

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 24, 2020: [ABERCROMBIE & FITCH](#)

Abercrombie & Fitch is an incredibly well-known modern brand, and it has been around for a while. Spoiler alert: they didn't used to sell cushy sweatpants.

THE STORY

Today's mall brand was, once upon a time, America's most successful gear shop. Hiram Bingham used A&F as outfitters for the Yale Peruvian expeditions that revealed Machu Picchu to Western culture, and customers like Hemingway and Teddy Roosevelt were known to shop there for their rugged manly provisions of choice (not to exclude the ladies, either: Amelia Earhart liked their suede jackets).

Operating from a palatial Madison Avenue flagship store, Abercrombie & Fitch was known for high-quality goods, loyal customers and a particular brand niche we might today call "rugged luxury" – upscale patrons looking to outfit themselves for sporting excursions, camping or travel, or simply to dress in tweedy style. Ads touted the "greatest sporting goods store in the world" to 1920's one-percenters: "the man that travels by sleeper or steamer – the businessman motoring or commuting from his Connecticut estate – the woman that golfs and rides and shoots – the sportsman planning his moose hunt or trip to Montana..." A&F maintained a publishing imprint as well, printing the 17th-century fishing manual *The Compleat Angler* as well as Audubon and Andrew Wyeth artwork, all calling forth the idea of the cultured sportsman.

So, wait: if they went bankrupt, how is everyone buying all those t-shirts? In the 1970's, the foundering brand filed for bankruptcy and was purchased by a sporting goods chain, which tried unsuccessfully to continue running it as an outfitter. In 1992 new president Mike Jeffries initiated the modern era by directing the brand to sex appeal and youth-focused casual clothing.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

What does a brand's story mean to you? When do you trust it and why? How much of our modern image of an "explorer" appears to come from the 19th century A&F image? (Think: Indiana Jones...)

Do you think the majority of A&F target consumers in the 19th and early 20th century were using the gear for function or status?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

["The Glory That Was Abercrombie, the Grandeur That Was Fitch,"](#) *The New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1977

["20th Century Camping With the Abercrombie & Fitch Catalog,"](#)

National Museum of American History

Find vintage A&F ads at [Chronicling America](#).