

Curtains for Merrills flagship

Chain begins, ends 65-year run on Market Street

BY TOM CARTER

Merrills drugstore on Market Street near Seventh closed the afternoon of June 17 after 65 years, leaving a hole in the mid-Market economy and in the hearts of hundreds of who embraced it as their general store.

"It's very sad," said Priscilla Nazareno, 87, as she left the cashier. She has been a

regular since 1986 when she moved into the 100-unit Dorothy Day Community at 54 McAllister. Taking advantage of the final week's 60% discount, Nazareno had plucked soap, glucosamine and two small American flags off the nearly barren shelves. "I've spent \$300 in the last three days here," she said, as she recognized someone else from Dorothy Day.

"I have no idea what we're going to do!" her friend said as he passed.

"What I'll miss is the post office," said John Zak, another customer roaming the forlorn aisles. "I've been shopping here 20 years."

This store at 1091 Market St. was first in the Bay Area chain of 14 Merrills Drug Centers; it opened in 1939. Ten stores were in San Francisco; this one was the last to close.

David Reese, son of the late founder, Merrill Reese, closed the store "for personal reasons," said Manager Bob Katz. "It's the end of an era."

In the store's dying days, Katz greeted hundreds of customers, many by their first names, as they picked over the shelves during the 40% off closeout that escalated the last week to 60%. Even tobacco and booze. The cigarettes all but flew off the shelves at 40% off. A \$45 carton of cigarettes went for \$27.

They ran out before the final week when "we were mobbed," according to one clerk. Customers carted off everything from baskets of food and children's games to deodorant and city maps. Little remained the last day but greeting cards, umbrellas and pacifiers.

In the '40s and '50s, the basement served as a second floor. People dressed up to go shopping on Market Street and they could grab a soda at Merrills' fountain while waiting for a prescription

to be filled. But, unlike rigid national chains, such as Woolworth's, Merrills evolved because it listened to its customers and stocked shelves accordingly. After the '89 quake, when the Main Post Office on Mission Street closed, Merrills picked up some of the slack by squeezing in a postal substation. Groceries supplanted health and beauty aids as the leading seller, Katz said.

Katz started managing the store in 1984. He saw street life turn ugly, then taper off with the dot-com boom that crested in 2000, his busiest year.

But the crash, combined with drug dealing out on the sidewalk, crippled business. Katz told The Extra last year, when the McDonald's across the street closed, that his business was down lower than the previous low, which was in 2002.

"Seniors needed us for their existence," Katz said. "They would come in to spend a few bucks and take advantage of the (10%) senior discount. And it was socializing for them."

"There's no grocery store now for them unless you count Whole Foods. But I equate that with Andronico's. I think people will miss us. Some have been shopping here 50 years."

Market Street Association President Carolyn Diamond says the area needs a grocery "with reasonable prices" and points out a lot of housing is planned nearby but it won't be ready for a couple of years.

"I'm real sorry to see Merrills go," Diamond said. "It was a real staple in the neighborhood. I just hope it doesn't stand vacant for very long. That wouldn't be good. It would attract a bad element."

Katz, unlike his store, can't retire at 65. A past president of the old Mid-Market Street/U.N. Plaza Business Association, Katz, 52, is sending his resume around. He started with Merrills in 1978.

"Personally, I feel a sense of loss," Katz said. "Ours was a real community-oriented operation. And this is a real thriving, living community. I have always been impressed with the variety and kinds of people who came in."

At 2:30 p.m. on the last day, after hanging a "Gone Fishing" sign on the front door, four Merrills employees, including one who had worked there 35 years, were across the street at Café do Brazil, quaffing a bottle of Cook's pink champagne, munching on a complimentary plate of owner Elvia Santos' fabled appetizers and they, too, were wondering what they would do now without Merrills. ■

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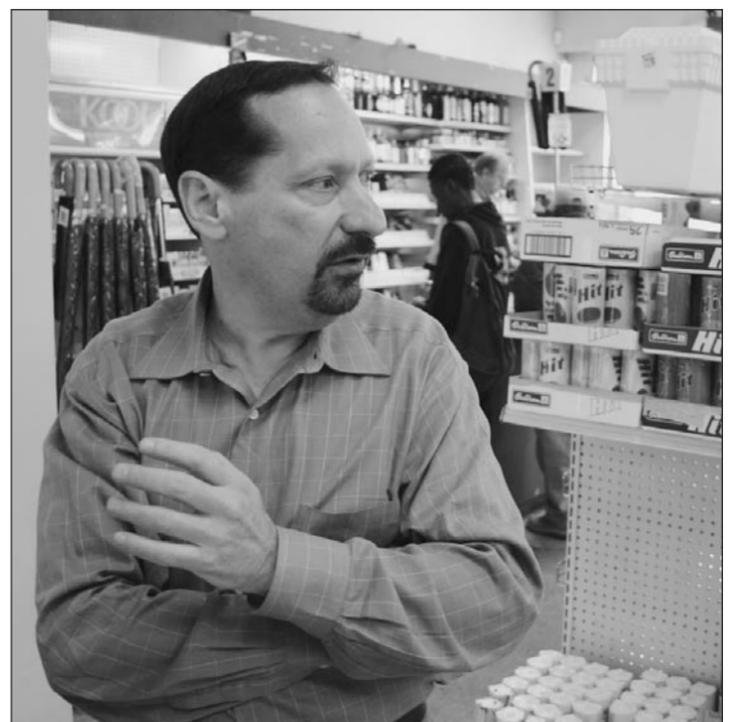


PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Store manager Bob Katz was busier than usual because of deep discounts, as Merrills sank into history.