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Macy's Clock? Loyal Shoppers Ticked Off


Chicago Tribune

Sep. 21--For many Chicagoans Marshall Field's was more than a place to shop.

It was a once-a-year holiday visit to the retailer's landmark State Street store to gape at the awe-inspiring Christmas windows and dine on chicken potpie beneath the Walnut Room's great tree.

Such childhood rituals, passed on from generation to generation, made Field's, more than any other retailer, part of the fabric of Chicago.

"When you talk about Chicago, you talk about Marshall Field's," said April Murphy of West Chicago, who began taking her two children to the State Street store as soon as they could walk. "I can't imagine Chicago without it. It makes you want to cry."

Murphy echoed the outpouring of sadness and disappointment over Tuesday's news that the venerated Field's moniker will disappear next year. Even though the stores will remain open, many said that shopping won't be the same without the forest green script over the doors.

More than 90 percent of respondents to an informal online Chicago Tribune poll said the name change will make a difference. The question received over 13,500 responses by 7 p.m. Tuesday.

The fact that the new name on the door will be Macy's, the New York retailer known for its Thanksgiving Day parade, added insult to injury for some.

"Chicago always tends to play second fiddle to New York, but Marshall Field's was ours," said Erika Salemmme, 35, who remembers childhood trips to the seventh-floor Walnut Room followed by showings of "A Christmas Carol" at the old Goodman Theater.

Chicagoans' loyalty to Field's is so fierce that some have started an online

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petition drive at www.keepitfields.org.

The end of the name means the loss of yet another link to Chicago's rich retailing history.

At age 22, Marshall Field came to Chicago in 1856 via Massachusetts and became an ace salesman at another dry-goods store. The store that became Marshall Field & Co. was actually started by Potter Palmer in 1852. Field bought an interest in the store in 1867.

Soon after he took over the store he revolutionized retailing by posting prices on the merchandise and guaranteeing everything he sold. Field immortalized the slogan, "Give the lady what she wants."

In 1892 he set out to create the finest department store and commissioned the architectural firm of renowned architect Daniel H. Burnham to design a retail palace at the corner of Washington Street and Wabash Avenue. When it was finished in 1907, a year after Field died, the State Street store was one of the largest retail establishments in the world.

Marshall Field & Co. became one of the nation's leading retailers, known for elegant atmosphere and lavish merchandise displays. Meanwhile, the Field family expanded into publishing and real estate, building the Merchandise Mart in 1931.

The family abandoned retailing in 1982, selling the Field's chain to a London company. Since then the chain has undergone more ownership changes. Cincinnati-based Federated Department Stores Inc. took over earlier this year.

Still, Marshall Field's has resonated as something special to Chicagoans.

"It's always sad for people to see those emotional touchstones change," said Jim Schmidt, a Chicago advertising executive who created ads for Field's in the 1990s. "Everyone can remember the first time they saw the elaborate Christmas windows."

Outside the State Street store, JoAnne Strauss, 76, of Chicago, said she will protest with her pocketbook. "I'm going to boycott. I think it's terrible that anyone would change a landmark name."

By Ameet Sachdev and Lorene Yue

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