

Percy Selden Straus

Percy Selden Straus, a member of the Business Historical Society, died on April 6, 1944. His passing has special significance for business history. It was Percy Straus and his brothers, Jesse and Herbert, who endowed the Straus Professorship of Business History at the Graduate School of Business Administration of Harvard University, the only chair for that subject in the country and indeed in the world. He thus participated in giving business history that academic recognition and continuity which have been a vital factor in the establishment of the subject as a field for research and study.

Percy Straus was born in New York City on June 27, 1876, the second son of Isidor Straus. After attending Dr. Sach's Collegiate Institute, he entered Harvard University in 1893. Upon graduating in 1897, he entered R. H. Macy & Co., the New York department store owned by his father and uncle. He remained with Macy's throughout his whole life with the exception of a short period in the late 1890's when he served as secretary to his uncle, who was then United States Minister to Turkey.

He began his work with Macy's in the receiving department, and he moved from one department to another until he was familiar with the principal operations of the store. Early in the century he began to take on heavy responsibilities in store management. On the death of Isidor Straus in 1912, the three brothers succeeded their father as partners in the firm and two years later they purchased their uncle's interest. On the incorporation of the firm in 1919, Percy Straus became vice-president; he was president from 1933 to 1940, thus serving as chief executive in the depression years. He became chairman of the board in 1940, but ill health prevented him from full participation in business in his last years.

Percy Straus and his brothers created the modern Macy's. In doing this, they revolutionized its administration, changing it from a more or less loose agglomeration of departments to a well-integrated institution. The special province of "Mr. Percy,"

as he was called throughout the store, was store systems and management, including personnel, maintenance, and delivery. He is especially known for his work in personnel organization. He stressed the need of well-educated men and women in business; indeed, he was a leader in bringing men and women with a liberal education into subordinate management or routine positions in business. And he was one of the first men in American retailing to look upon the training of personnel as an indispensable function of business. Throughout his career as a retailer he worked to make merchandising into a real profession.

From Macy's Mr. Straus's influence reached out to other companies and institutions. He was a director or officer of department stores which were Macy-controlled in Toledo, Atlanta, and Newark, and a director of the New York Life Insurance Company. He was also one of the founders and a director of the American Retail Federation. A benefactor of New York University, he was a member of its council and he gave strong support to its School of Retailing. Other educational institutions as well as charities were likewise aided by him.

Those who knew Percy Straus or observed him at work were impressed by the quality of his intellect. He had a rare capacity for cold, logical thinking and for thinking in terms of essentials. There was a certain pathos in his life in that by circumstance he became a business man, while by inclination he would have been a lawyer or a teacher. He was deeply conscious of the fact that in the last several years of his life he was unable to find the time or the energy to read books thoughtfully. This is one of the sacrifices which the business administrator frequently has to make under the drive of the demands and the responsibilities of his position in business.