

much a year do I spend on clothes? Clothing is a hobby with some women."

When Ann and Dee dress for work in the morning, it's obvious whose hobby is the clothes rack and whose is the car engine.

Ann wears her own merchandise, seldom buying clothes anywhere else. Today she is dressed in light colors. A profusion of looping threads curtain her beige sweater. On her wrist, she wears a diamond-rimmed gold watch with an all-diamond face.

And Dee? Blue coveralls.

It's just a few steps from the gas station's ice freezer to the Fashion Station's Italian sweaters, from Miller Lite in neon, to Erez in leather.

Despite the contrasts within, from outside the store, it's not immediately apparent this Texaco sells anything that doesn't go in an engine. Many first-time clients are surprised when they walk in, they say.

"I've had several husbands say, 'This is the most expensive gas I've ever had to buy,'" Ann says.

The couple says that although Hearne seems an unlikely place for an exclusive women's shop, it's a convenient stop for commuters. The Station survives on business from Dallas, Waco and College Station, just passing through. Business from students at Texas A&M was slow at first, Ann says, but is picking up. And it's not t-shirts which interest her clientele.

They're buying imported jewelry, giraffe sweatshirts and Indonesian cut-work shirts. They are the type of blouses, sweaters and dresses that become the centerpiece of an outfit.

Dee masterminded the con-

version from garage to boutique, but Ann did the decorating. Her store assaults the senses with color. Red, orange and yellow straw handbags, a sweatshirt in fashionable peach, a dress in bright purples and aqua blues, all fight it out against an earthy, green background.

The Weatherfords have plans to expand the clothing store by another third, into the remaining garage.

"Eventually she may take over the whole building," Dee says. "The gas business is not that good."

Dee says business is so good he's going to have to build two more dressing rooms.

Three, says Ann.

"I get a carload of six women all the time," she says. "They make a whole day of it."

Ann says it's the character of her store, not the novelty, that brings clients back to her.

"People are hungry for a personal touch," she says. "When I go to a big shopping center I can walk all day and go home without anything."

Her steady client and fan Mattie Earle McCoslin, of Hearne, agrees. She finds Ann's stock superior that of mall stores.

"Everybody loves to come to her shop," McCoslin says. "If you're looking for a certain something, she'll get it for you."

When buying her inventory at the Dallas Apparel Mart, Ann looks for suppliers who will sell her the smallest possible quantities.

"Jewelry I'll mostly buy one of," she says. "If I buy a dress, I'll buy three."

Knowing her customers also allows her to keep them in mind when she shops.

People like being waited on by the boss, Dee says, especially older people who would rather work with someone their own age. Ann doesn't employ any strangers.



Ann Weatherford (above) runs the clothing half of the store, while her husband Dee runs the self-service gas station. The clothes store is located in an area of the station where the service bays used to be.

"I'm here almost all the time," she says. "If I'm not here you're either working with my stepdaughter or my mother-in-law."

Ann says she has had several requests to open stores in other places, such as Bryan/College Station, but she has refused.

"I'd rather do an excellent job with a small store and personally know my customers and personally buy for them," she says.

When Walmart came to Hearne, it put a lot of pressure on small stores. But Dee has confidence in the Fashion Station's approach. It will survive, he says, long after the others have "gone bottoms up."

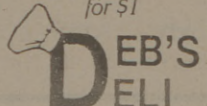
Ann and Dee have no plans to leave Hearne. So keep watching for the store that says "Texaco," "Low Clearance," and "25% off summer items." There's no telling what they'll be selling next.

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