingwear by name. Thanks to their edgy (for 1897) advertising campaigns using live models and strategic ad placement in women's fashion magazines the company became the nation's leading supplier of underwear.

Munsing's company focused on new designs, quality, and custom orders for the first few years. Supply didn't always meet demand. In July 5, 1888, the Henry H. Corson family of New Richland, Minnesota (Waseca County) needed their undershirts. "Our whole family had to lay in bed till our undershirts were washed and all because you haven't sent us any new ones."

Eventually, success followed. The company's early products were durable, comfortable and occasionally stylish. Munsing's patented crochet machine made it possible to add a decorative touch with a shell stitch edge on women's and children's underwear.

How many innovations did this Minnesota company claim? Try these:

Its former headquarters buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places and are now known as International Market Square. Built

in 1904 this was the first reinforced concrete building constructed in Minneapolis.

It was the first Minnesota company to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 1923.

It practically invented the golf shirt with its Penguin logo that continues to be a successful trademark.

But, really it's about the underwear.

Munsingwear's innovations included a combination of garment design and development of new fibers.

They pioneered the development of knit rayon for affordable garments with the qualities of silk.

Their "Foundette" featured the first "uplift" bra and girdle using the new elastic fabric called Lastex that Munsingwear introduced to the girdle market in 1932. This was the original power stretch, years before spandex.

Men's Kangaroo briefs were the first garments with a patented horizontal fly and kangaroo pouch.

Nylon was the post-WWII miracle fiber. The company introduced nylon tricot to its women's lingerie and foundations line in 1947 and patented the "Nylarib" nylon reinforced neckband to men's T-shirts in 1950.

Fashion colors entered the underwear vocabulary as nylon (for washability) and spandex (for stretch) became available and color choices expanded. In 1957 they introduced the industry's first coordinated line of lingerie and intimate apparel. The Vassarette women's division was formed, and accounted for half the company sales.

In 1959 they introduced multi-colored prints for coordinated intimate apparel. Adopting a fashion-forward European attitude, they called it "Toulouse". Marketed to a growing youth market of young baby boomers, underwear reflected outerwear fashion with its colorful prints and laces.

Innovation meant success for Munsingwear, which was at one time the largest producer of branded underwear in the US and the largest employer of women in Minnesota. 100 years of underwear history is embedded in the memory of the slogan: "Don't say Underwear - Say Munsingwear."