

Sales & Celebrations: Retailing and Regional Identity in Western New York State, 1920–1940. By Sarah Elvins. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004. xxi + 222 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$42.95. ISBN: 0-821-41549-2.

Reviewed by Howard R. Stanger

How national was the national retail market, asks historian Sarah Elvins in her study of western New York State retailers during the 1920s and 1930s? While the conventional view assumes that consumerism had a national homogenizing effect, Elvins's regional investigation finds the persistence of local identities amid vast economic and cultural changes. This blind spot may be attributable to historians' focus on big-city retailers and advertising agencies and to the rise of nationally branded goods. Buffalo and Rochester provide the settings for a reformulation of the history of consumption.

At the turn of the last century, both cities thrived economically. Entrepreneurs followed the influx of immigrants to western New York. Buffalo, New York's second-largest city, was home to over half a million people and boasted more millionaires per capita than New York City, owing to its commercial and industrial prowess. Rochester, at about half Buffalo's population, housed cutting-edge technical and manufacturing companies. Both midsize cities had vibrant downtown retail cores. Merchants, especially department-store owners, were very active in the civic, cultural, and business organizations that advertised the area's local advantages.

Unlike in the larger cities, local department-store owners were more prominent and visible in local affairs. Their "palaces of consumption," located on prime real estate, catered to middle-class women from the city and surrounding areas, who were drawn downtown for the enthralling shopping experience. Aside from the lure of attractive material goods, department stores provided elaborate Christmas window displays, hosted special "educational" events, sponsored parades and contents, and acted as civic boosters. Their "rhetoric of service" was directly

linked to local identity. Yet their emphasis on community was not wholly altruistic: it served as an important selling tool in the face of increasing competition from big-city retailers and chain stores.

The mass media and transportation developments made Americans aware of national brands and shifting styles. Western New York merchants (including grocers and druggists) developed strategies to stave off competitive threats. These smaller stores modernized their management methods and carved out their own styles while at the same time looking toward big-city stores for guidance. “The ability of local merchants and manufacturers to compete with the best New York City had to offer became a major component of . . . civic pride” (p. 48). And they did so by emulating the latest fashions seen in mass-circulation magazines, sending buyers to fashion centers, and featuring nationally branded products in their advertisements. “Local merchants maintained that there was no reason to look elsewhere for style goods: magazines were offered as proof that the stores in smaller cities were keeping up with national trends” (p. 63). Local newspapers acted as boosters for the stores and benefited from their success with increased ad revenues.

Chain stores grew in significance during the 1920s and 1930s and posed a greater threat to local retailers than the big-city stores. Chains sold nationally advertised branded goods at lower prices. Local merchants also adapted to the chain-store “menace” by: modernizing management and operations, purchasing in groups, establishing cash-only policies, and offering specialized services. They benefited from loyal working-class patrons with whom they shared ethnic and neighborhood ties and who could purchase goods on credit and utilize the special services offered by the stores but not the chains. Local merchants also found strong allies in the local press, whose editorials often excoriated the outside businesses. In response, chains cultivated local goodwill through charity and community involvement and hired morally and professionally upstanding employees and managers. “In the face of this new form of competition, independent merchants strenuously resisted the encroachment of chain retailers and asserted their own place in the communities they served” (p. 105).

Local merchants also had to cope with the Great Depression. In the late summer of 1931, Buffalo merchants organized “Buffalo Day” to resuscitate the local economy. Rochesterians created their own “Monroe County Pledge for Prosperity” day. “Although each city had a different approach to encouraging local spending, both played up the responsibility of the local citizen and the importance of boosting local retail sales as a way to turn around the region and, in turn, the country” (p. 121). Seeking localized private solutions to a national crisis, civic and business leaders hoped to modernize the Victorian triumvirate of frugality, thrift, and financial planning into responsible spending. Consuming now became one’s civic duty and a moral imperative. Even Buffalo’s newspapers touted consuming as a civic act and one less controversial than charity. However popular these events, they both failed to revive the local economies. They did, however, antedate the national “Buy American” campaigns that emerged first during the late 1930s.

The significance of the community appeal as a selling tool continued after 1931. National advertisers and local manufacturers tried to tap into local loyalties with mixed results. This, according to Elvins, challenges the narrative of national homogenization. During the 1930s, chain stores and local merchants continued to invest in downtown stores. Local stores sponsored and hosted many forms of public entertainments, which they offered as a public service. National and local manufacturers also sought ways to incorporate local elements in their advertisements.

Sales & Celebrations successfully provides a needed corrective to our understanding of how the local and national consumer cultures interacted. Elvins’s study of western New York retailers demonstrates how local merchants fended off homogenization and adapted to new retailing methods and larger economic changes. One minor omission needs mention. Buffalo’s Larkin Company, a large hybrid soap manufacturer and direct-mail-order house, was also an important purveyor of consumption and an innovator in marketing, but Larkin’s story is a bit different: a local company that expanded nationally and spread modernity and middle-class consumption to small-town American housewives with limited disposable income who were organized into buying clubs. While the company was

in decline during the 1930s, it did have a large department store in downtown Buffalo and, after 1917, operated a regional chain of retail food markets. This small corrective does not detract from Elvins's fine study, but it does raise additional questions about the process of consumerism and encourages historians to make further investigations at the local and regional levels.

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