

By Patrick Lapinski

BUILDING ON CREATING A NEW VIBE IN MEN'S CLOTHING *Tradition*

In the past year a transformation has been taking place at Ed Barbo's Columbia Clothing following a change in ownership. For the venerable institution, news of the sale generated a lot of buzz among the store's long-time loyal customers about the future of the menswear clothier.

"What's going to stay is the welcoming atmosphere. We've got a huge storefront, and we have our regular customers who come in to socialize with us; we have a nice lounge area; that will definitely continue. That's a big part of what we do for the gentlemen in our region," promises Kyle Dickinson, one of the new owners of the 1905-era Columbia Clothing store in downtown Duluth.

A fresh look is only the start of what the young entrepreneurs hope to bring to the store. "We've got a fun outdoor store featuring the Duck Head line of apparel in one of the little alcoves that will be more sportsman focused."

Dickinson says the intent is to create "a different vibe than the rest of the store and be a fun little hangout space."

Creating a gathering point for Duluthians of all ages and fashion to come together as a community is important to the Dickinson's desire to appeal to the store's traditional customer base, and to attract new clientele.

"We're going to start hosting more events in the space; different ways to support community institutions."



Since Kyle and his brother Jeff purchased the business they have been slowly transforming the interior, a remodel in progress while remaining open for business.

"We're about half done," says Dickinson in late February. Gone are many of the old antiques, there is new carpeting, as well as a fresh coat of paint to be followed by updated electrical to accommodate better interior lighting to showcase their lines of apparel.





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KYLE DICKINSON, CO-OWNER - ED BARBO'S COLUMBIA CLOTHING

Simultaneously, across the harbor in West Superior, messieurs William Billstein, Frank Nathan and Felix Sigman opened their Columbia Clothing Company at the corner of Tower Avenue and Winter Street in a day when men's suits cost \$10. When Burrows retired from Duluth in 1905, he sold his Great Eastern store to Billstein, Nathan and Sigman, who brought the Columbia Clothing name to Duluth. Following the death of Billstein in 1930, his widow sold the

Recent activities included a charity night for the Boys and Girls Club of the Northland, and a fundraiser for a local mountain biking nonprofit, "... a fun date night thing to give people an excuse to go out and get a little bit more dressed up."

business to Leonard G. Bradley, an insurance broker, his son Davis and Walter Soneson in October, 1936. Bradley was not an astute retailer and turned over control of a struggling Columbia Clothing to his son Davis in 1941, who ran the company successfully until his untimely death in 1953.

NEW BEGINNINGS

"Actually, neither of us have any prior experience in clothing," admits Kyle, the older of the two brothers who hail from Park Rapids. "We both knew we wanted to go into business together, but we never really knew what."

Kyle first arrived in Duluth in 2010, attending college at UMD, where he earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree. In the next 10 years he gained experience in the financial world, picked up his MBA and went to work as a Business Developer for the Entrepreneur Fund, an organization designed to support emerging small businesses. His experience there helped kindle the flames of wanting to own his own business.

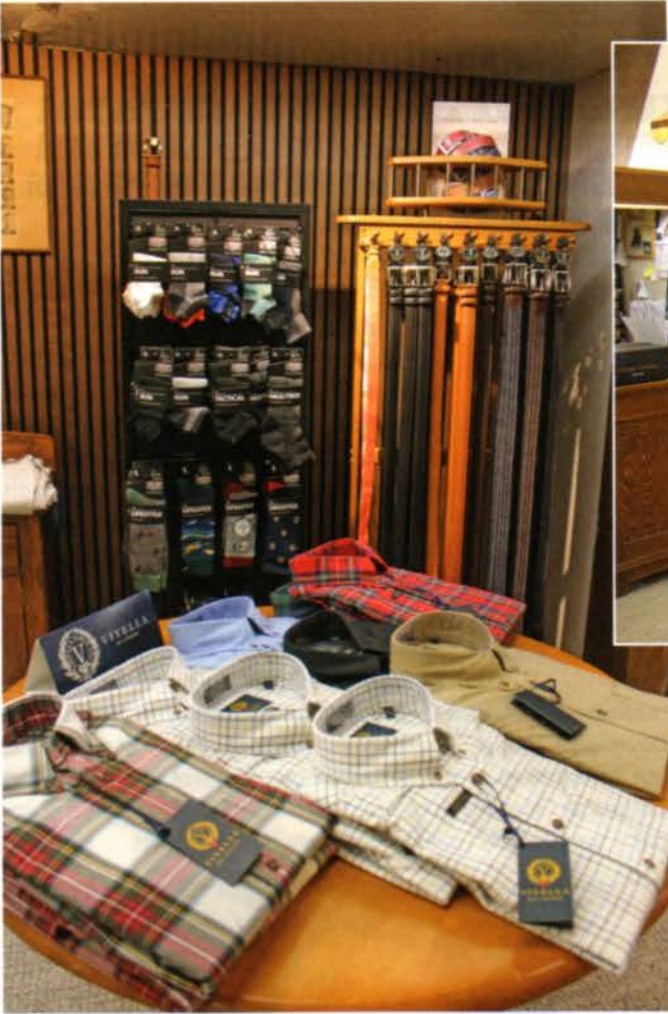
"We found Columbia Clothing listed for sale on a brokerage website. It seemed like a good deal; and it seemed like something we could do, and came with very long-term employees who knew the industry well and could teach us the ropes," explained Dickinson. "Here we are, a year later."

In August of last year, Dickinson Clothing Company, LLC, doing business as Barbo's Columbia Clothing, received a \$15,000 loan for working capital and display needs from the Duluth 1200 Fund to help kickstart their dream.

A LONGSTANDING TRADITION IN THE TWIN PORTS

Historically, a retail clothing business has occupied this space since 1891 when Matthew S. Burrow opened his Great Eastern Clothing store. Great Eastern was the first major tenant in an imposing new five-story Romanesque building built of iron, pressed brick and brown sandstone at the corner of 3rd Avenue West and Superior Street, "where the street car turns up the hill."





As purveyors of fine, quality menswear, the Barbo family have operated Columbia Clothing since Edward Barbo Sr. purchased the store from the estate of the late Davis Bradley. Barbo Sr. had cut his teeth in the retail industry as a shoe salesman. In 1919, lauded as "one of Duluth's foremost retail clerks," he was appointed manager of the shoe department at the Pantom & White department store, known to Duluthians simply as the Glass Block. In 1925 Barbo became manager of the Lester Shoe Store in Superior prior to returning to Duluth in 1948 to manage the Nunn-Bush Shoe Department at McGregor & Soderstrom before he

purchased Columbia Clothing. Following two decades on the sales floor he passed the business on to his son, Ed Jr., a move so seamless there was no need to change the signage or advertising.

Prior to his father's retirement in 1974, Ed Barbo Jr. started working at the store in 1969, a time when stylish clothing like bell bottoms competed with the rag-tag apparel of the hippie era. A UMD graduate with a degree in business economics, he shepherded the business through a new series of growth and change, like "The Underground" shop in the store's basement catering to a youthful generation of buyers.

During this time the store expanded into the neighboring National Liquor Store and more officially adopted the name of Ed Barbo's Columbia Clothing in its advertising as a means of differentiating themselves from the trendy Columbia Sportswear brand of jackets.

BUILDING ON TRADITION: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Dickinson is excited to point out that Ed Barbo and long-time salesman John Mohn will continue at the store





"Ed and John have their core customer base that tends to be older, so that is one segment, their continued customers. I'm in my 30s, and Jeff is 29, so naturally our social networks are a little younger. We get a good stirring of the melting pot between the older generations and their preferences, patterns and body styles, and the younger generations that have a desire to pay more attention to what they wear," says Dickinson. "What we're finding is people are a little less sensitive generally about the dollar value of something, as long as it's high quality and it lasts for many years. We're focusing on that purchasing habit of buying fewer but buying better."

part-time to assist in the transition. "Having Ed and John stay on well through the transition period here has helped give their current customer base some confidence that not too much is going to be changing, while we can slowly introduce the changes we want to make," noted Kyle.



As arbiters of fashion, Columbia Clothing will continue catering to men of refined taste. Their collection of formal wear is the cornerstone of the business, along with their line of wedding apparel. For someone looking to expand or upgrade their clothing look, the store's line of refined casual clothing will have heads turning in the workplace or out on the town. "Internally we call it our from 'cabin to boardroom lane,' items that you know are still functional and comfortable, but can still dress up with a nice sports coat for when you need to dash into the office or run out for a last-minute meeting."

"The formal wear is a big piece of what we do, and weddings." Formal wear consists of suits, sports coats, blazers, dress slacks, dress shirts and similar goods, says Dickinson. Their meticulous attention to details; custom fittings, quality material, expert tailoring, is what sets Columbia Clothing apart from your department store off-the-rack clothing prevalent in today's buy and toss culture.

"It's important to lay out what different terminology means in this industry," says Dickinson. "There are a lot of



big players in the space who call it custom suits, but really what they're doing is they're taking stuff off their rack, then sending it to a tailor to have the pants hemmed and the sleeves altered to the right length. That's not true, made to measure custom apparel. You're not changing the proportions of the cut fabrics, or you're not changing the clothing patterns. You're only accounting for maybe two of 45 possible measurements we would typically take for a full custom suit."

For a full-on custom suit, Dickinson says "we measure a lot of different measurements of a person's body to really figure out how they're different than the typical mold." Pre-tailored, personally fitted suits typically take several weeks to complete.

While Columbia no longer has on-site tailors, they have a core of long-time, trusted partners in that space. "We handle all the measuring, pinning, getting it to the tailors and getting it back."

If you're not sure you can find the right fabric or color, don't worry, Columbia has a vast collection of samples for their clothing lines. "We have thousands of fabric samples we can go through. When we're working on custom items, we'll really dig into these for that garment and identify the best composition, colors, construction style based off the type of that fabric."

For more budget-minded consumers, a level down from the custom fittings is the aforementioned off the rack tailoring, which is what most people are aware of. "You come in for a suit, you find one close, and we'll maybe adjust the length of the pants and hem up the sleeves a touch," explained Dickinson. "That's pretty standard and in house we're all trained and very experienced in doing that measuring work."

Wedding sales and rental will continue playing a significant role in

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 Clothing Co.
 323 West Superior Street

Columbia's offerings. Along the lines of the Victorian-era rhyme "Something borrowed, something new..." Kyle says they are now including an emergency kit for couples for the day the wedding. "We have a little box of random things that we have found couples needing in the last minute, like hand cleaning wipes, needle and thread. We have a shirt steamer that we send with; just random items you don't think of until you've been through it a hundred times like we have. The box comes with a prepaid shipping label so after the big day they just drop it off and mail everything back to us."



REFINED CASUAL: THE LOOK OF THE NORTHLAND

The notion that men of the Northland wear flannel is a bit of a cliché, but there is also a ring of truth to it. "Well, that is part of it," concedes Dickinson, "but for the fit, men up here in the Northland don't like super fitting clothing. That's much more of an Italian, East-West Coast thing. Men here in the Northland like a little bit more of a quiet luxury look; very subtle texture, not loud patterns. They like to kind of flash their quality, but not in a very obnoxious or bright way," says the clothier.

"As far as colors, they're very much a muted tone clientele; earth browns, rust brown and emerald greens are very popular. Our bestselling sports coat is actually a kind of a burnt orange Harris tweed sports coat." Think about the look of the late 1970s college professor says Dickinson. "That's probably the vibe of that sports coat. A little bit bigger and bulkier. Kind of that rustic north woods look with the elbow patches made out of leather."



As noted, the brothers plan to bring in some new lines to the store that are representative of their generation. "A lot of the brands currently sold in the store will stay. We're bringing in some new, higher quality lines as well, selvedge denim, stretch denim, some chinos, sweaters, suits, sports coats, jackets, including a line out of Amsterdam so we can make custom jeans."

Selling something as seemingly simple as a pair of jeans can be like reaching across a chasm depending upon a customer's prior experience. Part of any salesman's job is being an educator, driving value through knowledge and trust. "If somebody knows what selvedge denim is, you don't have to explain the difference to them between that and normal denim. They get it," explains Dickinson. However, he says, "To take someone from buying Levi's at Fleet Farm all the way to spending \$400 on a custom pair of selvedge denim jeans, that is a long educational journey, but it's one we find people very thirsty to have. So, it's fun. It's fun to show people and demonstrate to them."

Columbia Clothing has you covered from top, to bottom. Remember, Ed Barbo Sr. started out as a shoe salesman and the store continues to honor that tradition.





The Dickinson brothers are looking to up the ante when it comes to quality footwear.

"We're definitely expanding the quality tier up a bit and bringing in more than just dress shoes," explains Dickinson. "We've brought in Cole Haan shoes, well known for their more modern styles. We have also brought in Allen Edmonds, which definitely has a cult following in the region. A lot of their dress shoes are still made over in Port Washington, Wisconsin; they can be resoled, they're kind

of a staple in that world. We definitely have to have them. We're also working on bringing in what we're calling more of a casual shoe department, so little bit more of that shoe that can either dress up with you and that sports coat and jeans, or dress down on the weekends."

They haven't forgotten that Duluth has long winters, so the brothers plan to put more boots on the ground in the Northland with a line of Chelsea Boots that "provide a classier look, but can also be very functional in this weather, as it's snowing."

ONLINE CONVENIENCE

The concept of shopping for clothes online is not new. When it comes to custom fit apparel it is a bit more challenging, so the Dickinson's are going forward with a rather unique concept they think will be very convenient for their customers.

"You can shop online like usual, but if you don't want to go through the whole process of having things mailed to you,



finding it doesn't fit, and having to return it, we are finalizing our new website so you will be able to shop online, but instead of checking out, if you want that tactile experience of trying stuff on, feeling it in your hands before parting with your dollars, you can save it to your online rack and then you book a shopping appointment right there on the website so when you come to your shopping appointment, everything you chose online will be on your rack in the store, ready for you to try on," he explained. "We're pretty excited about that."

As new owners, the Dickinson's look forward to meeting all of fashion needs of the men of the Northland. "The reception has been great. People have been very excited to see the business stay open and transition to the next owners. I think there was a lot of concern on what was going to

happen to a really core tenant of the downtown space and for the business that has been a part of town here for so long. I think there were a lot of people kind of waiting to see what was going to happen, so, like us, we're all excited."

At a future date, the brothers will announce a new name for the clothing retailer but for the moment they are keeping it close to the vest, so to speak. **1**

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.





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