

# Woolworth to bid farewell to era <sup>M.N.</sup>

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## Bay Area employees get word of closings

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As the backbone of the American shopping fabric, Woolworth stores had survived nearly everything: recessions, floods, earthquakes, urban decay and 20th century advancements. Intertwined with five-and-dime folklore, Woolworth's was where Grandma and Grandpa bought their first kitchenware, where school kids found their crayons and homemakers feasted on bargains.

It was at the vanguard of an ever-changing America: its lunch counters the battlegrounds of Southern civil rights struggles.

"They always were the store for the little guy," said shopper Ruth Wilson, 51, of Soquel, a regular since 1963 at the Santa Cruz store.

On Thursday, one by one, hundreds of Woolworth stores across America found out the little guy will have to shop somewhere else. From Santa Cruz to San Jose to Fremont to Sunnyvale, stores that have been open since the days of the New Deal were told they will shut their doors by January.

The consolidation plan announced at New York headquarters Wednesday filtered into the 970 stores to be closed — including more than a dozen in the



Hung Nguyen, 11, tries on some Halloween masks Thursday at the Woolworth in East San Jose, one of the stores expected to close.

MICHAEL RONDOUT — MERCURY NEWS

Bay Area. Some shoppers were stunned at the loss of stores which had often been associated with benchmarks in their lives.

"I bought our pots and pans here after my wedding," said

Wilson, pausing in the Woolworth's on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz to digest news of its passing.

With store aisles stacked to the gills with Halloween para-

phernalia — plastic pumpkins, witch costumes and candy — shoppers found the news haunting.

"I've been around 38 years and as long as I can remember,

there's always been this Woolworth's," said Cynthia Garces, shopping with her family at the Woolworth's in East San Jose on Story Road. "Now where will we

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# Woolworth closings to mark end of era

## ■ WOOLWORTH

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go for bargains?"

Rarely changing address, Woolworths were more than discount stores. They were centers of community. In Santa Cruz, the Woolworth's was a mainstay of downtown life since 1937.

Years ago, the store ran a small lunch counter where regulars could swap gossip over tuna sandwiches on white bread, and apple pie.

The store survived Santa Cruz's flood of 1955, when river water rose halfway up parking meters. It outlasted the 1989 earthquake, and according to some business leaders, had returned to pre-quake sales levels.

It represented the last traditional retailer on Pacific Avenue that sold items such as nail polish, men's underwear and coat hangers. There was a pet department, a fabric area and plenty of knickknacks on holidays.

Some stores, like the longtime Woolworth's in downtown San Jose, will survive for the time being. It was unclear Thursday

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— Bruce Gottinger,  
store manager

how many of the stores to be closed will be converted to other retail establishments — including new Woolworth-run concerns.

But some employees interviewed were worried about losing their jobs. More than a hundred in the Bay Area could be laid off, according to company officials.

“It's a bitter pill to swallow,” said Bruce Gottinger, 38, manager of the Woolworth Garden Center on Stevenson Boulevard in Fremont and a 20-year Woolworth's veteran.

“They just told us two hours ago,” said clerk Robert Norvell, 16, of the Fremont store. “I was shocked. I guess I'll have to go out and look for a job.”

*Mercury News Staff Writer Dennis Rockstroh contributed to this report.*

## AREA STORES THAT WILL CLOSE

### Santa Cruz County

- Woolworth, 1213 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz

### Santa Clara County

- Woolworth, 861 El Camino Real, Sunnyvale
- Woolworth, 3085 Meridian Ave., San Jose
- Woolworth, 2855 Stevens Creek Blvd., Santa Clara
- Woolworth, 3062 Story Road
- Woolworth Garden Center, 1868 N. Capitol Ave.
- Woolworth Garden Center, 2851 S. White Road

### Alameda County

- Woolworth Express, NewPark Mall, Newark
- Woolworth Garden Center, 5525 Stevenson Blvd., Fremont
- Woolworth Garden Center, 395 Mowry Ave., Fremont
- Woolworth Garden Center, 7144 Regional St., Dublin
- Woolworth Garden Center, 25993 Dollar, Hayward
- Woolworth, Bay Fair Mall, San Leandro
- Woolworth, 275 W. MacArthur, Oakland
- Woolworth, Eastmont Mall, Oakland

Source: Woolworth