

ASSOCIATION OF MIT RETIREES



MEMOIR COLLECTION

February 2013, #5

ABOUT THE MEMOIR CLASS

*The Association of MIT Retirees memoir class has been going strong since 2011. This class of dedicated writers is led by **Nita Regnier**, Association advisory committee member and former instructor in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies in the Writing Center. The writers have produced fine work and we are pleased to share their stories with you. While their work represents a wide range of experiences and generations, some recollections may particularly resonate with you.*

*Our fifth featured work is by **Gloria J. Pless**.*

INTRODUCTION

After winding down my career at MIT, which followed a circuitous route from President Howard Johnson's office, to the Lab for Nuclear Science, to Random Hall Dorm, and then to the Chemistry Department, I decided I really didn't want to leave the MIT community. I continue with my personal trainer at the MIT gym and I also volunteer at the MIT Furniture Exchange. But, my educational growth has been through joining five like-minded individuals to learn about the tricks-of-the-trade of memoir writing under the very talented and humorous *Nita Regnier*. In my case, I wanted to pass on vignettes of my life primarily to my nephews and nieces and their children in Nova Scotia. They didn't always know over the years what I was up to. Some of my work is about my early days in Nova Scotia and our relatives, and other stories have to do with my travels and involvements. I hope, as they turn old and grey, that on a cold and wintry night my family would want to curl up with the latest chapter on what Aunt or Great Aunt Gloria did decades before.

— Gloria J. Pless

HOW I LEARNED TO SAVE MONEY AND SHOP IN FILENE'S BASEMENT

"Look at this, \$2.99 from Filene's Basement," said Aunt Mamie when she came home that summer, showing us her new purple hat. That was not her only bargain, she informed us. "I bought this for \$1.99," she added, holding up a purple bag with gathers near the clasp. Her purse, her hat, and her gloves all came from Filene's Basement.

To a little Canadian girl of five, Filene's Basement was an exotic name. Aunt Mamie told us about it: all items were marked down after the initial 12 days if they were not sold.



The first deduction was 25-percent, and then, subsequently, 50-percent and 75-percent after each six days. After that, items not sold were given to charity.

Aunt Mamie was a great advertisement for Filene's Basement. Her shape was substantial, as well, but she dressed elegantly. Being completely outfitted in one color certainly put her in the avant-garde fashion of that day. She told everyone about all of her great deals.

My Aunt Mamie was a contradiction. She dearly loved her bargains for she was living on dividends from stock she inherited from her former employer. She forged an intimate relationship with the Basement and she was faithful to it forever.

Aunt Mamie came home once a year from Boston to see her relatives in our small village of Wood's Harbor, Nova Scotia. I filed her news about the Basement in the back of my mind and brought it out later after my mother and I moved to Boston when I was eleven.

Mom and I went to investigate Filene's Basement soon after our arrival. Our first

experiences were not as positive as Aunt Mamie's. Why did we have to plough through scads of clothing thrown together on counters before we could find something that we liked or which fit us? Why were people so quick to grab items away from us? Why were there hundreds of items in one color or one size and not in any other colors or sizes? Why was everything such a mess? And, why did we have to strip off to our underwear behind some hangers on racks if we wanted to try on anything? No, we decided, Filene's Basement was not for us.

Years later, interested in Boston history, I learned about the son of the founder of the store, Edward Filene. While working for his father, he came up with the idea of selling off the excess inventory upstairs by moving it down to the basement, and this became the automatic markdown system. I decided with such an interesting history, I would give this store another chance.

In the 1960's, the Basement inventory came from Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and many other high-end stores. There were Ferragamo shoes in the shoe department, Bali bras in the underwear, and Lark suitcases in the luggage department. Certainly, there might not be the color one would want, or there could be a loose thread, a dye lot variable, buttons missing, or even a rip in the garment. But, one could not beat the prices! My sensibilities had changed, too. I had figured out how to scoot around the racks to camouflage myself in various stages of undress to try on a garment, and I did not blink an eyelash one day when a saleswoman shouted, "Yikes, a mouse just ran over my foot!"

One of the things I particularly liked about the Filene's Basement experience was its access. It was located at the intersection of Washington and Winter/Summer Streets — becoming Downtown Crossing in later years. It had an access directly from the Summer Street subway (Orange Line), and through tunnels connecting it to Park Street, and to both the Green and Red Lines. The tunnel took you to the entrance beside Dunkin' Donuts. There were two basements, the upper and the lower, and two escalators. One could get to the escalators through the main store or after entering through the tunnel. There were direct entrances from the street, too, but these were closed over the years because of easy theft.

Most of the ladies' clothing was in the lower basement. In the upper basement were men's

clothes, hats, gloves, purses, and household linens. It was always a challenge to match up colors and designs, and my linen closet still reflects this mishmash today.

In 2007, the Basement — after almost 100 years in its Downtown Crossing location — was no more. Mayor Tom Menino, shopper par excellence in the Basement, had been a prime mover for the redevelopment of the site but the developer was hit by the recession in 2008 and did not adhere to his promise of rehousing the Basement at the site by 2009.



I am still grieving over my loss of the Basement. The building is gutted and shuttered, and there is a big hole in the ground where the Franklin Street annex was. When I am at Downtown Crossing, I look at the dirty steps going down to the Basement, and I remember that a few steps inside that entrance, I found gloves and scarves straight ahead and luggage to the left.

The rocky relationship between the developer and the city is showing some signs of repair now, with the developer joining forces with a new dynamic partner. Plans are afoot for a tower of mixed commercial and residential use.

N.B.: A bright spot occurred today. *The Boston Globe* (January 30, 2013) reported that a new development project may begin as early as April 2013; it will retain some of the outward structure plus glass tower. I wonder if it will have a basement?

— Gloria J. Pless

The mission of the **Association of MIT Retirees** is to provide opportunities for members to engage with the Institute and to develop programs and events that will be of both interest and fun. We strive to be an active component in the MIT family by keeping our members in touch with each other and with the Institute, and to forge new friendships.

Nancy Alusow and Joe Collins are chairs of the Association. The organization is supported by Traci Swartz and Chris Ronsicki of the Community Services Office.

Your suggestions for activities are welcome.

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