

## Danvers Historical Society exhibit explores the success of Ideal Baby Shoe Co.

By Michael McHugh | Staff Writer

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*The exhibit will include a variety of shoes, shoemaking tools, advertisements, and photographs showing the company during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.*

*Courtesy photo*

A new exhibit hosted by Danvers Historical Society volunteers Sheila Cooke-Kayser and Joyce Cranford will explore the legacy of Danvers businesswoman Adra Day and the Ideal Baby Shoe Co., her business empire that supplied millions of babies around the world with the shoes they would take their very first steps in.

While the huge factory on Locust Street in Danvers may be gone, the legacy of Day's business still remains far reaching.

This is largely thanks to her innovative idea based on medical research to mold baby shoes for the left and right foot as opposed to straight-toed shoes, and her intelligent, medical-based marketing.

“She was a very smart businesswoman,” explained historian Sheila Cooke-Kayser of the Danvers Historical Society. “She would communicate with doctors and nurses about foot development, and researched what the proper shoe design for babies looked like from infancy to the first few years that they’re walking.

“She also would encourage the doctors that she worked with to have samples of her shoes at their offices. So when you brought your baby, your doctor might have suggested the Ideal Baby Shoe Co. just like doctors suggest pharmacies and stuff like that today.”



*Baby shoes produced by the Ideal Baby Shoe Company in the 40's and 50's, showcasing the different styles. Courtesy photo*

Going into the 20th century, the popularity of the shoes could not be overstated, with the infant children and grandchildren of famous figures like Queen Elizabeth II, Queen Juliana of Holland, and President Woodrow Wilson all having worn Day's shoes.

The exhibit will not only display a huge collection of baby shoe designs from 1906 through 1970, but the 19th century shoemaking tools used to craft them, photographs of the factories, and even the promotional materials and innovative marketing that catapulted the business into notoriety.

The Danvers Historical Society has collected such materials over decades, amassing a collection of hundreds of baby shoes of different styles and designs. In 1974, the last owners of the company, James and Robert McGinnity, donated the original shoe shop and more than 200 pairs of Ideal baby shoes to the society.

“We really dove in, and it's a pretty incredible collection,” said Laura Cilley, development coordinator at the Danvers Historical Society. “I just had absolutely no clue that there would be such a variety. So many incredible designs, colors, patterns — I mean, I wish they made them in adult sizes!”



More recent research into Day's history by historian Sheila Cooke-Kayser has revealed further details about her upbringing, business acumen, and family. We now know that she was born in Worthington in 1876 as the youngest of five children. After her father passed away in the 1890s, the family moved to Salem to work in the leather factories as stretchers, work that enabled her to bring home leather scraps and begin crafting the first iterations of Ideal Baby Shoes.



*Several pairs of leather baby shoes and a pair of child's gloves made by Adra Day's Ideal Baby Shoe Co., which started in Danvers over a century ago. Caroline Enos*

As a part of their monthly speaker series, the Danvers Historical Society will be hosting historian Sheila Cooke-Kayser to speak more in-depth about how Day's business went from taking home these leather scraps from her factory job to make shoes, to operating factories of her own and selling thousands of shoes a year.

The special presentation is scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 21, at 7 p.m. in Tapley Memorial Hall. The exhibit will be open Feb. 19, 21, and 23, from 10 a.m. to noon, also at Tapley Memorial Hall.

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