A quiet life in Pottstown

Ah, Christmas. A time of peace, quiet, and reflection.

For many families, it’s been just the opposite. We’re busy making lists, busy wrapping presents, busy at work, busy taking pictures, busy messaging on facebook, busy watching the latest on Netflix, busy texting. Busy, busy, busy.

Today, I’m going to reflect on one of my favorite Pottstonians, a man who led a peaceful, quiet, healthy life. He died in his sleep at 98. He was a tailor.

Hard to believe, but for hundreds of years men had their clothes custom made by tailors. Hand made suits were common up to the 1950s. James Fichtol, born in 1895, was apprenticed to a tailor at 14 and later got experience working for John Wanamaker’s Department Store in Philadelphia. He learned to make the 22 measurements of the body needed to draw an individual pattern.

In 1915, Fichtol opened his own shop in Pottstown and found a lot of business right away, especially from Hill School men and boys.

He bought men’s suit fabric from the many mills in and around Philadelphia.

For decades, he lived above his shop at 319 High Street. “I worked from 8 in the morning to 10 at night, six days a week,” he told me. Although he eventually cut back, he was still coming downstairs every weekday into his 90s making suits for his loyal and increasingly aged clientele.

Outside of serving in France in World War I, a few trips to the Jersey shore and New York, and a railroad trip to Miami, he never left Pottstown. His wife died in 1969 after 47 years of marriage.

I used to enjoy visiting him in his shop, which was like something out of the Smithsonian Museum, with its wooden cutting table, steam presses, and gas-fired iron.

Did he miss out on life? I don’t think so. He was content.

Commentary by Tom Hylton

LAST OF THE TAILORS—When James J. Fichtol opened his shop in Pottstown in 1915, most men bought their clothes from tailors. He continued to make suits at his 319 High Street shop until 1989, when he was 94. He died at 98.