For employees in the sales division of the G.C. Murphy Company, Store No. 12 meant the same as “Broadway” to an aspiring actor or “Nashville” to a songwriter.

By Jason Togyer
It may sound corny to people who didn’t work at Murphy’s, the McKeesport-based retailer that eventually had more than 500 stores in 24 states, but getting a post at “No. 12” in Downtown Pittsburgh meant you’d made it. Working at Store No. 12 was a fast track to an executive post at the G.C. Murphy Co. Perhaps just as important, a job at No. 12 meant excitement.

“I probably never worked harder in my entire life, [but] have you ever done anything so rewarding that it was just fun?” asks Jack Anderson of Pleasant Hills, Pennsylvania, an assistant manager at the store in the 1960s who spent more than 20 years with the company. “Store 12 was a goldmine—sales were great, profits were through the roof—everything we did was right.”

The store was big. It occupied five buildings and sprawled over half the city block bounded by Fifth Avenue, Diamond Street, McMasters Way, and Wood Street. An ideal spot, it pinpointed almost the exact geographical center of the Golden Triangle, adjacent at first to the Diamond Street Market House, and later to Market Square.

It wasn’t just size and location that made the store successful. After all, for much of the 20th century, the much more nationally prominent F.W. Woolworth Co. had two competing dime stores (the industry preferred the term “variety store”) on Sixth Avenue—one at Liberty Avenue, the other at Smithfield Street. Another competitor, J.G. McCrory Co., had a five-and-10 across Fifth Avenue from Murphy’s. Neither of those stores was a patch on Murphy’s Store No. 12. From 1930, when the store opened for business, until 1985 when the G.C. Murphy Co. fell victim to corporate raiders, No. 12 cultivated a carnival-like atmosphere that combined the convenience and value of dime-store shopping with the sights, sounds, and smells of a North African bazaar. In a 1948 Sunday magazine profile of Store No. 12, the Pittsburgh Press called it “yesterday’s country fair brought indoors … bright, colorful and noisy.” Besides Murphy’s 375 employees—including its all-female army of sales clerks, each stationed behind a mahogany counter piled high with merchandise and trimmed with chrome and glass—Store No. 12 also housed a flock of hucksters who paid Murphy’s for the right to set up stands flogging miracle floor cleaners, “leakproof” fountain pens, “the world’s sharpest knives,” and other gadgets. Two lunch counters opened daily at 7 a.m. (two hours before the rest of the store) and buzzed with activity until the doors were locked—at 5 p.m. most nights, but at 9 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays.

From a booth above the Diamond Street entrance, a fortune-teller called “Miss Chan” read clients’ lifelines, while in Murphy’s music department, pianist Marie Moss performed daily, playing tunes from the store’s selection of sheet music. In one corner, the Glick family rented space from G.C. Murphy to operate the New Diamond Market; after 1961, it was the last remaining outpost of Downtown Pittsburgh’s old 18th- and 19th-century market houses, offering everything from freshly killed poultry to outrageously inexpensive produce. In another corner, McKees Rocks-based Jenny Lee Bakery turned out everything from doughnuts to multi-tiered wedding cakes.

“It was a circus,” says Bill Kraus of Bethel Park, Pa., who began working at Store No. 12 in 1941 at 16 years old, and eventually became a vice president in Murphy’s buying division, spending almost 44 years with the company. “For its time, Store No. 12 was the most advanced merchandising concept of any in the country,” Kraus says. Most of the merchandise sold for under a dollar (until the 1950s, G.C. Murphy Co.’s cash registers could only tally sales up to $5), and all of it had to be carried out of the store in bags and transported on streetcars and buses. By those standards, Kraus says, the store’s volume was “staggering.”

In 1973, then-store manager Clair McElhinny of Greensburg, Pa., tallied up his “best selling” items. Staggering indeed. Try $41,000 in candy bars at 5 cents per, or more than $47,000 in greeting cards at 25 cents each. McElhinny, who eventually retired as Murphy’s vice president of sales, also sold $174,000 in cigarettes, $120,000 in pantyhose, and $119,000 in yarn from Store No. 12 in 1973. Although another Pittsburgh retailing landmark, National Record Mart, was right next door, Store No. 12 still sold $18,000 in 45-rpm records, most stuck on cardboard squares, wrapped in cellophane, and priced at three for $2.25. In 1974, Bill Anderson, another retired Murphy executive, determined that the company’s 128 Pennsylvania stores netted a profit that year of $10.9 million. Store No. 12 alone made up nearly nine percent of that figure. Even with the decline of urban shopping areas in the ’80s, McElhinny’s records show that Store No. 12 still averaged about $163 in sales per square foot, or twice the company’s average. Interviewed in 2004, Earl Rehrig, another former Store No. 12 manager, remembered being told by Chicago’s E.J. Brach & Sons that he was the candy company’s largest single customer.

Sometimes, Store No. 12’s volume shocked even longtime Murphy’s veterans.
Dave Backstrom was a district manager when the Hershey Co. decided to discontinue a candy called “Hersheyettes.” A Hershey salesman offered a special price—60 cents per pound—to Murphy’s Store No. 12. “We’ll take 4,000 pounds,” Backstrom told the salesman. Then he thought some more. “If you give me one week before you sell them to anyone else in the city,” he said, “I’ll take 18,000 pounds.”

“I don’t know if you ever saw 18,000 pounds of candy, but when it came in the back door, it made my heart quiver,” he said. Store No. 12 sold the entire shipment within two weeks.

The fountain and lunch counter on the first floor together seated 120 people, says Ellison “Al” Boggs of Pleasant Hills, who ran the G.C. Murphy Co.’s restaurant division for nearly 20 years. Hundreds more dined at the downstairs restaurant. Boggs can remember people waiting two or three deep behind each stool for a seat to open.
could be sold for a dime, and “five-and-10” stores soon popped up all over Pennsylvania—spreading out to neighboring states. Several of the major national chains had their origins in the Keystone State, including S.H. Kress in Nanticoke, Luzerne County, and J.J. Newberry in Stroudsburg, Monroe County.

Murphy got his start in the business working for a cousin, John G. McCrorey, who opened his first five-and-10 in Scottdale, Westmoreland County, in 1882. George Murphy managed the Jamestown, New York, location. His employee Sebastian S. Kresge went on to found the S.S. Kresge Co.—the direct ancestor of today’s Kmarts—while Murphy launched the G.C. Murphy Co. in March 1899, at 301 Fifth Avenue, McKeesport. By 1904, Murphy had 14 five-and-10s in nearby communities such as Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. It also had an impressive store on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. that catered to a clientele including senators, congressmen, former First Lady Mamie Eisenhower, and President Carter’s daughter Amy. “But,” Hudak says, “it was no Number 12.”

Strictly speaking, “No. 12” wasn’t the 12th store in the Murphy chain. Opened October 16, 1930, at a cost of more than $661,000, it was more like the 170th store, depending on how you’re counting. Murphy’s had a habit of moving stores from town to town and reusing their numbers; “No. 12” was originally assigned to the company’s wholesale department, or “wareroom,” in McKeesport.

It also wasn’t the first store that the G.C. Murphy Co. opened in downtown Pittsburgh. Just after opening his new five, 10, and 25 cent store at 545 Fifth Avenue in McKeesport on February 17, 1906, entrepreneur and Indiana County native George Clinton Murphy opened another on Pittsburgh’s Fifth Avenue.

Only 38 years old at the time, Murphy was already an old hand in the nation’s fast-growing variety store business, which revolutionized the retail landscape. Before the arrival of five-and-10-cent stores, merchandise stayed behind the counters and prices weren’t clearly marked. “Dime stores” put merchandise out for public inspection, and because they were part of large chains, they could sell staple goods for much less than independent shopkeepers—a nickel or a dime, in other words.

A few retailers experimented with “five-cent counters” in the 1870s, but it took a not-too-successful clerk at a dry goods store in Watertown, New York, to extend the concept to an entire store. Frank Winfield Woolworth’s first store in Utica didn’t catch on, but his second in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, did—along with another in Scranton. In short order, Woolworth added items that could be sold for a dime, and “five-and-10” stores soon popped up all over Pennsylvania—spreading out to neighboring states. Several of the major national chains had their origins in the Keystone State, including S.H. Kress in Nanticoke, Luzerne County, and J.J. Newberry in Stroudsburg, Monroe County.

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Braddock, Homestead, and Wilkinsburg. That’s when Woolworth, who then owned 76 five-and-10s, bought out Murphy.3

As part of the sale agreement, George Murphy promised not to open any additional five-and-10s in any of Woolworth’s towns, but that didn’t prevent Murphy from selling items for more than a dime, and by 1906, he was back in business with a new G.C. Murphy Co.—merchandise priced at five, 10, and 25 cents. In doing so, Murphy’s became the first five-and-10 store to break the 10-cent price ceiling. It took Woolworth nearly 30 years to follow suit, by which time the company had resorted to ridiculous subterfuge, such as selling hammers in two separate pieces (handle and head) to keep prices under a dime.

In 1909, Murphy’s name appeared on a chain of 12 variety stores doing $210,000 in sales in McKeesport, Pittsburgh, Greensburg, New Kensington, Turtle Creek, Latrobe, Rochester, Wimerding, Kittanning, and Ellwood City. Suddenly, tragedy struck. In April, George Murphy suffered a burst appendix and died at home of peritonitis. His will directed that his investments—including 388 shares of the G.C. Murphy Co.—be sold to provide yearly annuities for his family, but a public auction in 1910 found no takers (the historical record is silent on the reasons why, though possible buyers might have seen evidence that the business was failing), and according to Murphy’s granddaughter, Betty Briggs Rehfeldt, there was no thought of turning the company over to his widow.

In the hands of court-appointed receivers, the company foundered. Four stores closed; rumors circulated that one of the managers had a drinking problem. John G. McCrory sent another cousin, John Sephus Mack, to McKeesport to see if Murphy’s company was worth saving. Mack, another Indiana County native, was general manager of the McCrory five-and-10 chain; he reported back that the G.C. Murphy Co. should be acquired as soon as possible. “Young man, I make the decisions around here,” McCrory retorted. Nonplussed, Mack and another McCrory employee, Walter C. Shaw, Sr., scraped together their savings in 1911 and purchased control of the G.C. Murphy Co. McCrory refused to speak to Mack for years.

Surprisingly, as one of his first acts as sales manager of the G.C. Murphy Co., Shaw closed Pittsburgh’s downtown store and sold the location to the Chicago-based Thompson’s Restaurants chain of cafeterias. After holding one last sale, Shaw packed up the stock on December 26, 1911, and carted everything to the Monongahela Wharf where he made a deal with a packet boat captain to carry everything 270 miles to Gallipolis, Ohio, for $120. “The counters were hanging out over the sides of the packet, and it made a very peculiar-looking sight going down the Ohio River,” reads an early company history.6

In Gallipolis, Shaw established both a new Murphy store and a pattern that served the G.C. Murphy Co. well for years to come. Whenever possible, Murphy shunned big cities in favor of small towns. As Chain Store Age magazine pointed out in an admiring 1950 profile, other five-and-10 chains opened locations in major cities where “dime stores” were novelty appendages to the basic retail structure,” while in places like Gallipolis; Elkins, West Virginia; or Ashland, Kentucky, “Murphy’s was the store.” Murphy’s also established clusters of stores together so they could share the cost of advertising and promotion—locations in neighboring East Pittsburgh (Store No. 25) and Pitcairn (Store No. 69) followed the Turtle Creek and Wimerding locations.

Murphy’s grew vertically, rather than horizontally in the 1920s. While Woolworth, McCrory, and Kress rapidly added locations, G.C. Murphy Co. made its existing locations larger and better. This enlargement allowed Murphy’s to broaden its selection of

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G.C. Murphy Co.
Store No. 12
Best Selling Items 1973

$41,000
in candy bars at 5 cents per

$47,000
in greeting cards at 25 cents each

$174,000
in cigarettes

$120,000
in pantyhose

$119,000
in yarn

$18,000
in 45-rpm records
merchandise while only marginally increasing its overhead—or as Chain Store Age colorfully put it, Mack and Shaw weren’t concerned with “the number of cows” they had, but “how much milk” those cows produced.” Murphy’s produced splendidly; by 1940 its per-store sales ranked among the highest in the industry at $262,000 per location, versus $165,000 per store at Woolworth, $214,000 at Kresge, and $227,000 at the W.T. Grant Co. (founded by another Pennsylvania native—William Thomas Grant, born in Bradford).9

The G.C. Murphy Co.’s domination of small-town retailing foreshadowed a strategy repeated years later with similar success by Wal-Mart. Not surprisingly, just as Wal-Mart met resistance in the 1990s, many independent stores in the 1920s and ’30s considered Murphy’s and other chains a destructive influence and mounted aggressive campaigns to regulate or tax them out of existence. Unsuccessful in those efforts, by 1930 G.C. Murphy Co. served most of Appalachia. Several stores took root within the Pittsburgh city limits, in neighborhoods like East Liberty (on Homewood Avenue), Lawrenceville (at the corner of Butler and 44th streets), and Hazelwood (at 4847 Second Avenue), but until 1930, Murphy’s avoided returning to downtown.

When it came back, it did so in a big way. The first store’s contents fit on a packet boat; the second sported entrances on three different streets. In April 1930, the Pittsburgh contracting firm of H. Miller & Sons demolished several 19th-century buildings between Fifth Avenue, McMasters Way, and Diamond Street, including a group of shops and offices collectively known as the “Fifth Avenue Arcade.” In their place rose a new store designed by Harold E. Crosby, a 1922 graduate of Iowa State College who joined the G.C. Murphy Co. in the late 1920s and served as its chief architect for more than 30 years. Crosby created a three-story, steel-framed, T-
shaped building with brick and terra cotta facades on Fifth and Diamond, and tied this new structure into two existing buildings on McMasters.10

An established firm, Miller had built prominent Pittsburgh buildings such as Montefiore Hospital, the Irene Kaufman Settlement, and Taylor Allderdice High School, but never before had the company been pushed to such a breakneck pace. The new store, completed in just 70 working days (“a record in speedy construction,” according to one contemporary account,11 and three months ahead of schedule, according to an article in the *Pittsburgh Press*), featured more than 40,000 square feet of sales area on two floors. The work may have gone too quickly at times, before Crosby had finished with the blueprints in some instances. Murphy’s frequently tangled with Miller over the cost of changes. “This work was not started or asked for until the plasterers had started work in the basement (July 15) and we finally received orders to proceed ... Aug. 11,” says a note from someone at H. Miller written on a photo of the special plumbing required for the big first-floor soda fountain. On another photo of the store’s new asphalt floor tiles (a novelty in 1930), the same person groused: “All this work could have been completed June 4th had plans show details.” The addition of an extra office to a stairwell on Diamond Street caused “at least a week’s delay,” Miller & Sons told Murphy’s, while complaining that changes Crosby ordered to the façade held up a plastering crew 10 days.13

Nevertheless, by mid-September the counters were in, by mid-October the store opened for a special “preview,” and regular business hours started the following day. Of the city’s three daily newspapers, the morning *Post-Gazette* and afternoon *Press* offered brief mentions, while Hearst’s afternoon *Sun-Telegraph* devoted several stories and feature photos to what it called “a superbly appointed and decorated” store. (Only a cynic would point out that the “Telly” received the equivalent of three full pages of advertising from Murphy’s as well as the companies that helped to erect the store.) “Coming as it does during these months of so-called ‘business depression,’ the announcement is evidence of confidence in Pittsburgh and its buyers,” the *Sun-Telegraph* cooed. “This new Murphy establishment is significant, not only because of the values offered in high-grade merchandise it will offer at remarkably low prices, but also of the hundreds of local workers it will employ.”14

In great detail and with lavish use of ellipses, Murphy ads described the store’s interior, starting at the entrance at 228 Fifth Avenue:

[O]n your right, you see the soda fountain. What a fountain it is … the largest in Pittsburgh … all polished glass and gleaming marble and metal. Here soft leather upholstered seats invite you to rest ... cheery clerks hurry to serve you.
Ice cream and soda delights … toasted sandwiches … and so moderately priced … Murphy priced! Take a stroll through the store. All around you is bright, new merchandise … hundreds of items, almost anything you need. The store is a city block long. Stroll over to the Diamond Street entrance and new discoveries await you.

Entering from 219 Diamond Street, customers turning right found a magic place where miracles of candy-making are performed before your eyes.

‘The Great White Way,’ this long counter has been aptly called … then there is the Music Department, where sheet music, records and rolls … both American and foreign … are available. There is much more to see … too much to tell about in print. Come in and explore … you are welcome and you’ll enjoy it.”

According to McElhinny’s records, sales during that abbreviated year topped $495,000. In 1931 and Depression-wracked 1932, they near $1 million, finally breaking the million-dollar threshold in 1933. From there, both sales and the store itself expanded. Murphy’s first took over a floral shop on McMasters Way in 1935, then added the six-story Bedell Company clothing store on Fifth Avenue in 1940. The latter purchase increased the sales area by 30 percent and gave Store No. 12 five new floors for storage. Crosby tied the Bedell building and his 1930 structure together with a new, streamlined storefront of light pink tile. Between 1931 and 1950 at least
Besides Murphy’s 375 employees—including its all-female army of sales clerks, each stationed behind a mahogany counter piled high with merchandise and trimmed with chrome and glass—Store No. 12 also housed a flock of hucksters who paid Murphy’s for the right to set up stands flogging miracle floor cleaners, “leakproof” fountain pens, “the world’s sharpest knives,” and other gadgets.

10 more remodeling projects were completed at Store No. 12,16 and while the sales area sparkled (“every square inch of space is scientifically used,” marveled the Pittsburgh Press in 1948, adding, “there is not one dark spot in the whole store”)17, it was a crazy patchwork behind the scenes, where floors sloped unevenly to connect the old and new buildings. One of the stock rooms started life as a bowling alley, and in a few places the ceiling stood only five feet from the floor; scores remained chalked on the wall long after the last pins had fallen. “When I first [started working] there, they would call me, ‘Mr. Speidel to the bowling alley,’” Speidel remembers, “and I would say, ‘What the hell are you talking about, [what] ‘bowling alley? We also had (stockrooms called) ‘Bedell one’ and ‘Bedell two.’”

This combination of new and old buildings owned by different landlords created headaches for Murphy’s. “I practically lived in that building,” says Wayne Potter of Mt. Pleasant, Pa., a longtime maintenance supervisor. Worse yet, each time Murphy’s leased an adjoining property and knocked down the walls, it had to promise to replace them if it closed the store. As a young G.C. Murphy Co. accountant, Hudak estimated it would have cost “several millions of dollars” to restore the interconnected buildings to their original configurations. “No one ever thought it was a problem—that they would ever really have to put those walls back,” he says.

In fact, the store was so wildly successful no one ever thought it would close. A few weeks before Christmas 1948, the Press calculated that it took 45 minutes to push through the crowds from one side of the store to the other. Store No. 12 then stocked some 40,000 different items from candy, office supplies, and cosmetics to toys, clothing, and housewares. “Pitch artists and barkers ballyhoo special items in 12 sections of the store,” the writer noted. “In this bedlam, with the smell of candy, perfumes, frying hot dogs and buttered nuts, the rich and poor shop together. Some hurry from counter to counter. Others wander around taking in all of the sights, seeing and playing with the latest novelties.”18

At lunchtime, when the nearby headquarters of Alcoa, U. S. Steel, Westinghouse, Mellon Bank, and other corporations emptied, Store No. 12 bustled even more. Speidel says sales made between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. accounted for 65 percent of the store’s business. The fountain and lunch counter on the first floor together seated 120 people, says Ellison “Al” Boggs of Pleasant Hills, who ran the G.C. Murphy Co.’s restaurant division for nearly 20 years. Hundreds more dined at the downstairs restaurant. Boggs can remember people waiting two or three deep behind each stool for a seat to open. Sixty employees kept busy in the restaurant, preparing mostly “blue-plate lunches” such as casseroles and hot sandwiches. Other customers came to the store during their lunchbreak just for the store’s entertainment value. A popular attraction was the downstairs pet department, where two parrots named “George” and “Murphy” (for the company’s founder) held court for nearly 20 years, beginning in the 1960s. Birdnappers snatched them in the 1970s, but the parrots were soon recovered on the North Side and restored to their rightful perches.

After 1970, the G.C. Murphy Co. shifted its emphasis away from its variety stores and toward its new Murphy’s Marts: discount department stores modeled after Kmart. Store No. 12, however, remained the company’s spiritual flagship. The pitchmen faded away, but the store added a Pittsburgh Pirates ticket counter. During the Bucs’ 1975 pennant run the fifth-floor sign shop silkscreened thousands of headscarves for the team’s “Babushka Brigade.” With the development of Market Square Park and the completion of PPG Place, the store entered a sort of golden age. A corporate-wide remodeling program treated its interior to nostalgic-themed displays with a new emphasis on convenience items and impulse purchases. The New Diamond Market continued to thrive, too, despite being an anachronism amidst the high-gloss 1980s corporate shine of Renaissance II. “It was everything that Giant Eagle [grocery store] wishes they were,” Jack Anderson says. “If the rest of the world was selling bananas for 29 cents a pound, they would find a deal on bananas and sell them for 5 cents a pound, and people would line up around the block.”

In a December 10, 1984, story for the Press, Barbara Cloud marveled at the market’s endurance, calling it “a landmark” and “a link to the past.”19

The good times didn’t last. Although in
While the sales area sparkled, it was a crazy patchwork behind the scenes, where floors sloped unevenly to connect the old and new buildings.

In the early 1980s, the G.C. Murphy Co. posted three straight years of record profits. Flush with cash and carrying relatively little long-term debt, it soon attracted the attention of Wall Street sharks. First came Arthur Goldberg, the flamboyant future owner of the Bally casino chain; then Irwin “Irv the Liquidator” Jacobs, who was notorious for dismembering corporations and selling their assets. Murphy executives scrambled to arrange financing to take the company private, but time ran out in April 1985, when Jacobs sold his shares to Rocky Hill of Connecticut-based Ames Department Stores, a low-priced discount chain whose outlets competed with G.C. Murphy Co.’s Murphy’s Marts. Murphy stockholders eagerly snapped up Ames’ offer of $48 for each outstanding share, and by August the McKeesport company had become a division of the larger firm. Ames didn’t have—and didn’t want—any variety stores, and immediately closed 120 G.C. Murphy five-and-10s, including “Store No. 1” in McKeesport. Three years later, Ames spun the remaining variety stores—including Store No. 12—off to the parent company of Murphy’s old rival, McCrory.
Racked by management problems and struggling with massive debts, McCrory’s cut maintenance at Store No. 12, fired employees, and downgraded the merchandise to off-brand and generic products. The New Diamond Market lost its lease and was replaced by a supermarket; that market closed in 1994. By November 2001, when McCrory filed for bankruptcy protection (the second time in a decade) and liquidated its remaining 200 locations, the one-time pride of the G.C. Murphy Co. looked depressed and sickly. The floors were streaked with dirt; the shelves stood half-empty, and pigeons flitted through upstairs windows thoughtlessly left open. For six years, Store No. 12 sat empty, potential developers scared away in part by the expense of rehabilitating all of those disparate buildings that H.E. Crosby had connected.

Happily, Store No. 12 is about to get a new lease on life. In July 2008, Millcraft Industries of Washington County completed a $2.31 million deal to acquire the store and several adjoining buildings from Pittsburgh’s Urban Redevelopment Authority. The company, which spearheaded development of the Southpointe residential and commercial complex along Interstate 79, plans to turn Store No. 12 into “Market Square Place,” containing 50 loft-style apartments, retail stores, restaurants, and the downtown branch of the YMCA of Greater Pittsburgh. There probably won’t be anything sold for five or 10 cents, and you won’t be able to get your fortune told, but visitors will shop and eat and probably even hear live piano music from time to time. Though it won’t look much like it did in the days of John Sephus Mack and Walter Shaw, Sr., they’d probably be glad to see the store serving as a vital part of the region they loved—and which loved the G.C. Murphy Co. and its wild and wonderful Store No. 12.

Jason Togyer is author of the new book, *For the Love of Murphy’s: The Behind-the-Counter Story of a Great American Retailer* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2008), completed with the assistance of a grant from the G.C. Murphy Co. Foundation. A lifelong resident of the McKeesport area, Togyer is managing editor of *The Link*, the magazine of the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University.

13. H. Miller and Sons photo album, in files of McKeesport Heritage Center, McKeesport, Pa.