

# Restaurant-ing through history

FEBRUARY 3, 2019 · 4:43 PM

## Lunching at the dime store



Waves of nostalgia about lunch counter menus, low prices, friendly waitresses, and non-pretentious hospitality surged when dime stores began closing their counters in the 1970s and 1980s. [photo ca. 1930]

Nostalgia was mostly confined to former patrons who were white and not involved in the 1960s protests to integrate variety store lunch counters. In fact, some black activists still had criminal records on the books for participating in sit-ins.

It isn't surprising that dime store lunch counters were chosen as [sites of protest](#) in 1960 and 1961 if you realize that they were among the top food service chains in the country then. A report from 1964 showed that F. W. Woolworth Co. and McDonald's Systems, Inc. were neck and neck in the chain restaurant race. McDonald's was ahead in sales with \$114M while Woolworth was at \$100M, but Woolworth dominated the landscape with 1,950 units across the country as compared to McDonald's 611. And though not in the top ten, other dime store chains also had notable lunch counter sales, particularly Kresge, Grant, Newberry [shown below, 1940], and McCrory.



Dime store lunch counters dated back to the 1910s. The earliest lunch counters were probably the ones associated with the railroads, going back at least several decades into the 19th century. But dime stores added something new to their lunch counters – soda fountains – giving them wider appeal and the ability to attract customers between mealtimes.



Their installation involved significant capital investment. As dime store advertisements proclaimed, they were modern and sanitary. Through the first half of the 20th century, the stores constantly reminded the public that they were outfitted with the latest in modern gas and electric appliances for cooking, refrigeration, cleaning, and sterilization. [Kresge, Louisville, 1922]

When a new Woolworth store opened in Abilene TX in 1939, a lengthy story reported that “All utensils touched by food are of stainless, seamless steel.” Plus, it said, the food was kept at the correct temperatures at all times, dishes were washed and sterilized automatically, and the kitchen was lit by fluorescent fixtures.

I have no doubt that due to their expensive kitchen and counter equipment, dime store food service far exceeded the typical under-capitalized independent lunch room or restaurant of the same time in terms of sanitation.

Another modernizing feature was promoting women into lunch counter management. Although I’ve seen no numbers,

Woolworth's claimed that the majority of their lunch counters and bakeries had women managers. When a new Woolworth store opened in Butte MT in 1928, the opening of the lunch counter was under the supervision of a woman who managed a busy lunch counter in a Denver Woolworth store. This was surely a role not often played by women in the world of business then. She predicted that with 62 stools and quick service, the Butte store should easily be able to serve 1,000 persons at lunch.

Dime store lunch counters have been seen as early versions of fast food restaurants and to a degree this is true. They depended on fast delivery of food, high turnover of each counter stool, and price breaks for quantity buying. But there were also many ways in which they were not like the fast food chains that helped put them out of business.

Baking on the premises and selling baked goods in the store certainly set them apart from burger chains of the later 20th century.



So did using fresh produce and buying locally. When a new counter at the Newberry store was opened in Fremont OH in 1941, an advertisement stated, "Daily there arrives, fresh from the finest markets, a big assortment of garden vegetables and fruits; from the best local dairies come rich milk and cream and palate-tempting butter . . ." Local dairies and food purveyors often co-sponsored advertising when a new store was built or a new counter installed. A new Kresge store in St. Louis acknowledged its suppliers in 1919, "reliable firms, such as Freund Bakeries, Carpenter's Ice Cream, Thomas L. Tierney Tea and Coffee Co., Sixth Street Grocery Co., Bentzen Commission Co., Harry E. Grafeman, Foerstel Bros. Meat Co., Herz-Oakes, Swift."



Their menus included sandwiches and desserts, but also substantial hot meals.

A remodeled Kress store in Fort Worth TX announced its menus for April 1931 would include a number of 25c plate lunches such as Roast Chicken with Dressing, Cranberry Sauce, Creamed Potatoes, Buttered English Peas, Lettuce and Tomato Salad, Corn Sticks, Butter, and Rolls. There was also a vegetable plate with Mustard Greens, Creamed Potatoes, Buttered English Peas, Lettuce and Tomato Salad, Corn Sticks, Butter, and Rolls. [Woolworth menu, 1959 – click to enlarge]

Woolworth had a love affair with turkey, serving it on plate lunches throughout the year. The explanation, according to Karen Plunkett-Powell in Remembering Woolworth's, was that the store bought up farm surpluses for good prices – whether vegetables, dairy products, or turkey. Turkey seemed to appear frequently at Kress and Kresge also.



As dime stores experienced declines in business, their lunch counters were often the first sign of cutbacks, with the last ones closing in the late 1990s. Among the mourners were older patrons who took part in informal lunch counter coffee clubs. [Northampton MA, 1990]

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## Brandon

May 5, 2020 at 9:07 pm



In the early 1980s there were still a couple of Newberry's lunch counters in Portland, Oregon. I remember going in shopping with my mother and if I was good then she would take me to the lunch counter to get a treat. They had a fun game of popping the balloon to get the price for your ice-cream sundae from a \$0.01 to \$0.99 or something along those lines. I remember in the late 90's when they took them out it was very sad.

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## Katrina Ruml

December 2, 2019 at 7:00 pm



Hi — I just acquired a manual / cookbook it contains the executive office standard recipes for I believe the restaurant and lunch counters at Woolworths. It is a great book from USA 1951. It is extremely detailed in the recipes and instructions. It also details kitchen maintenance and cleanliness. I am just wondering if anybody else has come across one of these and has any information as to its rarity and value. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

## Jan Whitaker

December 2, 2019 at 10:07 pm



I've never seen one but it sounds interesting. I would think it would be worth about \$30, but just guessing.

[Reply](#)

## Gayle Castro

November 15, 2020 at 10:07 am



Katrina, I've been looking for a 1950's-60's Woolworths lunch counter recipe from my childhood in Seattle. I believe they were called "date nut toasties" or that's what we called them We'd get them in the morning at the lunch counter. They were moist like cake, round and the size of a crumpet, served warm with butter and sticky honey coating. Made in their on-site bakery. What a treat. Does your cookbook show anything that looks similar? I'd like to obtain the recipe. thank you, Gayle Castro

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## **Anonymous**

November 30, 2020 at 2:25 am



I do not have a recipe but fond memories of date nut toasties and corn toasties from my youth in San Francisco!

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## **Devany Vickery-Davidson**

February 7, 2019 at 11:26 am



Ah Jan, sweet memories! I remember going to Woolworths with my great Grandmother. My grandfather would drop us off and we would shop for fabric and notions, then have a chicken salad sandwich at the counter before he picked us up. Sometimes I would get ribbons for my hair. Such a treat! I think it was also the first place I had French fries!

[Reply](#)

## **Jan Whitaker**

February 7, 2019 at 1:28 pm



Thanks, Devany. Love the shopping for notions detail!

[Reply](#)

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## **jamdawg1**

February 5, 2019 at 5:04 am



I loved eating at Woolworth's. 😊 I remember the one at Eastland Mall in Columbus OH during the 70's and 80's. My Grandma worked at one in Downtown Chicago.

[Reply](#)

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## **sandra hunter**

February 4, 2019 at 10:07 am



Another outstanding trip back restauranting through history. Brought back memories of Woolworth on Grand near Fox theater. We lived on Washington around the corner from Gaslight Square while working at Port St. Louis, Magnolia House, Kotobuki before going to Clayton to 2 cents plain with Harvey and Ina Kopler. Still love the good pastrami on rye

purchased from the Chicago company I still enjoy today. When the weather break...will make a trip to a deli that sells them. Blessings

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**Jan Whitaker**

February 4, 2019 at 1:03 pm



Thanks, Sandra. I ate at that store a lot too when I worked down the street on Washington! Maybe we were both there at the same time.

[Reply](#)

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**Barbara H Shaffer**

February 3, 2019 at 9:49 pm



I enjoyed your post. Thank you for an interesting read.

Frank Woolworth is said to have started the idea of offering a turkey dinner year round at his lunch counters and not just for Thanksgiving. The idea was a big success. He also was not afraid to hire women to manage his stores; one such woman managed the Springfield, MA, store early on.

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