

1893 Panic of 1893
• World's Columbian
Exposition, Chicago
• Sears, Roebuck and Co.
established

1896 Plessy v. Ferguson
legalizes "separate but equal"
doctrine
• National Association of
Colored Women founded

1901 U.S. Steel
Corporation founded
• President McKinley
assassinated; Theodore
Roosevelt assumes presidency


1904 Helen Keller
graduates from Radcliffe
College

CHAPTER THREE

“A field that is their own province”

HELENA RUBINSTEIN

1890-1960 Fashioning the Business of Beauty

 In 1915, the noted author Edna Ferber introduced the American public to Emma McChesney, successful businesswoman. In the early 1910s, readers followed the life of Emma McChesney, first in stories in *Cosmopolitan* and *American Magazine* and then in a three-volume trilogy.¹ Emma was a compelling character for her time. Her ambition, willingness to take risks, and ability to understand just what the female consumer wanted catapulted her to the top of the Featherloom Petticoat Company. She helped transform the ladies' undergarment company into an influential enterprise with a national reputation and along the way she became a co-owner of the firm.

But life had not always been so easy for Emma. Married at eighteen, a mother shortly thereafter, she divorced her husband when she was twenty-six and set out on her own to support herself and her

1908 Muller v. Oregon limits women's hours in the workplace

1914 World War I begins in Europe

- First national celebration of Mother's Day
- Panama Canal opens
- Federal Trade Commission established to prevent unfair business competition

1920 Nineteenth Amendment gives women the vote

- League of Women Voters established
- First commercial radio station, WWJ, Detroit

1929 Stock market crash; Great Depression follows

son. She went to Featherloom, where she worked her way up from stenographer to traveling salesperson to secretary of the firm and, ultimately, to her position of ownership. Along the way she encountered sex discrimination. Some people treated her with suspicion as she traveled unescorted on trains and slept alone in hotels, and she constantly confronted the cultural view that a woman simply could not comprehend business. As one influential businessman explained when he opened important negotiations with her: "A lady as charming as you can understand nothing of business."² Emma also struggled to be both breadwinner and caregiver to her son; she agonized over the loss of independence she would face if she chose to remarry. She worked hard and at one time even traveled alone to South America, an unusual and daring business trip for a woman in the 1910s. There she completed a lucrative transaction, which turned Featherloom into an international firm; and she returned to marry the boss and run the company.

The popularity of the fictional Emma McChesney revealed a stunning reality for a new century: the notion of the successful businesswoman had seeped into the popular culture and captured the public imagination. Emma epitomized the optimism that emboldened women as they entered the twentieth century. She mirrored women's aspirations for public lives and their belief that a companionate marriage of equals would enable them to balance career and family. Meanwhile the growing numbers of businesswomen around the country and the founding of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs in 1919 revealed that Ferber's Emma McChesney reflected fact as well as fiction.³

For the most part, women entrepreneurs continued to find their best business opportunities in areas that catered specifically to women. Many clustered in the traditional areas of dressmaking and millinery, while others marketed hair products and cosmetics. This was a familiar pattern. Owned and run by women for women, the fashion and beauty industries brought the female market into the twentieth century. But the enormous demand by women for cosmetics and clothing was unprecedented and created an explosion of the fashion and beauty business in the early twentieth century, and women entrepreneurs transformed the beauty business into big business.⁴

Despite the major crises of the century—World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War—women entrepreneurs in fashion and beauty continued to turn fledgling companies into thriving corporations. As the beauty business became a national industry, many women entrepreneurs could not keep up. Others—including Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein, and Estee Lauder—achieved fortunes to rival those of many successful businessmen and proved their ability to compete as equals in the competitive world of capitalism. As they created businesses that catered to women, they proved their equality with men, achieved power and fortune, and expanded the boundaries of their gender roles without rebelling against them. At the same time, the growth of the fashion and beauty industries left an indelible mark on American culture and capitalism. These industries, founded by women entrepreneurs for women consumers,

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Madam C. J. Walker at the wheel of her Model A Ford, in 1912; she is shown in front of her Indianapolis home, with her niece and two co-workers.

took their place in the mainstream of American business and became a cornerstone of the American economy

☞ The dawn of the new century, with its burgeoning consumer culture, was an ideal time for an enterprising woman to launch a woman's business. The emergence of department stores, the institutions of mass distribution for the modern age, accelerated the growth of a mass consumer market. New York City, the nation's largest and most concentrated urban market, was the heart of the consumer revolution that swept the country. Most of the earliest department stores, including Lord & Taylor, B. Altman, Macy's, and Bloomingdale's, opened there. The department store phenomenon spread rapidly—stores opened around the country: Jordan Marsh and Filene's in Boston, Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, Marshall Field's in Chicago, and Bullock's in Los Angeles. Chain stores such as F. W. Woolworth served the consumer in smaller cities and towns, while mail-order houses such as Sears, Roebuck reached the rural market.

A few women stood out among this group of department store entrepreneurs: including Mary Ann Cohen Magnin of San Francisco, Carrie Marcus Neiman of Dallas, and Beatrice Fox Auerbach of Hartford. Scattered around the country, all three were daughters of Jewish immigrants; they not only felt comfortable in the world of commerce but understood the importance of consumption in women's lives.⁵

Mary Ann Magnin was the genius behind I. Magnin and Company of San Francisco. Her reputation as a skillful needleworker made I. Magnin the place to go for lingerie, baby clothes, and bridal trousseaux when it was founded in 1877. Had the store been named a century later, it might have carried her name, but conventional gender restrictions that demanded a private role for women in the late 1800s caused it to be named after Mary Ann's husband, Isaac, even though he took little interest in the business. Nevertheless, Mary Ann Magnin was the power behind the name. She managed all aspects of I. Magnin including buying and inspecting merchandise; further, she prepared her children to enter the business.⁶

In 1907, in the midst of a financial panic, Carrie Marcus Neiman, along with her husband and her brother, opened the Neiman Marcus department store in Dallas, Texas.⁷ At every turn, Neiman Marcus was a family venture: Carrie Marcus Neiman and her brother did the buying while her husband managed advertising and sales. Combining her careful attention to detail with her eye for fashion, she skillfully appealed to the regional loyalty and tastes of Texas women. Targeting wealthy women who traditionally had their clothing custom-made by personal dressmakers, she offered an alternative—high-styled, ready-to-wear clothing that could be customized by the store's hired dressmaker. In an era when New York City was the fashion center of the country, her goal was "to dress a whole city."⁸ When oil made Dallas a wealthy city, the Neiman



Carrie Marcus Neiman, ca. 1890