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## Personality Profile

# California's Million Dollar Apparel Croupier

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*Business was booming and booze, like bosoms, was something to keep hidden away. Speculation and speak-easies were a way of life. In New York, the rich got richer and the poor dreamt dreams of scaling Manhattan's mountains in an age where only doubt and death could keep a good man down.*

*It was a heady atmosphere for a small boy of seven selling penny roses at the 14th Street subway interchange. Life, like the roses, had an unmistakable fragrance to it and with the Great War out of the way and unending prosperity on the horizon, it was a good time to be starting into business.*

*Twelve years later the boy was a man and while the country struggled to regain its feet from the impossible blow of the Depression, he was busy trimming windows on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, unaware that from the sidewalk he was being watched closely. Barney Ruben, president of Bond Stores, Inc., liked the way the young man worked. He decided then and there to acquire his exclusive services for his own chain of stores.*

Albert J. Fenster, 19, didn't know it yet, but he was about to begin a career that would have few rivals in the garment industry.

Those who know him best are aware of a favorite quote he will utilize at the drop of a hat: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears the sound of a different drummer." It is this different drumbeat to which Albert Fenster has been constantly attuned. It perhaps explains the moves he has made, always puzzling, seemingly unwise, but always successful beyond the wildest dreams of those of petty pace.

From the Roaring Twenties to the Soaring Sixties, the man named Fenster managed to parlay a pushcart in the Bronx to a Rolls Royce in Los Angeles' Trousdale Estates.

He had an irresistible attraction for the garment industry almost from the outset, beginning as a stock boy in a Brighton Beach men's shop at \$2 a week. Two years later, he was managing the shop at \$25 a week but saw no future there. After another two years with another men's shop, he fortuitously struck out on his own as a window trimmer.

And that's how he came to meet Barney Ruben. The Bond Stores executive, like Fenster, knew a good thing as soon as he saw it. After two months, Fenster graduated from window trimmer for the clothing chain to district supervisor of displays.

A year later he was general manager of the company and in another year general manager and executive vice president.

At this juncture, another hiatus presented itself on the American and world scene, and Fenster opted for a three-year stint in U.S. Armed Forces Intelligence work.

Those three years may well have included his vacation time for the remainder of his life. It has been a steady push since then.

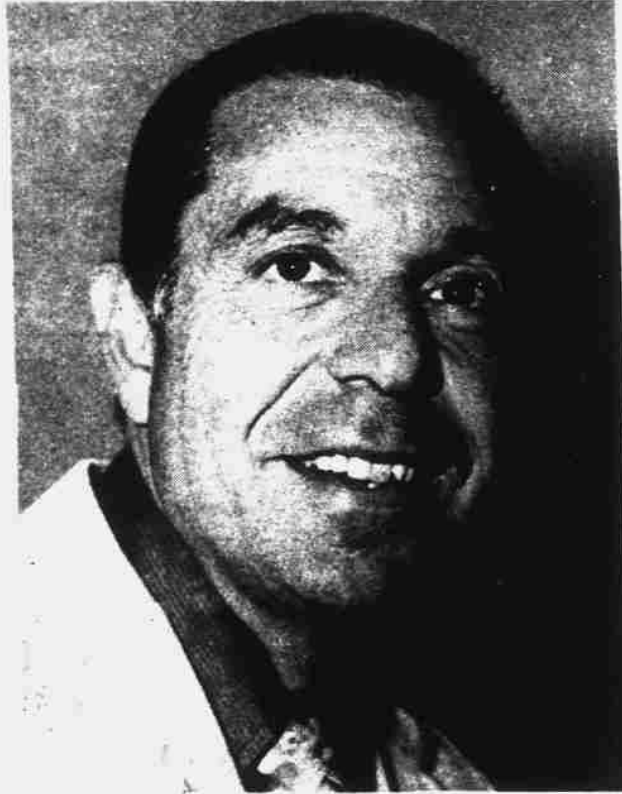
In 1947, Fenster was offered the presidency of Bond's at \$50,000 a year plus bonus. It was the natural culmination of a brilliant track record but in typical Fenster style, the 29-year-old wonder decided to branch out on his own again.

He picked an unlikely spot.

The waterfront district of Wilmington, California was a painful product of the post-war years. The rats that scurried through the alleys were

often lit up in the red glow from a number of dubious establishments in the Avalon Boulevard area. If it was a district that appealed to men, it was one that appealed to their baser instincts. The atmosphere was saltier than the air.

Progress was not to be denied its hour, however, and it arrived on the scene in the shape of Albert J. Fenster. At 334 Avalon Blvd., the entrepreneur opened what he called "an oasis in the middle of a desert"—a plush men's shop with a rich new facade and thick red carpeting.



**ALBERT FENSTER**

By 1950, Fenster was doing more than one-half million dollars in volume a year. Under the title "Union Men's Shops," he opened his second operation in Long Beach. Among other distinctions, his was the largest single outlet of its type for Florsheim shoes in the United States.

Fenster was an unqualified success in retailing. It was time to get out.

In 1955—while a man called Elvis was warning America to stay off his blue suede shoes, Al Fenster was busy in his new-found love—manufacturing. He began with ties, belts, leather goods and accessories and he really didn't care much what happened to the goods after they sold. He had finally built himself a multi-million dollar operation.

In the years since then, Fenster has built a small empire. It included Gaylord's Ltd., Fraternity Mfg. Co., and Saxon Mfg. Co., plus acquisitions which included Mark of California and Hogar Industries (Don Loper leather, jewelry and gifts).

Ten days after the beginning of 1969, he spun off the Hogar/Don Loper division to Dante for more than a million dollars. It added money in the pocket to what were already considerable holdings—a 12-story building at 12th and Santee Streets in Los Angeles' garment district, numerous smaller buildings which he has bought and sold like speculative stock, a \$750,000 home, and a wealth of education acquired in his spare time.

He assiduously studied law, textiles, accounting and interior decorating both at home and at school.

He dabbled in woodworking for a hobby and still swims, a.m. and p.m., to keep up his health.

At 51, Albert Fenster can well afford to retire to a most rewarding life. But retirement is the last thing on his mind. The distant drummer still calls to him.

Last month the man who donated more than a million dollars to local charities decided to build.

He bought the 950 S. Broadway Bldg. for more than a million. It houses, among others, Fashion Week, Jantzen, and Hystron Fibers. The building will be the new home base for Fenster's enterprises.

He purchased the Bardon of Hollywood Building at Washington Boulevard and Los Angeles Street.

He bought a building on Melrose for a new concept in retailing—a forerunner of 50 stores he plans to open on a franchise basis within the next year on the West Coast, under the name of House of Valentine.

He also acquired major interests in International Art Studios, Global Golf Shoes Inc., Barefoot Surfahs, Hawaiian Sands, Joker of California, Dal Industries, and Total Look. For the management and financing of the above corporations, he is forming Drum International as a holding corporation and the manufacturer of Don Loper dress shirts and House of Valentine accessories. Executive vice president of Drum International will be Harvey Brenner, long-time friend of Fenster and previously national sales manager of his Don Loper division. Brenner will also serve as general manager of the various smaller corporations.

The two men plan what amounts to the coup of the century in the garment industry—a total business in the garment and other divisions of one billion dollars annual volume within five years—a company twice the size of Genesco.

Fantasy? Vainglory? Maybe.

But Fenster made the multi-million dollar deals within 10 days after recovering from minor surgery in the hospital.

That was last month. In December, Fenster and Brenner have been in so many conferences coast-to-coast that they have been all but unattainable.

They have all but signed papers giving them major interests in a piece goods sales agency, a warehousing and delivery firm, and a firm specializing in the converting of imported and domestic piece goods.

At publication time, they were about ready to announce acquisition of a manufacturer of men's and women's fake furs and a manufacturer of handcrafted leather and suede apparel.

They have also added a bright new star to the Drum International board of directors in the person of Michael Vance, vice president in charge of product and personnel development for Disney Productions. His special tasks will include making the newly-formed House of Valentine a success in the world of men's fashions.

With his daughter teaching languages at UCLA and his son pursuing a brilliant career in law, Fenster needs no longer worry about their futures. At 51, he still has miles to go and a record that defies the law of averages.

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