

Woolworth's

The years from my graduation from high school in 1939 until Tracy and I were married on September 24, 1941 were probably the most important in my life, so important that I hardly know how to begin writing about them.

Some time after my graduation from high school, my sisters Iona and Iola were instrumental in getting me a part time job at Woolworth's store in Ogden, Utah, located on the west side of Washington Avenue between 23rd Street and 24th Street. The Depression was still on, and jobs were very hard to come by. I had decided to go to Weber College the next fall, and I was trying to get together enough money for the tuition. I don't remember how much money that entailed, but by today's standard it was probably not very much.

The job was in the cafeteria, which was located at the back of the store. It took up the entire back except for a long narrow strip on the south of the cafeteria, where the manager of the store and his secretary-bookkeeper kept an office. The kitchen for the cafeteria was in the basement directly below the cafeteria, and a dumb waiter reached from the basement to a corner of the cafeteria above so that supplies and food could be sent from the kitchen to the main floor of the cafeteria. Soiled dishes and empty pans could also be returned to the kitchen below. The name of the manager of the cafeteria itself was Mrs. Michaels, one of those people whose stern exterior somewhat hides a heart of gold. I became very fond of her.

There was an assistant manager for the cafeteria who had finished her training and was just waiting to be assigned to a manager position in another store. Her name was "Henry"—probably short for Henrietta. I forget her last name. She took an instant dislike to me and made my life at Woolworth's miserable. This situation was somewhat mitigated by the pleasant association of the other girls who worked in the cafeteria. I tried to keep as much distance as I could between Henry and myself but that was not always possible.

If you were on "full-time," you would work six hours a day, six days a week. Some of the girls may have made more—Henry probably did, but most of us made \$.25 an hour. I was on part-time. I worked usually on Saturdays and during holidays and when someone needed a substitute.

Woolworth cafeterias offered good food at very reasonable prices, even for the Depression. You could get a dinner consisting of a meat or macaroni and cheese, a vegetable, and a salad for \$.20. When we had turkey with a vegetable, dressing, gravy and a salad, it cost \$.25. A carbonated drink was \$.05, and an ice cream soda or a milkshake or malted milkshake was \$.20. Sandwiches were \$.10, unless it was a club sandwich (three pieces of toast, lettuce, tomatoes, and meat), and then the sandwich was \$.15 or \$.20, depending on the meat for the sandwich. Desserts were extra. Our kitchen cooked up all kinds of pies, made according to Woolworth's exact recipes. We had apple, cherry, pumpkin, caramel-pecan, and often banana cream and coconut cream pies. A slice of pie was \$.10 and if you wanted it topped with ice cream, it was \$.05 extra. A cup of coffee was \$.05, and refills were free. Meals did not come with our service. We either brought a lunch or bought lunch at the cafeteria.

Each employee was assigned a certain section of the cafeteria. You took people's orders, called them in, picked the order up, served it to the customer, collected the money when the meal was finished, rang it up in the cash register, and cleaned up after the customer was finished.

Cleaning up entailed clearing the dishes, wiping the counter clean, putting the silverware and the glassware on the sideboard of the sink within the assigned area, and putting the plates, cups, saucers, and other heavier dishes in long metal containers and seeing that these were sent downstairs to the automatic dishwashers when they were filled. Then, in your spare time, you washed the silverware and glassware, dried them, and returned them to their proper places on the shelves. At the end of the day, you saw that the counters were washed and dried clean for the next day. The sinks and sideboards were all stainless steel, and they were supposed to be left spotless.

Some of the more experienced girls were assigned to the area where the food was dished up (with exact portions). Some were assigned to the area where the drinks and the ice cream were served. We called our orders in to them and they called the numbers of the meals, such as No. 1, 2, 3, or the type of sandwich—turkey, chicken salad, cheese, etc., when they were ready to be picked up.

My sisters and I were good workers, and so even after my sisters graduated from Weber and got better jobs, I retained my job at Woolworth's while I was attending Weber College during the academic year of 1939-1940.

In the spring of 1940, Mrs. Michaels approached me and asked me if I would like to train for being a manager of a Woolworth cafeteria. I was very flattered, of course, but I asked her to let me think about it. At Weber, 1939-1940, I had decided to major in home economics with a minor in food. Managing a Woolworth cafeteria would bring me a better salary than I would receive as a teacher of home economics. I would have to, however, go wherever there was an opening.

After consulting with my parents, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity and informed Mrs. Michael of my decision. I went on full-time. Involved in the training was to have experience in all the aspects of the cafeteria, learning how to handle all the equipment and keep it in top shape. I would have to learn how to plan the menus, see that they were printed, and learn how to handle employees.

I soon found out that Woolworth's ran their cafeterias on a close cost basis. Each serving was weighed out and each recipe was priced according to cost. I soon reviewed my skill in fractions, as each item on the menu was reduced to its basic cost, all items totaled, and the entire meal figured out as to cost and profit. I spent much of the summer doing this cost analysis. While I was doing this, I had full access to all of Woolworth's recipes. I found out that Mrs. Michaels was a firm but fair employer.

I also found out that for some reason Henry was even more vindictive toward me. I think she felt threatened. I did not discuss this with Mrs. Michaels. But I couldn't understand why she disliked me so intensely. I did not think my training to be an assistant Woolworth cafeteria manager in any way threatened her. She was already trained.

Towards the end of the summer, however, a certain young man would come and sit on one of the empty stools and wait to walk me home. Mrs. Michaels did not like this because it meant that if I got serious about this young man, all her careful training might go down the drain because the I might not be willing to go wherever a job was offered to me because my husband's needs would probably come first.

She didn't need to worry, however, because something else came up to cause me to end my service in the cafeteria. The strong soaps we used to wash the silverware and glassware upstairs caused me to break out with eczema all up and down my hands and arms. The skin specialist told me I would have to quit if I were to clear up the eczema.

Mrs. Michaels was very nice about it. She talked to the manager of the store and recommended that he transfer me to the floor instead of letting me go entirely. He did this, and for the rest of the summer I worked on the floor. In hindsight, I wish I had spent that year at Weber and graduated with my Associate of Science, a two-year degree, which is all that Weber offered at that time. Later, Weber moved to another campus up near the mountains off Harrison Avenue and became a four-year college.

All of the Langford girls except me graduated from Weber, and all the boys graduated from Weber too. The war came along, and the Langford brothers and sisters married, and some of us left Ogden for other pursuits. I learned a lot about nutrition, meal planning, etc. at the cafeteria. That fall, if it hadn't been for the eczema, I would have learned how to cook all those secret recipes that I had so carefully analyzed and priced during that summer. It was a good experience.