

When Denver Had The Denver

By Dennis Payton Knight

Downtown Denver is busy today with coffee shops on every other corner, convenience stores, tourist shops and chain restaurants populating most of the other store fronts. But look behind the neon to the names carved into the architecture, and you will see our town once had a bevy of department stores.

The most recognizable of the old buildings in Denver is the D&F Tower. Built in 1910, it was part of the Daniels & Fisher Department Store at Sixteenth and Arapahoe, and with twenty floors and clock faces on all four sides, she was the tallest building between the Mississippi and California. When Daniels & Fisher was bought out by the May Company in 1958, the store was vacated and torn down, but the landmark tower was saved and her bells still chime.

The May Company and Daniels & Fisher competed with local stores such as Denver Dry Goods, Neusteters, Joslins, and Gano-Downs. During the middle of the twentieth century we heard the names trumpeted on radio and television, and perused voluminous ads in the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Denver Post*. Families would go downtown at Christmas to gaze at the wonderlands of colorfully decorated store windows.

Once upon a time, little girls spend the day shopping with their mothers and lunch in the grandeur of The Denver Dry Goods Tea Room, the food brought out on elegantly domed plates by servers in white aprons and gloves. The Denver, established in 1879, by 1910 was proclaiming itself to be the biggest department store west of Chicago. When it became part of the Associated Dry Goods Company it was one of the most profitable units, just behind Lord & Taylor. The Denver had stores in other Colorado cities and suburbs, even one in Billings, Montana. The May Company, which already had Daniels & Fisher, acquired The Denver and the Associated Dry Goods chain, and eventually they all merged into the oblivion that is now Macy's.

The May Company itself was a Colorado enterprise, having been founded in Leadville during the silver rush of 1877. In 1956, when May bought out The Daniel & Fisher Company, it created a new division known as May D&F and built a dazzling building in Zeckendorf Plaza at Sixteenth and Tremont. The parabolic structure designed by I.M. Pei was as architecture a beauty, but really not much good for retail or anything else, and so it was razed in the 1990's. Ironically, her grandfather, the proud D&F Tower, still stands up the street along with the buildings of her sisters, Denver Dry Goods Building, Neusteters and Joslins.

Big chains inherited Denver's fine old department stores and discarded their fine old names. Macy's eventually swallowed Denver Dry Goods and May D&F, and Dillard's got Joslins. Today our suburban malls have the national chains like Macy's, Dillards, Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus, but none of them have ventured back to downtown Denver. It is their loss, and ours too.