

Hennepin

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The Bundt pan
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From Ethiopia to Minnesota
Lake Minnetonka's Crona Craft
Prizewinning cupcakes
Woolworth's stores
Events & exhibitions
and more!



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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MIGHTY FIVE-AND-DIME

BY WILLIAM E. BURLESON

It's hard to imagine a business that was so at once iconic, romanticized, and — at times — vilified as the venerable five-and-dime, F. W. Woolworth. The once-ubiquitous and seemingly indestructible international conglomerate has been gone for two decades, and the mention of its name brings smiles and “I remember when” from people of a certain age while garnering blank stares from the smartphone set.

To tell the story of Woolworth's, a good place to start is 1979, when two watershed events took place. First, Woolworth's celebrated its centennial. There was a lot

to celebrate: the corporation, including the namesake five-and-dime stores, Woolco and its hip Kenney Shoes, Footlocker, and a number of other subsidiaries across the world, had more than 4,000 stores with more than 200,000 employees. The second event was that I got a job at the 701 Nicollet Mall store in downtown Minneapolis. This could have arguably been the peak of the retail behemoth's powers and the beginning of its demise (1979, not my getting a job there.). The F. W. Woolworth Company was such an institution that it was one of the Dow Jones's 30 businesses. In less than 20 years, the entire retail empire was gone.

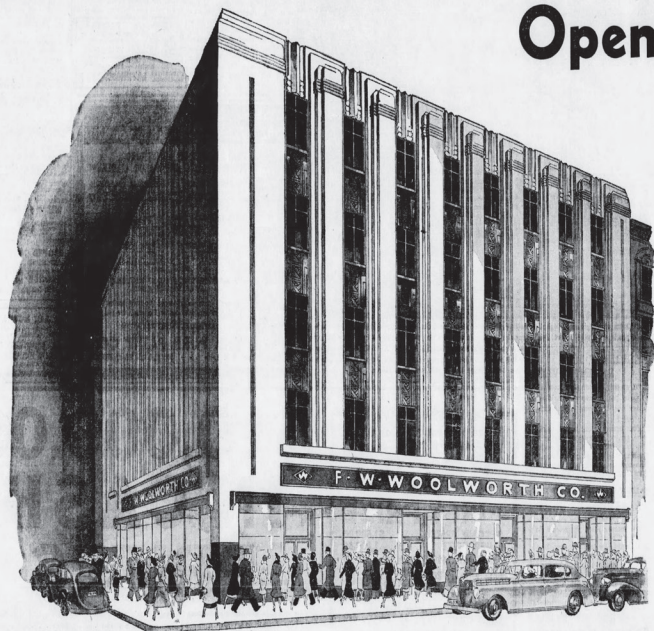
WOOLWORTH'S HISTORY

It would be hard to overemphasize how ubiquitous Woolworth's stores were in the American landscape. There were once 3,000 Woolworth's stores in North America, anchoring downtowns small and large, key streetcar strips, and, later, shopping malls.

If you are in that aforementioned smartphone set and unfamiliar with Woolworth's, imagine a large dollar store or a tiny Walmart. A good comparison is one of those new small format Targets that can be found in Uptown and Stadium Village in Minneapolis and all over New York City, only without the groceries and cachet. Woolworth's carried everything a person needed — toiletries, paper goods, stationary, fabrics, not to mention candy, pets, records, and cigarettes: all the necessities.

Postcard from the collections of Dean Borghorst

WOOLWORTH'S NEW STORE Opens Friday



Nicollet Avenue has a new store! A store worthy of this great shopping thoroughfare—a store worthy of the progressive spirit of Minneapolis and of the Northwest! Woolworth's new building is completed—its new, modern and completely air-conditioned store is ready to invite your patronage. Shop in complete comfort at Woolworth's in any season of the year! Lunch at Woolworth's for economy and good food!



I got the grandest peek in the world—down to get through the new store before it was opened to the public. I had a peek at the store in one of New York's windowless streets. They have everything you can think of on their new store floor. Every single article in the store has something to bring you. They have the most complete assortment of goods in the store. They have the most complete assortment of goods in the store. They have the most complete assortment of goods in the store.

Attend the Grand Opening Friday, April 9th, Starting at 9:30 A. M.

- Modern to the last detail, Woolworth's new Nicollet Avenue store will officially open for business Friday morning, April 9th, at 9:30 o'clock. You are cordially invited to be present at the formal opening and to inspect at your leisure the three spacious floors of especially selected, big-value merchandise.
- Woolworth's new store building represents the last word in architectural and engineering genius—in planning, in design, in construction, and in equipment. Nothing has been overlooked that might contribute to the comfort and convenience of the shopper. The entire store is air-conditioned to maintain proper temperatures and proper humidity the year 'round. All water is drawn from Woolworth's own deep, Artesian well. All foods are prepared in modern, sanitary kitchens right in the building. All baked goods, pastries, breads, etc., are mixed and baked in a model bakery in the building. Cakes are kept in a dust and vermin-proof vault where temperatures are maintained at just the right level.
- At every counter, the thrifty shopper will recognize outstanding merchandise values. From staples and necessities to hobby and gift articles, Woolworth's will not only offer you more for your money, but in many cases items that cannot be duplicated elsewhere.
- Woolworth's is proud to offer its modern and greatly increased facilities to Minneapolis—and, through its new building, to give evidence of its faith in the future of the Northwest.

STORE DIRECTORY

BASEMENT	MAIN FLOOR	SECOND FLOOR
Laundry Department	Laundry Department	History & Relics
Cosmetics	Sale Articles	Liquors
Books Stationery	Candy	Toy Goods
Gloves	Jewelry	Military
Cordery	Greeting Cards	Headwear
Toys	Stationery	Ribbon and Lace
Hardware	Knives	Trunks
Tinware and Sewing	Candy Novelties	Art Goods
Lamp Shades and Lamps	Cosmetics	Shoes
Household Supplies	Shirts	Art Flowers
Pat Supplies	Shirtings	Buttons
Garden Seeds and Bulbs	Shirtings	
Grocery Supplies	Shirtings	



FOOD and FOUNTAIN SERVICE. One of the features of Woolworth's new store is its store-length, attractive lunch counter on the main and basement floors. 126 individual stools will accommodate rush hour patrons. Model kitchens will handle the preparation of all foods. Breakfasts, lunches and fountain refreshments will be served from opening to closing every day. You'll want to eat at Woolworth's often.



ESCALATOR TO SECOND FLOOR. No need to climb the stairs to get to Woolworth's new second floor departments—you can ride up the stairs. The big, convenient escalator, in action all day long, will do your climbing for you. Visit Woolworth's second floor, via the escalator located at the rear of the main floor.

F. W. WOOLWORTH CO.

NICOLLET AVENUE AT SEVENTH STREET

Long before I worked at the IDS Center store (right inside the Crystal Court door, selling cigarettes), I bought my first record single there — *Superstition* by Stevie Wonder — for 99 cents. My family often shopped downtown — that's what people did — and Woolworth's was a regular stop. I can still smell the candy and popcorn of the old, pre-IDS Center store, and I remember sitting at the counter at the grill. Sometimes we would go out to Southdale as well. Woolworth seemed to anchor the middle of the mall, with a takeout in the front and people eating their fried chicken in the courtyard, making for a very different mall experience than today.

It was all the dream of one Frank Winfield Woolworth. Woolworth was born April 13, 1852, and grew up as a farm boy in northern New York State. He knew he didn't want to be a farmer; instead, he hungered for the life of a successful merchant. But at the time this was a hard job to come by. In 1873, Woolworth finally got a job as an apprentice at the Watertown, New York, dry goods store, Augsbury & More.

In 1879, Woolworth took advantage of a marketing craze, the five-cent store, to open his first store in downtown Utica, New York. While it opened to booming sales, business quickly dropped off as people realized there wasn't a lot of quality you could buy for a nickel, even in 1879. He closed the store and opened another one in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, that very same year. There he carried dime merchandise as well, opening up a world of higher-quality goods. Woolworth's stores sold merchandise for literally five and ten cents, and sometimes 20 cents, for the next 50 years.

Frank Woolworth continued to have successes and failures along the way, hunting for the right business model. An early product success were glass Christmas ornaments. According to the 1940 book *Five and Ten, the Fabulous Life of*

F. W. Woolworth, Woolworth said, "I was incredulous. It was hard to understand what the people would want with those colored glass things." They sold out in two days. Candy was another early success. At one point, Woolworth's sold one-seventh of the candy sold in the U. S. And then there was the sign. It's hard to imagine a more recognized sign than the Woolworth classic red-and-gold signs, rumored to have been designed by Frank himself. For many decades, the

solid gold serif font graced streetcar lines and main streets across the country. While this branding would eventually be updated, from my observations, the F. W. Woolworth company was not in the habit of updating old stores. As a result, you might have seen the old streamlined high-style signs into the 1970s and beyond.

But Frank Woolworth's key innovation as a retailer involved both merchandising and personnel. He was having trouble finding enough of the right kind of worker: the Family Man. His solution: display merchandise on counters where the customer could make their own selection, eliminating the need for a salesman and opening the door to hiring young women who only needed to wrap the customer's purchase. He could pay these young women pennies, far less than the salesmen. Thus was born the self-service merchandising model that we take for granted now.

I mentioned that at times Woolworth's was vilified. Paying women poorly had its problems, and labor issues would dog Frank Woolworth and those who followed him. In 1892, Woolworth's "counter girls" went on strike in some of Woolworth's busiest stores. In 1899, Woolworth's got the message and gave Christmas bonuses of \$25 and raised the wage from \$1.50 to \$2.50 a week. In the book, *Remembering Woolworth's: A nostalgic History of the World's Most Famous Five-and-Dime*, Karen Plunkett-Powell reports that 80 percent of Woolworth's employees between 1876 and 1940 were women — young women — most being between 18 and 21. According to Plunkett-Powell, "When it came to paying his hardworking female wage employees, Mr. Woolworth was an old Scrooge."

There were strikes for higher wages in New York and Chicago all the way to small stores in Texas. In 1937, there was a "sit-down" strike in Detroit, where counter girls refused to leave until their demands were met.



Southdale's Woolworth's store, mid-1950s



Southdale Woolworth's lunch counter, 1956

Photo courtesy Gruen Associates

This situation persisted well into the second half of the century. Through the 1970s, nearly all managers were male and there were no female higher-level executives.

Linda Crosby Johnson was a South Minneapolis girl who took the 14A bus on Bloomington Avenue to work at the downtown Woolworth's. "When I started, there were still about five women who had worked during the war (World War II)." One slow day, she inquired from the woman who took care of the linen area why she wasn't a floor manager since they used her as such when the male floor manager went on break or lunch. "She told me she used to be the store manager during the war but when the men came back, the females who had filled in for them were all demoted to department positions." But this discrimination wasn't historical, it was ongoing. "The Personnel Department was a female and the Head of Security was female, all the rest of management were male." It didn't go unnoticed. "At one time two attorneys asked if I had ever been offered a management position, and, if not, they wanted to represent me in a case against Woolworth's," says Crosby Johnson.

I saw the same situation that Johnson saw, but in my case, I benefited from it. I worked at Woolworth's part-time while going to college. After I dropped out, I went to work full-time. At that point, I was one of about 100 clerks, who were, with one other exception, all women. Meanwhile, the management team were all men. Within a month of my going full-time, I was promoted to the position of floor manager, passing up many far more experienced and probably equally motivated women. I like to think I worked hard and earned it, but I doubt I worked that hard.

Crosby Johnson's story about how World War II echoed decades later reminds me of a retirement party I attended in the mid-1980s. The party was for an assistant manager. At the party, they showed slides from the past, and there was the assistant manager in his early twenties, fresh out of World War II as an elevator operator, and with him in the photos were all the other old timers at the party. They had all worked there, and been friends their entire adult lives. The young men in the pictures, managers; the young women, clerks. They were a family, albeit a patriarchal one.

To talk about Woolworth's, we cannot leave out how discrimination is another reason Woolworth's was vilified on a national scale. On February 1, 1960, four African American college students sat down at a lunch counter at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. They wanted service but were denied and asked to leave. They refused. The rest is history, representing a key moment in the struggle for civil rights. The lunch counter itself now is at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

WOOLWORTH'S IN HENNEPIN COUNTY

My IDS Center store I worked at was just the last of four Nicollet Avenue Woolworth's. In 1904, Frank Woolworth traveled west and

bought 21 independent five-and-dimes, including one each in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The Minneapolis store was at 509-511 Nicollet Avenue, and the 1903 city directory lists that location as having been Pfohl & Smith, a notions retailer.

Woolworth's would be there until 1937, when they built a new building at 701 Nicollet, the busiest shopping corner in Minneapolis with Dayton's and Donaldson's department stores and Kresge (a competing five-and-dime chain) on the other three corners. Woolworth's new high-style moderne building — no small investment and a rare one in downtown Minneapolis for the Great Depression — featured air-conditioning and an escalator to the second floor.

Joan Wright, 84, a Washburn High graduate, still recalls the wood floors. "Sometimes I would take the streetcar downtown, transferring twice, to meet a friend to shop at Woolworth's." Says Wright. "I remember sitting at the lunch counter, having a chocolate thick ice cream drink kind of like a milkshake."

"I have memories 60-plus-years-old of going Christmas shopping at Woolworth's — the crowds, the smells, the lights," says Bonnie Batcheller Patrick about the downtown Minneapolis store. Bonnie, 65, grew up in the South Side around 29th Avenue South and Minnehaha Parkway. "As I remember, my mother took me on the bus downtown before Christmas." She recalls that, "The crowds were scary, given that I was short and everyone else was tall, the Christmas lights in the store, the decorations were overwhelmingly bright." Woolworth's was the source of warmer-month memories as well. "Every summer my father would bring home 'ice cream cookies' (wafer cookies) in huge bags," she adds, "I associate them with summer."

Finally, in 1970, this building — one that would now surely draw the attention of historical preservationists because of its beautiful high-style deco details — would be torn down to build the IDS Center.

Of course, the story of Woolworth's on the Mall was not over yet. "I started at Woolworth's when they temporarily moved from the corner of 7th and Nicollet to the middle of the block on Nicollet between 6th and 7th. I believe this was in the late spring 1970," says Linda Crosby Johnson. The store had moved one block away to the old Kresge building (not the original corner location but a smaller building at 628 Nicollet). The new store featured some new ideas. "Woolworth's was trying out some new departments on the second floor, and I worked in the sporting goods area. There was also a new men's wear department; together these two took up half of the floor. The sporting goods department was designed to compete with Dayton's and the other main downtown stores. We carried a full range of firearms, handguns, and ammo."

This location — and the sporting good department — were just temporary until the new Philip Johnson masterpiece, the IDS Center, was completed. In 1973 Woolworth's moved home to the same prime spot it had been in since 1937. The new store brought with it the traditional smell of candy and popcorn and the usual

August 13, 1967

mix of necessities and impulse buys, including records, parakeets, souvenirs, and toys, plus now large men's and women's clothing departments. It also featured two food takeouts for the busy downtown worker and three sit-down restaurants: a grill in the basement serving homeless vets, retirees, and shiny-suited café that few people probably knew was part of Woolworth's; and the noble Harvest House cafeteria, which would eventually inherit the regulars from the Forum Cafeteria when it closed a block up 7th Street (you can't go wrong with a self-serve bottomless cup of coffee).

This was my store. I was proud to work there since I had to wear a tie, and no one in my family owned ties. I worked in several departments, and, as I mentioned, eventually became a floor manager, but my salad days were clearly at that cigarette counter. Well, cameras, too, but Woolworth's sold a lot more cigarettes than cameras. At lunchtime, people would queue up for cigarettes, and we took great pride in how fast we could move the line along. Over time, I had a routine of juggling the packs and cartons, flipping the change in the air, and snapping the money. It made the day a bit more fun for me, and, maybe, for the customer as well. And

