

Memory Lane

EXPLORE THE PAST OF DOWNTOWN HAMILTON

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Robinson's Department Store

The building that housed the G.W. Robinson Company was originally owned and operated by the Watkins Company Limited. In March of 1898 a fire left the Proctor Building, belonging to John Proctor, metal merchant, in ruins. Fredrick Watkins of the Right House purchased the land, constructing a new building on the site. The F.W. Watkins Company Limited went bankrupt soon after, creditors foreclosed on the mortgage and the building was sold to George Webster Robinson. In November 1899 The G.W. Robinson department store opened for business. In time, this retail store would become one of the biggest businesses in the City of Hamilton, and would make James Street South one the busiest retail districts in the area. Some of the first ever motion pictures shown in Hamilton were shown here in a roped off area on the second floor.



By 1920 the building was six storeys high and boasted the city's first commercial escalator. In 1917 the store opened Toyland for Christmas and sponsored Hamilton's first Santa Claus parade of sorts in 1919. Santa arrived at the TH&B railway station and made his way to the store's Toyland.

Just twenty years after opening, the store stood over five-storeys high. In 1920, another storey was added onto the building, and a rear addition added an extra floor space of 18,000 square feet. The renovation project also included the installation of a 2-way escalator, travelling from the first floor to the second floor. All departments were equipped with electric cash registers to increase the efficiency of customer service, and a new soda fountain and luncheonette were added.

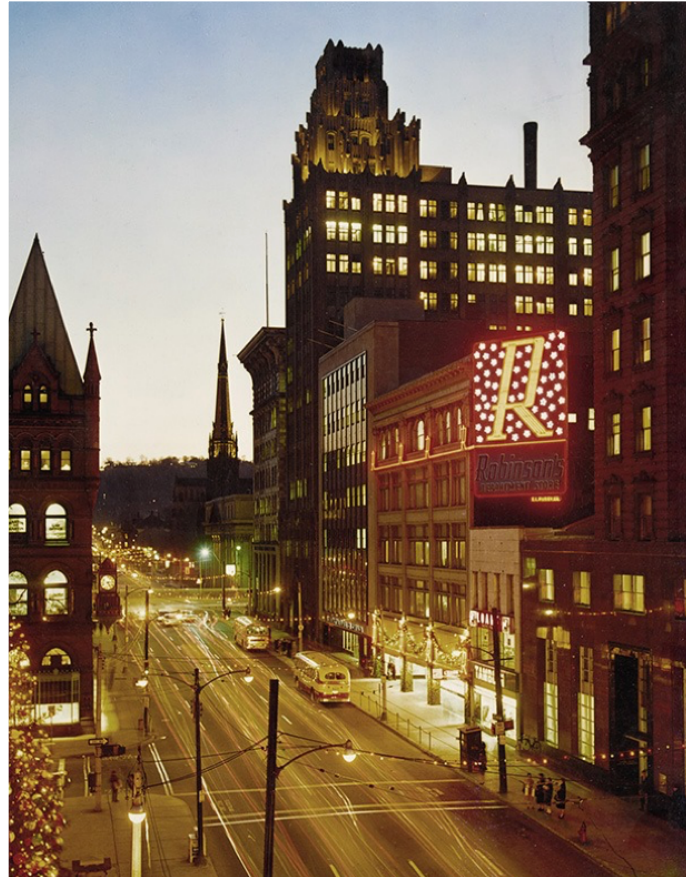
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Robinson's Department Store ...continued

The Robinson's store was ravaged by a disastrous fire in March of 1926. The total damage was estimated at \$700,000. The store was rebuilt on the same site. In 1929, G.W. Robinson retired and appointed R.L. Smith, former Vice-President, as President of the Company.

In 1954, the Company was sold to the British firm of Owen & Owen Limited of Liverpool, who owned and operated ten English department stores. The company had been associated with Robinson's for years, as a British agent and purchaser. The Owen & Owen Company planned a renovation for the James Street store. They decided to construct a new storefront and install new high-speed elevators and escalators. The modernization project included the addition of a new exterior featuring nonreflecting glass, a first in Canada, and gave Robinson's the largest display windows in the city.



James St. South at King lit up at night during the 1970s.



Exterior of Robinson's in 1959 following the modernization project.



Robinson's lunch counter disappeared due to space problems but store's management soon found considerable demand still existed for the counter. The result was the new coffee bar pictured here that opened again in 1961.

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Robinson's Department Store ...continued



A massive crowd in 1961 that jammed Robinson's store for a sale. James Street South was blocked to pedestrian traffic by the biggest crowd seen there since Armistice Day, 1918.



Pictured is Robinson's new main floor in 1961. In the background by the main door is the new curved cosmetics counter.

In the 1960s the building was once again remodeled. Renovations to the store continued throughout the decades that the store remained in business. Robinson's was the first retail store to have Sunday's shopping hours starting in 1983 which lead to multiple police charges for violating the Sunday shopping by-laws of the time. Robinson's closed in 1983 and the building itself was demolished.

At the height of their popularity department stores were more than just a shopping destination, they were a place to meet and most featured in house restaurants for shoppers. When you consider that Hamilton had a number of large department stores thriving downtown – Robinson's, Eaton's, Woolworth's, Kresge's, The Right House, Zellers- and there was still enough demand to support them all in addition to smaller retail shops all around the core you see just how popular these types of stores were.



Men's shoe department as of 1961.



The front façade of the store later in its life after another renovation.