

**Elizabeth Parke Firestone:
Her Couture Collection and Her Role as a Woman of Influence**

PROSPECTUS

September 10, 2003

Elizabeth Parke Firestone donated a large collection of her couture clothing to the University of Akron in 1989, and items from her Ocean Lawn residence were added to the collection in 1992 through a donation from Mrs. Firestone's estate following her death. I first viewed some of the items during a History of Fashion course with Dr. Virginia Gunn; and then, as a graduate assistant, I worked with the collection and became fascinated with the art and the history surrounding it. During my Material Studies coursework, I completed an artifact study of one of Mrs. Firestone's favorite dresses, a 1961 Christian Dior wool après-midi dress.

As the daughter-in-law of Harvey Samuel Firestone Sr., the founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company and a good friend of Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, and the wife of Harvey Samuel Firestone Jr., the president and chairman of Firestone Tire and Rubber Company during the middle of the twentieth century, Mrs. Firestone was embedded in the history of Akron and the rubber industry from 1921 through 1970. She was an influential advocate of the arts, including painting, couture clothing, and antique French silver; and, she was a prominent member of the culture in which she lived. Her collections and her life provide a window into the industrial revolution and its impact on the growth and development of Akron, and the resulting changes in its culture.

Mrs. Firestone began her married life, in 1921, by accompanying Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and Harvey Firestone on one of their legendary camping trips. President Warren G. Harding joined this camping trip, and it was the first one in which the wives were invited to participate. Later that decade, Harvey Firestone Jr. and his wife traveled to Liberia and other countries in search of natural rubber, and this was only the beginning of a very interesting and full life. During Thropean trips, Mrs. Firestone researched and purchased numerous and profoundly significant works of art and rare eighteenth-century Louis XV silver. She amassed highly respected collections of Sevres porcelain and other *tems*, which were exhibited at museums beginning in the 1940s at The Detroit *Museum* of Art. Her clothing was custom-made by the couture houses of Dior, Balenciaga, Mainbocher and other designers during the years of the greatest impact of designer houses on the fashion mass market. She also purchased high quality, custom linens and lingerie embellished with fine handwork. Her daughters attended a local private Catholic school, Our Lady of the *Elms*; and Mrs. Firestone was active in the local *garden club* and St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Akron, Ohio. The Firestone family actively promoted the welfare of Akron, and they were involved in many of Akron's historic events during their lives. Researching the life and collections of Mrs. Firestone will provide a facet of our history that might otherwise be lost.

While researching Mrs. Firestone's favorite Dior wool apron-widened *dress*, I was able to identify and contact her former local seamstress, Gizella Kurder, and executive assistant, Thurlie Boyer. Mrs. Kurder altered and copied some of Mrs. Firestone's couture clothing. Mrs. Boyer handled the correspondence between Mrs. Firestone and various art

dealers and couture houses. She also assisted Mrs. Firestone and her family with her donations of various collections to museums and historical societies.

Since then, I have been able to find other possible interviewees, including John Moore, the Firestone superintendent of transportation; John Miller, the director of The University of Akron Archives; and Charles Billow, the Firestone family funeral director. All three of these men knew Mrs. Firestone and the rest of the Firestone family well, and they worked with Mrs. Firestone. They are also elderly, and the information they will be able to provide is a treasure to be preserved before it is gone forever.

Although I have been unable to find any specific academic studies of Mrs. Firestone and her collections, (have been able to find some of her personal papers and photographs archived at The Benson Ford Research Center in Dearborn, Michigan, and The University of Akron Archives. ~The personal papers and photographs document her contribution to the history of Akron and the world, the acquisition of many pieces in her collections, and her role as a corporate wife. Mrs. Firestone and some of her fine arts collections also appeared in various magazines over the years. These articles emphasize her interest and influence in the arts. A collection of her French silver is permanently on exhibit at The Boston Museum of Art, and various other collections are located at museums and historical societies in Ohio, Michigan, New York, and Massachusetts.

The University of *Akron* Couture Collection, in conjunction with printed material relating to the collections and oral history transcripts, is another integral source of research material about Mrs. Firestone. Fashion reflects culture; and clothing construction techniques, fabrics, and fibers demonstrate the technological advances, available materials, and artistic advancement of the culture in which they are produced.

Utilizing an ease study approach, I plan to study Mrs. Firestone's societal role relating to her collections through in-depth study of a variety of research methods, including oral histories, the archival study of specific items in the Firestone Collection at The University of Akron, and the study of printed material including personal papers, magazines, newspapers, and census reports. A wide variety of sources, which will be verified for authenticity, will increase the validity and reliability of my qualitative study. Verification of statements by interviewees will be sought by seeking information from a variety of subjects; and, by allowing interviewees to share memories in a less structured interview format, I hope to learn new information that might not otherwise be revealed.

My thesis will analyze the data collected in an effort to understand Mrs. Firestone's role in society in relation to her collections and the culture in which she lived, including Akron and the rubber industry. Mrs. Firestone married Harvey Firestone Jr. in 1921, and their involvement in Akron and New York society and the rubber industry dramatically declined after 1970; therefore, my thesis will cover the time frame from 1921 -1970.

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