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Fluoroscope machine used to check footwear fit returns to Port as couple's gift to downtown museum

Decades ago, when children went to get fitted for new shoes at Pesch Shoe Store on Franklin Street in downtown Port Washington, they used the latest device for ensuring the proper fit — a Simplex fluoroscope machine.

For parents, the X-ray shoe-fitting machine was a godsend, allowing them to determine if their youngster's toes had enough room in the shoes.

For kids, it made shoe shopping, if not fun, at least tolerable. After all, a quick look inside the machine and you could see the bones in your feet.

However, concerns about the amount of radiation customers and salespeople received from the machines led to their removal from most stores by the late 1950s or mid-1960s.

Although there were an estimated 10,000 machines in the U.S. in the early 1950s, most of them remain only as memories.

But the Simplex fluoroscope machine at Pesch's store at 221 N. Franklin St. sat in the basement of the building for years. Eventually, it ended up at Peter and Mary Schils' Cedar Valley Road home in Fredonia, a curiosity in their basement.

"The people I know, when I tell them I have the X-ray shoe machine, they go crazy," Peter Schils said. "Everybody remembers it.

"Every time we went by (Pesch's) as kids, we'd go in and turn the machine on and look at our toes."

Soon the machine will return to downtown Port. The couple is donating it to the Port Washington Historical Society, which will display it in its new museum.

"We're thrilled to get it," Society President Jackie Oleson said. "We thought this was kind of cool."

Shoe-fitting fluoroscopes consisted of a lead-shielded X-ray tube in the base of a metal or

wooden cabinet. The customer would place his feet in a slot near the bottom of the machine and the projected X-rays would produce an image of the feet within the shoes.

Three viewing scopes topped the cabinet — one for the customer, often a child, one for the parent and one for the salesman.

Initially created by Boston physician Jacob Lowe during World War I to diagnose foot problems in veterans, the machines were converted for civilian use after the war. In his 1919 patent application, Lowe claimed “a shoe merchant can positively assure his customers that they need never wear ill-fitting boots and shoes,” according to the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Milwaukee became the center for production of the machines in the U.S. after Lowe assigned his patent to the Adrian Co. of Milwaukee, according to the Society.

Fluoroscopes quickly became a fixture in American shoe stores eager to promote the latest technology.

But by the late 1940s, research revealed that a high percentage of the machines emitted dangerous levels of radiation, according to the Society. In 1950, Milwaukee became one of the first cities in the country to regulate their operation and location. By 1960, 34 states banned the machines.

The fluoroscope at Pesch Shoe Store in Port Washington ended up in the basement, where it lingered until about a decade ago.

“We didn’t really know exactly what it was or how it worked,” said Bette Langford, who operated the former Serendipity Gift Shop in the building at the time. “It was extremely heavy. I’m sure that’s why it got left behind.”

One day when Mary Schils was shopping at Serendipity, she and Langford struck up a conversation. When Mrs. Schils told her she was an X-ray technician, Langford mentioned the fluoroscope machine.

“She said we’ve got this old X-ray machine in the basement,” Mrs. Schils said. “She said ‘If you want it, it’s yours.’ The fact that I was in X-ray, it seemed like a perfect fit.”

The catch was that the couple had to remove the machine, which still has all its parts, from the building.

“We really worked at it,” Mr. Schils said. “It was a hot summer day, and we had a group of guys but we struggled and struggled to get it out of there.” It’s fitting that the machine ended up at the couple’s house, since Mr. Schils said he is a shirttail relative of the Pesch family.

“It’s kind of like a family heirloom,” he said.

Mr. Schils cleaned up the machine when they got it home, then fired it up. Mrs. Schils brought a couple lead aprons home from work for the occasion.

However, the machine didn't work.

"We never got it running," Mrs. Schils said. "It's in the exact same shape today as it was when we got it home."

Although it's been a wonderful conversation piece through the years, Mr. Schils recently decided it was time to let go of it.

"We've had a lot of fun with it, but it's always in the way," he said. "I told my wife, either we're going to donate it or I'm throwing it out.'"

The couple is thrilled to donate the machine to the Historical Society.

"I figure it's part of the city's history, so why not?" Mr. Schils said. "Even if there was some value to it, I wouldn't be interested in selling it. I'd rather donate it to the museum. It means a lot to so many people here."

Oleson said the donation fits in well with the Society's focus now that it has turned over much of its genealogy resources to the Luxembourg American Cultural Center in Belgium.

"We're all about the local business history," she said. "It's part of what we need to hang onto. I think this (type of donation) is one of those things that is going to happen when we have a museum."

The Society has already received some Smith Bros. memorabilia from Ned Huwatschek, items relating the Guenther Brickyard from the late Edna Guenther and, on loan, a metal sign that hung over the sidewalk at the Grand Theater on Grand Avenue, Oleson noted.

Image Information: THE SIMPLEX fluoroscope machine that once allowed parents and sales clerks at Pesch Shoe Store in downtown Port Washington to check the fit of shoes by using X-rays is being donated to the Port Washington Historical Society by Mary and Peter Schils of Fredonia. Photo by Sam Arendt