Preserving Minneapolis music
The Bundt pan
Site of 1934 Teamsters strike
Other local history groups
From Ethiopia to Minnesota
Lake Minnetonka’s Crona Craft
Prizewinning cupcakes
Woolworth’s stores
Events & exhibitions
and more!
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-dimes 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.
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 & Moore.

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 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 recognizable 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 salesmen 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.

F. W. Woolworth's new store opens Friday.
The Personnel Department was a female and the Head of Security Woolworth’s. “When I started, there were still about five women. They were a family, albeit a patriarchal one. The young men in the pictures, managers; the young women, clerks. They had all worked there, and been friends their entire adult lives. 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 Woolworths, we cannot leave out how discriminating the store was, especially in the early 1960s. At lunchtime, people would be throwing food at the window, and cameras, too, would be turned on to capture the scene. Woolworth’s was known for its strict policies, especially regarding race and gender. During this time, it was common for black students to sit at a Woolworth’s lunch counter and be denied service. This led to the famous sit-in at a Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina, which eventually led to the Civil Rights Movement.

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. “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. It 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.

“Why do you think Woolworth’s was tried so hard to compete in the sporting goods area?”

“This location — and the sporting goods 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 mix of necessities and impulse buys, including records, parakeets, souvenirs, and toys, plus new larger clothing departments. It also featured two food takeouts for the busy downtown workers and three sit-down restaurants: a grill in the basement service for retirees, and shiny-suited lawyers, a second-floor 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 department with high-style deco details — would be torn down to build the IDS Center.

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They all died by the end of the week, Apache Plaza, and, briefly, Brookdale. Woolworth’s was merely reflecting how Woolworth’s were gone, save Dan Woolworth’s locations across Minneapolis, and it seemed at times (without the e) sansserif logo.

Minneapolis demolished the streetcar and profitable service. After everything you needed was a practical and profitable service. After Minneapolis demolished the streetcar system and freeways began taking people to the suburbs, Woolworth’s soon followed. Now, instead of anchoring Minneapolis arteries, Woolworth sold their pendants and Pic-a-Mix candy in shopping malls such as the aforementioned Southdale, plus Knollwood Plaza, Apache Plaza, and, briefly, Brookside.

The iconic red-and-gold signs were replaced with a new, sixty modern (without the e) sansserif logo.

The End of Woolworth’s

The foreboding of their coming demise must have been the closing of Woolco. In the 1960s, not only were big malls popping up, Target, Walmart, and K-Mart were also changing how we shopped. Soon we were driving on wide freeways to big-box stores surrounded by acres of parking. Woolworth tried their hand at big box discount retailing as well as their Woolco chain (of which there were none in Hennepin Country). Woolco lost money. Finally, in 1982, all US Woolcos closed, resulting in the loss of 30,000 jobs. According to the New York Times, September 25, 1982, among other causes of Woolco’s demise was commitment. “We started about the same time as K-Mart. We have 310 stores. They have about 2,000,” Edward F. Gibbons, chairman and CEO of Woolworths, told the Times. “Their commitment to the discount business was more complete than ours.”

The old five-and-dimes persisted, but their days were numbered. Finally, in 1993, Woolworth’s closed 20 of 21 stores in Minnesota, including my 701 Nicollet Mall store. A sign of the times, the Nicollet Mall location became a Gap.

Newspaper columnists lamented the loss, and the long-time Nicollet store manager even authored a Star Tribune commentary on the greed of retail. Woolworth’s, closing a profitable store that served so many people. Finally, in 1995, the lone Minnesota store at the Rochester Apache Mall turned off its lights for the last time.

In 1997, the last 400-plus stores in the US and hundreds more abroad closed. The mighty had fallen. Why is open to speculation. For sure, the old five-and-dimes suffered from neglect in favor of the corporation’s portfolio of specialty stores. And shopping had changed, with big-boxes firmly anchoring sales of basic goods. Even the shopping malls — where Woolworth’s had gone all in — were changing, moving away from the utilitarian toward youth and fashion. Or maybe as with Woolco, it was simply more profitable to close.

No matter the causes, the result was no more goldfish, no more Pic-a-Mix candy, no more tables of seemingly random stuff, and no more five-and-dimes.

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Me, I fled in the mid-1980s. I continued in retail with a smaller, but fast-growing little drugstore business called Walgreens. Now, several careers later, I still have a giant warm spot for Woolworths.

Today remnants of the old five-and-dimes remain. Some of the specialty stores — Foot Locker, Lady Foot Locker, and more — continue under the Foot Locker corporate name. Meanwhile, Woolworth’s name can still be found in Australia, Germany, and Mexico, not associated with the original business Frank built. But in Hennepin County, all that remains are the 5 remember when the occasional store front where if you squint, you can still see the original red and gold Woolworth’s sign. Frank Woolworth must have been so proud of.

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