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## **01082006 Marshall Field's The Last Christmas**

By Pat Terry

### **MARSHALL FIELD'S: THE LAST CHRISTMAS A FIRST-PERSON REPORT FROM CHICAGO**



**Dining under the Marshall Field's tree has been a downtown Chicago holiday tradition for over 100 years.**

By Pat Terry

When Federated Department Stores announced in 2005 that it would be scrapping the name of its recently purchased store, Marshall Field's, and replacing it with the "Macy's" nameplate, a collective cry of outrage was heard throughout Chicagoland.

Field's, after all, was a longtime (154 years) institution, which engendered the popular refrain, "Meet me under the clock at Field's." Somehow, "Meet me under the clock at Macy's" has a hollow sound - that is, if there will even BE a clock.

The Midwest is not California or New York.

Midwesterners are solid, slow to jump on the latest trend and proud of it. We love the old, the traditional - and we hated losing the old Stock Exchange, Meigs Field, the Tree Studios, City News Bureau and, on February 28, the century-old Berghoff Restaurant.

And now it's Marshall Field's, the grande dame of Chicago retailing, and the world's second largest department store.

Housed in a National Historic Landmark building on State Street, in the heart of the city's fabled "Loop" (other Field's stores are in the suburbs and Wisconsin), Field's was bought by Federated last year and, we fear, nothing will ever be the same.

By September, Macy's, that interloper, will be slapping its name on our Field's stores.

On the PBS TV show, "Chicago Week in Review," David Greising, a business columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, chose the name change as "the most interesting story of the year."

My husband, a native Chicagoan and former *Tribune* critic, was devastated when he heard about the name change. "That was absolutely a knucklehead PR move on their part," he grouched. "I remember going down to Field's in the late '40s on the El with my parents, having lunch under The Tree, sitting in Santa's lap and checking out the goodies in what had to be the city's best toy department.

"When I think of Marshall Field's, I think of a kind of Midwestern warm and fuzzy ambience," he added. "When I think of Macy's, I think of New York and pushing and shoving in the aisles. Believe me, this move was no 'Miracle on 34th Street.' Where are you now, Natalie Wood and Edmund Gwenn, now that we need you?"

Although an Ohio native (Cleveland Heights), I've lived in downtown Chicago all my adult life - car-less for years. And Field's has been my store, just a quick bus trip away, with Carson Pirie Scott a close second.

So what has Marshall Field's meant to me, this store I'm about to lose?

- Snooping weekly in the amazing furniture, carpet and rug departments as a reporter for *Home Furnishings Daily* (now *HFN*), checking out new merchandise and changes in the apparel departments for *Women's Wear Daily*.
- Hopping on the bus for a quick trip to see the Christmas display windows, taking the kids to see Santa (though one refused to sit on his lap).
- Shopping with my mother-in-law to take advantage of her Field's employee discount.
- Waiting for an hour to eat a holiday lunch in the Walnut room, so I can sit under the 45-foot high Great Tree (or Christmas tree, if you want to be politically incorrect).
- Scouring the toy department for the unique or educational, as mass merchants blanketed the country with TV-promoted toys.

- Heading for watch and jewelry repair while ducking the "mad perfume sprayers" in cosmetics.
- And dragging the kids down, dressed up, to Field's photo studio for our first family portrait.

But we've seen lots of changes at Field's throughout the years, so maybe we'll survive.

In the "old days," salespeople were polite, professional and knew their merchandise. They were very helpful because they worked on commission. Later on, as more opportunities opened to women, a Field's sales job lost its glamour. (My mother-in-law had accepted a post at Field's for the prestige, despite a better salary and benefits offered by Sears.)

Many of the new sales "associates" were invariably busy chewing gum or chatting up a colleague. But the pendulum may be swinging back. Last week, one middle-aged saleswoman happily helped us with bath accessories, even scrounging up a yardstick to measure a wicker tissue box cover (product tags offered no information other than price).

In the "old days," my mother-in-law and her friends made a day of it at Field's, checking their coats and parcels, shopping and dining in one of the restaurants.

Today, the coat check remains, and the dining options have expanded dramatically. There are now three restaurants, two food courts, two juice bars, Australian Homemade Premium Ice Cream and two Starbucks coffee bars. But today, many shoppers are juggling busy lives at work and home, and they just want to run in and out.

It's not easy to shop a store with 10 floors, 800,000 square feet of retailing space and maybe a dozen departments and designer boutiques just for women's apparel. My husband finally stopped buying my Christmas presents at Field's because of the dizzying amount of choices.

Sales staff used to come in one color - white - and one or two religions. In the late '60s, around the time of Martin Luther King's assassination, Field's and the other State Street department stores began to integrate their staff, display mannequins and customer bases (Carson's and Ward's windows led the way). When Field's highly regarded furniture buyer Len Capulli was named merchandise manager of home furnishings, many colleagues voiced surprise. It seems that Len was the first Catholic ever promoted above buyer level.

WASP restraint, rather than a sense of adventure, has always seemed to be the Field's way in home furnishings.

Years ago, while checking my retail beat for *HFD*, I spotted a stunning modern display - clear Plexiglas chairs and rain-like bands of clear plastic suspended from the ceiling - innovation that might have come from Chicago's School of the Art Institute. When I called to ask questions, a buyer warned me that store higher-ups were not happy -- it was too avant-garde. Sure enough, in a day or two, the rain was gone.

These days, however, Field's seems to have added a bit of sauciness. Above the Jonathan Adler Gallery in the 8<sup>th</sup> floor furniture department, Adler's design manifesto reads, in part: "We believe that when it comes to decorating, the wife is always right unless the husband is gay" and "We believe minimalism is a bummer" and "We believe celebrities should pay full price."

Field's extensive, high-end Oriental rug department also looked a bit livelier than usual last week, with furniture arranged on expensive rugs to suggest dining areas and other rooms in

the house.

But what will Macy's do with Field's impressive 7<sup>th</sup> floor Archive? Shoppers glimpse the Field's story in snapshots ranging from the store's 1852 opening on Lake Street to its five-year State Street renovation, completed in 1992; Norman Rockwell's famous painting of the Field's Great Clock that appeared on the cover of Saturday Evening Post (1945); store-friendly quotes from the likes of Ginger Rogers, Liza Minnelli and Duncan Hines; and the disclosure that, in a previous life, movie actress Dorothy Lamour was a Field's elevator operator?

In a nod to nostalgia, Cliff and I decided to have a "last Christmas breakfast" in the venerable Walnut Room under The Tree in late December. Upon entering the store before hours, we asked a tough chic-looking blonde (was she a New York import?) if people were lamenting the name change. We were icily informed, "We're not closing the store; it just will have a different name. Life goes on."

And breakfast went on, at tables already filled with multi-generation families. (Unlike the "olden days," many diners were egregiously underdressed in ensembles of well-worn jeans and faded lumberjack shirts. But the well-outfitted families were also out in force. The place was so popular this season that a waiter told us they had ordered 75,000 Santa Bear mugs to sell as commemorative items, and the mugs were sold out the day before Christmas. And, unlike the sober past, a table noted that the Walnut Room during the day was offering such drinks as Granny's Very Own Apple Pie Martini and After Dinner Raspberry Truffle Martini.

Later, we stopped to look at Field's nationally touted, Christmas window displays. (The Field's finale, an animated, hard-edged look at the Cinderella story, is a real evolution from the original lace and ribbon filled windows.) Like baseball, holiday window gazing is still a multigenerational event. One year a woman in Oregon told the store she was going to take her grandchildren in Pennsylvania to Chicago in December because she grew up observing the State Street tradition.

As for the name change itself, many Chicago residents saw the "beginning of the end" when Field's moved its Frango Mint operation from State Street to out of state. The Frango Candy Kitchen, established in 1915, was located on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, and the smell of chocolate was everywhere. "People are always surprised that we're right here in downtown Chicago," the Candy Kitchen manager told writer Cliff Terry in 1996. "I mean, I guess they think the candy is made somewhere else by elves."

At the 1996 National Democratic Convention in Chicago, complimentary boxes of Frango chocolates were sent to the delegates, and the candy was delivered to aficionados around the world. Popular comedian Carol Burnett had a "chocolate fantasy" of touring the kitchen. Sure enough, she did. "She told us she was in Frango heaven, and that she wanted to be laid down on one of our pouring tables and have liquid Frango chocolate just poured all over her," recalls one employee. "We said maybe we could work on that for her next visit. Then she did her Tarzan yell for everyone."

Despite the departure of "Marshall Field's" (it still feels unbelievable), downtown Chicago is in a resurrection mode, begun some time ago with construction of the post-modern Harold Washington Library, expansion of DePaul University, the more recent boom in the nearby theater district and good restaurants and city plans for further revitalization. All along, Field's has been an anchor, a mainstay, whose windows continue to spell prestige, good taste, high-end.

Will Macy's continue that tradition?

**ED NOTE: Pat Terry is a Chicago-based free-lance writer who contributes frequently to *Rugnews.com*.**