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CNY VINTAGE

1958: Syracuse mayor's 'Christmas gift' of free parking backfires

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This photo from 1954 shows how busy downtown Syracuse was during the Christmas season. In 1958, Mayor Anthony Henninger looked to attract more shoppers by placing a moratorium on parking meters in the days leading up to Christmas. (Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)



By **Johnathan Croyle**, jcroyle@syracuse.com
syracuse.com

In the decades before Destiny USA and Amazon, Central New Yorkers did much of their Christmas shopping at downtown Syracuse department stores.

The Post-Standard's reports on what typical Saturday was like in downtown Syracuse during the 1940s and '50s during the holiday season describe a shopping experience that is completely foreign to today's readers.

Here is a sample of what the newspaper said about what it was like downtown on Saturday, Dec. 13, 1958:



The front page of the Dec. 14, 1958 Post-

Standard local section proclaimed Syracuse was on a downtown "shopping spree" and wrote about how happy local business owners were. (Less excited was poor Miss Helen Nash, 21, who was photographed after suffering a terrible broken leg in a toboggan accident at Thornden Park.)

"Thousand upon thousands of shoppers yesterday made it a green Christmas for merchants. Edwards' 800-car parking garage was jammed at 10 a.m. It had to be closed. Every other garage and parking lot had the same happy experience. Traffic policemen may not have been as happy. The streets were packed solid with autos and it took nearly half an hour to traverse downtown in any direction."

The Post-Standard's reporter, Leroy Natanson, predicted that the day "may have been an all-time record selling day" and reported that "every department store, variety store and specialty shop was crowded, and it was a buying crowd."

Syracuse's shopping center was said then to have everything that a person could want: modern stores and shops, theaters and excellent restaurants.



In an editorial three days later, the newspaper called Syracuse's booming downtown to be "one of the city's greatest assets" and declared the experience offered there to be "one of the best in the country east of the Mississippi."

To further encourage people to travel to downtown for their holiday shopping, Syracuse Mayor Anthony Henninger decided to give area shoppers an early Christmas gift.

On Dec. 13, 1958, he declared a city-wide moratorium on parking meter fees, which would continue for the remainder of the Christmas shopping season.

He believed the potential loss of revenue to the city, thought to be roughly \$5,000 from 3,000 meters, was a fair trade if it meant even more consumer traffic to downtown businesses.

(Henninger's "Christmas gift" to the city may have also been used to dampen some rumors in 1958 that he was a bit of a Scrooge after it was falsely reported that he had banned holiday decorations and parties at City Hall.)



He had just two requests.

First, he asked that shoppers respect the time limit on the meters and to remain no longer in a metered spot than would be legal if they had deposited money in a meter. This would give all an "equal break" at a spot.

Second, he asked that merchants and their employees not use the metered spaces all day, leaving them open for their customers.

Business leaders cheered the mayor's decision. One said that the "only result would be good," and it would help blunt people's interest in going to suburban shopping malls, like Shoppingtown Mall and Northern Lights.

The Post-Standard joked that the mayor may have had another motive:

"From another angle the moratorium was expected to give the Traffic Violations Bureau at police headquarters a chance to get caught up with a backlog of work in processing tickets."



They would not get a chance to get caught up, at least initially.

In fact, after the first day of the moratorium, Dec. 15, 1958, the police had even more tickets to process.

The first day ended in "general confusion," a flurry of parking tickets and one big traffic jam.

Police said that motorists misinterpreted the mayor's proclamation, many believing that Henninger had lifted all parking restrictions, not just parking meter payments.

They said that resulted in tickets "in more than normal quantities" being issued.

The worst violation was the disregard of the 4:30 to 6 p.m. parking ban on city streets. At the end of the business day, motorists found the streets of Syracuse to be "literally choked when illegally parked cars brought through-downtown traffic to a near standstill during the evening rush."



Police also noticed that many store employees did not heed the mayor's request and instead drove to work and parked in front of their business all day.

It also seemed that many simply did not know about the mayor's proclamation. Twenty percent of the city's meters had money in them after the first day.

The confusion of the first day was not repeated in the days that followed and after a slow start, everyone appreciated Mayor Henninger's Christmas gift.

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