

The Changing Face of Retail – From the Wolf Family & Wolf-Habein to 2010

The ever changing face of retail has taken many twists and turns as it has evolved over the years. The Wal-Marts, Best Buys, Targets, Costcos, and a myriad of others have created a retail landscape vastly different from those present in much of the last century, both nationally and locally. One of those stores that many who have lived in Martin County since at least the early 1970's will probably remember is the Wolf-Habein store. Wolf-Habein, frequently referred to as "Wolf's," was a popular department store located at 123 North North Avenue, now Downtown Plaza, in Fairmont.

The history of this store can be traced back to the Wolf-Habein Corporation of Waseca, Minnesota. It was originally comprised of Orin Robert (O.R.) Wolf, William Wolf, Al Wolf, and their brother-in-law, Henry C. Habein. In 1899, they purchased the J. T. Swearingen store in Fairmont. O. R. Wolf had general store experience in Faribault and Minneapolis, was very ambitious, and he wanted to go into business for himself. Consequently, he saved \$250.00, and borrowed \$500.00 in order to go in with his brothers on the purchase of the Fairmont store. Al Wolf and William Wolf had stores in Faribault and Blue Earth, so the partnership consisted of three stores. After Al Wolf died in 1939, O. R. Wolf traded his interests in the other stores for full ownership of the Fairmont store.

O. R. Wolf's son, William, was born in 1909 at 403 S. Elm St. in Fairmont. He had a brother, Marland, and a sister, Wilhelmina Carey. He attended public schools in Fairmont and graduated from Shattuck in Faribault, Minnesota, in 1926, Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1930, and he obtained an MBA from the Harvard Business School in 1932. William Wolf was obviously a very well educated individual that would also become a very capable businessman.

William started his career in retail when he joined Associated Dry Goods at Powers Department Store in Minneapolis. He later transferred to Hanes Department Store in Newark, New Jersey, where he became Divisional Merchandise Manager of women's and misses accessories, silverware, books, office supplies, and yard goods. It was in New Jersey where he met his wife, Thayle Landers. They were married in 1938 and returned to Fairmont that same year. Also in that same year, 1938, William J. Wolf, Sr., joined his father, O. R. Wolf, in running the Fairmont store. Bill and Thayle had two children, William, Jr., presently of New Paltz, New York, and Dara, presently of Dallas, Texas.

William Wolf was also quite civic minded and very active in the community. He served as president of Interlaken Golf Club; he was a member of the chamber of commerce,

the Masonic Lodge, Fairmont Kiwanis, and SCORE. In addition, in 1953, he was elected a director of The First National Bank succeeding Frank L. McCadden.

The November 8, 1955, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* designated a considerable amount of space to Wolf's third expansion since 1899, and the many changes that had taken place over the years. It was reported that their first expansion was shortly after WW I and included discontinuing the grocery department. Their second expansion involved more than doubling their balcony space to be used to display merchandise, and their third in, 1955, was their greatest of all and involved converting their basement storage space to merchandise display space.

In that *Sentinel* article, O. R. Wolf interestingly discussed the many changes he had seen over the course of his career in retail since he started in the mercantile business in 1888. In particular, he recalled those early days in which it was customary to "throw in" a bag of candy for the kids, bargaining and haggling over price was the rule rather than the exception, it was not unusual to grant credit for as long as a year, customers always expected a discount for paying in "cash," and in the early years a counter was a place to sit on or lean on, not for displaying merchandise. Another fascinating merchandising expectation that O. R. Wolf experienced early in his career, as quoted in the *Sentinel* article previously mentioned, was as follows: "It was a part of the merchant's 'duty' to entertain, keep warm, and not infrequently feed the women and children while the customer stayed at the saloon until it closed at midnight. The saloons in those days featured free lunch including pickled pig hocks, sardines, anchovies, crackers and cheese, pickles, and bread." This is, no doubt, one "perk" offered by retailers that has long since been discontinued.

The Wolf-Habein advertising slogan and paper goods script logo was "Wolf's, First in Quality Since 1899." It remained unchanged throughout the history of the store. In 1974, Wolf's was sold to the Ehler's Corporation, thus ending an era.

From 1899 to 1974, the Wolf-Habein Department Store was a well known, respected, and popular retail fixture to Fairmont and Martin County residents. Since then, many locally owned establishments such as Wolf-Habein seem to have gradually evaporated and been replaced through the evolution of national retailers and department stores. Times change, but those of us that remember that era will always have fond memories of Wolf-Habein and what it represented to the local economy and community of that time.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dara Wolf LaForce-Skelton for her contribution of historical information about her family for this article.

For more information on the Wolf-Habein store and the Wolf family, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.