

Rochester Goes Shopping: Sibley's and the Rise of "Consumer Culture"

By Karen McCally

Few Rochester institutions inspire more vivid memories than Sibley's. With its handsomely showcased clothing and linens, tantalizing baked goods, fashionable hair salon, and elegant sixth-floor tea room, Sibley's cultivated luxury and style. As the fortunes of Sibley's and other downtown department stores waned, American historians began to recognize the profound impact these institutions had on American culture. Born of the nineteenth century dry goods store, department stores brought us the whole concept of shopping—not just running an errand to the corner store, but lingering in stores, gazing at objects, and fantasizing about what we might own.

There was a solid economic foundation to the advent of shopping. From 1890 to 1930, the American economy evolved from a system to process, manufacture, and transport basic commodities, to a system to design, manufacture and sell an ever-growing variety of consumer goods. Today, we assume that Americans embraced consumer goods automatically. But for the mostly Protestant and buttoned-up middle class of the late nineteenth century, getting in the habit of buying entailed a cultural revolution.



Front side of an 1878 Sibley's trade card promoting the store's Christmas holiday Open House. Trade cards, a new but rapidly expanding form of advertising in the 1870s, presented familiar images in vivid colors. Flowers and women, stock images on trade cards, were unrelated to the store or its products, except as recognizable symbols of abundance.

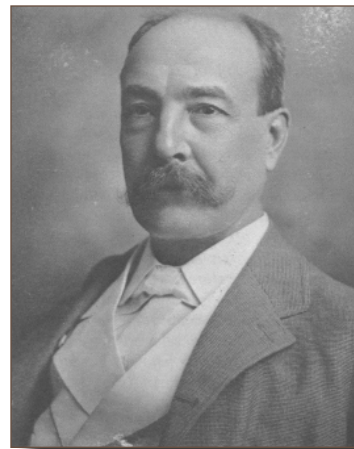
It meant getting Americans to temper their adherence to traditional values like work, self-denial, and thrift in order to permit—and even celebrate—values like pleasure, indulgence, and fantasy. The first generation of department store magnates, of which Sibley, Lindsay and Curr were prime examples, worked closely with a new type of professional—the advertising agent—to sell not just products, but sensations, experiences, identities, and lifestyles. Historians invented the phrase “consumer culture” to describe this assumption that we can transform ourselves through what we buy.

Founded in 1868, the Sibley, Lindsay & Curr Com-

pany distinguished itself from the very beginning as a new kind of store. Rufus Sibley, Alexander Lindsay, and John Curr had all been mentored in what was arguably North America's first modern department store: Hogg, Brown & Taylor of Boston. Hogg hired its clerks from Scotland, then the most advanced center of the textile industry. Lindsay was one such clerk. Trained in Glasgow, he emigrated to Boston to work for Hogg. There he met bookkeeper Sibley and a Scottish counterpart, John Curr, and the three decided to go into business for themselves.

With limited capital, large and established markets such as New York City were out of the question. But Rochester, with a respectable population of nearly 60,000 and a rapidly diversifying economy, seemed a promising destination to the three entrepreneurs. On March 30, 1868, Sibley, Lindsay, & Curr Co. opened for business at 73 Main Street.

The store grew quickly under Lindsay's management.



Like other department store pioneers, Lindsay understood that it was more than the item itself that induced a customer to buy. The key to selling was in the art of display, and its potential to create an emotional bond between patron and product. In 1993 historian William Leach chronicled the rise of consumerism in his landmark book *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. In chapters with titles such as “Color, Glass and Light” and “Sell Them Their Dreams,” Leach traced the words and deeds of the first generation of department store magnates as they attempted to perfect the art of display. While Leach focused his research on Philadelphia's Wanamaker's, he could just as easily have written his book about Sibley's. As Sibley's expanded rapidly, the store segregated business functions in small, upper story offices, to create the largest possible floor space to showcase goods. Lindsay

Alexander Lindsay, the most visible of the Sibley's partners, was the principal buyer and day-to-day manager of the store from its beginning in 1868 until his retirement in 1914.

was among the first managers, for example, to insist on wide aisles as a way to encourage shoppers to move freely throughout the store.

To attract shoppers from off the streets, Sibley's hired a new type of professional: the window decorator. In 1918, Sibley's Head Decorator, E.D. Pierce created such elaborate and appealing windows that one Rochester daily devoted an entire article to Sibley's window displays.

And then there was light. Pioneer department store magnates made optimal use of the new technology of electricity, which in the 1890s began creating entire "white light" districts within cities. Sibley's alone made up such a district. As the store boasted in its 100th anniversary history: "By 1908 Sibley's dominated the Main St. scene... More arc



lamps were used to light the counters and stockrooms than existed in nine Upstate towns combined."

As it turned out, Sibley's and downtown rose and fell together. The store flourished for over 100 years. A one-aisle store with thirteen employees in 1868, Sibley's grew to a 23-acre monolith at

the corner of Main Street and Clinton Avenue with employees in the thousands.

But while the downtown department store is now gone, its historical legacy endures. Manufacturers and retailers rely more than ever on designers and advertising agents, who formulate brands—product identities

that suggest not just an object or service, but an experience or lifestyle. Today what we call "branding" encompasses many of the practices put in place by Lindsay and others a century ago. Only the packaging is different.



Above: When Sibley's moved to the corner of Main Street and East Avenue in 1906, it became one of the five largest department stores in the nation.

Left: Sibley's wide aisles encouraged customers to move freely through the store, and to encircle the attractive displays of store products.