

Remembering Foley's

By Teresa Tomkins-Walsh



News of the impending demolition of the Macy's née Foley's downtown building flooded newspapers, internet, and television in August 2013. News of the decision reaffirmed for many citizens that Houston continues to be a city striding toward its future with little regard for preservation of its past.

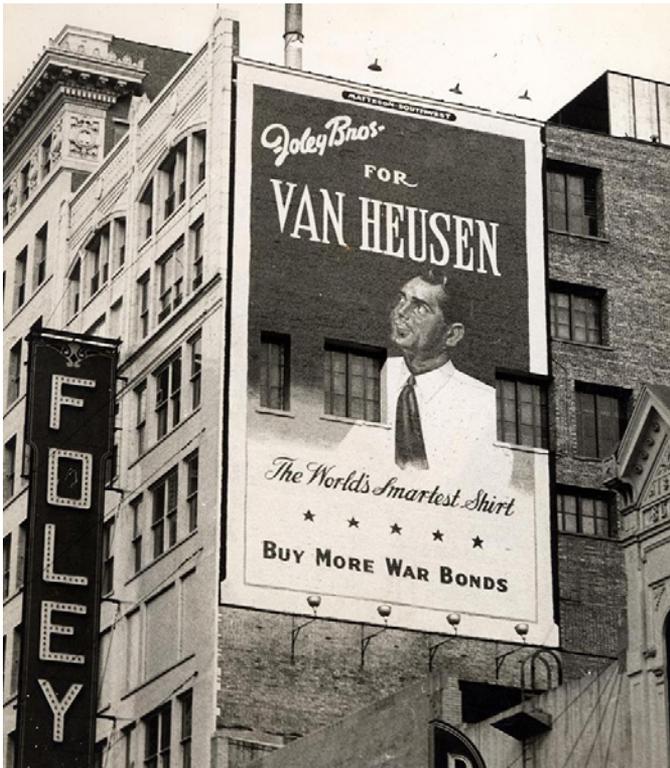
Protests to the rather expeditious decision concentrated less on the business rationale and more on the significance of personal and collective memories. Clearly, it was not Macy's that people remembered – it was the Foley's that had occupied two blocks at Main and Dallas. Many Houstonians fondly remembered the Christmas windows, the parades, the basement sales, the escalators, and the enveloping consumer experience. Other Houstonians remembered Foley's as a significant symbol of segregation during the first half of the twentieth century and then a leader in the desegregation of downtown Houston during the early 1960s.

Foley's downtown store was a symbol of the many meanings that Foley's held for Houstonians – a symbol for Houston's dramatic recovery after the Second World War, a symbol for the city's expanding affluence during the latter half of the twentieth century, and a symbol for the transformation of Houston from a somewhat provincial town into an international center for business and commerce. Perhaps most of all, Foley's downtown store was a symbol for the kind of management that blends keen business practices with genuine community engagement.

Although the Main Street store was a potent signifier for all manner of personal and collective memories, Foley's was more to Houston than a single building. There were earlier stores and an array of later branch stores. Clearly none was as

When the Houston History Archives mounted the Foley's exhibit, a collaborative team developed this exhibit poster to capture the elements in Foley's history.

All photos courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



When the United States entered World War II, Foley Bros. diverted advertising efforts to bond drives and other wartime services. All sales promotions were suspended during this time, and Foley's supported an overseas canteen.

significant as the Main Street store, but all are part of the Foley's legacy and part of Houston's history.

Destruction of the downtown store need not mean that another chunk of Houston's history lands in the dustbin. Indeed, the Foley's Department Store Records endure in the Houston History Archives in the Special Collections Department of the M. D. Anderson Library at the University of Houston, and archives can serve as a foundation for collective memory.¹

Collective memory can also be defined as public memory, memory promoted and reinforced with public programming.² To preserve the memory of all that Foley's meant to Houston and to commemorate the public opening of the Foley's archival collection, Houston History Archives mounted an exhibit in spring of 2011. *Foley's Department Store: Houston's Community Partner, 1900-2005* opened on the first floor of the M. D. Anderson Library in four large windows devoted to themes of urban and suburban retail architecture, social action, community partnerships, and of course, retail amenities.

As Houstonians regret the loss of the Main Street Store, it is important to remember that it was preceded by several Foley's stores, the first built by William L. Foley as a dry goods store at 214 Travis around 1889. He later trained James A. Foley and Pat C. Foley, and they opened their own store at 507 Main in 1900 – the first of the Foley's department stores. Pat and James Foley moved three times, and by 1922, Foley's was the largest department store in Houston.²

The exhibit photos housed permanently in the archival collection reveal the evolution of Foley's downtown stores from the Foley Bros. early enterprises through every step of construction of Kenneth Franzheim's pioneering 1947 design of the "store of tomorrow." Construction began on a magnificent new \$9,000,000 Foley's store in 1946. Final construction costs totaled \$13,000,000. Max Levine, vice president and general manager, told a crowd gathered to watch the ground breaking ceremony that "Houston is proud of Foley Bros. and Foley Bros. is proud of Houston." Levine added that the new store would redeem Foley's pledge to build in Houston the finest department store in the South. When Foley's opened in 1947, it was the first complete department store built in the country since 1928. It was also a testament to Foley's faith in Houston's future.³

Newspaper and radio accounts of the Kenneth Franzheim's architectural plans invited Houstonians to anticipate the grand opening where comfort and luxury would be the shopper's companion. Plans included an air conditioning system that would saturate the building with cool, electronically filtered air during the summer months. Even during power failures fresh air would pour into the building through intakes in the building walls. Suspended heating pipes would ensure an even temperature throughout the building. The heating and air conditioning plants would be situated in the five-story garage and service building immediately west of the store, opposite Travis.

The new Foley's was an architectural phenomenon that departed from traditional retail design. Design features included a pleasing combination of fluorescent and incandescent lights to illuminate the store. The curved vista on Main Street was the largest display window in the country. Escalators were wide enough to carry three people abreast. The design included a windowless exteri-



Renowned in Houston for its display windows, Foley's created this futuristic vision of Houston in the year 2000 to celebrate Foley's Golden Anniversary in 1950.



Foley's branch stores in 1986.

or (except for the first floor display windows) to save on air conditioning costs.

Foley's downtown was only one part of Foley's architectural story and the archival collection preserves not only photos but also records of the step-by-step management decisions as Foley's considered building branch stores. Sharpstown was the first branch store and a big step in Houston's move toward suburbanization. Notably different in design from the Main Street store, the Sharpstown store was low (three stories) and broad and featured acres of parking, a characteristic of low density suburban development patterns common in the South after the Second World War. Before embarking on expansion with branch stores, Foley's management closely studied transportation issues in Houston and surrounding areas. As the company selected sites for branches during the 1960s, management evaluated existing traffic patterns and requested improvements from the City of Houston, Harris County, and the Texas Highway Commission. The company also studied and asked for improvements in sanitary sewers, storm sewers, and waterlines in areas around proposed Foley's stores. Records of the investigations and the management decisions are preserved in the Foley's archival collection.⁴

While aesthetic urban and suburban architecture were central to Foley's retail management strategies, Foley's owners and managers demonstrated a rare commitment to the people of Houston, a commitment that preceded

the construction of the remarkable Main Street store. Houstonians recognized and rewarded Foley Bros. as a community partner and leader in social action throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

More than a retail business, Foley's Department Store became a fixture of Houston's community, offering philanthropy, employment, entertainment, and fashion. By 1927, Foley's store included an auditorium that substituted for a civic center and served as a rehearsal hall for the Houston symphony. During the Bank Holiday



Foley's attracted customers by inviting celebrities to marketing events. Here Roy Rogers and Trigger work the parade crowd.

of 1933, Foley's replaced patrons' personal checks with Foley's checks which were accepted at stores around town. When the banks reopened and Foley's deposited the personal checks, every check cleared.

A Foley's vice president, along with other business leaders, created the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition and held the first show in 1932 in the Democratic Convention Hall. In 1938, event planners added the rodeo and parade, signaling the beginning of the Trail Ride Tradition. Foley's remained a solid supporter of what became Houston's biggest annual philanthropic event.

After the war, Foley's became the "store of tomorrow" with the new building at 1100 Main Street, but the Franzheim building represented a continuation rather than a shift in Foley's management philosophy of commitment to community. Combining the roles of community partner and retailer, Foley's sold Girl Scout uniforms and camping equipment. Foley's coordinated merchandise with the sale of Girl Scout cookies in February, the Girl Scout Birthday and Annual Council Meeting in March, and Girl Scout Week at the end of October. To promote the Girl Scouts and increase sales, Foley's celebrated milestones with window displays and offered prizes to girls who visited stores during promotions.⁵

Another example of community participation was Foley's sponsorship of a Little League team known as the Foley's Texans. In addition to providing support for uniforms and participation in the Rotary Little League Baseball of Houston, Foley's management encouraged Foley's employees to attend games and support the team.⁶

In 1950 Foley's sponsored Santa's ride from Union Station to Foley's. The following year, Santa's ride became a full-fledged parade (Thanksgiving) that continued for forty-four years as an annual event attended by thousands of Houstonians and viewed on television by many others. Viewing Foley's Christmas windows became another holiday tradition.⁷

Foley's successfully combined retail strategies with community partnerships and social action. A most notable instance was the role Foley's played in desegregating Houston. During the early 1960s, student activists from Texas Southern University (TSU) began efforts to desegregate downtown. First, the students targeted government facilities, but downtown Foley's became a major target because of its central location (Main and Dallas) and its retail dominance. Several influences



Foley's front façade was a major bus stop that attracted protesters during efforts to desegregate Houston's downtown public facilities – July 1960.

shaped Foley's response. Student protests inside and outside the store worried Foley's management, and pressure from Houston's business community encouraged the store to avoid racial conflict. Desegregation of Foley's succeeded because a coordinated news blackout averted anti-integration backlash.⁸

Uncomfortable with the protests at first, Foley's management adapted quickly to welcome African American employees and customers, even participating in NAACP events. Potential new markets offset resistance to desegregation. Foley's offered appliances to the "Negro Market" first, expecting a subsequent boost in apparel sales. Shortly following the Foley's example, Houston hotels, movie theaters, public libraries, and golf courses desegregated. In 1970 women marched on The Men's Grill at Foley's commemorating fifty years of the right to vote – and suddenly the name changed to "The Grill" and women were welcomed as patrons.⁹

Foley's management worked tirelessly to encourage interactive community participation, but



Cover photo from a wedding planner brochure that included layout suggestions for the wedding party in the church, seating plans for the wedding reception, and options for the components of the bride's regalia and trousseau.

Foley's was an effective community partner because it was a successful business. Managers never forgot that their business was sales, and Foley's offered a variety of consumer amenities. Shopping at Foley's could be an all-encompassing experience. Inside the store with no windows beyond the first floor, one could shop, dine, rest, listen to music, visit the beauty salon, attend a fashion show, and have packages gift wrapped or sent to the garage for pick up later. Foley's shoppers enjoyed something like a casino experience where no daylight distracted from every possible enjoyment.¹⁰

Foley's worked to be first in opening the Houston fashion seasons. Paris fashion was an obvious favorite, but Edith Head's Hollywood designs were also exhibited one year. For those who could not afford design originals and were handy with a needle, Foley's sponsored "Les Belles de Paris" – A VOGUE Pattern Fashion Show. Foley's fashion shows were often a feature of charitable social events such as those organized for the Houston Symphony, Houston Grand Opera, and Pin Oak Charity Horse Show. Foley's Folio Board presented fashions and special programs for career women.

Many Houstonians remember Foley's bridal department where consultants offered an array of advice and services, including wedding planning, invitation printing, trousseau selection, and photography. Consultants suggested options for reception menus and wedding etiquette, and other wedding events. Of course, Foley's was a center for wedding dresses, offering varieties of lace, bodices, trains, and veils.¹¹

Brides, student athletes, activists, shoppers, and other Houstonians possess memories of Foley's. Loss of the building need not mean that Houston loses the memory of Foley's. In fact, many of the features that made the building remarkable in 1947 were the same features that made the building challenging to re-purpose in the twenty-first century. Its size, windowless construction, plus the shift toward suburban demographics in which Foley's played a lead role all contributed to the perceived need to redevelop the urban space and the retail concept.

It might be said that Foley's captured the spirit of Houston more than any other single entity. Sports teams, NASA, bayous, magnolias all signified Houston to visitors, but Foley's permeated every aspect of Houston's interior culture. Construction and maintenance of collective memory must be an active process with both individual and collective activity: "Historians, artists, scientists, religious leaders, and philosophers all share responsibility for the cultural memory systems of their communities, creating, propagating, and perpetuating communal culture over time and across spatial boundaries."¹²

Archives and museums are repositories for memory but do not infuse the community without active participation. Public programming invites such participation, and the Houston Heritage Society stepped up to engage the Houston community with memories of Foley's by re-mounting the Houston History Archives exhibit from November 2012 to February 2013.

Foley's archives are rich with the memories of Foley's in Houston and preserve the documentation of a management style that respected and supported the community. Because the Foley's Department Store Records are preserved and open to the public, memories of Foley's will persist beyond the life of the Main Street building and beyond the lifetimes of those who personally experienced Foley's as a community partner, benefited from Foley's social action, and enjoyed the shopping.

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HOUSTON HISTORY ARCHIVES

Acquisition of Foley's Department Store Records

Collection includes 42 record cartons,
16 oversized boxes, 32 bound ledgers,
and real estate records that are open
to the public.

2006 – Proposal presented and accepted

2007 – Macy's executed deed of gift

2007 – Records transferred to UH

2009 – Lasker Meyer begins book research

2011 – Records opened to public

2011-2012 – Harvard doctoral student researches labor; UT doctoral student researches transportation

