

Marshall Field's Department Store – A Chicago Landmark

Long before Nordstrom's developed their "easy return" policy, Marshall Field's was famous for their unconditional returns. The upscale department store of the gilded age is also credited with the retail dictums "Give the Lady What She Wants" and "The Customer Is Always Right."

On October 8, 1871, when the great Chicago fire broke out, company officials and employees worked round the clock to remove as much merchandise as possible, eventually working by the light of the approaching fire. When the city waterworks burned, any hope of saving the store was lost. So much merchandise had been saved, however, that the store was able to reopen temporarily in a horse car barn.

I include the history because if you don't understand how Marshall Field's has been essential to Chicago for over a century, you can't appreciate the disappointment people felt when it was purchased by Macy's in 2005 and the name was changed. Chicagoans mourned the loss of a grand tradition.

When I was a child, it was a huge treat to travel downtown to see their Christmas windows, and the tradition of the three story (45 ft) Christmas tree still prevails. As a child, you would nearly fall over trying to view the decorations at the very top.

If we were "very good" (translation – when mom was exhausted) we might get to eat in the cafeteria, then naturally, rush to chocolate kitchen on the seventh floor to watch workers box Frango mints, while we inhaled the rich aroma of chocolate. Wow. A store that made its own candy. We vowed that's where we'd work when we grew up.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Marshall Field's was innovative for its time. In the 19th century, a lady did not eat outside of the home unescorted; women returned home for lunch. One day a Field's store clerk shared her lunch (a chicken pot pie) with a tired shopper and Field's was inspired to open a tea room. Ladies no longer had to make two trips to complete their shopping. To this day the Walnut Room serves Mrs. Herring's traditional chicken pot pie. Field's also created the first European buying office (Manchester, England), the first bridal registry, the first personal shopper, the first escalators, and was the first to offer revolving credit, as well as introduce the concept of book signings. All these things are taken for granted now, but they started in Chicago.

Marshall Field left more than a retail legacy. Along with John D. Rockefeller, Field helped found the University of Chicago. He also gifted one million dollars to Chicago's Museum of Natural History, and willed the institution an additional eight million upon his death.

Meet Me Under the Clock

Probably the most recognized tradition and familiar phrase heard on the streets of Chicago for over 100 years has been "meet me under the clock." As a child, I was terrified to stand under Great Clock, certain it would fall off in the high Chicago winds. And no wonder, each of the two clocks, on the northwest and

southwest corners on State Street, weigh 7.5 tons apiece. The Great Clock (SW corner) has been proudly standing guard, keeping everyone punctual since 1897. Early on in the store's history, people naturally congregated at the southwest corner of the store. Folks even began leaving notes for one another on Marshall Field's windows! Legend has it that the clock was installed in an effort to end this practice. What I wouldn't give to view some of those early notes, perhaps revealing a secret liaison, or romantic rendezvous.

Worth a Visit

Be sure to see the Tiffany & Co. mosaic dome which caps the 5-story atrium. Over 6,000 square feet in size, is the first iridescent glass dome ever created, and it continues to be the largest glass mosaic of its kind. As for the building's exterior, only the 3,000 year old Temple of Karnack in Egypt with its 70 foot columns rivals the 50 foot granite columns on the store's state street façade. The building is touted as the second largest store in the world.

Remember to visit the seventh floor to view Norman Rockwell's famous painting *The Clock Mender*, which once graced the cover of the Saturday Evening Post (November 3, 1945). The painting features a man perched atop a ladder adjusting one of the Marshall's Field's clocks to coordinate with the time on his pocket watch! Pretty clever of Rockwell, I must say. The painting eventually joined a seven city national tour *Pictures for the American People*. It has also been featured in the Norman Rockwell Museum, the Guggenheim, the Corcoran Gallery, the San Diego Museum of Art and the Phoenix Museum.