**Feature Essay: Shopping in a New Society**

Macy’s was founded by Rowland Hussey Macy, who between 1843 and 1855 opened four retail dry goods stores, including the original Macy’s store in downtown Haverhill, Massachusetts, established in 1851 to serve the mill industry employees of the area. Of all the innovations that changed the way people lived between the 1870s and 1920s, one of the most important was the rise and development of the department store, those sprawling urban empires of goods and services that fueled the mass consumption of the new society. A significant invention in itself, the department store took advantage of myriad other changes in American and European society, especially the industrial transformation that led to the mass production of consumer goods in varieties and amounts never seen before.

That industrial revolution in turn drew on breakthroughs in transportation, including a vast railroad network that linked cities and villages and ended the relative isolation and self-sufficiency of the nation’s “island communities.” The railroads tied people together, brought in products from outside, fostered greater interdependence, and encouraged economic specialization. In the cities, new streetcar systems, another revolution in transportation, carried shoppers directly to stores, workplaces, and other destinations, regardless of the weather. As a New York City department store suggested one winter, “Ladies, if walking is too bad, just take the cars.” The advice took hold. The word “commuter” first entered the language in the 1870s.

As machines turned out a plethora of new products, it became vital to sell them, and a “new science of marketing” spread. Printer’s Ink, the first major advertising journal, began publishing in 1881. The rotary press, invented in 1875, initiated a new era in newspaper advertising. Woodcuts, halftones, and photoengraving added illustrations to catch the consumer’s eye. Liking the results, businesses spent more on advertising every year. In 1870, they spent about $50 million; in 1900, about $95 million; in 1920, over $500 million. (By the 1970s, it was $22.4 billion.) Ads and billboards sprouted up everywhere, touting cigarettes, cars, perfumes, and cosmetics. Advertising agents, using new statistical sampling techniques, developed modern concepts of market testing and research. “When people see your name constantly in the paper,” Printer’s Ink argued, “they begin to believe they know you and it is but a short step from advertising to patronage.”

Reflecting common values, department stores flourished in Europe as well as in America, particularly in Paris. Emile Zola, the famed French novelist, said the department store democratized luxury, offering the public for the first time in history free admission to displays of material goods. “Shop,” he and others pointed out, had become a verb. In the United States, R. H. Macy in New York City, John Wanamaker in Philadelphia, and Marshall Field in Chicago turned the department store into a national institution. There, people learned to “browse,” a relatively new concept, and to buy. Innovations in pricing, display, and advertising helped customers develop wants they had not known they had.

In 1870, Wanamaker took out the first full-page newspaper ad, and by 1891, Macy, too, had turned to full-page advertisements, often placed on pages next to an article of special interest to women. The ads were hard to resist:

Follow the crowd [an 1885 ad in a New York newspaper said] and it will always take you to R. H. MACY & CO. **What better evidence do you wish that ours is The All Around Store of New York City? Ride our bicycles, read our books, cook in our saucepans, dine off our china, wear our silks, get under our blankets, smoke our cigars, drink our wines – Shop at Macy’s – and life will Cost You Less and Yield You More Than You** **Dreamed Possible**.

Even the surroundings often evoked a dream. Cash registers, a new invention, rang up every sale, and by the 1880s, electric lights highlighted the goods. Electric elevators and escalators carried shoppers to new heights. Plate-glass windows, a product of discoveries in the technology of glassmaking, flooded the stores with daylight. Windows on the street levels became “show windows,” a term developed in the United States. “Window-shopping,” another new word, became popular. Looking through those windows, store owners soon noted, were women, hundreds of them, and it was around women that they built their businesses.

“Woman is a shopper,” as an industry journal noted. “Out of that fact has come the modern department store.” In these years, growing numbers of women worked in factories, telephone exchanges, and business offices, and they could spend their wages on items they desired. By 1880, 2.6 million women were in the work force; in 1890, 4 million. In 1900, more than 5 million women—one fifth of all adult women—worked outside the home. Within limits, of course, that meant money in women’s pockets, and the new department stores tailored their advertising and wares to appeal to women. They also did everything they could to make their stores safe, clean, and appealing. In 1892, Macy’s built a new ladies’ waiting room, calling it the “most luxurious and beautiful department devoted to the comfort of ladies to be found in a mercantile establishment in the city.” Soon there were ladies’ lunch rooms; dressing rooms specially lit to show off evening gowns in broad daylight; and shelves of hats, glass, and china with monograms and other special designs. It was not unusual for a department store to stock 1,300 types of women’s shoes.

The department store, along with advertising, brand names, and other innovations, brought Americans of all backgrounds into a national market. Even as the country itself grew, a homogeneity of goods bound it together, touching cities and farms, East and West, rich and poor. A common language of consumption turned Americans into a community of consumers, who were surrounded by goods unavailable just decades before and able to purchase them. They had learned to make, want, and buy.

These are lessons not forgotten. The department store even today accounts for more than one-tenth of all annual commercial sales in the United States. The spread of the World Wide Web has added, like transportation and communication innovations in an earlier era, another route for consumers to buy the alluring products of the department stores. The so-called “Cyber-Monday” of the 2011 Christmas season enticed those who preferred to shop and spend their money buying goods online. According to the New York Times, on “Cyber-Monday” shoppers bought $1.25 billion worth of goods over the Internet. Somehow, one suspects, this would not have surprised Macy, Wanamaker, and their nineteenth-century colleagues.

**Questions for Discussion**

What conditions between the 1870s and 1920s led to the rise of the department store?

What changes did department stores bring in people’s lives?