

Gimbels

Whenever I think of Gimbels, I think about my favorite Christmas movie, *Miracle on 34th St.* The movie highlighted the famous competition between the Gimbels and Macy's stores in New York City. But, let's backtrack...What was Gimbels and why is it famous?

The story of Gimbels, at one time the world's largest department store enterprise, started with Isaac Gimbel. He was born on April 24, 1856, the son of Bavarian immigrants. His parents had settled in Vincennes, IN, where his father soon opened a general store.

In 1865, Isaac's father moved to Philadelphia, leaving the store in the charge of his eldest son, Jacob. It was under Jacob that Isaac embarked on his career at the age of 13.

In 1882, Jacob and Isaac opened branch stores in Danville, IL, and Washington, IN. In 1889, they established another store in Milwaukee, WI, the latter under the name of Gimbel Brothers. Things were going well, indeed.

Over the years, five other brothers—Charles, David, Ellis, Louis, and Benedict—

joined the business, as did Nathan Hamburger, who had been adopted by Jacob. These eight made up the firm of Gimbel Brothers. The profits from the Milwaukee store enabled the firm to buy a Philadelphia retail house in 1894, which they transformed into a Gimbel department store that soon became one of the city's principal merchandising firms.

A New York City store, opened in 1910, was placed under the direction of Isaac. Situated on Greeley Square, it was near the huge Macy's store on Herald Square, and they became famous rivals, each trying to outdo the other.

In 1922, the Gimbel stores in New York, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia were consolidated into Gimbels Bros., Inc., of which Isaac was made president. In the same year, Gimbels acquired Saks & Co. as a subsidiary. When Isaac died in 1931, his seven stores, with their 20,000 employees, comprised the world's largest such endeavor.

Gimbels finally went out of business several years ago, but many who had gone to New York, especially, before that made it a special point to visit the most famous of all the Gimbel stores. Today, Gimbels is a footnote in the marketing world, I suppose, but for those of us old enough to remember it, Gimbels is a legend.

