

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 4: Business Women at Work

March 2016

Flora Krauch: How a Progressive Era Working Woman Became Known as Mother to the Nation's First Complete Children's Wear Department

JYOTI VERDERAME*

Today I will talk about one woman's appropriation of Progressive Era scientific, medical, social, psychological, and retail rhetoric to validate her expertise in child welfare and retail. I will look at the example of Flora Krauch to argue that she developed a unique business strategy with two objectives in mind. First, to build the first complete children's department in an American department store. And second, to make that department a space for female experts in childhood development and welfare. For Krauch, business was not just about retail and advertising, but about developing a space for women's professional development as experts in childhood welfare. She thus sought to place department stores on equal footing with other institutions such as hospitals, government agencies, schools, and insurance agencies, where experts in childhood welfare were employed.

Flora Krauch was the first female buyer at L.S. Ayres. In the children's department there, she adopted the language of early twentieth-century child welfare reform experts. Previous historians have examined the Progressive Era creation of women's work in the new female professions of nursing, social work, teaching, and home economics. Some historians even include women entering medicine in female specialties. Women in this group were mostly single. They created a niche that allowed them to tap into uniquely feminine professional territories that men ceded and acknowledged as a "female right to

expertise . . . where women and children were the only clients.”¹ However few historians, if any, provide a detailed analysis of women using this right to expertise to develop a children’s department and create a space for women’s professional development. Flora Krauch provides an example of a woman applying these strategies in the world of retail business. What did this early-twentieth-century female strategy look like in the realm of department stores? In what ways did Krauch use these strategies to further the development of her co-workers as professionals? Finally, how does our understanding of the history of women, work, and department stores change when we look at the case of Flora Krauch?

To answer these questions I will first examine the growing demand at the turn of the century for expert advice on proper childrearing. Then, I will discuss Krauch’s techniques in building the children’s department and her appropriation of expert advice to validate her child welfare expertise. In doing so, I will highlight Krauch’s strategies for building her department. As we shall see, although Krauch successfully built a retail department, her goal was never purely economic. Instead, she was motivated by a desire to build her expertise as a child welfare expert, and to be respected for that expertise. I will show how she sought to establish herself as an expert by examining her newspaper articles in the *Indianapolis News*. In my conclusion, I will describe how these insights into Krauch’s actions and motives opens up new avenues for research on women and retail in the early twentieth century.

The twentieth century ushered in a time of transition in attitudes towards childhood. Children were viewed less as contributors to the family economy and more for their emotional worth.² Progressive-minded male doctors and scientists concluded that the modern mother’s foremost duty was the proper development of her children. As a result, women were told to seek expert childrearing advice. In fact, some professionalizing females empowered themselves by casting blame on mothers for certain social problems that focused on children.³ Although little evidence exists to show whether mothers accepted the advice, the twentieth century saw an increase in the number of experts offering childrearing advice. Through expert guidance, mothers would capably tend to their children’s body, mind, and character.

*Jyoti Verderame received her Masters’ in U.S. History at Indiana University, Indianapolis in 2016.

¹ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xiii-xv.

² Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 29.

³ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform*, xv.

At the same time, changes in industry resulted in mothers spending less time in productive household labor and more time as efficient consumers in burgeoning department stores.⁴ In fact, in the twenty years after 1890, American retailers such as Marshall Field & Company and Macy's, in Chicago and New York City, respectively, sought ways to welcome the growing number of women entering stores with children in tow. Strategies included centralizing certain infants' and children's related products into one space and creating a carnival-like atmosphere for children. They also partnered with child welfare experts, by providing doctors and nurses to offer childrearing advice to customers in their stores. These were some of the strategies department stores used to respond to the women and children

These developments were just starting to take place when Flora Krauch entered the field. From 1900 to late 1908, Krauch worked in Chicago's Carson Pirie Scott as a clerk in children's clothing and at A. Starr Best as a buyer for the infants'-wear specialty shop. These stores were adopting the trends set by the larger stores. In Krauch's writings, she indicates that as a clerk she learned the importance of maintaining a hygienic environment, the art of display, and the skill needed to sell children's clothing. As a buyer, she traveled to New York City on garment and merchandise buying trips. She learned to evaluate the properties and quality of textiles as well as about price lines. Most importantly, she learned about the educational and safety aspects to the items she bought. She witnessed how stores used different merchandising techniques to spotlight child welfare and increase profits.⁵

Upon the opening of the children's department in January 1909, executives at L.S. Ayres ran a series of newspaper ads in the *Indianapolis News* to announce Krauch's arrival and to inform the public that she was there to overhaul their offerings in children and infant's clothing. The first of these ads identified Krauch as the new, expert buyer for the department and to advertise a three-month-long clearance event.⁶ Another article explained that Krauch was selling off the existing "very long old-

⁴Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), 128-129; and Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 33.

⁵Flora Krauch, "The Question Box," *Infants' Department* 1, no. 5 (January 1918), 84; Flora Krauch, "Letters to a New Buyer: First Letter," *Infants' Department* 2, no. 3 (November 1918), 52; Flora Krauch, "Letter to Merchandise Manager," *Infants' Department* 3, no. 1 (September 1919), 16; Flora Krauch, "Twenty-five Years Ago," *Infants' and Children's Department* 12, no. 1 (January 1930), 100; Flora Krauch, "Looking Southward," *Infants' and Children's Department* 12, no. 4 (April 1930), 579; Flora Krauch, "Chicago for Inspiration," *Infants' and Children's Department* 13, no. 3 (March 1931), 359; Flora Krauch, "Development of Gift Section," *Earnshaw's Infants', Children's and Girls' Wear* 19, no. 6 (June 1937), 62.

⁶L. S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, January 25, 1909, microfilm, p. 18.

fashioned baby clothes” and handmade baby dresses to make room for new staple items.⁷ In fact, L.S. Ayres allowed Krauch to sell every garment at cost or even at a loss to expedite removal of the items she did not want. The sale was so successful that L.S. Ayres had to temporarily provide her with fourteen saleswomen to keep up with the demands of the sale.⁸ L.S. Ayres continued to publicly praise Krauch with another ad stating, “Her entire business life has been devoted to supplying the dress needs of infants and young children. She is therefore fully qualified to do what she proposes—make the ‘Children’s Corner’ of L.S. Ayres one of the best infants’ stores in the country.”⁹ So, the executives at L.S. Ayres recognized that new attitudes toward children could be used to boost the store’s overall reputation by hiring Krauch and not losing ground in the increasingly important infants’ and children’s merchandise business.

Krauch applied strategies used at other department stores when she came to L.S. Ayres to spearhead the opening of the children’s department. Aside from selling off the old-fashioned infants’ and children’s clothes, Krauch maximized her space to demonstrate that the infants’ department would become one of the store’s assets. She “enlarged, improved, restocked, and beautified” the department with assortments of items “never before assembled in Indianapolis.” Innovations in stork shower gifts, a special-order workroom, layettes, guimpes, sweaters, and knit bands were introduced. An array of outerwear, both “dainty and practical,” as well as conveniences for the mother and child’s health and comfort were all evident in Krauch’s infants’ and children’s department.¹⁰

At this point I’ve offered evidence of L.S. Ayres executives’ support for Krauch’s expert merchandising techniques. To accomplish her goal of centralizing all infants’ and children’s merchandise in the children’s department, Krauch drew upon her experiences in other department stores and trade journal recommendations indicating the importance of appealing to children.¹¹ In that spirit, Krauch added a hygienic children’s barber shop, child-sized toilets in the restroom, and a hygienic play yard.

⁷ L. S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, January 27, 1909, microfilm, p. 20; M616, Box 1, Folder 36, L. S. Ayres & Company Historical Files, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

⁸ L. S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, January 25, 1909, microfilm, p. 18; L. S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, January 26, 1909, microfilm, p. 16.

⁹ L. S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, January 25, 1909, microfilm, p. 18.

¹⁰ L. S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, March 29, 1909, microfilm, p. 18; Flora Krauch, “Building a Department at Small Costs: This letter to a Merchandise manager tells how an attractive Infants’ Department was made inexpensively from discarded fixtures,” *Infants’ Department* 3, no. 2 (October 1919), 33. A guimpe is a high-necked blouse or undergarment worn underneath a low-necked dress.

¹¹ Neil M. Clark, “The ‘Knee-High’ Customer: How Merchants and Manufacturers Make a Sales Appeal through the Children,” *System: The Magazine of Business* 27 (1915): 238.

Furthermore, L.S. Ayres' toy department had its start in Krauch's children's department. Current studies show that "the heart of the children's merchandising structure was the toy store."¹² To be sure, the growth of the American toy business "increase[ed] by 1300 percent between 1905 and 1920."¹³ Krauch placed L.S. Ayres in the middle of this money-making movement.

Krauch also centralized many other child-related items by removing them from other departments. She persuaded Frederick Ayres to install a five-foot shelf for a baby shoe display. Infants' and children's shoes were typically in the women's shoe department, but moving them to her department made the shopping experience easier for mothers. Merchandising advice found in trade journals from 1908 and 1909 suggested locating children's shoes in or next to the children's clothing department.¹⁴ Krauch also appropriated a wide range of children's furniture that was formerly found in the home furnishings department; she corralled cribs, baby-walkers, high chairs, and strollers into her department. She also persuaded Frederick Ayres that housedresses and corsets were essential accessories to maternal health and warranted placement in the children's department.¹⁵ Lastly, she shepherded books, cups, and a broad range of items into her department after convincing the store owner that these novelty items rounded out the creation of a totally seamless shopping experience for mothers.

Krauch's success at L.S. Ayres might best be understood in terms of the size and location of her infants' and children's department. Initially Krauch was allotted only 500 square feet next to the freight elevator at the back of the third floor to single-handedly develop one of the best infants' stores in the country. Despite the lack of space, Krauch's clientele grew, which necessitated hiring two female assistants. In 1911 she convinced Frederick Ayres that she needed additional space and was offered unfinished space in an adjacent building. She devised a floor plan and solicited the help of the store's maintenance crew. Together they cleaned the space and constructed display cabinets, shelves, and

¹²William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 87.

¹³ U. S. Department of Commerce, "International Trade in Toys," *Trade Information Bulletin* no. 445 (Washington, D.C., December 1926).

¹⁴ "Encouraging the Children's Trade," *Shoe Retailer and Boots and Shoes Weekly* 69 (November 7, 1908): 37, accessed November 12, 2015, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=098-AQAAMMAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP1>; "Selling Children's Shoes," *Dry Goods Economist* 63, no. 2 (August 14, 1909): 23, accessed October 28, 2015, https://books.google.com/books/about/Dry_Goods_Economist_html?id=DYFBAQAAMAAJ.

¹⁵ M616, Box 1, Folder 36, L. S. Ayres & Company Historical Files, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

closets for storage. Glass cases, show tables, and mirrors rounded out the department.¹⁶ Krauch and her specialized new staff held her mother education lectures in this new space. Convinced of her expert childrearing advice, L.S. Ayres printed and distributed a thirty-page hard-backed book full of Krauch's information for mothers of small children.¹⁷ In 1914 Krauch's department expanded again and acquired space next to the famous L.S. Ayres Tea Room. By the time Krauch left in 1917, she expanded the infants' and children's department to a 21,000 square foot space with over forty highly trained female employees under her charge.

At this point I have demonstrated how Krauch marshaled myriad infants'- and children's-related merchandise to create a complete department. These efforts led to increasing sales in the infants' and children's department from previous years' sales thanks in part to the consolidation of related items to one department.¹⁸ But increasing profits was never her only goal. Instead, she saw the department store as an opportunity to develop her credentials as a child welfare expert, as well as the credentials of her female colleagues. Krauch's desire to use a retail department store as a way to establish expertise makes sense, considering the collaboration between department stores and the U.S. Children's Bureau beginning in 1915. Stores offered child welfare advice and promoted the bureau's baby saving campaigns as ways for stores to shed their image as employers of child labor. But the bureau urged nurses and doctors, traditional experts to educate mothers. Krauch, on the other hand, sought this expert status through her business experience rather than through medical training.

We can see how she combined her identity as a retailer with that of an expert in the advice columns and lectures she began giving in 1911. I have found no evidence of any other children's wear buyer dispensing child welfare advice at this time.¹⁹ Krauch appears to be a pioneer in her efforts to use her retail experience as the basis for becoming an expert in mother education-child welfare and to pass

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Opening Display of Children's Wear," *Indianapolis News*, microfilm, May 29, 1912.

¹⁸ "Why Ayres Put All Children's Wear on One Floor," *Millinery Trade Review* 46 (August 1921), 51.

¹⁹ Histories of Macy's, Filene's, Wanamaker's, and Carson Pirie Scott indicate that buyers for women's ready-to-wear clothing typically purchased items for the scattered and limited assortment of infants' and children's merchandise. Furthermore, even when department stores were advised to dedicate space for actual infants' and children's merchandise departments, these histories suggest that the main attraction to the department was a carnival-like atmosphere with the toy section as a focal point. William Leach states that upon the Children's Bureau's collaboration with department stores to disseminate child welfare advice, doctors and nurses were the individuals offering the advice, not merchandise buyers. Lastly, the leading trade journal, *Dry Goods Economist*, did not indicate the novel approach to child welfare advice being offered by a merchandise buyer. The *Dry Goods Economist* was the retail industry's go-to trade journal for innovative business trends. If there was a movement prior to Flora Krauch's use of the department as a forum for mother education and child welfare, writers for the *Dry Goods Economist* would have been aware and would have alerted retailers to implement the tactic.

that expertise to her female employees. In my research I have identified several examples of Krauch's method. These reflected the whole range of academic fields that were weighing in on childhood welfare, from anthropology to medical science. Today I will focus on just one strategy, which was her appropriation of psychological theories to validate her choices in merchandise offerings at L.S. Ayres.

Beginning in the 1890s, renowned child psychologist Dr. G. Stanley Hall declared that child development was segmented into stages characterized by developmental milestones.²⁰ Each milestone required distinct clothing and merchandise to encourage growth. When we look at Krauch's articles, we see that she applied this knowledge to justify her retail offerings. She wrote that "twelve years of close observation and . . . special study" confirmed her suggestions. For instance, she promoted the use of healthful flannel bands to cover the navel dressing in the first few weeks after an infants' birth, and its continued use for at least eighteen months.²¹ She also advised mothers to abandon the old-fashioned long, white cotton gowns that infants and children typically wore once they reached the developmental stage of crawling. Short clothes similar to creepers or rompers facilitated crawling and the child's "growing strength, size, and intelligence."²² As children progressed from crawling to walking, Krauch recommended the Glascock Baby Tender and Walker as a way to exercise, strengthen, and develop straight legs.²³

Krauch also addressed the ramifications of dressing children in gender-neutral clothes. At the turn of the century, mothers were accused of feminizing the family. To become modern mothers, they needed to add "muscular fiber" to the next generation of young boys.²⁴ Krauch's recommendation required the elimination of voluminous "dresses" and "short clothes." She also cautioned mothers to purchase appropriate headwear for toddler boys that was not "a 'girly' hat nor a cap." Young boys' clothes needed to be "babyish but also boyish." Krauch also noted that "mothers of boy babies must understand that fanciful clothes are not for their little ones . . . boys have tastes and the real boy balks at ruffles and ribbons." Furthermore, when advertising summer beach suits for young boys, Krauch

²⁰Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, 28.

²¹Flora Krauch, "Baby Bands," *Indianapolis News*, January 20, 1912, microfilm, p. 24.

²²Flora Krauch, "The Question Box," *Indianapolis News*, March 8, 1913, microfilm, p. 28; Flora Krauch, "Putting Baby in His First Short Clothes," *Indianapolis News*, April 12, 1913, microfilm, p. 24; Flora Krauch, "The Happy Babe and the Creeper," *Indianapolis News*, February 17, 1912, microfilm, p. 24.

²³Flora Krauch, "Learning to Walk," *Indianapolis News*, November 18, 1911, microfilm, p. 28.

²⁴Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 21-35.

emphasized that the short pants were to be worn without stockings so boys could expose their shins.²⁵ In fact, in 1911 L.S. Ayres allowed Krauch to advertise her children's department as having "real boy clothes so your boy won't wear frilly frocks."²⁶

Another psychological concern discussed by late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century child psychologists, philosophers, and physicians was negative peer interactions. Children could be bullied or teased because of poverty, deformities, and bad habits that could be remedied through hygienic and appropriate purchases. Krauch capitalized on these concerns by finding ways to apply them to her merchandise.

For example, she used several articles in 1912 to discuss the psychology behind shoes and clothes. Krauch wrote of a particular mother's emotional outburst upon seeing copper-toed shoes in Krauch's department. As a child the mother never had the luxury of owning a pair, though it seemed all her peers did. That deprivation remained in this mother's memory so many years later that she immediately purchased a pair for her own daughter to prevent similar humiliation.²⁷ In another instance, Krauch advised mothers that for the teenage girl, high school graduation was a memorable time with deep sentiment attached to the event. Thus, graduation dresses needed to be "frilly and fancy" else the young girl suffer embarrassment among her peers.²⁸ Krauch understood that the need to fit in and have a sense of belonging was reflected through clothing and footwear. For better or worse, children either gained the acceptance or rejection of their peers through these choices.

Krauch also explained how accessory items provided lessons in gentility, the elimination of bad habits, and cures for disfigurements. Again, these problems were inseparable from the basic premise that mothers both caused and could prevent the potential long-lasting psychological damage occurring from poor childrearing. In 1912 she specifically cited an article in *Our Children*, a child psychology journal, written by a Dr. Wynnon. He urged teaching children gentility through the use of a handkerchief.

²⁵ Flora Krauch, "The Boy Baby and His Hat," *Indianapolis News*, March 30, 1912, microfilm, p. 24; Flora Krauch, "For Baby Boy," *Indianapolis News*, April 27, 1912, microfilm, p. 28; Flora Krauch, "Romper that are Different," *Indianapolis News*, September 14, 1912, microfilm, p. 24; and Flora Krauch, "The Question Box," *Indianapolis News*, January 4, 1913, microfilm, p. 24.

²⁶ Advertisement for boys' apparel in the children's department, *Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1911, microfilm, p. 21.

²⁷ Flora Krauch, "The Little Shoes with Copper Toes," *Indianapolis News*, September 28, 1912, microfilm, p. 28; Flora Krauch, "After the Rain," *Indianapolis News*, November 30, 1912, microfilm, p. 24; Flora Krauch, "Proper Shoes for Baby" [ca. 1912], M616, Box 1, Folder 39, L.S. Ayres & Company Historical Files, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.

²⁸ Flora Krauch, "A Perplexing Problem," *Indianapolis News*, May 4, 1912, microfilm, p. 28.

Similarly, Krauch told her customers to “urge [their children] of the crime of negligence in its use.”²⁹ In another article she argued that lessons in respect for property were easily taught to children with the purchase of a personal drinking cup.³⁰ Thus, Krauch was able to turn the simple act of drinking into a lesson about social relations and private ownership. Furthermore, Krauch had remedies for thumb sucking and “flamboyant ears.” A sanitary thumb shield remedied the former bad habit and a sanitary soft-meshed cap for the latter disfigurement.³¹ In fact, almost immediately after her arrival at L.S. Ayres in 1909, Krauch advertised that in her department the ear cap was one of many novel items designed to promote the comfort of mother and infants.³² These concerns for a child’s social and psychological health and the mother’s education on product information were best addressed, according to Krauch, by an expert who was familiar with both psychology and consumer products. For Krauch, this expert should be a buyer like herself.

These examples show that Krauch’s strategy, which used psychological theories to support her product offerings in the children’s department, was about more than economics. It was about her status and authority as a professional expert.

At this point I will turn to my conclusion. Krauch’s work warrants examination because within a decade, her innovations put L.S. Ayres at the front of the burgeoning infants’ and children’s merchandise industry. On the one hand, the changes she introduced were typical at the time. There was nothing unique about the way L.S. Ayres used the store to partner with child welfare advocacy. Many stores partnered with government agencies. What the case of Krauch reveals, is how Krauch used this national trend to carve out a space for herself to become an expert in child welfare. In doing this, she sought to open up a new avenue for women’s professional development.

²⁹Flora Krauch, “Habits and Handkerchiefs,” *Indianapolis News*, August 17, 1912, microfilm, p. 24.

³⁰Flora Krauch, “The Individual Cup,” *Indianapolis News*, November 9, 1912, microfilm, p. 28.

³¹Flora Krauch, “The Twig and the Auricle: A Beauty Hint for Baby” [ca. 1912], M616, Box 1, Folder 39, L.S. Ayres & Company Historical Files, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana; Leroy M. Yale, M.D., “Letters to the Editor-Nursery Problems,” in *The Care of Infants and Young Children and the General Interests of the Nursery*, Volume 1, ed. Leroy M. Yale, M.D. (New York: Babyhood Publishing Company, 1885), 118. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://archive.org/stream/babyhooddevoted01unkngoo#page/n90/mode/2up/search/memory+books>.

³²L.S. Ayres & Company advertisement, *Indianapolis News*, April 28, 1909, microfilm, p. 16.

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