

History Chest: Christmas on Park Avenue a century ago

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BY ROD LEITH
SOUTH BERGENITE

Rutherford welcomed F.W. Woolworth's 5 and 10 cent store to Park Avenue just in time for Christmas of 1913. The community's love affair with its quaint department store atmosphere lasted through many generations of children and adults who grew to rely on it for anything from a fancy aluminum cake pan to its treasured line of Buddy "L" trucks.

In the early period of the 20th century, people shopped on Park Avenue, as well as Passaic and Paterson, for Christmas gifts and shopping year long. Besides Woolworth's, Park Avenue hosted several popular stores, like Rutherford Drugs, Mrs. R.L. Terhune's Dry Goods and William Black Hardware. A trolley ran along Park Avenue, and then on to Newark and Hackensack.

"Shopping at Woolworth's was a big deal," exclaimed Corrine Harrison Campbell, who recalled that "the toy section was fabulous and the decorations were always beautiful." Campbell, who resided on Eastern Way (then Spring Street), as a child, and now lives in Garfield, said she loved to accompany her grandmother, Lena Smallwood, on shopping trips to Woolworth's. "The lady clerks were so nice," she added.

Founded by Frank Winfield Woolworth in 1878, the 5 and 10 cent stores were located in Jersey City, Paterson, Bergenfield and Hackensack as well as Rutherford. The Woolworth family, beginning in Utica, N.Y., and Lancaster, Pa., pioneered in a merchandizing concept that combined direct purchasing with sales and customer service. Early on, Woolworth's chief competitor was Sebastian S. Kresge. One retail historian noted that Woolworth and Kresge stores attracted a new excitement in shopping by letting customers "touch the merchandize" rather than displaying retail goods behind a guarded counter.

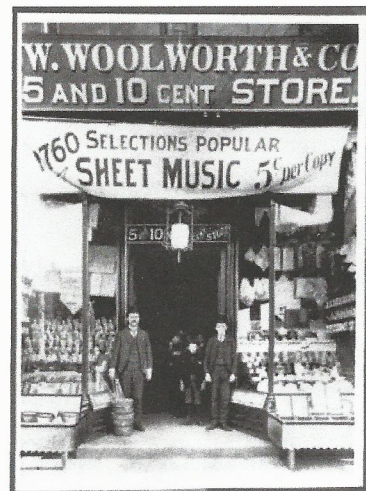
Belding A. Hoyt, who opened a dry good business at 48 Park Ave. around 1900, announced the Rutherford debut of the Woolworth store. Hoyt, who owned the building, decided to move his store up the block to 78 Park Avenue. "F.W. Woolworth here after September 1 next," Hoyt announced in a page one advertisement July 19, 1913, in *The Rutherford Republican*. Woolworth stayed in Hoyt's building until the late 1920s, when it moved to 52 Park Avenue in space rented from Ferdinand Brunner, who owned and operated one of Rutherford's most popular jewelry stores at 54 Park Ave.

In those days there were few Rutherford stores to compete with the variety of merchandize offered by Woolworth. In the late 1890s William E. Waller Jr. arrived here from Brooklyn and established a department store at 15 Park Ave. Waller's store specialized in quality crockery, glass and housewares. His business was absorbed into a new department store in the early 1930s, owned by Chester A. Drucker, who had managed a general merchandize store in Paterson. His store was popularly known as "Drucker's" and was operated at 15 Park Ave. by his two sons, Arthur and Walter, after Chester Drucker's death in 1957. Valentino's on the Park and Coccia Realty, which take up 11-15 Park Ave., occupy the former Drucker's space.

"Just about every week, you'd do the tour of the stores on Park Avenue," recalled William D. Galloway of Elm Street, Rutherford. "We'd end up at Woolworth's, where my mother would buy her sewing supplies and wrapping for Christmas gifts."

James. A. Hands, another long-time Rutherford resident who now lives in Mystic, Conn., fondly recalled the novelties offered by Woolworth's. And Hands especially remembered Buddy "L." trucks, a cast metal toy line manufactured by Moline Press Steel Company, beginning in 1910.

"Sell a toy, spread some joy," was a slogan popularized by Frank W. Woolworth. That appeal was certainly not lost on Campbell. She recalled as a child eyeing the "life like" toy



FILE PHOTO/TERRENCE JAMES/THE RECORD
A Woolworth storefront at the turn of the century.



PHOTO COURTESY/WOOLWORTH MUSEUM
The store was known for its expansive toy department especially around Christmas time.

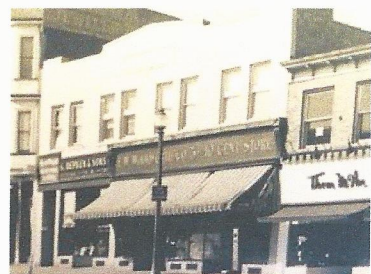


PHOTO COURTESY/MEADOWLANDS MUSEUM
F.W. Woolworth settled at 52 Park Ave. in Rutherford until 1998. Taken in the 1930s, its neighbors in this photo were the coal dealer, G. Depken & Sons, at 54 Park and, in the building next door at 50 Park, Thomas McAnn Shoes. Its current occupants are Substance

automobiles in the rear of Woolworth's store. A child could maneuver those tiny cars by working the pedals. One Christmas, her grandmother bought her one. "I cried like a baby," she said.

Salon & Barberspa and a martial arts studio called The DoJo.

Mary Ramdas, who began working as a clerk at the Rutherford Woolworth's in 1984, recalled with joy her many years employed there. "I really miss the store, especially at Christmas time," she said. She rose through the ranks to become store manager and had the dubious responsibility of closing the Rutherford store in 1997. She could see the beginning of its decline in 1993 when the store lost a big block of its clientele with the closing of the Rutherford campus of Fairleigh Dickinson University. By then, the Harrisburg, Pa.-based chain had acquired the 52 Park Ave. building, identified by its brick front with classical dentil cornices.

"The FDU students were big shoppers," she said. "They would come in to buy all kinds of supplies," everything from pencils to sheets and pillow cases for their dorm room, she added. Like most of the store's previous managers, Ramdas resided in Rutherford. Born in British Guiana in 1945, she came to the United States in the mid-1970s. She and her husband moved to Rutherford about the time she joined the Woolworth staff. She considered her fellow employees like a second family, she said.

To turn a phrase by Campbell, Christmas was a big deal for Woolworth's and its employees. Ramdas recalled the store donated the Christmas lights for the evergreen tree planted by Boiling Springs Bank in 1995 at the Williams Center for the Arts. Often, a Woolworth's employee would dress in costume for Rutherford's holiday parades. "There was special Christmas music," she recalled. "Once when Santa's visited the store, we danced together in the aisle."

Rod Leith is Rutherford's borough historian, sits on the Rutherford Historical Committee and is Acting President of the Meadowlands Museum. He is also a former reporter for The Record.

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