Remnants of an Era: Two Silent Stores

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT was not the marketing of opulence. It catered to anything except expensive excess. It was an idea based on frugality and the most for the least. It was, in fact, a matter of nickels and dimes; it was that great American institution, the five-and-ten.

In theory and in folklore it is still going strong. F.W. Woolworth is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. A number of Woolworth's competitors and copiers are around in one form or another. Kress's and Kresge's, Newberry's, Lamston's and Grant's, have engaged in the battle of bargains and novelties over the years as prices rose from a dime to a dollar.

But "The Great Five and Ten Cent Store," Woolworth's first successful foray into the formula in Lancaster, Pa., in 1878, is a set of faded pictures now, and the "Woolworth idea" of selling an immense variety of goods at a fixed, low price is a thing of the past. The other essential part of the formula — arranging counterloads of merchandise so that customers could see and handle every item — has become a casualty of security and the packaging industry.

Corporate and marketing developments and changes in production, distribution and life styles have turned the small-goods variety store into the discount supermarket that sells everything from brand-name clothing to major appliances.

The price tag can run in the hundreds and the tender is plastic credit. But this is more than a revolution in selling styles. The rise and fall of the five-and-ten involves many themes: fashions in merchandising and morality, the development of trends and tastes, and a new scale and set of standards for retail operations that have turned those

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who practiced a thrifty Yankee and pioneer ethic into a profligate consumer society.

To students of American business and culture, this is an instructive chapter of socio-economic history. But for many of us the phasing out of the five-and-ten is a matter of pure, bathetic nostalgia. The mortal illness was not just creeping inflation. The death of the dime store is an all-too-appropriate story for our times.

The flagship stores of two of the largest competing chains — Woolworth and Kress — now stand empty at opposite corners of 39th Street on Fifth Avenue. Kress's was built in the popular Art Deco style as the crowning glory of

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F.W. Woolworth Company

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"dimedom" in 1935; Woolworth's followed with an equally impressive Fifth Avenue store within a few years. The mode has been called Depression Modern by Martin Greif, and the Skyscraper Style by Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, in books of the same name that celebrate the architecture of the period. As Woolworth Modern, it continued to be the rather "retardataire" style of choice for the chain through the 1950's.

The Kress Building closed in September 1977, and Woolworth's followed last June. The two silent stores symbolized the end of an era. For millions of Americans, the climax and greatest joy of every downtown outing when they were young was the trip to the five-and-ten. For the boys it was the lure of unlimited gadgets and hardware counters that displayed every size and shape of shining hooks, nails and screws. For girls it was the clandestinely purchased Tangee lipstick and the dazzling array of forbidden costume jewelry.

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In the fall, the back-to-school counter supplied the marbleized cardboard notebooks and cedar-scented pencils, the snap-ringed loose leaf binders and fresh sheaves of paper that signaled the season's start. There were after-school banana splits and tricolored ice cream sandwiches enclosed in square cookie covers with the flavor of pasteboard — a taste that became addictive.

The stores smelled of sweet candies and cosmetics and burned toast from the luncheonette counters along the wall; they echoed to the sound of feet on hardwood floors, the ringing of old-fashioned cash registers and the clanging of bells for change.

And there was the absolute saturation of the eye with every conceivable knickknack, arranged with a geometric precision based on the sales and esthetic theory that more is more. Show windows composed totally of fluted handkerchiefs, or enamel pots, or bars of soap, were an underappreciated art form.

Rows of snap fasteners on cards and stacks of cups and saucers were joined by new colored plastics of infinite uses and rampant kitsch that are now collectors' items. No one had yet invented targeted promotions or point-of-sale displays. There was a simple cornucopia of counters. "What the bazaar was to the Middle East," the anniversary literature tells us, "Woolworth's was to America."

F.W. Woolworth Company

Windows were arranged on the theory that more is more

"Nothing over 10 cents" was the gilt-lettered message suspended from the ceiling in early Woolworth stores and emblazoned in gold on the carmine-red signs outside. The limit was held even as competitors raised the ante in the search for more varied goods, to five, 10 and 15 cents, and then to five, 10 and 25 cents, and finally to a dollar top.

By 1919, when Frank Woolworth died, 600,000 American babies were wearing his 10-cent gold-filled rings. European and Japanese imports had become common. The Kress stores, with the declared aim of making life better for everyone, introduced reproductions of art masterpieces for a quarter, and "realistic" artificial flowers for a dime.

In 1932, Woolworth finally lifted its 10-cent limit to 20 cents, and in 1935 all arbitrary price levels were removed. Dollar hats and 70-cent turkey dinners were a far cry from the five-cent "Yankee notions" of the first stores — the safety pins, thimbles, combs, button hooks, collar buttons, boot straps, pencils, baby bibs, harmonicas and napkins that were the Yankee peddler's stock in trade.

Small change built both fortunes and monuments. In 1913, the newly completed Woolworth Building in Lower Manhattan, the world's tallest skyscraper at the time, was flooded with light from a switch in the White House, and Cass Gilbert's Gothic extravaganza was immediately dubbed the "cathedral of commerce."

The elaborate terra cotta traceries, the facade sculpture and glittering mosaics, are said to have been paid for in cash by Frank Woolworth's nickels and dimes. The founder sat in an office that was a replica of the Empire Room of Napoleon's palace at Compiègne, except that marble was substituted for wood.

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Samuel H. Kress's Fifth Avenue store of 1935, by the architect Edward F. Sibbert, featured granite, stainless steel, bronze and baked enamel, and deco details that look like the tops of palm trees in the sunrise. Critics were less enthusiastic about its style than its functional plan, which included warehousing on the premises and fixed outlines on the floor for ladders and other movable equipment. This concern with the saving of time and energy harked back to Samuel Kress's Pennsylvania Dutch belief in "the essential rightness of conservative frugality," which also included the removal and saving of nails from crates.

It was hard work and hard bargains all the way. In the early years, packages were wrapped in newspaper, and "chestnuts" and "stickers," or items that did not move, were mixed with "plums" and "corkers" that produced a good profit. The dimestore men could squeeze a buffalo nickel until it bellowed. They knew, of course, what a nickel was worth in those days.

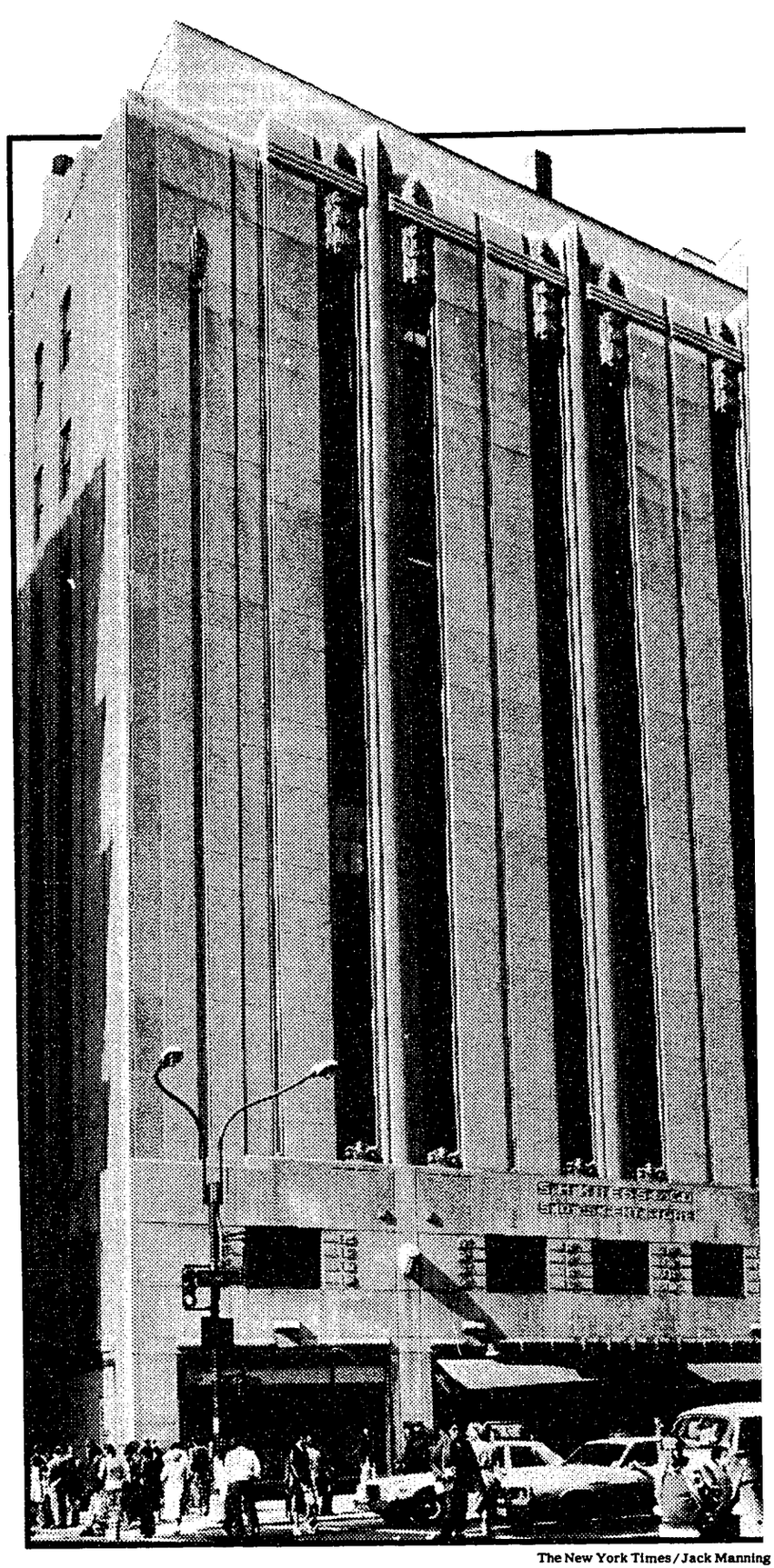
The demise of the founders and the growth of the corporate structure ushered in decades of change. Woolworth acquired other companies and expanded into fashion and foods; its Woolco Division entered the discounting field. Kress was absorbed by the fashion conglomerate, Genesco, in the 1960's, and the S.S. Kresge Company was changed to the K-Mart Corporation in 1977, with K-Marts accounting for 94.5 percent of the company's domestic sales.

What had occurred was a total revolution in the American way of living and buying. Stores grew to warehouse size, and aisles of goods became acres of products. With the new mass merchandising of mass-produced goods, locations shifted from Main Street to shopping centers. Buying in quantity no longer meant saving up and splurging in one glorious nickel and dime bash, or going in with $2 and coming out with 10 presents, from celluloid animals to unbelievable bric-a-brac.

Even in the remaining variety stores, costly plastic packs of multiple items replaced the fun — and the economy — of being able to pick out exactly what was wanted or needed. Sales policy and its handmaidens, packaging and promotion, have a lot to answer for in the inflationary spiral.

But not only the Yankee notions went the way of the 10-cent bargain; thrift, frugality, and the time-honored concept of buying for cash are equally obsolete. Overreaching and overpaying have become the two sides of the coin that has no resemblance to small change. If I am ever radicalized, it will be done by those advertisements for $150 shoes and $90 jeans and $300 sets of cooking untensils with French names and the implicit message that without them I might as well drop dead.

Kress sold a fine drip coffee pot for 50 cents, and I have gone to wonderful parties in a pair of Woolworth "canary diamond" chandelier earrings that are as close as I will ever get to the real Cartier thing. In the dim light of a cocktail lounge dollar hats looked glamorous with a 10-cent veil. You can't buy happiness, of course, but there was a time when you could get pretty close for a nickel or a dime.



The New York Times / Jack Manning

Art Deco details adorn empty Kress store on Fifth Avenue