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Swan song at Ford's

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Mike McCollum

Ford's Department Store clerk Grace Valdivia, left, waits on a customer yesterday during one of the busiest days in recent memory for the Watsonville store.

Customers jam store in final days

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Ford's Department Store yesterday had an abundance of something that had been scarce at the store for a long time — customers. Lots of them.

On Thursday, Ford's announced it was closing its Watsonville store on Feb. 14. The store had been the company's flagship and a downtown anchor for 140 years.

Yesterday, Ford's launched its going-out-of-business sale, drawing hundreds of customers. The giant parking lot behind the

store was packed and drivers cruised the lot and adjacent streets, hunting for any available parking space. Sometimes they formed a traffic jam of cars and pickups pointing in all directions.

Inside the store, the scene looked like an after-Christmas sale in better times, with lines of customers waiting their turn at the register.

A rueful Grace Valdivia, an 8-year store employee, thought the deluge of customers was too little, too late.

"They left us, now here they

are," said Valdivia. "You wonder where all these people were before."

Thursday's announcement came as no surprise. It had been rumored for months that the financially strapped Charles Ford Co. would not survive. The company had been struggling since the 1989 earthquake and in October finally declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

The Watsonville store opened in October 1991 and replaced the old store, which had to be torn down after the earthquake. The old store had a lunch

counter and even had a hardware department, two things the new store lacked.

Many customers found the new store's merchandise overpriced and the selection limited. Soon after the new store's auspicious and opulent grand opening, it began to sputter and sales dropped off dramatically.

Carmen Obeso, a Salinas resident, had been a Ford's customer for 25 years before Northridge Mall opened in northern Salinas. Before the mall opened, Obeso would drive

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building, Woolpert said.