



*at the elbow of* Wilkes Bashford

BY RANDY PERRY

The hotel conference room doesn't get decorated much to become an acceptable location for a political fundraiser. I scope out where the recipient of our client's contribution is doing her perfunctory meet and greet, the length of the reception line and, perhaps most importantly, the food being served. Is it filling or simply your tomatoes slapped on a Melba toast type that isn't enough to substitute for dinner?

I grab a plate and begin the selection process. Not bad. The shrimp is fresh. There's the multi-colored pasta with vegetables. Chicken strips have been skewered. I find my wall space and lean back. I pick up a discussion between two suited men that at first seems shallow and out of place. However, despite my condescension, it doesn't stop me from eavesdropping.

"The only button you fasten on your three-button suit is the one at belly button level," says a sartorially resplendent lobbyist.

"That's ridiculous," his counterpart argues with a vehemence that exceeds his policy discussions at the Capitol. "Why would you have that many buttons and only button one of them?"

"I'm not the answer guy," the lobbyist answers sarcastically.

My nosiness is piqued. I get those magazines and I read the Q and As regarding men's lives. I've learned a lot from those articles that answer the timeless questions such as, "Does my back hair really turn a woman off?" and "Boxers or briefs?"

I step into the conversation uninvited and offer my invaluable expertise and insight into the world of couture.

"Not every button is meant to be buttoned," I say with great seriousness. They smile numbly at my wisdom and for a moment we forget the shrimp and ponder this thought with the same solemnity of the apostle Peter advising Jesus whether he should button his caftan before giving his Sermon on the Mount.

After enlightening the politicians, I begin my drive home. But tonight I wasn't one of the cattle thinking of meetings made and my flashes of erudition and insight at exactly the right moment. No, I was haunted, taunted even by fashion questions. That night, as I carefully folded my long-legged pocketed briefs for later laundering and splashed on some cologne before getting into bed it hit me. I need my own answer guy. I need someone I can call when confronted by life's mysteries.

The next morning I awakened with the vigor of a convert. By God, I was going to find out who could answer the questions that leave me staring blankly at the closet when I'm thinking double-breasted or a daring four-button. The first step in my quest is to begin asking people I consider fashionably wise who they feel can fulfill my mission. To my surprise, my search ends as quickly as it begins. Two of the first three people I asked respond with the same name... "Wilkes Bashford, of course."

Wilkes Bashford.

I make the pilgrimage to Sutter Street in San Francisco to find out for myself if the most influential clothier in California can truly be my answer guy.

Wilkes, the first name coming from his mother's maiden name, greets me in the lobby of his elegant seven-story store. I stand tall and tighten my stomach muscles, my chest lifting, offering a model's straight lines from the back of my head to the heels of my shoes. I expect Wilkes to notice. He doesn't seem to. He's hungry and we decide to have lunch. I end up walking down Sutter Street with the youthful, dapper septuagenarian. He doesn't comment on my Thailand-made custom suit, or notice I am in the kind of shape that cutting edge customers of a certain age recognize as youthfulness.

I learn that Wilkes gets stopped by everyone. He wears a stylish hat and his suit is expensive looking but not ostentatious. Wilkes is nice looking, a naturally bemused expression giving a stamp of intelligence to his features. People walk past me to shake his hand. Even with my crooked Elvis smile and debonair nod, I am invisible. Wilkes is the most recognizable non-politician or sports figure in San Francisco. He is gracious and clever; Sutter Street is his neighborhood.

After a quick lunch that I just barely miss paying for when I drop my wallet as we both reach for the check, we walk to his private office at the store. It is guarded by a dachshund that makes up for a lack of size with a tenacious sense of territory. The office is stacked with papers and fabric swatches. Once we get settled in I ask my



WILKES AND THE TENACIOUS DACHSHUND; WILKES EARLY YEARS

first important question—how to get a beef stain off my “trousers”? I thought he would be impressed that I said trousers and not pants. He feels the material and says, “I think the best thing to do is to burn them.”

Wilkes can say anything without appearing rude. He was born in upstate New York into a small family, his brother considerably younger, and both of his parents doting. His father was a teacher and draftsman who helped run an International Harvester dealership in the days following the Second World War when there was money to be made marketing freezers. His mother was a housewife.

Wilkes went to the University of Cincinnati, a co-op school where he majored in Business and Economics. He explains that as a co-op school, he would go to school

for seven weeks, then work on a job for seven weeks. After five years he graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree and real world experience.

Wilkes felt he wanted to be on one coast or the other. He chose San Francisco because of a television show that featured the city in the stories and hooked him into moving out west. He was 26 years old.

In 1959 Wilkes got a job at the White House, at the time the city’s venerable department store. He worked there with the management team until one of the men’s clothing buyers left. At age 29, just three years after graduating college, Wilkes Bashford was promoted to one of the men’s buyers at the White House Department Store and was sent to Europe where he began his career buying and selling men’s clothes.

**California Conversations: Did you buy on instinct or did you have people advising you?**

**Wilkes Bashford:** It was instinct, but the buying offices had been around since the turn of the century and we had one in London, one in Paris, and one in Italy. There were plenty of people to give me advice.

*Wilkes worked at the White House Department Store from 1959 to 1965 when a poor business decision forced the grand place to close its doors. Wilkes was heartbroken. The store he grew to love was out of business and he was out of a job. He moved to New York and went to work as a fashion director. He traveled the country offering advice to others, but missed being in a store.*

**WB:** I returned to San Francisco and found a space. At that time you could do things that you couldn't do today, as far as opening a store with a minimum amount of capital.

**CC: Where was your first Wilkes Bashford?**

**WB:** On Sutter, across the street from where we are now. I had one other person invest in the store with me and there were three of us working there. I think our total investment in 1966, as I remember, was about \$40,000.

**CC: What was the name of the first store?**

**WB:** Wilkes Bashford. Same logo we have now.

*In the early days Wilkes and his partner were working six days a week. They did their own books and closed on Sunday. During that time they created the Wilkes Bashford slogan, "Menswear for the Bold Conservative."*

**CC: Will the bold conservative wear an Italian suit?**

**WB:** He's not a cutting edge guy, but he'll step out a little bit with some guts.

**CC: What separated Wilkes Bashford from the other stores opening at the same time?**

**WB:** There were no other stores opening. San Francisco was a conservative town in menswear at that time. When we opened, there weren't any designers like there are today; Ralph Lauren, Giorgio Armani, Versace...

*Wilkes Bashford, the store, began to boom in 1971. Wilkes explains how the timing of the expansion of the store, which included a comfortable, fully stocked bar, was partly due to the emergence of menswear designers.*

*Wilkes was going to Europe and meeting with the young Europeans. In New York he met an ambitious young man by the name of Ralph Lauren.*

**WB:** Someone told me there was this kid doing interesting things with ties that were wide. In 1966, ties were real narrow, 3" or less and they sold for about \$5. There was this young kid in the Empire State Building doing these wider ties. I went to the 25<sup>th</sup> Floor and Ralph was sitting in a room by himself. The neckwear company had given him one room to show his ties. I bought the ties, and he invited me to the downstairs restaurant. The amazing thing was, he told me what he was going to do with his life, and he was maybe 25 at the time. He did everything he said he was going to.

**CC: You talk about the designers...**

**WB:** I knew them all. When I first came into contact with them, they were designers for other companies, designers who wanted to put a little more into their menswear. Remember, menswear was a relatively young field, so what you had were manufacturers who knew how to make a beautiful product, but they didn't have a sense of fashion or design. At this particular period, there was an awakening. The Italians, in particular, decided it was time to push some style in men's fashion. So, these talented people, Giorgio Armani and Gianni Versace, were able to flourish.

*At that time, the three fashion capitals were Milan, Florence and Rome. Wilkes reflected back on how 30 years prior, Florence started a small trade show called "Pitti Uomo." He explains how the shows took place twice a year and anyone who wanted to be a factor in the menswear industry attended.*

**WB:** I got a trophy for being one of three American retailers who went to the first 20 shows. I was in an advantageous position to pick up the collections of these new designers as they developed. So, when Giorgio Armani stopped designing for other companies and started his own company, I introduced him to San Francisco...same thing with Versace.

*Wilkes explains that for a period of 25 years, he would travel to Europe four times a year.*

**WB:** We did Italy, France, and England, but then I began to throw in Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Belgium.

There were some good designers there; I looked them up.

**CC:** Can you look at a suit and tell if it's an Armani or Versace?

**WB:** Most definitely. Armani's clothes are very precise. They have a look that doesn't vary much. He's an intellectual designer. He thinks of a concept that he wants to introduce and he is particular with his achievement. Versace was an emotional designer. He put flare and excitement into it. These designers have a "look." There are people who have been designing for years, but never establish a "look."

**CC:** What's the difference between buying your suits and having one handmade in Thailand?

**WB:** Our suits are handmade by the finest houses in Italy. Brioni has a school where they train their tailors. They start when they are 16 and by the time they touch any part of the garment, they have been intensively trained. So, you have a suit hand-tailored by the best because the Italians have it in their system to make a beautiful garment. A custom made suit is generally made by one man. Who knows what he feels in his hand? Too many people equate "custom made" with something great, but you have to ask, "How good was the custom tailor?" You also have to ask, "Did your custom tailor access the best fabrics?" So I say, unless an individual has a physical reason that he needs an individual fitting, I don't see a need for a custom suit.

**CC:** What causes a change in styles? Are you trying to influence those to whom you are selling, or are you influenced?

**WB:** I think it's both. You can't ignore the overall movements that are taking place. For example, some men like double breasted and at one point double breasted was 60% of our business and now it's probably 8%. The key is trying to be ahead of the move.

**CC:** What causes the changes?

**WB:** Someone famous is caught wearing different clothes, or an influential movie comes along. Armani, in "American Gigolo" with Richard Gere, had a tremendous influence on the market. All of a sudden people wanted that look. Ralph did "The Great Gatsby" and for the next three or four years, solid color blazers were major. You have to just look ahead.

*It was time to let Wilkes know I was doing my homework.*

**CC:** I heard one-button suits are happening in Europe right now.

**WB:** One-button suits have been happening for a long time, but only in a small amount of the market. The number of buttons on a suit is kind of exaggerated in its importance. When it comes right down to it, the only real issue for what is selling is two buttons and three buttons. If our suits weren't double breasted, they were all two buttons. Eight or nine years ago,



WILKES AT HOME; WILKES WITH FRIEND; SHOPPING AT WILKES BASHFORD

## measuring Willie Brown



Willie Brown was a 39 regular when he met Wilkes Bashford in 1966. If you are shopping for him, Willie is now a 42 regular.

It is only because computers have become sophisticated that it is possible to begin numbering the suits Willie has

worn. His love of clothes is a matter of record and, even more, Wilkes goes so far as to say that Willie Brown may be the most stylish person he has ever met.

California Conversations, in an effort to expand the scope of in-depth investigative journalism, went to the archives in search of what we believed could be a contradiction in style displayed by the long time Assembly Speaker and former mayor.

Wilkes would have none of it. He said the rules of plaids and stripes being worn in the same outfit don't apply to individuals like Willie. He said Willie Brown is daring enough, and has enough sense of self that he can wear anything.

Enough said, Mr. Bashford.

three-button, which comes from the traditional market, Brooks Brothers, became very popular in Europe. With the three-button suit comes the long, more slender look. Now I'm beginning to see two buttons taking over again this year.

**CC:** I know it sounds ridiculous, but that is what actually brought me to your doorstep...do you fasten the top button of a 3-button suit or not?

**WB:** (*Wilkes smiles patiently*) The largest part of a man is straight across his chest, which is why you never fasten the top button of a 3-button suit. For example, our suits are made to roll into the middle button so that it elongates you, makes you look taller and in better shape. You can take our suit to the cleaners and the cleaner can make a mistake in pressing it, but if the suit is made well, it will always roll to the center button. The roll of a suit is not accidental. These suits are cut this way so even if a mistake is made in the laundering, it doesn't change the way the suit lays.

**CC:** I noticed the trousers have changed. No cuffs now, flat panel...

**WB:** The issues in trousers are always going to be pleated or plain? Medium or low rise? What should the diameter of the leg be? Those are really the issues in trousers, and they change all the time to keep things looking fresh.

**CC:** Pocket squares. When do you wear them?

**WB:** Pocket squares can always be worn to dress up a suit. The type of pocket square is based on the occasion. A silk pocket square is normally worn in the evening for more formal occasions, wherein a loose more flowing square can be worn casually and during the day.

*Having fully satisfied my quest for an answer man, I didn't want to end this conversation without asking Wilkes about his friendships with the characters that shape the city he loves.*

**CC:** Do you remember the first time you met Willie Brown?

**WB:** He came in the store shortly after we opened, and he claims I thought he was a shoplifter. The true version is I thought he was a competitor, because he knew so much about the clothes. Whenever he introduces me, he always says I thought he was a shoplifter.



WILKES WITH JERRY BROWN, ANGELA AND JOE ALIOTO; STREET THUG; A DASHING WILKES; WILKES WITH MARY MARTIN

**CC:** When did you meet the legendary columnist, Herb Caen?

**WB:** Probably about the same time as Willie. You have to remember these are two very inquisitive men who want to know everything that's going on. If something new was happening in San Francisco, like a new store, Herb wanted to know about it. He came in very early on and he was in his own way a quiet dandy. He loved clothes and knew a lot about them.

**CC:** Herb was a close friend?

**WB:** Yes, I spent every Christmas Eve with him from 1969 until the Christmas Eve before he died. Willie, Herb and I started having lunch every Wednesday in 1974, and did so until Herb died in 1997. Willie and I still do it.

**CC:** You're soft spoken, dignified, quiet and very gentlemanly. Willie, who we love, is very outgoing. Where did Herb fit in on this?

**WB:** Herb was wonderful, although he could be stern. People were always trying to be witty around him, and would repeat themselves hoping to get into his column. I always wondered how a kid that grew up in Sacramento was so worldly and knew so many things. He was an amazingly well-versed person on facts and the world.

*Wilkes' knowledge is overwhelming. And, although I feel we are starting our descent, I realize I have not asked any details about today's Wilkes Bashford store.*

**CC: What was your largest sale?**

**WB:** Well, if we're talking just clothes, because we used to sell jewelry, that would be \$130,000–\$140,000.

**CC: Average price of a suit?**

**WB:** The majority of the suits we sell are Brioni and go from \$4,000–\$7,000. Then we carry some designer products on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor—the suits run from about \$1,800–\$7,000, with the majority of them being in the \$3,500–\$4,000 range.

**CC: Average price for a dress shirt?**

**WB:** Around \$345.00.

**CC: Shoes?**

**WB:** \$450.00.

**CC: When someone walks into the store and says, “I want to buy a suit from Wilkes Bashford.” Is that a suit off-the-rack?**

**WB:** Yes, but it can also be a made-to-measure suit.

**CC: The price difference of a suit off-the-rack and a made-to-measure suit is what...double?**

**WB:** No, there's not that much difference. It all depends.

**CC: I think the average person doesn't understand how it works. When would I choose a made-to-measure vs. off-the-rack suit?**

**WB:** It's actually quite simple. If you walk into our store and find a suit in the fabric that you like, and we happen to have your size, we can sell you that suit with perhaps a few in-house alterations. However, if we have a suit in the fabric that you like, but have sold the size that you need, we can generally measure you and have that suit made in the same fabric in Italy. You will receive your suit 6-8 weeks later. We would then call you to come back to the store, and we would do the final alterations here.

**CC: Seasonal clothes. Are they based on color or fabric weight?**

**WB:** Generally fabric weight, although color enters into it too.

*My answer guy answers questions faster than I can ask them. I begin to think about what my newfound fashion buddies in Sacramento would want to know.*

**CC: If you had to pick three things people don't know about suits, what would they be?**

**WB:** The biggest problem is not getting a suit fitted properly, or exaggerating the details on a suit, too many stitches or colors, and not keeping the suit elegant. It is in the details more than anything else.

**CC: What decides the price of a suit?**

**WB:** The biggest differences in the price of a suit are whether it's handmade or machine made and the type of fabric. If you're dealing with a store that carries virtually all handmade clothing, it doesn't matter how you order it, whether it's made-to-measure or right out of stock. It's the fabric and the fact that it's handmade.

*This year the Wilkes Bashford Company is celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary by opening a new store—their fifth—in Carmel. Although he employs approximately 100 people, the statistic I found amazing is that the average length of stay for an employee is more than 20 years. One of the gentlemen I met when looking at sale items, shared that he has been with the company 30 years. He thinks of Wilkes Bashford, the person, as family and Wilkes Bashford, the store, as home.*

*I ask about discounts for friends. Never is the response. He says his prices are fair and he wouldn't want his clients, who are also his friends, to ever think that one person gets a price the other doesn't. I'm nothing if I'm not sensitive, and when he tells me that his personal life and life at the store are synonymous, I settle for that being as much as he wants to talk about. He does admit to a longtime love affair—the other person is in heaven now, no doubt preparing the angels for a future move to Brioni suits. We chat amiably and the conversation winds down.*

*After meeting Wilkes Bashford, I simply want to wake up each morning knowing that my suit will always roll to the middle...I'll have you know, out of gratitude for the hours he gave me, I bought a pair of Grovati Wilkes Bashford shoes on sale—I won't talk in public about them costing \$250.00...they were 50% off. Although the bright orange bag holding my shoes was not as large as I hoped, I carried it to the car with pride. Wilkes was right...I felt different in the shoes, because of how well they're made and the handcrafting that went into making them a special fit. Best of all, I could now say I'm connected to Wilkes when I act as my own answer guy and give advice at future fundraisers.*