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The Marshall Field of dreams

By Marilyn Gardner

In the annals of department-store history, it would be hard to top a comment about Marshall Field's, made long ago by a Chicago matron. After hearing the news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, she exclaimed, "Nothing is left anymore - except, thank God, Marshall Field's."

Even if the story is apocryphal, it neatly captures the affection and loyalty legions of shoppers feel for the famous store. But soon not even Marshall Field's will be left. Federated Department Stores has announced that in the fall of 2006, it will convert all 62 Marshall Field's stores to Macy's.

So distressing is the news that customers are writing impassioned testimonials to www.keepitfields.org, a website that is also collecting signatures for a petition against the name change. Supporters express a range of emotions - anger, sadness, disappointment - as they tell about what the store means to them. They talk about its legendary service, its wondrous selection of merchandise, its flagship State Street store. Some threaten to cut up all their Federated charge cards. Others insist they will never enter the store again if it becomes Macy's.

Federated argues that customers talk more about nostalgia than about the merchandise. But the sadness here goes beyond nostalgia, beyond warm memories of dining in the Walnut Room or taking children to see the Christmas windows. The larger loss has to do with the homogenization of shopping everywhere.

One by one, regional retailing landmarks have been swallowed up and renamed. Think of Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, Woodward & Lothrop in Washington, D.C., Jordan Marsh in Boston, Dayton's in Minneapolis, Hudson's in Detroit. The pleasure of regional identities in stores has disappeared. In subtle ways, that loss contributes to a fraying of community ties, a growing impersonality in the marketplace.

The founders of these stores, Marshall Field among them, were often renowned for their philanthropy. Their influence extended well beyond the shopping bags their customers carried home. They turned some of their profits back into the community to support cultural and educational institutions.

Banks, too, are losing their local ties. Over the years my bank, as one example, has changed from BayBank, based in New England, to BankBoston to Fleet to Bank of America in Charlotte, N.C.

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Will we all wake up someday to discover that mergers have left us with only one giant department store and one nationwide bank?

Newspapers have undergone a similar loss of local ownership. Newsrooms once filled with writers and editors who had deep roots in the community are now likely to be staffed, at least in part, by a revolving door of journalists who move from one newspaper to another in a vast media chain.

Those of us who grew up with Marshall Field's in our lives, and who still visit the store when we return to Chicago, know what a void its disappearance will represent, in big and little ways. Macy's Frango Mints? Macy's Walnut Room? Macy's clock? Sorry, Federated, they just don't have the same ring.

Federated claims that customers are not shopping at Field's, and that the competition has changed. But have they really tried to reinvigorate a once-great store? Imagine what an infusion of new ideas and a commitment to individuality could do to mark the beginning of a new chapter for the store and its customers.

Please, Federated, just one more chance?

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