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J. C. Penney in the Land of Enchantment
The Evolution of a National Department Store in Twentieth-Century New Mexico

DAVID DELBERT KRUGER

In March 1914, just two years after New Mexico attained statehood, a young merchant named James Cash Penney held a grand opening for a new “Golden Rule” store in downtown Gallup. At the time, Gallup was a railroad town of only twenty-two hundred residents in a state where the largest city barely topped eleven thousand.1 Despite New Mexico’s sparse population, Penney foresaw opportunity and growth across the Land of Enchantment and within sixteen years he would establish fourteen additional department stores in towns as small as Clayton and cities as large as Albuquerque.2 Although Penney’s stores had modestly originated in Wyoming at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was rapidly creating what would become the nation’s first transcontinental department-store chain, certainly the first of its kind ever to grace the cities and towns of New Mexico. With Penney’s own brand of Golden Rule capitalism, J. C. Penney stores would play an integral role in the lives of residents from town and country. As New Mexican communities and consumers evolved throughout the twentieth century, so did their J. C. Penney stores, moving from icons of main street commerce to anchors of modern shopping malls.

David Delbert Kruger is the Agricultural Research Librarian at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming. He has published several articles about James Cash Penney and the cultural impacts of his department-store chain. He is currently working on a book about Penney’s agricultural activities. Kruger resides on a small farm near Harmony, Wyoming, and can be contacted at tseliot@uwyo.edu. The author would like to thank Joan Gosnell, Southern Methodist University Archivist in charge of the J. C. Penney Collection at DeGolyer Library; Dr. Mary Frances Wagley, daughter of James Cash Penney; and the Clements Center for Southwest Studies at Southern Methodist University for their generous assistance in researching this article.
Penney was thirty-eight years old when he opened his first New Mexico store in 1914. He operated his small but rapidly growing chain out of Utah after opening his first humble store in Kemmerer, Wyoming, twelve years earlier. From 1902 to 1909, growth had been slow, with the chain adding five more stores collectively in Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho. However, from 1910 to 1913, the chain averaged ten new locations each year and formally incorporated with forty-eight stores in 1913. Penney’s location in Gallup was officially the fifty-fourth store in the chain on 14 March 1914. Penney’s second New Mexico store opened two weeks later in East Las Vegas. Like Penney’s earlier stores, these locations opened under the “Golden Rule” nameplate before converting to Penney’s abbreviated name in the latter half of the decade. By 1957 Gallup’s growing population prompted the company to construct a larger new store downtown, where it remained until moving to Rio West Mall in 1982. The Gallup store is now one of the oldest in the entire J. C. Penney chain, serving western New Mexico customers for more than a hundred years. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.

Figure 1. J. C. Penney Store, Downtown Gallup, circa 1920. This undated photograph from the early 1920s shows James Cash Penney’s first location in New Mexico, which opened as the fifty-fourth store in the chain on 14 March 1914. Penney’s second New Mexico store opened two weeks later in East Las Vegas. Like Penney’s earlier stores, these locations opened under the “Golden Rule” nameplate before converting to Penney’s abbreviated name in the latter half of the decade. By 1957 Gallup’s growing population prompted the company to construct a larger new store downtown, where it remained until moving to Rio West Mall in 1982. The Gallup store is now one of the oldest in the entire J. C. Penney chain, serving western New Mexico customers for more than a hundred years. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.
The store is to be one of a chain of 70 establishments operated by the J. C. Penny [sic] Company, Incorporated. A number of buyers for the concern are located permanently in the east. They know good merchandise and how to buy it right. The result is that the company gets its goods at the lowest prices, eliminating the jobber, salesman, or other middlemen. The consumer gets the benefit. Mr. Davis [store manager] explained to a representative of the Optic this morning the system under which the chain of stores is managed. He said each is a separate part of one big whole, and must make a report of its sales, profits or losses each day to the head office. He said the stores handle merchandise of all grades, from cheapest to the best, and can meet the demands of all kinds of people and all kinds of pocketbooks. Everything handled by a general merchandise store is carried, with the exception of groceries and hardware. As was stated above, the store will be open to the public on Wednesday morning. Mr. Davis has secured a large force of salespeople, and he invites the people to visit the store on its opening day, whether they come to purchase or look about. He
says the store is here to stay and he expects it to be a success from the start.³

Penney’s chain of stores still had the appearance and function of a regional operation, personally overseen by Penney and co-owned with other men who served as his store managers and partners. Penney’s first three locations in Wyoming were initially partnerships between Penney and his older mentors, Thomas Callahan and Guy Johnson. The immediate success of these stores gave Penney the idea and revenue to partner with equally ambitious young men and to create his own retail chain across the West, with the goal of about fifty locations.⁴

Prior to opening his New Mexico locations, Penney launched every store under the nameplate Golden Rule as opposed to his abbreviated name. The Golden Rule name represented not only his syndicate of affiliated merchants but his Christian philosophy of doing business. Penney later explained: “There were many golden-rule stores, doing many types of business throughout the West. But the name was a poignant link for me with my father’s and mother’s ideals and injunctions. For me it had the creative meaning of one of the most fundamental laws that can be expressed in words . . . While Christ was not the first to give it expression, His was the perfect pronouncement.”⁵ For Penney, Golden Rule capitalism meant doing unto others as he would have them do unto him. For his customers, it entailed buying only quality merchandise at the lowest possible price on a cash-only basis with no sales on credit. For people who came to work for Penney, it promised opportunities and incentives for growth as Penney “associates,” particularly the potential to share in a store’s profits and possibly manage their own stores, as Penney had been able to do with Callahan and Johnson.

By the latter half of the twentieth century, New Mexico governor Jerry Apodaca expressed great affection for what Penney had ultimately accomplished in the state and his own life. Both of the governor’s parents had worked for Penney’s New Mexican stores, his father spent almost thirty years as a J. C. Penney associate. “I can remember every payday my dad would bring the company’s [Pay Day employee newsletter] home and we’d all have to listen to all the good things about JC Penney,” Apodaca nostalgically recalled at the grand opening of a new J. C. Penney store in Santa Fe in 1975.⁶

Penney believed that the goal of any merchant was to serve the public and that his stores could be progressive agents in the emerging communities in which they were located. To this extent, Penney was a progressive reformer not just through philanthropy, but through his core business activities. Having grown up a poor Missouri farm boy, Penney believed that innovations in chain-store retailing and his organization could improve the livelihoods of common people across rural America, whether they came to work for him or only to
shop in town. His stores kept trade dollars within the local community and further established the local main street as a viable, modern trade center. Unlike competitors Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward, which operated solely via mail order until the 1920s, Penney brought the advantages of a national department store to the customers of smaller towns and cities, many with populations of fewer than one thousand residents. His immense success in his first ten years made apparent that his formula was working: his chain had expanded from one store in Wyoming to thirty-six in eight states with total sales exceeding $2 million. By early 1914, the New York Times had already taken notice of Penney as an innovative businessman in the West and featured him in a lengthy interview during one of his buying trips to New York City.

To be sure, since the heyday of the Santa Fe Trail in the mid-nineteenth century, similar independent merchants had opened and operated retail stores in New Mexico during the 1800s. The railroad, penetrating the territory in the 1880s, made them increasingly viable in and necessary for growing communities. Jewish immigrants Solomon Bibo and Charles Ilfeld became well known for their early trading and retail establishments in New Mexico Territory. Sol Floersheim, an employee of Charles Ilfeld, made his mark by starting his own mercantile company from Springer, New Mexico. By the end of the nineteenth century, brothers George and Frank Bond had augmented their wool- and sheep-trade business in New Mexico by opening general stores in Española and Wagon Mound; Cuervo, Roy, Taos, and Encino from 1900–1905; and Santa Rosa and Grants the following decade. These emerging New Mexico businesses were general stores in form and function with agricultural trading activities on the side and sales in credit and cash. Their inventories were typically acquired through a buying agent, such as Ilfeld’s area trader Adolph Letcher, or through various sales representatives and jobbers who could provide merchandise from East Coast markets to the West, although at higher prices due to their role as “middlemen.”

Penney was considerably younger than Bibo, Ilfeld, Floersheim, and the Bond brothers, but learned the retail trade from a similar mentor, Thomas Callahan. Like his mentor, Penney began his career working for independent merchants in one-store operations, but learned from Callahan that the future of retailing involved expanding into multiple stores, ultimately keeping prices low through volume purchase of merchandise and cash-only sales. An effective chain could additionally standardize merchandise quality and customer service across locations, while using local managers to tailor inventories to the specific needs of each community. The best inventories for local customers ultimately were the best inventories for the chain, since each tiny store generated its profits by how fast inventories could be sold and replenished, or “turned.” Like Ilfeld and the Bond
brothers, Penney understood that partnerships were the key to making these chains successful, giving the local manager not just a share of the profits, but ownership in the store and a stake in the entire chain as it continued to expand.

Penney’s Golden Rule philosophy additionally applied to economic markets and he believed business should be honest and fair, as opposed to cutthroat and predatory, particularly as it affected the local community and its customers. He refused to open any store in a locale where another Golden Rule merchant was already operating, and largely sought small but growing towns whose business districts would be augmented by his retail presence. Penney was not interested in competing directly with existing general stores since his merchandise focused largely on dry goods and shoes. Given the rural nature of his chain, he arguably became the greatest competition for mail order houses like Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward, which had no on-site department stores until the 1920s, and even made failed overtures for Penney to merge his chain with theirs during the same decade.12

In 1914, just as Penney began expanding into New Mexico, profound changes for himself and his company were already underway. Inside his organization, Penney’s senior partners strongly believed that his Golden Rule stores were poised to become America’s first nationwide department-store chain. Although Penney initially resisted their ideas, the partners eventually persuaded him to begin using his name, abbreviated as J. C. Penney, for their stores, primarily to distinguish their business from other Golden Rule chains in the same region. Penney in turn convinced his partners that he and his headquarters needed to move east from Salt Lake City to New York City, the corporate business hub of the United States.13

Despite moving to New York in the summer of 1914, Penney still focused on his operation’s expansion in the West, which included opening a new store in Albuquerque, a city of just eleven thousand residents. From his New York City headquarters, Penney secured the lease for a downtown location in the Melini Building on West Central Avenue between Fourth and Fifth Streets where the store would remain for nearly seventy years. Prior to opening the store in October 1915, the company took out a four-page advertisement in the Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Morning Journal to showcase its vast selection of merchandise and its attractive low prices. On opening day a reporter for the local newspaper thought that he would avoid what were sure to be busy daytime crowds by visiting later in the evening. To the reporter’s surprise, the store had not only been crowded with customers since 9 a.m., but remained busy even into the night. Neither manager W. B. Hicks nor assistant manager Mr. Buchanan had stopped for a break once the doors opened. “It has been one continual rush,” said Mr. Buchanan during a frantic interview, “and when the day’s receipts are checked and a report made to the
home store headquarters in New York it will prove that the Albuquerque purchasing public know a good thing and that the Albuquerque Penney store will move along in the front ranks of all other Penney’s stores.”

A year after the Albuquerque store opened, the company unveiled two more New Mexico locations in downtown Raton and Roswell. The opening of the Raton store was front page news in the Raton (N.Mex.) Range: “Manager Kendall has spared no efforts to give Raton as attractive and complete a store as may be found anywhere and cordially invites the people of Raton to give the new emporium a visit during the coming week for the critical inspection of the large display of new spring stock which the store offers in its several departments.”

In Roswell the company took out four full pages in the Roswell (N.Mex.) Daily Record to introduce the new store to local customers, highlighting its vast selection of quality merchandise and low prices due to cash-only policies. The store also challenged local residents to bring in their “mail order house catalogues” and comparison shop:

Figure 3. Associates Gather Prior to Grand Opening of Downtown Albuquerque Store Near 4th and Central, 1915. In 1915 Penney leased the Melini Building at 410 Central Avenue SW to open this store in Albuquerque, which at the time had a population of only eleven thousand residents. On its first day, the store was so busy that neither the manager nor assistant manager was able to take a break from 9 a.m. until the store closed that night. Although the store would evolve through expansions and remodels, it would continue serving downtown Albuquerque in essentially the same location until its permanent closure in 1986. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.
Granting that Mail Order houses sell merchandise cheap we want to show you “YOU CAN DO BETTER AT HOME!” The opening of this new store will not be amidst sweet tones of music or a profusion of flowers but you will see the cleanest and best assorted line of Dry Goods, Clothing and Shoes ever shown in Roswell, lines that have been selected from the best for the money the country shows. You will find our lines priced at rock-bottom. You will find here prices on merchandise that demonstrates our claim for the best and most efficient buying organization in America.16

A frequent misperception is that J. C. Penney, like Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward, also participated in the catalog warehouse business during the early twentieth century. In reality J. C. Penney entered into the catalog business only in 1963, while maintaining its strict cash-only sales policy until 1958.17 Still, as a department store for predominantly rural customers, the company's main street stores were in direct competition with the catalogs of Sears and Ward, and the success of Penney's company was entirely dependent on customers making cash purchases inside its main street locations. As a result, the Roswell store aggressively catered to rural customers within 150 miles of the city, listing parcel rates and offering them mail-order service from the store if they sent sufficient cash to cover the cost of merchandise and return postage; additional cash beyond the purchase prices and postage would rightfully be returned to the customer along with their merchandise.18

Although the company did not open any additional stores in New Mexico until 1920, with the newest location in downtown Silver City, the J. C. Penney Company expanded to include more than three-hundred locations nationwide in twenty-six states with sales of more than $42 million between 1915 and 1920.19 Revenues for the small-town chain collectively topped Macy’s massive location on Thirty-Fourth Street in New York City, despite the fact that Macy’s had been in business forty-four years longer.20 From 1917 to 1920, Penney had also delegated a significant portion of his company workload, turning over the presidency to his partner Earl Corder Sams, who in turn prepared the retail chain for expansion to more than a thousand new stores during the 1920s. Penney remained chairman of the board, thus maintaining his authority over major company decisions for the next four decades, but his reduction in duties freed time to visit stores in person throughout the nation and pursue the agricultural and charitable causes that were also his passion.21

In 1923 the J. C. Penney Company planned to unveil four New Mexico stores in one year. The first of these openings was held in Santa Fe that spring, and its enthusiastic response generated the following observations in the Santa Fe New Mexican:
The J. C. Penney Company opened its store on San Francisco street this morning, and it required the help of all of its ten employees on the floors to wait on the crowd. The opening was an immense success, and every visitor seemed pleased with the display of dry goods, clothing, shoes, ready-to-wear, men's furnishings, traveling trunks, and other articles. There seemed to be everything from shoes and hose to collars and hats; from pajamas to Norfolk suits; from a silk handkerchief to a silk dress. The prices appealed to the public, and many people who had not come to buy studied the tags and made purchases before leaving.22

In August 1923, the company located new J. C. Penney stores in downtown Clovis, Las Cruces, and Carlsbad within the same week. The new Clovis store took out a newspaper ad with the headline proclaiming, “To Mr. and Mrs. Average American, Who Deserve the Best the World Affords, This Store is Dedicated!”23 The Las Cruces store took out four pages in the *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Rio Grande Farmer* to advertise its selection and prices with the first three pages in English and the fourth page entirely in Spanish, a gesture far ahead of its time for reaching Hispanic customers in Doña Ana County and beyond. In a front-page interview, Las Cruces manager G. W. Bright highlighted how Penney’s policies on buying and selling merchandise ultimately benefitted its customers: “We do not have to figure on losing any bad accounts or interest on slow pay. We also save a lot of money on bookkeeping, which goes into the value of the merchandise we sell. The Penney Company never has sales. Every article in our stock is priced as low as it can be when it arrives at the store. We try to make everything we sell a ‘bargain’ at the regular price.”24 The company also made clear that its low prices did not come at the expense of customer service. “Courtesy to all our customers at all times is one of the foundations on which Mr. Penney built up his great business,” explained Carlsbad manager F. A. McGee. “Our constant aim is not only to provide good merchandise at uniformly low prices, but to make each customer’s experience in our store the kind that will assure pleasant remembrances. We strive to serve others as we ourselves like to be served.”25

Throughout the 1920s, as J. C. Penney was becoming the nation’s first transcontinental department-store chain, Penney and his company leadership still assured its customers that the company was committed to its small-town roots. The company avoided opening stores in larger cities, capitalizing on its ability to fit into the business landscape of small-town main streets, and encouraged store managers to establish relationships with local communities and customers. In this way, the J. C. Penney store became a progressive agent for small towns and rural customers, giving them a department store with all the purchasing power,
Figure 4. Spanish-Language Advertisement of Grand Opening Values at the New J. C. Penney Store in Downtown Las Cruces, 1923. When the Las Cruces J. C. Penney store opened in 1923, the company made additional efforts to reach customers from the sizable Hispanic community. The grand opening ad in the Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Rio Grande Farmer took up four full pages, with the fourth page written entirely in Spanish, and featuring merchandise that local associates felt would appeal to Hispanic customers. Penney felt bilingual ads and bilingual associates were components of good local customer service. Penney’s national efforts in this regard were not limited to Hispanic communities; the company also engaged in similar approaches for Dutch and German populations in Iowa farming communities and Finnish populations in Oregon. The success of the Las Cruces store by the late 1930s was evident in its expansion and renovation into a triple-room format, encompassing three storefronts with modern metal signage and bright yellow and black canopies. The downtown Las Cruces store would remain at 201 North Main until 1966, when it moved to Loretto Shopping Center before moving again to Mesilla Valley Mall in 1982. Grand opening advertisement courtesy Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Rio Grande Farmer.
selection, service, and value of a “big city” department store. As company president Sams explained to the *Taos (N.Mex.) Valley News*:

> Every store in the entire J. C. Penney Co., organization is a local store in its service to the community in which it is located. It is a fixed policy of the company that the local managers shall contribute in every way they can to the development and growth of the cities in which they are doing business. Many store managers own their own homes. Practically every manager is a member of one or more local organizations and contributes to local enterprises. . . . In a way, the J. C. Penney Co., is a department store doing in the vicinity of $200,000,000 a year in sales, and serving millions of customers, with counters placed at convenient spots over a 3,000,000 square mile area. We could not bring all of our customers to one store so we have taken the store to the customers. At the present time there are well over 1000 of these stores. In a relatively short time we hope to increase the number to 1500 or more.26

The hopes of Sams became reality within one year. The company planned openings for five-hundred new department stores in 1929 alone.27 As New Mexico’s population grew, particularly in the eastern portion of the state, the company was ready to incorporate the Land of Enchantment into its expansion plans once again. Throughout the year, new stores opened on the main streets of Artesia, Portales, and Tucumcari, as well as the northern communities of Farmington and Taos.28 The J. C. Penney store in Portales had been so anticipated that the local newspaper devoted three front-page articles to the arrival of its manager, its fixtures and merchandise, and ultimately its grand opening.29 These small towns consistently regarded the new J. C. Penney Stores as symbols of community progress as expressed by this front-page article in the *Taos (N.Mex.) Valley News*:

> Many Taos residents who know the value of a J. C. Penney Co. store, will be glad to learn that Taos has been selected, along with other progressive communities of the west, for the establishment of one of their stores. . . . Taos people may look forward now to more savings in their purchases as the J. C. Penney Co. people sell at very reasonable prices and high class goods at that, all due to their big volume of business throughout the country.30

The *Farmington (N.Mex.) Republican* also saw its new J. C. Penney store as a progressive addition worthy of its front page:

> The J. C. Penney store, brilliant for modern lighting and perfect harmony of walls and ceiling and interior decoration, is formally receiving hundreds of visitors this evening, embracing many out of town folks, from
everywhere, that they may get an idea of what one of the most modern of 1300 Penney stores is like. Civic pride in the new acquisition to the city’s commercial structure was generally manifest. The Penney store, like the great electric and gas companies, comes more upon what Farmington is going to be than she is now, seeing clearly that the city is in the formative for greater achievement. Farmington is handling nearly double the volume of business done three years ago and will more than double during the next three years.31

Even Clayton, with a population just over twenty-five hundred, was on the company’s list as a prospective new location. One year later, in 1930, the Union County seat held a grand opening for a new J. C. Penney department store.32
In terms of size, these earlier J. C. Penney stores sharply contrasted with their later downtown incarnations and shopping-mall locations which today comprise all J. C. Penney’s New Mexico stores. The early Santa Fe store, standing on the corner of San Francisco and Don Gaspar, was merely thirty-five feet wide by ninety feet deep, giving it a total square footage that would barely cover 2 percent of a mammoth Walmart Supercenter or Super Target. The early Farmington location was even smaller with its entire main street storefront just over twenty feet wide. Penney preferred to start in small locations and expand as sales and profits grew. As a result, most New Mexico stores opened in what he called single-room configurations, essentially a building about twenty to thirty feet wide with one open room for the entire sales floor. If population growth and high sales volumes were certain, as was the case in Albuquerque, the company opened with a double-room store, a location twice as wide with support columns typically down the center of the sales floor. As other New Mexico towns grew and the demand for even larger J. C. Penney stores became apparent, the company would expand an existing store into adjacent space, creating a double-room configuration. In cities as large as Albuquerque and Las Cruces, and towns as small as Tucumcari, single- and double-room stores even expanded to triple-room configurations.

Regardless of the store’s configuration and width, Penney’s locations typically distinguished themselves with bright yellow “J. C. PENNEY COMPANY” steel signage and matching yellow and black mosaic tile across the apron of the storefront. Large display windows showcased merchandise on mannequins and displays, which were illuminated long after the store had closed for the evening. Whenever downtown customers walked inside a J. C. Penney store from a main street sidewalk, they characteristically encountered a bisymmetrical sales floor with high, pressed-tin ceilings and a large mezzanine balcony extending above the back of the store. Offices were above the store entrance. Since J. C. Penney stores were cash-only operations, these balconies initially functioned as secure places to exchange and store cash. Spring-loaded containers delivered money to and from the sales floor along a series of wire cables. This cable system, officially known as the Lamson Cash Conveyor, allowed clerks to send a customer’s itemized receipt and cash up to the balcony, where the money would be collected and the transaction recorded before sending the paid receipt and any change due back down to the customer. In busy downtown stores like Albuquerque’s, the sights and sounds of these cash conveyors, constantly in action, were part and parcel to the J. C. Penney store experience. Even as modern cash registers made the system obsolete, the store’s mezzanine balconies were still utilized as part of the standard J. C. Penney store layout, even incorporated into many of the company’s newer locations through the 1950s.
In October 1929, the rise of Penney and his chain of department stores culminated with a successful listing on the New York Stock Exchange. Excitement from this moment was short-lived since the stock market crashed six days later and the Great Depression began. Over the next two years, nationwide sales at J. C. Penney stores dropped by $36 million.\textsuperscript{38} In the Las Cruces store alone, sales fell from $175,937 in 1929 to $114,310 in 1932.\textsuperscript{39} Although Penney’s company survived the heaviest blows of the Depression, Penney personally suffered a series of financial setbacks that evaporated his fortune of nearly $40 million, including nearly all of the company stock that he had generously, but recklessly, used as collateral for charities he created. For all of his past successes, by 1931 Penney had privately come to regard himself as “a complete failure,” sinking into depression and even contemplating suicide. Rather than

Figure 6. Founder of the J. C. Penney Company, James Cash Penney, 1940s. James Cash Penney (1875–1971) was the mastermind of America’s first national department-store chain, with more locations in New Mexico than any previous merchant. Just two years after statehood, Penney saw great potential in New Mexico communities, and from 1914–1930 began establishing his department stores in towns as small as Clayton and cities as large as Albuquerque (the Hobbs and Alamogordo stores came later, in 1939 and 1957 respectively). Every J. C. Penney store Penney opened in New Mexico evolved and thrived even after his long life came to an end in 1971. In addition Penney and his company influenced other entrepreneurs and their chains in New Mexico. His early protégés Charles Ross Anthony and J. M. McDonald opened several of their department stores throughout the state; former Penney associate Sam Walton would later open more New Mexico locations than any other chain. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.
give into misery, however, Penney sought relief by visiting J. C. Penney stores, associates, and customers throughout the country, particularly in the West, where his business had begun.⁴⁰

In May 1931, Penney made a wide-ranging railroad trip by himself to drop in on stores throughout the West. As he travelled from Texas to Colorado, Penney took the opportunity to spend a day in Clayton and Raton, New Mexico, thoroughly examining the J. C. Penney stores in each town, and recording his impressions in a report that he relayed back to his New York City headquarters. Despite the fact that his chain comprised over fourteen-hundred stores, Penney’s comments after visiting the Clayton J. C. Penney clearly demonstrated his profound attention to detail: “This is a small store and is very much crowded. It is an old, single room and the rent is $135. Mr. Triplett [new store manager] claims that he could have rented a new room—built especially for us—at the same figure, or that he could have gotten this room for $35 less. There is a very good first man in this store—a Spaniard. He is a good salesman and would make a valuable man for a larger store where there is a large Mexican trade. He speaks English well.”⁴¹ Penney sent his personal observations back to company president Sams who addressed them at the earliest convenience. The Clayton store was put on the list for a new location after Penney’s visit; it would eventually move into a modern new building on the corner of Main and Front, nearly three times as large and built to company specifications.⁴² Of course, Penney equally articulated flaws in personnel and management as soon as he saw them, and his experience in nearby Raton was far from positive. After walking around the sales floor, Penney described the inventory as “one of the worst looking stocks I saw on this or any other trip.”⁴³ Accordingly, Penney would have directly “expressed” his opinions to Raton manager F. A. Snell, and additionally, the New York City office would have followed up on the store with a visit from the respective district manager. For better or worse, New Mexico managers were not anonymous to even the company founder, and Penney made a point to know them personally and remember each one across his entire chain, either through store visits or company conventions.⁴⁴

Penney’s depression reached rock bottom in December 1931, when his physical condition deteriorated so badly that he was forced to check into the Kellogg Sanitarium after visiting a J. C. Penney store in Battle Creek, Michigan. His stay was short, but a profound religious experience in the sanitarium gave Penney the strength he needed to move forward with his life, physically, mentally, and spiritually. When Penney’s close friends learned of his financial hardships and the generosity that caused them, three of them donated portions of their own salaries and stock shares to help him recover and buy back stock shares that had flooded the market. The Great Depression galvanized Penney’s religious faith, and he
occasionally augmented his role as company founder and chairman by delivering Christian sermons throughout the country. Even books he wrote about the company and its stores concurrently addressed his deep belief in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{45}

J. C. Penney stores suffered declines in sales and profits throughout the Depression, but every one of Penney’s New Mexico locations survived. In many cases, Penney’s value-based pricing made his stores an even more attractive shopping destination. Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt became quite fond of the company and its role in helping American shoppers weather the economic crises; on a trip through Casper, Wyoming, FDR even purchased a lap robe from the local J. C. Penney store to wear during his presidential parade. By 1932 Penney was enthusiastically back to work, frequently visiting locations across the country, motivating local associates and managers, studying agricultural and economic conditions, and visiting with the average consumers who made up his vast customer base.\textsuperscript{46}

Although the company had capitalized on doing business in small rural towns for its first thirty years, by 1931 company president Sams began planning J. C. Penney stores for large metropolitan cities with massive prototypes that
could generate over $1 million in sales even in the midst of the Depression. In 1934 sales for J. C. Penney stores nationwide finally surpassed their 1929 levels, and by the late 1930s, the company was ready to focus on growth in New Mexico once again. Sales floors in Albuquerque, Clovis, and Las Cruces expanded into adjacent buildings and were completely remodeled. In 1939 J. C. Penney unveiled its first location in the oil and gas boomtown of Hobbs, opening a modern store at 104 West Broadway. Similar to the Hobbs store with its new contemporary design, the company arranged for the construction of new store buildings in Clayton and Silver City that were twice the size of their predecessors with wider modern storefronts and sales floors. The three newer locations were nearly identical, boasting bright stucco façades and horizontal kerfs across their storefronts, a subtle homage to the rays of the Zia sun.

During the 1940s, nearly 150,000 additional people made New Mexico their home. After World War II ended, consumer spending in cities large and small reached levels not sustained since the 1920s. As William “Mil” Batten, J. C. Penney’s innovative CEO from 1958 to 1974 later reflected, postwar America was shifting away from agrarian and working professions in rural towns toward affluent white-collar industries and the suburbs, particularly in the Southwest. While consumption prior to World War II had been rooted in daily necessities, postwar consumers were increasingly driven by new desires, fired by increased disposable income and sophisticated advertising, met in the retail market by greater shopping selection and convenience, including credit purchasing and better parking. In addition to these changing consumer practices, national and regional chains were also emerging across New Mexico as significant competition for Penney’s operations. Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward, both of which had proposed merging with J. C. Penney in 1929, regularly unveiled new department store locations to augment their catalog business. Joyce-Pruitt department stores, a local New Mexican chain, directly competed with J. C. Penney stores in Artesia, Carlsbad, Clovis, Portales, and Roswell. Some of Penney’s own associates, notably Oklahoman C. R. Anthony and Missouri native J. M. McDonald, had left the J. C. Penney Company to start their own regional chains, targeting New Mexico cities and towns as well. In downtown Artesia alone, J. C. Penney, C. R. Anthony, and J. M. McDonald each had stores competing in the same business district.

As a result of these postwar developments, J. C. Penney began targeting significant expansions and improvements to nearly every one of its New Mexico locations. The most notable occurred in downtown Albuquerque, where the store at 410 Central Avenue SW began a three-year renovation and expansion, forcing it to operate out of the old Armory Building during the construction. The Melini Building, which had originally housed the downtown Albuquerque store, was
completely unrecognizable after extensive renovations that included a modern new façade across what had once been two buildings, and two additional floors seamlessly added to the top of the structure. Of course, the company held a popular, well-attended grand re-opening for the new store in 1949. Over the next two decades, even with the rise of suburban J. C. Penney stores in Hiland and Winrock shopping centers, the downtown store remained a viable location, clearly visible from the busy intersection of Fourth and Central, and getting an additional expansion and renovation in 1966. After seventy years in its original location, the downtown Albuquerque store would permanently close in 1986. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.

Smaller towns benefited from Penney’s store improvements as well. Although the store in downtown Tucumcari had already been expanded to a double-room configuration, business was so good that it was expanded again to a triple-room configuration in 1947. The “new” J. C. Penney store, once three separate commercial spaces, was nearly as large as J. C. Penney locations in Clovis and Las Cruces.

To capitalize on its household name and distinguish itself on value and price, the J. C. Penney Company prominently began using the slogan, “It Pays
to Shop at Penney’s,” even displaying it on both ends of its wide storefront in downtown Clovis. Newspaper advertisements across the state featured cost-conscious men and women exclaiming, “Mr. Penney, I have a problem!” with Penney replying with advertisements for low prices—for example, cotton dresses at $2.79 each. The bottom of the ads proclaimed Penney’s to be “The Solution to Your Budget Problem.” Aside from being a popular back-to-school shopping destination, J. C. Penney stores also appealed to baby-boom children by throwing a “Penney’s Movie Party” on the last Saturday of each summer. Typically, hundreds of children gathered at the local J. C. Penney and were led as a group to a nearby movie theatre for a free afternoon matinee, compliments of the store.

By the late 1940s, New Mexico clearly reflected America’s growing consumer culture, and J. C. Penney stores responded accordingly with larger, newer locations. In some cases, the company found it advantageous to relocate stores into entirely new buildings constructed exclusively for the company, as it did in both Carlsbad and Las Vegas. The company’s policy mandated using local contractors for its buildings whenever possible, and it selected Carlsbad’s Howard Kerr and Las Vegas’s Joseph Maloof to construct the new locations. Concurrently, J. C. Penney made a concerted effort to blend its new stores aesthetically into New Mexico cityscapes by incorporating current Southwestern architectural trends that included Spanish and Pueblo influences. Both the plans for the new Carlsbad and Las Vegas stores featured mission-inspired clay-tile roofs with stucco and terracotta fronts, and other architectural details well beyond the cost and functionality of a “cookie cutter” store design. The façade for the new Carlsbad location not only incorporated arched windows and a veranda on its second floor, but a mission tower with a planter-box balcony visible on the southeast corner of Canal and Fox.

Beyond their Southwestern architectural features, the new J. C. Penney locations showcased all the amenities of ultra-modern department stores with wide storefront display windows, stainless steel doors and trim, fluorescent lighting, carpet and tiled flooring, and air conditioning. When the new Carlsbad store opened in June 1948, the event became the top story for the Carlsbad (N.Mex.) Daily Current-Argus, and its front page article illustrated how much the community had embraced the new location: “Thousands of persons from throughout the Carlsbad area turned out today for the opening of the new J. C. Penney Department Store at Fox and Canal. Carlsbad firms and individuals by the dozens sent flowers and best wishes to Manager P. R. Lucas and the J. C. Penney Company. The beautiful new store, modern in every respect, was visited by throngs of people throughout the day. The new building is a fitting memorial to the late Howard Kerr, its builder.”
Figure 9. New J. C. Penney Store with Southwest Architecture, Downtown Las Vegas, 1948. Postwar sales increases in Las Vegas prompted the need for this new, larger store built by then-resident Joseph Maloof. Opened in 1948, just after Penney’s new store in downtown Carlsbad, the new Las Vegas location on the corner of 8th and Douglas also utilized Southwest architectural features and a large modern sales floor with merchandise balconies and a full basement. In the 1980s, as downtown J. C. Penney stores across the state gave way to shopping mall locations or permanent closure, the Las Vegas, Silver City, and Taos stores became Penney’s only remaining downtown locations in New Mexico. The Las Vegas store was the last to survive before permanently closing in 1996. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.

J. C. Penney’s efforts to please its Las Vegas shoppers extended far beyond giving them a modern store with pleasing local architecture. In March 1948, while the new store at Eighth and Douglas was still under construction, a fire broke out at the previous location at Sixth and Lincoln, inside the Las Vegas Hotel Building. Despite subzero temperatures outside, the ensuing fire destroyed the entire ladies department in the northwest part of the store, and intense smoke and heat ruined $40,000 worth of the remaining merchandise. The source of the fire turned out to be an adjacent business, and with a new J. C. Penney store already under construction, the company could have simply walked away from the former store and its customers until the new store opened two months later. To the pleasant surprise of Las Vegas shoppers and businesses, local manager Roy Cox announced the company would continue serving Las Vegas from the older store, despite the extensive damage.62 Any salvageable merchandise was marked down and cleared out, and within two weeks, the entire J. C. Penney store was completely repaired, cleaned, repainted, and restocked with a fresh inventory, including Easter dresses for $10.90 and men’s suits for $47.50.63 It is plausible that J. C. Penney lost money by refurbishing the fire-damaged location.
and keeping it open, however, J. C. Penney’s good will certainly contributed to the positive reception for its new store later that June, when its grand opening became the lead story in the *Las Vegas (N.Mex.) Daily Optic*:

Formal opening of the new J. C. Penney store at Eighth and Douglas this morning was marked by an impressive ceremony during which Tom B. Kindel and Manuel J. Baca, mayors of East and West Las Vegas, cut the green and white ribbons stretched across the doors. Prior to the opening of the doors, “The Star Spangled Banner” was played over the loud speaking system. Many Las Vegans were present for the opening and a steady stream of customers and “well-wishers” continued to visit the store throughout the day. Dozens of baskets of flowers, sent by Las Vegas businessmen, decorated the various departments.64

The Las Vegas-San Miguel County Chamber of Commerce, as well as numerous local businesses and contractors, posted newspaper advertisements congratulating
J. C. Penney on the new store. “We are proud to have been able to construct a building for so progressive a firm,” wrote local businessman and chief builder Joseph Maloof. “Their move is a mark of progress for Las Vegas.”

In October 1950, the company unveiled another new store in downtown Raton, at the corner of Second and Rio Grande. This modern location, with air conditioning, fluorescent lighting, and a 50-foot-wide storefront, was three times larger than the previous store. Constructed and owned by Raton businessmen Al Bisconti and Martin Pavletich, the new store building was hailed by the *Raton (N.Mex.) Daily Range* as one of the finest J. C. Penney locations in the state. In addition to a sales floor 140 feet long, the new Raton J. C. Penney featured two balconies at the front and rear, as well as a full basement. Notably, it was only the second J. C. Penney store in the entire nation to feature a “Toddler Shop,” a department of ready-to-wear clothes exclusively for infants and children of the baby boom. Mayor C. L. Healy and Dr. J. Q. Thaxton presided over the crowded grand opening, and Thaxton described the store as “a valuable asset to our city” and “one of the finest stores in the southwest.” Other local J. C. Penney managers and several guests from the regional office in Denver also attended the grand opening.
opening, including Walter Neppl, an up-and-coming assistant manager who would later make his mark on New Mexico and ultimately the company. 

Although J. C. Penney followed its success in Raton by opening a new location in downtown Artesia on the southwest corner of Fourth and Quay, the most significant new store for New Mexico opened on the eastern fringe of Albuquerque in 1954. Since Penney had opened the downtown Albuquerque store in 1915, the city’s population had exploded from just eleven thousand residents to more than one hundred thousand, growing rapidly toward two hundred thousand throughout the 1950s. Despite the massive expansion to the downtown store, J. C. Penney realized it could no longer serve Albuquerque shoppers from one store in the central business district, and it took the opportunity to reach New Mexico’s first suburban shoppers by opening a second store in the Hiland Shopping Center, a strip mall at 4700 Central Avenue East, adjacent to the Madison Street intersection. Aside from having ample free parking, the Hiland store looked very similar to Penney’s predominantly downtown locations of that era. It was distinct, though, for being the first J. C. Penney store in New Mexico located away from a central business district. Penney’s first suburban venture in Albuquerque proved highly successful: the Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal reported that at least ten thousand people shopped at the new store on its first day.

The new store’s manager, Walter Neppl, quickly developed a company-wide reputation for successfully opening suburban J. C. Penney stores. Neppl had already bought a house in Albuquerque and believed it would be his family’s permanent home, but his performance at the Hiland J. C. Penney prompted the company to reassign him to one of its regional offices in 1955. For the rest of the 1950s, Neppl helped design suburban J. C. Penney stores, primarily in outdoor strip centers. By the 1960s, he developed the even larger “full-line” indoor shopping mall prototypes that arrived in Albuquerque and Las Cruces in the 1960s. Neppl’s innovations and contributions to J. C. Penney stores were given the highest praise in 1976 when he was named president of the J. C. Penney Company, a position he would hold until his retirement in 1982.

Despite the excitement over Penney’s new Hiland store, the company focused exclusively on improving its stores in New Mexico’s downtowns for the rest of the 1950s. As formidable national chains like Sears and Ward began establishing larger suburban locations, and as regional chains such as C. R. Anthony became competitive in numerous New Mexico towns, the company continued to seek ways to improve its main street locations with modern renovations to older storefronts and the introduction of better merchandise displays, fluorescent lighting, and air conditioning. J. C. Penney stores in New Mexico also responded to booming populations and the additional shoppers that came with
them. In Santa Fe, the company secured a larger location on the Plaza at 66 San Francisco Street, the site of what had once been a military chapel constructed by Spanish governor Marin del Valle in the eighteenth century. To preserve the historical and cultural aesthetics of the district, J. C. Penney hired Santa Fe architect Bradley P. Kidder to create a modern store that also incorporated Spanish architecture and Southwest design throughout the new building. Santa Fe residents did virtually all the work for the new store from its initial design to its final construction. When the new store opened in August 1956, Mayor Leo Murphy officiated the grand opening ceremonies, declaring that Santa Fe was proud of its new

Figure 12. Interior of the First Suburban J. C. Penney Store in New Mexico, Albuquerque Hiland Shopping Center, 1957. In 1954, J. C. Penney opened its second Albuquerque store in Hiland Shopping Center at 4700 Central Avenue SE, just off the Madison Street intersection. Although its interior and exterior design strongly resembled Penney’s downtown locations, the store’s ample free parking made it a popular shopping destination for suburbanites on what was then the east end of the city. Its first store manager, Walter Neppl, was so successful that the company asked him to leave Albuquerque and develop shopping center prototypes for J. C. Penney stores across the country. By 1960 the Hiland J. C. Penney was selling more merchandise than the downtown Albuquerque store. Neppl’s outstanding work eventually led to his promotion as president of the J. C. Penney Company in 1976. The company permanently closed the Hiland J. C. Penney in January 1987. Photograph courtesy DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, J. C. Penney Collection.
J. C. Penney store not just for contributing greatly to the city’s economy but for its managers and associates and their productive involvement in the city’s local affairs. The Santa Fe New Mexican praised the new J. C. Penney store as “an outstanding example of what can be done to preserve the architectural integrity of Santa Fe at no loss to the efficiency needed in a business building.”

Penney had been unable to personally visit the new location, but the New Mexican printed his thoughts on the secret behind his company’s continued success, particularly in the context of consumers in an ever-changing business world: “Today’s greatest challenge, not only in merchandising but in every phase of living, is human relations. You won’t find a finer example of good human relations than between our people and our customers. The answer lies in the spirit within our company, built up because everybody has an opportunity to get ahead and participate in the profits. It pays to be unselfish from the selfish point of view. That’s our secret—and it gets more priceless all the time!”

In December 1956, the J. C. Penney Company featured Santa Fe and its new store in their company newsletter, including an informal endorsement from one of its local customers. “Best of all I like the sales people at Penney’s,” remarked Santa Fe resident Catherine E. Gust, “They make you feel that coming into the store is like visiting with old friends.”

Throughout the 1950s, Penney enjoyed an almost-celebrity status. Fortune magazine christened him “King of the Soft Goods” at the beginning of the decade, noting that one in four Americans shopped at his stores. Journalist Edward R. Murrow interviewed Penney for his Person to Person television program, while Life magazine made Penney’s eightieth birthday party one of their photographic feature stories. With a net worth of more than $20 million, Penney had undoubtedly become a major American capitalist headquartered in New York City, yet he refused to sever ties with his small-town, agrarian roots. As Penney remained involved in his stores, the J. C. Penney Company concurrently maintained its main street locations in the tradition of earlier mercantile capitalism, even as retail chains became increasingly driven by corporate profits in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Even into the 1960s, Penney’s chain continued to operate department stores in places with little more than a thousand residents, including his agrarian hometown of Hamilton, Missouri, which the company founder routinely visited every year. Penney also maintained personal involvement in numerous agricultural and philanthropic activities around the nation, the National 4-H Foundation among them, to continue improving rural America. Outside of spending his winters in Arizona, he frequently travelled by himself to visit older J. C. Penney stores in other small towns, enjoying his days chatting with local customers and his nights dining and sleeping at the homes of local store managers. Amazingly,
even though he had never lived in these communities, he was still able to connect deeply with their residents. “I believe the reason for this [connection],” reflected Penney’s daughter Mary Frances, “is that he really liked, respected and enjoyed all sorts of people, except those who ‘put on airs.’ He never forgot his roots as a poor boy in Hamilton.”

Two months after the new downtown Santa Fe store opened, J. C. Penney unveiled another new store in downtown Gallup with Mayor D. F. “Mickey” Mollica cutting the grand opening ribbon. Local newspaper editor Richard R.
Ryan had frequently visited the new store before it opened, and it impressed him so much that on the day of the grand opening, he printed the following editorial on the front page of the Gallup (N.Mex.) Daily Independent:

The new J. C. Penney store, which opened this morning, is quite a place. We have had occasion to be inside a number of times in recent weeks, and are much impressed. It is nearly three times as large as the old one; there is plenty of space in which to display the merchandise (and what fine merchandise, too)! We were pleased by the arrangement of departments, the display of merchandise, the many thoughtful ideas which help the customer. The choice of color for interior decoration, the attractive lay-out of departments, the functional, completely modern design, all make it a fine place in which to shop. It is one more example of the development of this community; if building continues through 1957 as it did through 1955 and 1956, the old timers won’t recognize Gallup.80

To the north, in Farmington, the company drew up plans to transform its tiny location into a new larger J. C. Penney store for the growing city, taking over adjacent buildings and constructing a massive new storefront along West Main Street.81 Although J. C. Penney had not ventured into any additional New Mexico towns since 1939, the rising population of Alamogordo led the company finally to construct and open a new store there in November 1957, downtown at 809 New York Avenue, employing about fifty new associates.82 Throughout the 1950s, Penney’s downtown stores were well received by New Mexico shoppers, but the Alamogordo J. C. Penney would be the last new downtown location for the state. Although Penney did not participate in the grand openings for any of these stores, he returned to New Mexico in September 1958, accepting an invitation to visit San Patricio painter Peter Hurd. Penney flew into Roswell and spent nine days as a guest at Hurd’s Sentinel Ranch before returning to New York City via Albuquerque.83

By 1960 the company was already planning its second suburban location for Albuquerque at Winrock Center, a large commercial project along Louisiana Boulevard developed by and named after Winthrop Rockefeller of the famous Rockefeller family.84 The newest CEO, Mil Batten, appointed in 1958, was innovative enough to move Penney’s stores into such modern concepts as data automation and climate-controlled shopping malls. He provided continuity by upholding the Golden Rule values that had long been codified by the company in its mission statement, informally known as the “Penney Idea.”85 When Winrock Center was completed in March 1961, the event was so significant that Batten personally came to Albuquerque to celebrate the center’s grand opening. Along with the family of Winthrop Rockefeller, there were celebrities Raymond Burr and Shelley
Fabares, the latter just months away from releasing her number one hit, “Johnny Angel.” Chairmen of the Boards for Montgomery Ward and Safeway also attended the grand openings for their stores in the new mall.\(^{86}\) Public excitement for the new shopping center was so great that on its Wednesday morning opening, traffic along Louisiana Boulevard was backed up for more than a block, and drivers complained about having to wait fifteen minutes just to get into the parking lot.\(^{87}\)

J. C. Penney’s initial location at Winrock Center, with twenty-three thousand square feet on its main floor and another eleven thousand in its basement, was considered large for its time, and was described in the *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal* as “huge.”\(^{88}\) However, former Albuquerque J. C. Penney manager Walter Neppl, under the direction of CEO Batten, was planning significantly larger Penney’s stores with gigantic New Mexico locations that would carry full lines
of merchandise and services, including hardware, major appliances, furniture, toys, sporting goods, beauty salons, and even automotive service centers. The first of these “full-line” stores in New Mexico opened at Loretto Shopping Center in Las Cruces in April 1966. At sixty-six thousand square feet, the new J. C. Penney store in Las Cruces was hailed as New Mexico's largest ever, more than seven times the size of its downtown predecessor at 201 North Main. In an interview with the Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun, store manager Pat Varty shared his affection for the new store and its customers: “The Penney Company has been serving Las Cruces for the past 43 years and now with the opening of our new full-line department store, we hope to provide the Las Cruces community better quality and service than ever before. Las Cruces has always been very good to the Penney Company and we hope to be able to maintain our fine relationship for many years to come.” The new Las Cruces store employed 180 associates, and featured a grand opening ceremony with mariachi music and speeches by Mayor T. J. Graham, New Mexico Department of Development Director Robert Hoffman, Chamber of Commerce President F. Frank Adams, and gubernatorial candidate T. E. “Gene” Lusk.

For all of its grand-opening fanfare, the reign of the Las Cruces J. C. Penney as New Mexico's largest and greatest was short lived. Six months after it opened, J. C. Penney unveiled an even more impressive store in Albuquerque, expanding its Winrock Center location into a gigantic, full-line “Penney’s” store with 167,000 square feet of selling space, in addition to a fourteen-bay automotive center. In anticipation of Albuquerque's future growth, J. C. Penney also enlarged and remodeled its other two Albuquerque stores in downtown and at Hiland Shopping Center. In November 1966, the company celebrated their recent expansions and renovations by holding simultaneous grand re-openings for all three Albuquerque J. C. Penney stores, each featuring the stylish teal and black “Penney's” logo across their storefronts.

Penney was ninety-one years old when the company unveiled these modern New Mexico stores. Although he was unable to return to the state for their celebrations, he remained very aware of his retail chain's evolution into what were undeniably massive, modern department stores: the Winrock J. C. Penney alone was almost two hundred times larger than the first store he had opened sixty-four years earlier in Kemmerer, Wyoming. Despite his age, Penney never completely retired from his company and remained physically and mentally active for the rest of his life, even regularly reporting for work at the J. C. Penney headquarters in New York City as late as December 1970. By the time he turned ninety-five in September of that year, he was nearly blind in both eyes and hard of hearing, but still able to write the following thoughts: “As I look to the future, each day of my life brings me new challenges and a diversity of
Throughout 1966 J. C. Penney concurrently expanded and renovated all three of its Albuquerque locations and held a grand re-opening celebration that November. Although the full-line conversion of the Winrock store was most significant with a 100,000 square foot addition plus a 14 bay automotive center, the downtown and Hiland stores were also expanded to 57,000 and 42,000 square feet respectively, and offered new departments including appliances, electronics, sporting goods, and records. All three stores were remodeled with the new “Penney’s” logo that was in vogue for the company throughout the 1960s. Yet even these expanded, modernized stores could not keep pace with a rapidly changing Albuquerque, and within twenty years, J. C. Penney decided to permanently close both the downtown and Hiland stores. By 1989 the company even shut down the massive Winrock location in favor of a new one at Coronado Center (in the former Sanger-Harris location). J. C. Penney added its last new Albuquerque store in 1994 with the opening of Cottonwood Mall. Advertisement courtesy Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal.
stimulating activities. Without the coordination of my body, my mind, and my soul, I could not maintain my strength, spirit, and the zest of happy living. God willing, I hope to live to reach the century mark. I want the remaining golden years of my life to be the best and most useful ones of all." On 12 February 1971, as Penney recovered from hip surgery in a New York City hospital, he quietly passed away from a heart attack. At the time of Penney’s death, every store that he had established in New Mexico was still open for business, and each honored his life by closing on the morning of his funeral.

In the years following Penney’s death, the company began cultivating a new public image. A modern Helvetica logo and the advertising slogan, “This is J. C. Penney,” deliberately attempted to further modernize and move away from the informal “Penney’s” trade name that had been traditionally used by the company and its longtime shoppers. Marketing increasingly shifted toward J. C. Penney’s newer suburban shopping-mall stores and away from the iconic downtown locations Penney himself had established in the first half of the twentieth century. As recently as 1974, a J. C. Penney department store still served the downtowns of seventeen New Mexico communities. Albuquerque’s busy suburban stores at Winrock and Hiland shopping centers complemented the longtime J. C. Penney store downtown, while the full-line store at Loretto Shopping Center was just a block south of downtown Las Cruces. However, by the latter half of the 1970s, the development of regional shopping malls near interstate highways and the pressure of suburban growth away from New Mexico’s central business districts had already begun transforming J. C. Penney stores and their respective main streets. In November 1975, J. C. Penney closed its location on the Plaza in downtown Santa Fe. Gov. Jerry Apodaca officially cut the ribbon for a newer, larger store in DeVargas Shopping Center, one mile northwest along Paseo De Peralta. Less than a year later, the company abandoned its location in downtown Hobbs for a new J. C. Penney store on North Turner Street in the Broadmoor Shopping Center.

Statewide and nationwide, J. C. Penney’s new mall locations offered shoppers larger stores with greater selection and services, as well as ample free parking, while giving the company higher sales and profits than their downtown locations could ever provide. Within ten years, J. C. Penney moved its downtown stores in Alamogordo, Carlsbad, Clovis, Farmington, Gallup, and Roswell to modern indoor malls, and permanently closed its department stores on the main streets of smaller New Mexico towns such as Clayton, Tucumcari, Portales, and Raton. The closings in these smaller towns did not occur without emotion since the local J. C. Penney stores had virtually become part of the communities themselves, having served them and employed residents for more than fifty years, seventy in the case of Raton. A longtime J. C. Penney shopper
in Tucumcari expressed her outrage and sorrow by writing a personal letter to the company’s founder in 1976, unaware that he was no longer alive. “You have allowed the closing of a J. C. Penney store in our community and it is a sad, regrettable, unnecessary step,” the woman wrote. “We in Tucumcari feel you have let us down.” In 1985 the J. C. Penney store in downtown Albuquerque celebrated its seventieth and final Christmas, quietly closing in January 1986. By the early 1990s, only the Las Vegas, Silver City, and Taos stores remained in downtown locations, and even Albuquerque’s suburban J. C. Penney stores at Winrock and Hiland shopping centers vanished in favor of newer locations at Coronado Center and Cottonwood Mall. In 1996 J. C. Penney’s downtown era in New Mexico officially ended when the company shut down the Las Vegas store on the corner of Eighth and Douglas, bringing more than eighty years of business in northeast New Mexico to a permanent end.

In the one hundred years since Penney opened his first location in the state, New Mexico’s population has risen to more than two million people. Albuquerque, for instance, increased from barely eleven thousand residents to a metropolitan population of nearly nine hundred thousand. New Mexico’s consumers have evolved with the rest of America, with shoppers driven more by low-priced “wants” and convenience than old-fashioned service and “needs.” Accordingly, suburban big-box stores like Walmart and Target are thriving as small town main streets continue to wither. The chain bearing Penney’s name has evolved with these changes, morphing into ten suburban locations in nine New Mexico cities. Shoppers now reach them via four lane highways or simply use an app on their smartphones to shop J. C. Penney online. Even Amazon.com, arguably the next great empire in American retail, is the creation of a New Mexico native, company founder and CEO Jeff Bezos.

Looking today at the vacant main streets of Clayton, Raton, and Tucumcari, or the chic galleries and trendy shops that now pervade the downtowns of Santa Fe and Taos, it is difficult to believe that J. C. Penney department stores ever flourished there. Yet Penney and his stores were very much a part of these disparate places throughout the twentieth century, serving generations of New Mexico shoppers in accordance with his Golden Rule convictions. Penney was undeniably the merchandising genius behind a national department-store chain in the twentieth century, but he was also a visionary who clearly saw potential in the Land of Enchantment at a time when many of his competitors could not.

NOTES

2. J. C. Penney Store Opening/Closing Date Lists, box 229, JCPCR.

3. “Golden Rule Store to Open Wednesday,” Las Vegas (N.Mex.) Daily Optic, 30 March 1914, p. 5.


13. Penney, Fifty Years with the Golden Rule, 93.


16. Roswell (N.Mex.) Daily Record, 6 April 1916, p. 3.


18. Roswell (N.Mex.) Daily Record, 6 April 1916, p. 4.

19. Dynamo, January 1921, 32. Dynamo was the J. C. Penney Company associate newsletter published from 1917 to 1932.


23. Clovis (N.Mex.) _News_, 9 August 1923, p. 3.

24. “J. C. Penney Co. Opens 475th Store This Week in Cruces,” _Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Rio Grande Farmer_, 16 August 1923, p. 1. James Cash Penney’s original “no sales” pricing strategy should not be confused with recent CEO Ron Johnson’s “Fair and Square” pricing system for J. C. Penney in 2012. Johnson’s system was designed to raise profit margins and attract higher-end vendors by eliminating sales and discounts, and offered no real benefits to modern consumers who could easily comparison shop for the same or lower prices online or at competitors like Macy’s and Kohl’s. In contrast Penney had established prices that were already as good as most competitors’ sale prices.


30. “J. C. Penney Co. Store for Taos,” _Taos (N.Mex.) Valley News_, 29 December 1928, p. 1. In Taos, unlike other New Mexico locations, the J. C. Penney Company bought out an existing store, Gerson Gusdorf Dry Goods, and converted it into one of its own. Gusdorf had formerly been a retail partner of George and Frank Bond.


32. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, _Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Population, Volume 1, Number of Inhabitants_, New Mexico, Table 5, 1930 column, 702; and J. C. Penney Store Opening/Closing Date Lists, box 229, JCPCR.

33. J. C. Penney has not operated downtown stores in New Mexico since 1996, with its only contiguous downtown stores operating in El Paso and McAllen, Texas; and Alamosa and Fort Morgan, Colorado.


36. Photographs of J. C. Penney stores in downtown Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Tucumcari, New Mexico, J. C. Penney Historic Store Photographs Series, box 67, JCPCR.
Except where otherwise noted, physical descriptions of J. C. Penney stores are based upon the author’s personal observations and data mined from historical store photographs in the J. C. Penney Collection at DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.


40. Mary Frances Wagley, interview with the author, 18 August 2010, Cockeysville, Maryland. For further reading on Penney’s experience during the Great Depression and its impact on his character and faith, see Orlando L. Tibbetts, The Spiritual Journey of J. C. Penney (Danbury, Conn.: Rutledge Books, 1999), 125–65; and Curry, Creating an American Institution, 273–74.

41. James Cash Penney, Report: Covering Visits to Certain J. C. Penney Company Stores in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, and Iowa, April 26 to May 15, 1931, folder C-1, box C-2, A2004.0006, James Cash Penney Papers, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas [hereafter JCPP], 17–18.

42. The new Clayton store would remain at this location for nearly fifty more years, from its 1940 opening until its permanent closure in 1986.


44. “J. C. Penney has Keen Memory for Name, Face,” Shenandoah (Iowa) Evening Sentinel, 28 April 1969, p. 7.


46. Curry, Creating an American Institution, 282.

47. Promotional materials for Seattle, Washington, J. C. Penney Store #1457, 1931, box 198, JCPCR; and “New Seattle Store is Landmark,” Dynamo, September 1931, 3–4. The first of these metropolitan locations, in downtown Seattle at Second and Pike, was the largest department store the company had ever opened at the time, with over six floors of selling space, plus escalators and elevators.


49. Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1550, Hobbs, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR. According to the 1940 Census, the population of Hobbs had risen from 398 residents in 1930 to 10,619 by 1940.

50. J. C. Penney Store Opening/Closing Date Lists, box 229, JCPCR.

51. Lendol Calder’s Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) further explores this rise of the postwar consumer culture, and provides context for why J. C. Penney inevitably needed to move away from smaller stores and their cash-only sales policy.


54. Roy Stewart, One of a Kind: The Life of C. R. Anthony (Oklahoma City, Okla.: Western Heritage Books, 1981). By the 1950s, Oklahoman C. R. Anthony would have
his “Anthony’s” stores on a number of New Mexico main streets and strip centers. J. M. McDonald, a boyhood friend of Penney’s, began buying out independent department stores and then operating them under his J. M. McDonald chain. Former Penney associate Samuel M. Walton later opened the first of his retail stores in 1945, though his Walmart chain would not come to New Mexico until 1983.

55. C. R. Anthony and J. C. Penney already had department stores in Artesia, while J. M. McDonald operated the Virtue’s Department Store under its original name. The J. C. Penney store would later construct and move to a new location in downtown Artesia, on the corner of Fourth and Quay, before closing in 1974.


57. Photographs of J. C. Penney stores in Clovis, Las Cruces, and Tucumcari, New Mexico, J. C. Penney Historic Store Photographs Series, box 67, JCPCR.

58. For an example of this advertisement, see *Las Vegas (N.Mex.) Daily Optic*, 14 February 1948, p. 8.


70. J. C. Penney Store Opening/Closing Date Lists, box 229, JCPCR; and Store Histories for J. C. Penney Stores #373, Santa Fe, New Mexico, #1659-2, Albuquerque, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR.


73. Store History for J. C. Penney Store #373, Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR; and “Penney Store Blends With Plaza’s Theme,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 8 August 1956, 2B.

74. "Penney Store Blends With Plaza’s Theme," Santa Fe New Mexican, 8 August 1956, 2B; and "Mayor Leo Murphy Officiated Store Opening, Cut Ribbon," Santa Fe New Mexican, 9 August 1956, 2A.

75. “The Amazing Penney Company,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 8 August 1956, 6B-7B.

76. Store History for J. C. Penney Store #373, Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR.


78. Wagley, interview.


81. Store History for J. C. Penney Store #2132, Farmington, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR. The downtown Farmington and Hobbs stores were both significantly expanded in 1959.

82. “Penney’s Opens Tomorrow; Mayor Rolland to Officiate,” Alamogordo (N.Mex.) Daily News, 20 November 1957, pp. 1, 6; and Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1741, Alamogordo, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR.

83. Travel Log for James Cash Penney, 1958, box 45, JCPP.


89. Neppl, interview transcript, JCPCR, 2.2–2.17.

90. “State’s Largest Penney Store Opens Wednesday,” Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun, 24 April 1966, p. 1. The Loretto J. C. Penney was also located on Main Street, just five blocks south of its former location in downtown Las Cruces.


92. Store History for J. C. Penney Store #86, Albuquerque, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR.

93. “Penney’s Winrock Store Open During Expansion”; “Downtown Penney’s One of Oldest In Chain”; and “Penney’s Hiland Outlet Has Third Expansion,” Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal, 1 November 1966, B2. The expansion to the downtown store gave it fifty-seven thousand square feet of selling space, extremely large for a downtown location, while the expansion to the Hiland store was just over forty-two thousand square feet. All
three expanded stores sold appliances, electronics, records, and sporting goods, including hunting rifles and ammunition.


95. James Cash Penney, Personal Testimony, 1971, folder 4, box C-1, JCPP.


98. Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1550, Hobbs, New Mexico, September 2001, electronic files, JCPCR.

99. Ellen H. Buckley to James Cash Penney, 18 May 1976, J. C. Penney Field Public Relations Files, New Mexico box, JCPCR.
