

**THE ELITE MILLINERY – MRS. J.B. SMITH, PROPRIETOR,
STANWOOD, WASHINGTON ABOUT 1919 – 1929**

In November 2005, SAHS received a \$10,000 donation from the estate of Kathryn Smith Kissinger, who has donated many times in the last 15 years to our various projects and programs. She lived in Maryland but never forgot Stanwood where she grew up. In 1994 she wrote a brief biography of her mother who owned a millinery shop in Stanwood in the 1920s. It was one of about five millinery shops that were open during those years. Charlotte Thorsen, Mrs. May Watson, "Hogan & Dolan" and Mrs. Sigurd Hall operated others. Millineries and dress shops were popular careers for young women who were only recently allowed to vote and could appreciate new freedom of operating a business of their own – whether out of necessity or because they wanted the independence. The following is the story of Kathryn Kissinger's mother, Mrs. J. B. Smith who operated the Elite Millinery from about 1919 until about 1929.

LATEST THINGS IN
FUR AND BROCADED
HATS
Just from the Market

ELITE MILLINERY

Next door to Post Office. Mrs. J. B. Smith, Prop.

OCTOBER 22, 1920.



Bricked Main Street looking west, Stanwood, circa 1925. The storefronts on the right have hats in the shop windows, one of them may be Elite Millinery though there was also another hat shop just east of here just out of the view of this picture.

“As nearly as I can recall, my mother opened her millinery shop, “The Elite Millinery” in Stanwood late in 1918 or early 1919 at a location on Main Street [the brick street] between the Post Office and what was known as the telephone building.” The “telephone building” was really a two-story house, which was used as an office and, when vacated, rented for occupancy as a home. It was our first home when we moved to Stanwood from a farm north of town since it was convenient to my mother’s business. I do not remember much about the millinery shop the first two or three years as I was only four years old when Mother opened the shop – my sister, Rowena, was six and my brother “Jack” eight.

Prior to opening the shop, my Mother attended a millinery school in Portland, Oregon, to learn the art of making and trimming hats. In the beginning she only sold hats and millinery accessories. She made hats to order or would re-trim older hats by replacing flowers, feathers, ribbon, etc. Later, as business increased, she bought ready-made hats as well.

From the time she opened her shop until she was forced to close the doors at the beginning of the Great Depression, I vividly remember boxes and boxes of ribbons, braids, feathers, flowers, shaped buck-

ram crowns and brims, wire, etc. With these materials she made her hats, sewing crowns and brims together after having covered them with various hat fabrics (fabrics such as velvet, material that matched a woman’s dress or coat, braids) the selection depending on whether it was a winter or a summer hat. Then the trimming for that particular hat was applied and secured into position by needle and thread and possibly some glue. The final step was sewing in the lining.

Perhaps, what I remember most clearly was the odor of millinery glue when I would enter the shop coming home from school or elsewhere. I also remember my Mother having severe headaches. As I grew older, I thought perhaps they were caused by stress or long hours of tedious work but now I believe her inhaling the fumes of the glue, which contained ether as a drying agent, may have been a contributing factor.

I do not remember when the shop was moved to a location across the street beyond the First National Bank. When she moved to the new location, and possibly the old location, she added a line of women’s ready-to-wear, mainly dresses, coats and lingerie; later there was a gift line [about 1924]. She also acquired a hemstitching machine and sold pillowcases, tablecloths, particularly luncheon size, doilies, etc. On which she had placed designs with transfer patterns to be embroidered and the edges were hemstitched so that the buyer could apply a crocheted lace edging.

As time progressed, more and more customers were favoring the ready-made hats and Mother was spending less and less time on making hats by hand. If the customer did not like the way the ready-made hat was trimmed, she would change it for them but that happened infrequently. She was able to spend more time on her other lines, as well as doing dressmaking and necessary alterations on the garments which she sold. Finally as the Depression began to penetrate our area, the “Elite Millinery” was forced to close its doors, sometime in 1929, I believe.