

Downtown Department Store Shopping



Horne's Department Store decorated for Christmas, 1948.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Federated Department Stores, Inc. Lazarus Division, David L. Avetta, MSP 0398.

For more than a century, one of the quintessential experiences of visiting Pittsburgh or any major American city was a trip to a downtown department store. With floor after floor of goods that often could not be found anywhere else, a visit to a store such as Kaufmann's, Horne's, Gimbels, or Boggs & Buhl was a true family event. In the early days, store visits also provided a glimpse of technology that many people could not afford at home, such as electric lights when gas lights were still common. Many people rode their first elevator or escalator and ate at their first restaurant there. By the 1920s, the "Big Three"—Kaufmann's, Horne's, and Gimbels—provided jobs for thousands and competed fiercely to attract customers during the crucial holiday shopping season. A visit to their increasingly elaborate Christmas windows and toyland displays became a beloved tradition shared by generations of Pittsburghers.

The flagship downtown stores reigned supreme through the 1950s even as the economy weathered two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the ups and downs of an industrial economy. By the

1960s, as shopping tastes and new forms of transportation changed how Americans spent their dollars and their leisure time, the large downtown stores found it difficult to compete with malls and specialty stores located more conveniently for suburban shoppers.

Boggs & Buhl had already closed in 1958, a victim of a changing North Side that would soon see itself radically transformed by urban redevelopment. Others hung on longer, but in 1986, Gimbels closed, and the Joseph Horne Co. followed in 1994. Kaufmann's continued through 2006, when a takeover by Macy's Inc., retired the familiar local name. The landmark store, rebranded as Macy's, lasted until 2015, when it closed for good.

Although the stores are now gone, their legacy lives on at the Senator John Heinz History Center, where extensive collections of photographs, artifacts, and documents record the history of Kaufmann's and Horne's, as well as a number of the city's other department stores, including Gimbels and Boggs & Buhl.



Shopping for coats at Kaufmann's, c. 1918-20.

This image captures the activity in what looks to be the women's coat department at Kaufmann's around 1920. The large number of store clerks waiting on customers was a typical part of the shopping experience before the 1930s, when new ideas about self-service and grouping clothing by size began to emerge.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Kaufmann's Department Store MSP 371. B4.F14.

Looking for clothing at Kaufmann's, 1950. The retail shopping experience looks more familiar in this image showing the women's department during Kaufmann's 79th anniversary sale in 1950. Labor shortages during World War II accelerated the change in retail culture that started in the 1930s. By 1950, retailers understood that allowing customers to have greater access to merchandise actually encouraged them to buy more.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Kaufmann's Department Store, MSP 0371.



Christmas shoppers crowd Horne's Department Store, 1945.

It is hard to believe that anyone else could fit in the store in this photograph capturing the crush of people heading for the escalator at the Joseph Horne Co. Department Store during the Christmas shopping season of 1945. Perhaps people were in the mood to celebrate. World War II had ended months earlier, and 1945 was the first holiday season for many years with no war looming on the horizon.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Pittsburgh Public Schools, MSP 117.B18.F4.

