



## Main Street Empire: J C Penney in Nebraska

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Article Summary: By the late 1920s, J C Penney had stores in more than fifty Nebraska communities—more than any retailer before or since. Later the company evolved into a suburban shopping mall anchor, following a national trend toward larger stores serving larger regions.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: James Cash Penney, Earl Corder Sams, Roswell Penney, J C Penney Jr, Guy Johnson, J B Byars, F Scott Puliver, Elizabeth Sunberg, Peter Lakers, R R Ferguson, H M Stearns, P L Frandsen, McKay [Imperial, Nebraska manager], Hadley [McCook, Nebraska manager], Lloyd Faidley, D B Woodyard, Earl Sams, William "Mil" Batten, Donald Seibert, William Howell

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\*Please note: The large number of J C Penney locations prohibits listing all of them in this cover page. Only those referred to more often have been listed above.

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Photographs / Images: Grand opening of a new J C Penney store in downtown Lincoln, 1950; James Cash Penney, 1929; James Cash Penney with 1927-1928 Peer Cup champion bull; Lincoln J C Penney store in 1929; Wahoo, Nebraska J C Penney store, 1941; J C Penney Scottsbluff store 1948 fire; Lincoln J C Penney new store 1950; interior of the York J C Penney store in 1957; Holdrege J C Penney store in 1958; J C Penney, about 1958, with two young children in the shoe department; J C Penney logos





# Main Street Empire: J. C. PENNEY IN NEBRASKA

BY DAVID DELBERT KRUGER

The April 1914 opening of downtown Grand Island's J. C. Penney store was as significant for the company's thirty-eight-year-old founder as it was for the crowd waiting along the Third Street sidewalk. For James Cash Penney, the Grand Island opening marked not only his first store in Nebraska, but also the closest he had come to operating near his hometown of Hamilton, Missouri. Nebraska's first J. C. Penney store was also, arguably, the first of the franchise's stores in the entire Midwest, as the next closest location was over three hundred miles away in Fort Morgan, Colorado.<sup>1</sup> For nearly a decade, Penney had been creating a chain of sixty stores, but until 1914 his commercial reach extended no farther east than Colorado. The name "J. C. Penney" was almost unrecognizable to Nebraskans at the time, particularly in the shadows of established retailers like Brandeis, Miller & Paine, Herpolsheimer's, Louis Bergman, and Rudge & Guenzel.<sup>2</sup> The Grand Island location had been planned from the company's first headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, but by the time it opened, Penney had already persuaded his board of directors to relocate the headquarters to New York City for better access to manufacturers, distribution lines, and financial institutions. If James Cash Penney and his company were moving east, it seemed logical that many additional J. C. Penney stores in Nebraska would soon follow. Within fifteen years, James Cash Penney was able to saturate more Nebraska towns—large and small—than any other retailer before or since, with most of his stores serving their respective main streets for more than fifty years.

Grand opening of a new J. C. Penney store in downtown Lincoln, November 16, 1950. At its peak, the franchise had stores in more than fifty Nebraska communities.  
NSHS RG2183-1950-1116-2

James Cash Penney, 1929.  
DeGolyer Library, Southern  
Methodist University,  
Dallas, Texas. A2004.007



**Although Penney never resided** in Nebraska, he understood its largely agrarian culture and had spent considerable time living in its border states of Missouri, Colorado, and Wyoming. Growing up in northwest Missouri, Penney had taken up farming as a teenager before health concerns forced him to migrate to Colorado and later Wyoming to pursue a career in retailing.<sup>4</sup> However, even as he changed professions, Penney continued to be most comfortable in small towns and rural areas that were largely dependent upon agriculture. As he later reflected:

For me, innately, cities were places to keep away from. Small towns were where I was at home. I knew how to get close to the lives of small town people, learning their needs and preferences and serving them accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Penney's move to New York City in 1914, he still identified with farmers and ranchers, and believed that he shared their values and understood their needs. As a fundamentalist Christian, Penney also believed that a J. C. Penney store in their rural communities could be the embodiment of what a retail institution should be: an honest neighbor that operated by the golden rule "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you." Penney had opened his first stores as cash-only Golden Rule mercantiles, primarily for sheep ranchers, miners, and their families, allowing them to maximize quality with minimum prices.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, he also embraced thrifty farmers and railroad work-

ers in Nebraska. The newspaper ads for his first Nebraska store featured headlines such as "Grand Island's Cheapest Store" and "We Cater to Railroad Men."<sup>6</sup> While J. C. Penney stores did sell complete lines of fashionable apparel for the entire family, Penney never envisioned his department stores emulating the flair of J. L. Brandeis or Miller & Paine. J. C. Penney stores were simply a value-based mercantile for common Nebraskans who needed Pay Day overalls and quality linens as much as they needed a Towncraft suit or a Marathon fedora.

Within a year of the Grand Island opening, the company opened additional J. C. Penney stores in Hastings and Beatrice. Expanding throughout Nebraska was very much in line with Penney's aspirations. "If I had insisted on keeping personal control of the Penney Company," Penney later reflected, "we would still be merely a small chain of stores scattered through the Middle West."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Penney would have preferred gradually opening new stores using existing store profits and associate partnerships. Doing so had enabled him to expand his chain without borrowing money, but the process took too much time for rapid nationwide expansion, something that his partners and associates increasingly wanted. Six years after moving to New York City, the J. C. Penney Company was able to expand from 48 stores in seven states to 197 stores in 25 states. Over the same period, annual sales had mushroomed from \$2.6 million to \$28.7 million.<sup>8</sup>

The chain grew rapidly throughout the nation and continued to expand its presence in Nebraska. In 1916, new stores were opened in Falls City, McCook, and Ord. Within two years, North Platte and David City also welcomed J. C. Penney stores to their downtown business districts. Amazingly, the company was able to find additional new locations with little more than manager recommendations, personal visits, census figures, and crude marketing data. From its New York headquarters, eight scouts were assigned to perpetually visit, investigate, and report on potential sites across the United States. "From the J. C. Penney perspective, bigger cities were not necessarily better locations. Although Grand Island had a population just over 10,000, none of the other Nebraska store locations at that time had populations larger than 5,000."<sup>9</sup> In its first twenty years, the company didn't even have a store prototype large enough to serve a city the size of Lincoln, much less Omaha, so locations in those cities were not even considered.

It was somewhat ironic that a former Missouri farmboy, with stores primarily in rural towns, suddenly found himself running a company from an

office in Midtown Manhattan. For Penney, this was not the happy ending to a real-life Horatio Alger story. Penney still longed for country living, but with J. C. Penney stores becoming a national chain, he felt obliged to remain in New York. Geography, however, did not stop him from reconnecting with rural life. In 1917, he turned day-to-day leadership of the J. C. Penney Company over to Earl Corder Sams, his trusted protégé from Simpson, Kansas, in order to free up time for agricultural pursuits. Penney remained chairman of the board, but purchased a farm just north of New York City as his personal residence. Ironically, moving to New York City had given Penney his greatest opportunities to return to his agrarian roots, and his re-embrace of agriculture and rural living was not a nostalgic attempt to cope with the modernism of the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Penney pragmatically saw his involvement in agriculture as one more way to practice the golden rule while improving the bottom line of J. C. Penney stores across the nation:

[...] as far back as the days of starting out in [Wyoming], I had perceived that, since stores in small towns are naturally dependent in great measure on rural people, prosperity for farmers means prosperity for our stores [...]. By the onset of the twenties we had over three hundred stores, located in a large number of states, and my incessant trips among them enabled me to form a clear impression of agricultural conditions and problems. It seemed to me that nearly everywhere I went farmers stood in need of better cattle.<sup>12</sup>

In 1922, Penney purchased a large dairy farm in upstate New York and began to study and breed Guernsey cattle. Three years later, he created Penney Farms, a 120,000-acre operation in central Florida that served as a model farming community and agricultural institute.<sup>13</sup> Foremost Dairies Products was a development that grew out of Penney Farms, with its name coming directly from Penney's champion Guernsey bull.<sup>14</sup> Penney had no problem bringing his agricultural interests into his retail stores. On a corporate trip from New York to the Pacific Northwest, Penney took several of his prize-winning Guernsey cattle with him, and large displays of their trophies were placed in J. C. Penney store windows throughout Oregon.<sup>15</sup> Penney even brought a pen with a live draft mule to display *inside* the J. C. Penney store in his hometown of Hamilton, Missouri. His first two sons, Roswell and J. C., Jr., were also enticed by his work in agriculture, and followed their father into agribusiness rather than management careers with the J. C. Penney Company.

Throughout the 1920s, J. C. Penney's expansion across Nebraska was virtually impossible to ignore. In 1920 alone, Penney established new stores in Columbus, Fremont, Kearney, and Norfolk. Within five years, after stores were opened in Broken Bow, Nebraska City, and Auburn, the J. C. Penney Company was operating thirteen stores statewide. However, these Nebraska openings were merely the beginning of a much larger presence, as the company began planning a wave of openings in the late 1920s that would result in more than fifty J. C. Penney stores statewide. Some of the growth came from opening new stores outright, as in York, but much of it came from buying out other

"It seemed to me that nearly everywhere I went farmers stood in need of better cattle," Penney wrote. To this end he began to study and breed cattle. He is shown here with a 1927-28 Peer Cup champion bull. DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, A2004.007



The Lincoln J. C. Penney store, shown in 1929, was similar in size and layout to stores in much smaller towns. The cash conveyor system is visible along the ceiling. Containers with a customer's money and bill of sale were cabled up to the balcony; an associate would send the container down with a receipt and correct change. DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, A2004.007



regional chains and converting their outlets to J. C. Penney stores. In 1927, Penney's former mentor, Guy Johnson, wanted to retire from retailing, and sold Penney his small chain of Golden Rule stores, including locations in Scottsbluff and Kimball. Penney paid cash for all twenty of Johnson's stores, immediately converting them to J. C. Penney stores. The following year, 1928, was incredibly significant for J. C. Penney's growth in Nebraska, as the company opened a store in Lincoln, as well as Tecumseh, and purchased the J. B. Byars chain. The Byars chain was the largest Penney had ever acquired, consisting of 117 stores across Colorado, Kansas, and southern Nebraska, as well as other Nebraska locations in Sargent, Sidney, Tekamah, and West Point. Penney had personally known J. B. Byars from his early days with the Golden Rule syndicate in Wyoming, and had informally agreed not to compete in any town where Byars was operating.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, as soon as the acquisition was finalized, the company began converting J. B. Byars stores to J. C. Penney stores.<sup>17</sup> As the Byars stores had predominantly been located in smaller towns, the conversions were typically front-page stories for their respective local newspapers. In

1929, Penney was also able to expand into the Nebraska Panhandle by buying out and converting Barnett Golden Rule stores in Chappell, Gordon, Hemingford, and Rushville. In Bayard, a new J. C. Penney store was built from the ground up, using a local contractor from Hemingford.<sup>18</sup> The opening of the Bayard store and the arrival of F. Scott Puliver, a University of Nebraska graduate brought back from Alabama to manage it, became the lead story in Bayard's newspaper.<sup>19</sup> By the end of 1929, after the Byars and Golden Rule conversions were complete, twenty-five additional J. C. Penney stores lined main streets from Rushville to Auburn, and Tekamah to Benkelman. Nationally, 395 J. C. Penney stores were opened that year, giving J. C. Penney a chain of over one thousand stores, with at least one location in each of the forty-eight states.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to national competitors Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck, J. C. Penney did not offer credit purchases or catalog sales until 1958 and 1963, respectively. As a result, J. C. Penney stores during the first half of the century were heavily dependent upon rural customers who were willing and able to make cash purchases. According to Elizabeth Sunberg, an associate who began working at the Grand Island store in 1924:

Farm customers would come in from miles around. They would shop all day, and sometimes we [clerks] would spend as much as half a day with one customer. They would buy their supplies for nearly a year.<sup>21</sup>

In appearance, most of the early J. C. Penney stores in Nebraska were rather narrow, many of them featuring rear balconies overlooking the sales floor, with staircases usually on the left side of the store as you walked in.<sup>22</sup> The balconies were initially part of the store's design for handling cash, as Penney was philosophically opposed to selling merchandise on credit, and currency was seldom exchanged or kept on the main sales floor.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when customers purchased items from J. C. Penney stores with balconies—such as stores in Albion, Falls City, Fremont, Kearney, or Scottsbluff—the sales clerk would take the customer's money and place it with a bill of sale, inside a closed container attached to a cable line. The container would then be cabled up to the balcony overlooking the sales floor, where another associate would retrieve the cash before sending the container back down with a receipt and correct change. These cable cash conveyor systems remained in place until secure cash registers made them obsolete.<sup>24</sup>

**As the J. C. Penney chain** continued to grow, James Cash Penney and his associates seemed to have a “Midas touch” for business decisions. However, their first major miscalculation could not have come at a worse time. On October 23, 1929, Penney and his board decided to take the company public, just six days before the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. Nationwide, sales at J. C. Penney stores soon dropped by more than \$19 million, and though company stock did not completely bottom out, the financial impact on Penney was crippling. For the previous twenty years, Penney had chosen not to take a salary from his own company, living off the profits of his store partnerships, and compounded his financial woes by generously placing his entire fortune of J. C. Penney stock as collateral for philanthropies.<sup>25</sup> When his Florida bank failed, James Cash Penney was essentially broke, and quietly began to regard himself as a complete failure. However, many of his associates were touched by his plight, well aware that Penney's own generosity had led him to the brink of ruin. Eventually, more than a thousand of Penney's associates rallied behind him, donating portions of their own salaries and stock shares to help him recover financially.<sup>26</sup>

J. C. Penney Company associates across the state were not only loyal to their founder, but in many cases to the Nebraska towns they served. Penney felt it was important that every store manager become an active part of the community where a J. C. Penney store was located, even if the manager had grown up elsewhere. A major criterion for selecting managers was how well they fit a respective community, and in several cases, store managers in Nebraska had very long tenures in the same locations, even while enduring the hardships of the Great Depression. In Columbus, Peter Lakers managed the J. C. Penney store for thirty-three years, from 1924 to 1957, while R. R. Ferguson oversaw the Kearney store from 1931 to 1960. In Fairbury, H. M. Stearns ran the J. C. Penney store from 1931 to 1957, while P. L. Frandsen managed the York J. C. Penney from 1934 to 1961. Although Penney was miles away in his New York office, he remained personally acquainted with his managers and how they were regarded within their Nebraska communities.

Despite the adverse economic impact of the Great Depression, the J. C. Penney Company was able to sustain its expansion in Nebraska throughout the 1930s. At the beginning of the decade, additional J. C. Penney stores opened in Ainsworth and Albion, along with nearly 150 others nationwide.<sup>27</sup> In 1931, Penney felt it would be beneficial for himself and his Nebraska associates if he personally visited stores across the state. In May of that year, he traveled to Denver and began working his way by rail into Imperial and McCook, where he addressed the local Rotary Club before continuing on to visit J. C. Penney stores in Holdrege, Kearney, Grand Island, Columbus, and Fremont. Penney used the trip as an opportunity to assess not only economic and agricultural conditions, but the quality of his personnel, particularly his store managers. At times his opinions could be glowing, as evidenced in his notes after visiting the J. C. Penney store in Imperial:

[Store manager] McKay is a bright boy, doing the work by himself with one saleswoman, and assisted by his wife. They are a worthwhile couple; I was favorably impressed with them.<sup>28</sup>

and McCook:

This is a nice store, well located and doing the business of the town. The personnel is good, though the men are all young and with little experience. The women are very good. [Store manager] Hadley is exceedingly aggressive and “on his toes.” He is of pleasing personality and has the makings of a man capable of handling a large business.<sup>29</sup>



J. C. Penney store in Wahoo, 1941. DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. A2004.007

However, Penney was not on a mission to make his associates feel good about themselves. His opinions could be equally harsh based upon what he observed. Consider the detail of his criticisms and analysis of the Grand Island store, especially given the fact that he had, at the time, over a thousand other stores nationwide:

This store presents the most unkempt appearance of any of our stores that I have seen—it is really dirty. The stock is a terrible mess—a lot of old merchandise—and more winter goods (including overshoes) carried over than in any store I saw on this trip. I will mention here merely a few items of winter goods that this store has carried over. By actual count there are 1675 pair of overshoes and rubber footwear; 171 pair of warm and sheep-lined shoes; 117 ½ dozen pair of men's and boys' heavy winter underwear; 64 dozen pair of lined gloves and mittens; 70 pair of wool blankets; 88 men's and boys' overcoats; 144 warm and sheep-lined coats; 145 heavy sweaters; 24 ½ dozen flannel shirts; etc., etc. If ever a store needed attention this one does. [Store manager] Lloyd [Faidley], as well as the force, are very much broken up over [previous store manager] Harry's death. Much of Lloyd's thoughts and time at present are taken up with getting Harry's affairs straightened out.<sup>31</sup>

as well as his complete revulsion with the Columbus store, despite its profitable bottom line:

This is a very junky store and is heavily overstocked. It is most unattractive. The basement is in bad shape. A big stock of underwear and of toys was carried over. The center table is piled with merchandise in great disorder—the counters are the same. The hat stock is antiquated. Winter caps are still on the shelves. The ready-to-wear is heavily stocked. The office is a veritable rat trap—as dirty as a pig pen. How a man can work amid such disorder is beyond me! I was not impressed with Mr. Lakers' help. In spite of these unfavorable conditions, the [sales and profit] showing is very satisfactory.<sup>31</sup>

The trip also gave Penney peace of mind to visit communities like Kearney, where two banks had gone under and he was breaking in a new store manager. Ultimately, his short visit to Nebraska was productive for both Penney and his associates, giving him a clearer vision of conditions statewide, and helping associates understand what J. C. Penney himself wanted each of his stores to be.

In 1932, the company opened stores in Chadron, Crete, and Seward. In less than two decades after opening his Grand Island store, Penney had brought a J. C. Penney store to more than fifty Nebraska main streets, eleven of them in the Panhandle. Ironically, the only significant Nebraska community not to have a J. C. Penney store was Omaha. True to Penney's roots, the J. C. Penney Company had focused primarily on smaller cities and agrarian towns in the region, rather than larger cities like Omaha, Kansas City, and Des Moines. Consequently, if Omaha residents wanted to shop at a J. C. Penney store, they had to drive either to Fremont or across the Missouri River to Iowa and the Council Bluffs store, which Penney had opened in 1925. However, by the 1930s the J. C. Penney Company began exploring the idea of metropolitan J. C. Penney stores to serve these larger cities. In 1931, Penney opened his first metropolitan store prototype in Seattle, Washington. The success of that massive store gave the company enough confidence to open a J. C. Penney in downtown Omaha two years later. In February 1933, Penney personally came out to Omaha the day before the grand opening, and his notes reveal his enthusiasm with what he saw in the city, his store, and its manager, D. B. Woodyard:

Woodyard had the entire town talking J. C. Penney Company. Newspapers carried notices of the opening; in fact the newspapers were tremendously interested and helpful. Three radio stations offered their services. A representative of Governor Bryan, Mayor Metcalf,

Woodyard, and I appeared on one of the programs. The president of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce extended a welcome to the Company on behalf of his organization, to which I responded. The store is well located, and Woodyard, with Mr. Torrey's assistance, was well prepared. He had selected carefully three hundred salesmen and women. The stock was well arranged.<sup>32</sup>

The next day, even Penney was overwhelmed by how customers had responded to his Omaha store:

At nine o'clock the doors were opened. It was fortunate that Mr. Woodyard had planned to have the police, for in a few moments after the doors were opened the store was full of people and it was necessary to close the doors. A large crowd outside waited to gain admittance when the doors should be re-opened. Two policemen stood at the entrance to the basement and admitted only as many as the store could take care of. It was impossible to serve the crowds. The aisles of the first floor were so blocked that no one could get through. Mr. Andrews secured some twenty cash registers, stationing them at convenient places with someone at the register to wrap the goods and make change. People were of the opinion that the prices were specials and would last only for the opening day. Brandeis, Woodyard's chief competitor, came out with full page advertisements featuring goods in their basement, which brought forth considerable comment.<sup>33</sup>

After the Omaha grand opening and his engagements around the city, Penney traveled on to Lincoln to visit the store there and to formally address the Lincoln Kiwanis Club.

Even after Penney returned to New York, he personally followed up on his observations during the Nebraska trip, with considerable attention to detail:

When I was in Lincoln, Nebraska, I ventured the remark to [Lincoln store manager] Dallas that I thought the store ought to be getting more business—that it seemed to me there was more business to be had in a city of that size. He came back by having each of his associates write me making suggestions as to ways of increasing business in Lincoln. Though it has been quite a task I have answered each of these letters individually, and since so many associates asked specifically for information or suggestions regarding salesmanship I have had some of my thoughts on the subject put into one composite letter for the group.<sup>34</sup>

Penney continued to re-visit Nebraska stores during the Depression. Three months after opening

the Omaha store, he returned to the state and spent a week visiting rural J. C. Penney stores throughout the Panhandle.<sup>35</sup> Penney conducted motivational store meetings in Alliance, Chadron, and Scottsbluff, and spent substantial time inspecting stores in Bayard, Gordon, Kimball, Rushville, and Sidney. Outside of his stores, he accepted invitations to be the guest speaker at Rotary Clubs in Alliance and Scottsbluff, as well as the Rushville Chamber of Commerce. In Chadron, he gave a speech to the state college assembly titled, "The Secret of Success." A year later, in 1934, Penney again ventured out to Nebraska, conducting a motivational meeting at the Omaha store for over four hundred associates and managers in the region.<sup>36</sup>

Not all of Penney's Nebraska stores were successful—local economic conditions forced the company to close its locations in Chappell, Hemingford, and Lewellen before 1935. However, even in the midst of the Depression, the value-driven pricing and golden rule principles on which Penney had built his business began to attract more and more shoppers to J. C. Penney stores. By the mid-1930s, national sales had completely recovered, and fifty-three Nebraska cities and towns still had a J. C. Penney department store in their central business district. By the latter half of the decade, the store Penney personally opened in downtown Omaha had become so crowded that the company began planning for a newer, larger location at 102 South Sixteenth Street. Reopening the new Omaha store in 1938 was as big an event for the J. C. Penney Company as the first Omaha store had been five years earlier. This time, Earl Sams, president of the J. C. Penney Company, traveled from New York City to attend the grand opening ceremonies. The night before the new store opened, Sams also made company history by broadcasting J. C. Penney's first radio program on Omaha's WOW station. The grand opening of the new Omaha store made the front page of the company's *Pay Day* newspaper for October 1938. Although Penney could not make the trip, he traveled to Omaha the following year with his wife Caroline, as honored guests for the seventieth anniversary of the Union Pacific Railroad.<sup>37</sup>

As Nebraska recovered economically, J. C. Penney stores across the state began to expand and modernize their downtown locations. Stores in towns such as Fairbury, Neligh, and Wahoo received newer goldenrod signs with black "J. C. PENNEY COMPANY" lettering to update their main street appearances. Stores in Ainsworth and Cozad were completely remodeled, and, as growing populations in other towns began to outpace selling



A 1948 fire at the Scottsbluff store caused \$200,000 damage. The company quickly rebuilt and reopened a larger store on the same site. DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. A2004.007

space and supply, plans were made for completely relocating those J. C. Penney stores to even larger, modern downtown locations. Of course, growing populations and economic conditions weren't the only factors causing stores to relocate or remodel. Occasionally, a natural disaster would prove that a J. C. Penney store was not invincible to the destructive forces of nature. In downtown Scottsbluff, the J. C. Penney store at 1616 Broadway caught fire in 1948, with flames up to 300 feet high eventually engulfing the entire building and nearly \$200,000 of merchandise and furnishings. Although the facade of the store survived, the interior was completely destroyed by fire and smoke damage. J. C. Penney demolished what was left of the Scottsbluff store, and quickly rebuilt and reopened a larger store on the same site, where it would remain for nearly forty more years. Even after the tumult of the Great Depression and World War II, over fifty of the stores Penney opened in Nebraska had survived.

As the 1940s drew to a close, the company began planning for a new J. C. Penney store in downtown Lincoln. Despite Lincoln's growing population and commercial activity, the original store at 1134 O Street was really no larger than similar J. C. Penney stores in smaller towns like Albion and McCook, and had been historically dwarfed by Lincoln department stores such as Miller & Paine, Golds, and Rudge & Guenzel.<sup>39</sup> Even national chains Montgomery Ward and Sears operated out of significantly larger Lincoln locations. Ironically, it was competitor Miller & Paine that helped J. C. Penney secure a prime location for a new store on the corner of Thirteenth and O streets, the site of the former Burr Building. Miller & Paine had owned the Burr Building, which was diagonally northeast of its massive downtown store, since 1938, and agreed to provide that site for a new J. C. Penney store in Lincoln, provided that Miller & Paine could oversee construction of the new building and lease it back to the J. C. Penney Company on a long-term basis.<sup>40</sup> The agreement was mutually beneficial, because it would create a new retailing epicenter for Lincoln, the intersection of Thirteenth and O, with both stores serving as anchors. The new Lincoln J. C. Penney would cost \$600,000 to build, but would be four times larger than the previous store and employ over 300 J. C. Penney associates.<sup>41</sup> The new store would also feature air conditioning, elevators, escalators, and five floors of selling space, including a "Penney's Toyland" for children on the fourth floor, plus a stockroom warehouse at the top of the building. At a planned size of over 60,000 square feet, it would become, at the time, the largest J. C. Penney store between Minneapolis and Salt Lake City. When the new store opened on November 16, 1950, Mayor Victor Anderson cut the tape while Chamber of Commerce Secretary Archie Bailey served as master of ceremonies.<sup>42</sup> Although the grand opening occurred on a Thursday morning, nearly a thousand eager customers sprawled along the O Street sidewalk leading into its entrance. Many Lincoln businesses, including competitors Magee's and Miller & Paine, took out large congratulatory ads in the *Lincoln Star*, while J. C. Penney proudly advertised the new store as "Your Big Modern Penney's at the Crossroads of Lincoln." The morning after the grand opening, the Lincoln J. C. Penney took out another full-page ad, thanking "the thousands of friends and neighbors who stopped in to say hello," and displaying a photo of customers turning the sales floor into standing-room-only as they flowed into the store from its O Street entrance.<sup>43</sup>



Although the company had not ventured into any new Nebraska cities since 1933, by 1950, Omaha's growing postwar population led the company to open an additional store in the downtown district of South Omaha. In 1951, Hastings College personally honored James Cash Penney with an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, explicitly "in further recognition of his achievements as 'The Merchant of Main Street.'"<sup>44</sup> Nationwide, the J. C. Penney Company continued its rapid growth almost fifty years after Penney's first store, topping 1,600 stores and a \$1 billion sales mark in 1951. J. C. Penney also surpassed F. W. Woolworth in sales, becoming the nation's third largest department store in sales, behind Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward.<sup>45</sup> As the J. C. Penney Company entered the 1950s, competition with national chains like Sears and Wards, as well as regional chains like

Brandeis, made modernizing its downtown stores a major priority. In Grand Island, the J. C. Penney store more than tripled in size when it relocated to a new building at 319 West Third.<sup>46</sup> During the store's grand opening on July 27, 1955, hundreds of customers lined the sidewalks of West Third and Walnut.<sup>47</sup> In sharp contrast to its predecessor, the new store in Grand Island was completely air conditioned with 24,000 square feet of selling space on three floors, as well as forty employees.<sup>48</sup> Even towns smaller than Grand Island began to receive newer, larger J. C. Penney stores in their central business districts. Throughout the decade, new J. C. Penney stores were also built in Chadron, Cozad, Gordon, Nebraska City, Sidney, and York. In O'Neill, a larger J. C. Penney store was created by significantly remodeling and expanding an existing downtown location. Additionally, J. C. Penney

The new downtown Lincoln J. C. Penney store opened November 16, 1950. Although the grand opening occurred on a Thursday morning, nearly a thousand eager customers sprawled along the sidewalk at Thirteenth and O streets. NSHS RG2183-1950-1116-1



**Above: Interior of the York J. C. Penney store in 1957.** DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. A2004.007

stores in Ainsworth, Alliance, Crete, Hastings, Holdrege, Kearney, and Omaha all received complete facelifts to their downtown storefronts. In these renovations, the old yellow and black signage and glass block fronts were replaced by smooth cladding across the face of the building, with individual "J.C. PENNEY CO." letters extending from the cladding. In addition, showcase entrances and doors were trimmed in stainless steel, while interior hardwood floors were covered and fluorescent lighting was installed throughout the sales floor.

**Below: The Holdrege store in 1958.** DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. A2004.007



As the 1960s began, J. C. Penney continued relocating its Nebraska stores within downtown business districts, to new and significantly larger buildings constructed exclusively for the J. C. Penney Company. In 1961, J. C. Penney held grand openings for newly relocated stores in Broken Bow and Columbus. Within three years, stores in Hastings and Holdrege were also relocated to new downtown buildings, while the McCook store replaced an expansive W. T. Grant location at 201 West C Street. Although J. C. Penney relocated stores to new downtown locations in Nebraska throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and even 1970s, the opening of the South Omaha store in 1950 marked the last time that J. C. Penney would enter a Nebraska city with a downtown location.<sup>49</sup> As early as 1948, the company had already begun experimenting with J. C. Penney stores located away from downtown business districts.<sup>50</sup> Under the leadership of then-CEO William "Mil" Batten, J. C. Penney continued to experiment with larger store prototypes in suburban malls.<sup>51</sup> Chairman Batten began pushing for the introduction of massive, full-line J. C. Penney stores at malls in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania, each of them featuring multiple product lines and full-service automotive centers. The company quickly realized that the increased parking, foot traffic, and selling space of shopping centers translated to increased sales and profits for J. C. Penney stores. After Brandeis and Sears had successfully opened department stores in suburban Omaha shopping centers, the J. C. Penney Company was ready to do the same in Nebraska.<sup>52</sup> Plans were made to close the downtown stores in South Omaha and Fremont and reopen them in indoor malls being constructed on the outskirts of those cities. In the fall of 1966, the first J. C. Penney mall stores in Nebraska opened one month apart from each other, in Southroads Mall in Bellevue and Fremont Mall in Fremont. Both stores featured the newer "Penney's" logo on their exteriors and were more than four times as large as their former downtown locations. The Southroads and Fremont Mall stores also featured ten-bay automotive centers in their parking lots.<sup>53</sup> However, the reign of these locations as Nebraska's largest and most modern J. C. Penney stores quickly ended the following year, with the completion of Omaha's Westroads Mall. In 1967, the company opened Nebraska's most expansive J. C. Penney ever in that shopping center.<sup>54</sup> Built as a complement to the J. C. Penney stores in downtown Omaha and Southroads Mall, the Westroads store featured two large levels and nearly 190,000 square feet of selling space, includ-

ing a beauty salon, appliances, furniture, hardware, electronics, and a fourteen-bay automotive center.<sup>57</sup> The opening of the Westroads store gave metropolitan Omaha its third J. C. Penney store, the most any Nebraska city ever had at any given time.<sup>58</sup>

J. C. Penney's mall experiments in Nebraska were so successful that the company decided to apply the same concept in Norfolk the following year, when a shopping center was being developed for the southern edge of that city. In May 1968, the downtown Norfolk store was closed and replaced by a location in Sunset Plaza that featured nearly 80,000 square feet of selling space, along with an eight-bay automotive center.<sup>59</sup> The Sunset Plaza J. C. Penney became the third largest J. C. Penney in Nebraska, behind only the Westroads and Southroads stores. Despite Norfolk's modest population, this new J. C. Penney store was also, from 1968 until 1975, larger than any other J. C. Penney store in the Dakotas, Wyoming, or Montana.

As Mr. Penney entered his tenth decade of living, he was still able to watch J. C. Penney stores evolve into the shopping mall concept, many of them more than two hundred times larger than the original store he first opened in Wyoming. Penney personally attended grand openings for several of these stores throughout the 1960s, often interspersed between visits to the farms he owned in northern Missouri.<sup>60</sup> At ninety-five, Penney had guided his company into the 1970s, even showing up for work at his New York office five days a week. "God willing," he wrote in his personal testimony, "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."<sup>61</sup> Penney died of a heart attack in 1971, after giving nearly seventy years of his life to the stores that carried his name. Although his funeral was held in New York City, every J. C. Penney store across Nebraska closed that morning in remembrance.<sup>62</sup>

**Ultimately, the demise of** James Cash Penney foreshadowed the demise of the numerous J. C. Penney stores that lined Nebraska's main streets. Nationwide, J. C. Penney stores began an extensive transformation after Penney's death, largely under the leadership of executives Donald Seibert and William Howell.<sup>63</sup> The teal and black "Penney's" logo of the 1960s, which was prominently displayed on the four Nebraska mall stores in Omaha, Bellevue, Fremont, and Norfolk, was quickly replaced with the modern, Helvetica-scripted "JCPenney" that has been used by J. C. Penney stores ever since. In 1975, Howell also began to

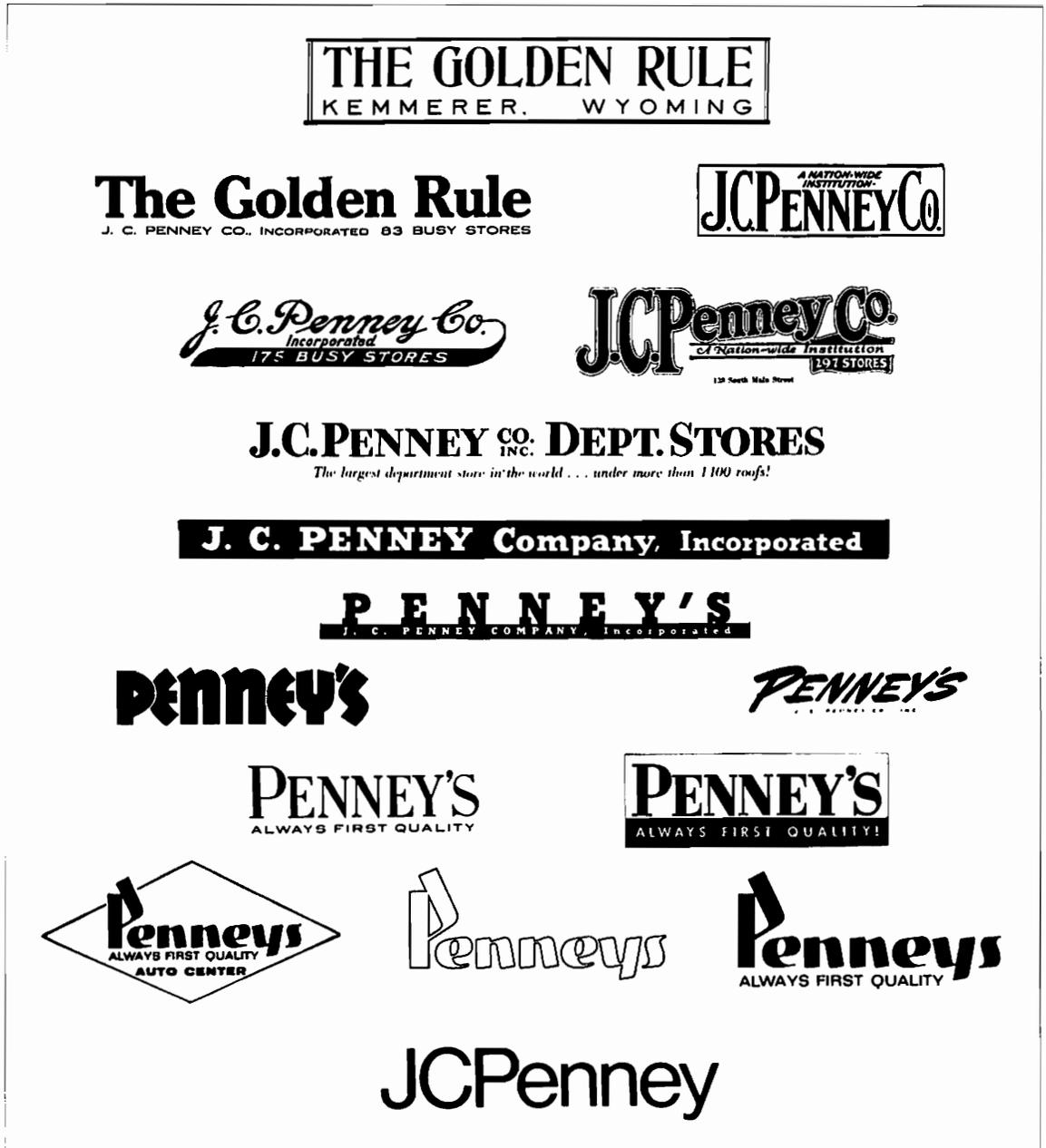


reexamine what future J. C. Penney stores should ultimately be, particularly if they could viably continue to operate in rural downtown locations.<sup>62</sup>

Howell's repositioning of J. C. Penney locations was unconventional, as J. C. Penney stores were still primarily downtown department stores, even into the 1970s. Despite the growing appeal of indoor shopping centers, as well as the completion of Interstates 80 and 680 and the arrival of large discount stores like Kmart, Gibson's, and Woolco, 90 percent of Nebraska's forty J. C. Penney stores were still located in a downtown business district. When the company planned to build a new J. C. Penney store in Kearney, they selected a Central Avenue site downtown, just across the street from the older store. Of the four J. C. Penney stores in Nebraska shopping malls, two were located in metropolitan Omaha, and the city was still being served by the downtown J. C. Penney store on South Sixteenth: only the stores in Fremont, Norfolk, and South Omaha/Bellevue had completely vacated downtown locations for their respective shopping malls. However, as the decade progressed, the appeal of new J. C. Penney stores away from Nebraska's downtown business districts rapidly gained momentum. In 1972, the store in downtown North Platte was closed in favor of a new indoor mall location near Interstate 80. In 1975, the company shut down the J. C. Penney store in downtown Omaha to focus on its mall stores in Bellevue and West Omaha. By 1980, after just twenty-five years in its newer

J. C. Penney, shown here in about 1958, remained active into old age. Until his death at age ninety-five in 1971, he was still showing up for work at his New York office five days a week. DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, A2004.007

The evolution of J. C. Penney logos, starting with Penney's original Golden Rule store in Kemmerer, Wyoming. DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, A2004.007



location, the J. C. Penney store in downtown Grand Island was relocated to the Conestoga Mall.<sup>63</sup>

By the 1980s, declines in rural populations and changes in consumer culture, as well as increased profits from moving downtown stores to shopping centers, inevitably transformed J. C. Penney from a main street merchant to a shopping mall anchor. In Nebraska's largest cities, department store retailing increasingly began to shift away from downtown business districts, as Brandeis closed its flagship store in downtown Omaha, as well as the Golds location it had been operating in downtown Lincoln.<sup>64</sup> However, the movement away from

downtown department stores was also occurring in smaller, rural communities. J. C. Penney department stores in towns like Broken Bow, Ogallala, and Tekamah faced shrinking sales and profits, partially from declining agricultural economies and populations, but also from local residents traveling to shop at exciting, climate-controlled malls in Grand Island, North Platte, and Omaha. By 1982, the J. C. Penney Company had accepted that most of its small-town department stores across Nebraska were no longer sustainable.<sup>65</sup> Chairman Howell's 1982 report, *The JCPenney Stores Positioning Statement*, officially shifted the company's primary

emphasis away from downtown stores in rural towns, and towards the shopping mall prototypes of larger, suburban communities. The company noted it would permanently close underperforming stores in smaller markets, and either expand downtown locations or completely abandon them for shopping centers.<sup>66</sup> The J. C. Penney department store in downtown Chadron was the first to permanently close, while J. C. Penney stores in downtown Lincoln, Scottsbluff, and Kearney were quickly relocated to shopping centers.<sup>67</sup> For most of the remaining stores, particularly those in towns not large enough to build or support shopping centers, J. C. Penney's downtown presence soon became a nostalgic memory.

From 1982 to 1990, over twenty Nebraska towns permanently lost the J. C. Penney department stores that had lined their main streets for over half a century.<sup>68</sup> In every one of these towns, the loss of a longtime J. C. Penney store was akin to losing part of the community itself, and the store closings seldom occurred without an emotional response. When the company announced its intentions to close the J. C. Penney store in Gordon, the town and nearby Oglala Sioux tribe went so far as to send a delegation to the corporate headquarters in New York City, pleading that J. C. Penney keep the department store open.<sup>69</sup> Gordon's efforts, which included over one hundred letters, a 700-signature petition, and personal testimonies from the nine members who traveled to New York, were not enough to change the company's decision.<sup>70</sup> Sixteen years later, when the company announced it was closing the Beatrice J. C. Penney store after nearly ninety years of continuous business on Court Street, over 4,000 local residents signed a petition to persuade company executives and the board of directors to keep the store open, again to no avail.<sup>71</sup> By the end of 2002, with the closing of the Beatrice J. C. Penney and the relocation of the downtown Columbus store to a lifestyle shopping center east of that city, the McCook store became Nebraska's last J. C. Penney store in a downtown location, in the former W. T. Grant building it has occupied since 1963.<sup>72</sup>

At the time of this writing, just twelve J. C. Penney department stores are still doing business in Nebraska, forty-four fewer than James Cash Penney established statewide.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, the small number today does not negate the impact that J. C. Penney truly had on so many communities throughout the state: economically, socially, and even personally. In establishing his retail presence across Nebraska, Penney held to a belief that

putting J. C. Penney stores in such rural places was the right thing to do:

We were all small-town and country boys [...] It wasn't our way to invade small towns and villages out of the blue [...] to make a quick cleanup, then disappear again into thin air, leaving people with empty pockets and nothing of value to show for their money. We were settling permanently, as small-town men born and bred, who understood our neighbors as readily as they could understand us. And in coming among them to stay, it was with an idea beneficial to all.<sup>74</sup>

Ultimately, on his way to creating a national department store chain, James Cash Penney was able to bring his store to more Nebraska main streets than any retailer who came before him.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, J. C. Penney began in Nebraska as a microscopic competitor to retail giants like Brandeis, Miller & Paine, Golds, and Rudge & Guenzel. A century later, those Nebraskan empires have all vanished. The homogeneous chains of Walmart, Dillards, Younkers, and Target now dominate Nebraska's retail landscape, and the thought of any national department store ever existing on a vacant, small town main street seems sadly improbable.<sup>76</sup> Yet the creation of a Missouri farm boy remains a relevant and recognizable part of contemporary Nebraska life, just as Penney and his stores remain an indelible part of the history of over fifty towns throughout the state. From Lincoln to Lewellen, no other retailer in Nebraska has ever come close to James Cash Penney's accomplishment. It is highly unlikely that any retailer ever will. ☒

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## NOTES

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The author would like to acknowledge Joan Gosnell, Southern Methodist University archivist and former J. C. Penney archivist in charge of the J. C. Penney Collection at DeGolyer Library; Jerry Probst, former archivist for the J. C. Penney Corporate Archives; Gordon Lindsey, former Vice-President of Communications for the J. C. Penney Company; and the Nebraska State Historical Society Library and Archives for their assistance in researching this article.

<sup>1</sup> J. C. Penney had opened two other stores in North Dakota the same week.

<sup>2</sup> William Gold's famous department store in Lincoln did not prominently bear his surname until 1915. Similarly, the J. C. Penney name was not prominently used on Penney's stores until 1914. Penney's earlier stores were opened under the Golden Rule name, in affiliation with the merchandise syndicate of stores in western states that emphasized volume buying power for discount pricing, as well as quality merchandise sold on a cash-and-carry basis.

<sup>3</sup> The risk of consumption had forced Penney's initial move from Missouri to Denver. His time in Colorado was brief, but crucial in guiding him to his opportunities with Thomas M. Callahan and William G. Johnson's Golden Rule Stores in Wyoming. See Mary Elizabeth Curry, *Creating an American Institution: the Merchandising Genius of J. C. Penney* (New York: Garland, 1993), 49-61; James Cash Penney, *Fifty Years With the Golden Rule* (New York: Harper, 1950), 36-43.

<sup>4</sup> Penney, *Fifty Years*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Golden Rule stores later operating in Nebraska were affiliated with the same merchandise syndicate that had given Penney his start. These stores were never part of J. C. Penney's chain, though Penney personally knew most of their proprietors. As J. C. Penney expanded his chain into Nebraska, at least three different proprietors opened chains of Golden Rule stores throughout the state. In the late 1920s, Penney began to buy many of them out and convert their locations to J. C. Penney stores. J. M. McDonald, a former associate of Penney, also operated several of these stores in Nebraska, eventually under his own name.

<sup>6</sup> Grand Island J. C. Penney Store Advertisements. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, April 15, 1914, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Penney, *Fifty Years*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>9</sup> Glen G. White, "Picking Sites for Penney Stores," *Chain Store Age* 1, No. 2 (July 1925): 5.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910 Volume III Population 1910 Reports by states, with statistics for counties, cities and other civil divisions (Washington Government Printing Office, 1913), 39-41.

<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that Henry Ford's Greenfield Village project in Michigan was more of a nostalgic attempt to cling to the ideals of rural life in spite of the modern urbanization Ford's company had helped set in motion. Unlike Penney, Ford despised farm work and embraced a business rooted by nature in industrial cities; despite its New York headquarters, Penney's business was still heavily rooted in small, agricultural communities.

<sup>12</sup> Penney, *Fifty Years*, 120-21. Penney would remain involved with agriculture throughout his life, even into his eighties.

<sup>13</sup> This Florida project would eventually surpass 200,000 acres and be operated by Penney's eldest son, Roswell. See Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 208-12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>16</sup> "J. C. Penney Co. Formally Takes Over Byars Store." *West Point Republican*, Aug. 1, 1929, 1. Penney's informal "non-compete" agreements with other acquaintances from the Golden Rule syndicate may also explain why J. C. Penney never opened stores in viable locations like Blair, Lexington, or Valentine.

<sup>17</sup> J. C. Penney department stores in Alma, Benkelman, Curtis, Franklin, Geneva, Imperial, Red Cloud, Sargent, Sidney, Superior, Tekamah, and West Point were all converted from J. B. Byars stores.

<sup>18</sup> "Clyde Elder has just completed a building for the J. C. Penney chain of stores at Bayard," *Hemingford Ledger*, July 25, 1929, 4.

<sup>19</sup> "New Manager of J. C. Penney Store Arrives this Week," *Bayard Transcript*. Aug. 15, 1929, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *The Dynamo* 13 (Aug. 1929): 10.

<sup>21</sup> "Employee to Take Part in Opening Ceremonies," *Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 26, 1955, 9.

<sup>22</sup> This layout was quite common in the majority of early J. C. Penney stores, whether they were built from the ground up, as in Aurora, converted from other retail chains, as Byars stores in Geneva and West Point, or modified within existing buildings, as stores in Kimball and Fairbury. The balcony layout is still evident in the former J. C. Penney buildings of downtown Albion, Beatrice, Columbus, Fremont, Kearney, and York. As of this writing, the design is still utilized by downtown J. C. Penney stores operating in Kemmerer and Sheridan, Wyoming; Decorah, Iowa; Wahpeton, North Dakota; Sidney, Montana; Fort Morgan, Colorado; Price, Utah; and Astoria, Oregon.

<sup>23</sup> Penney remained morally galvanized against selling merchandise on credit, largely based on the damage he had watched credit sales inflict on miners and their families during his early days in Wyoming. When the J. C. Penney Board of Directors finally voted to allow credit purchasing in 1958, the only dissenting vote came from Penney himself.

<sup>24</sup> Jerry Probst, interview by author, July 2, 1997. Probst had been the official J. C. Penney archivist at the corporate headquarters in Plano, Texas.

<sup>25</sup> Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 269.

<sup>26</sup> *J. C. Penney: An American Legacy; A 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, 16. Penney's experience during the Great Depression ultimately galvanized his Christian faith. Much of his subsequent personal writings, even books he wrote ostensibly about the J. C. Penney Company, explicitly address his belief in Jesus Christ. Orlando Tibbett's *The Spiritual Journey of J. C. Penney* (Danbury, CT: Rutledge, 1999) details Penney's faith and its indelible impact on his life.

<sup>27</sup> The Ainsworth J. C. Penney store was actually a relocation of a Golden Rule store Penney had acquired in nearby Bassett.

<sup>28</sup> 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, 34, Box C-2, A2004.0006. J. C. Penney Papers, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX (hereafter cited as JCPC, DeGolyer Library).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> James Cash Penney Resume of Impressions: Iowa and Other Stores, February 13 – March 10, 1933, 11, Box C-2, JCPC, DeGolyer Library.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> James Cash Penney to W. A. Reynolds, April 20, 1933, correspondence to J. C. Penney Building Department, Box C-1, JCPC, DeGolyer Library.

<sup>35</sup> James Cash Penney Trip Recapitulation, 1934, Box C-2, JCPC, DeGolyer Library.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1482 – Omaha, NE, Oct. 2001, Electronic Files, A2004.0007, J. C. Penney Company Records, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX (hereafter cited as JCPCR, DeGolyer Library).

<sup>38</sup> "Penney Store in Scottsbluff Burned; Most of \$150,000 Stock Reported Destroyed." *Scottsbluff Star Herald*, Dec. 22, 1948, 1, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Rudge & Guenzel's department store was still in a large and elegant location at Thirteenth and N streets when it permanently closed in 1941. For additional analysis of Rudge & Guenzel's store, as well as an overview of Nebraska's independent department stores, see Vicki Howard, "The Rise and Fall of Rudge & Guenzel: From Independent Retailer to Department Store Chain," *Nebraska History* 89 (Fall 2008): 102-19.

<sup>40</sup> "Opening of New Penney Building Hailed as Latest Step in

City Retail Growth," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Nov. 15, 1950, 12.

<sup>41</sup> "Changing Skyline at 13<sup>th</sup> and O," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Nov. 15, 1950, 1.

<sup>42</sup> "Opening of New Penney Building Hailed as Latest Step in City Retail Growth," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Nov. 15, 1950, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Lincoln J. C. Penney Store Advertisement, *Lincoln Star*, Nov. 17, 1950, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Patty Sitorius, telephone interview by author, November 18, 2010. Sitorius is the Vice President of Scholarship Development at Hastings College.

<sup>45</sup> "Penney's: King of the Soft Goods," *Fortune*, Sept. 1950, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Grand Island J. C. Penney Grand Opening Advertisement. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 26, 1955, 1.

<sup>47</sup> "J. C. Penney Opening Draws Large Throngs," *Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 27, 1955, 3.

<sup>48</sup> "New J. C. Penney Store Will Open Its Doors on Wednesday Morning," *Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 26, 1955, 4.

<sup>49</sup> The last J. C. Penney store in Nebraska to re-open in a downtown location was the Kearney store in 1976. It remained there only twelve years before moving to the Hilltop Mall.

<sup>50</sup> The first J. C. Penney store located away from a downtown business district opened in 1948, in the Hampden Village Shopping Center in suburban St. Louis.

<sup>51</sup> After his appointment as CEO in 1958, William "Mil" Batten is largely credited for positioning J. C. Penney stores as modern shopping mall anchors with credit purchasing, expanded product lines, and technological support. See Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 305-14.

<sup>52</sup> Brandeis developed, financed, and anchored the regional shopping centers that would eventually become Crossroads Mall and Southroads Mall.

<sup>53</sup> Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1880-4 – Fremont, NE; Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1906-7 – South Omaha, NE, Oct. 2001, Electronic Files, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

<sup>54</sup> The Westroads Mall store remains the largest J. C. Penney store ever opened in Nebraska.

<sup>55</sup> Store History for J. C. Penney Store #911-8 – Omaha, NE, Oct. 2001, Electronic Files, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. The size of the Westroads J. C. Penney is comparable to today's sprawling Walmart "Supercenters," and nearly two hundred times as large as Penney's first store in Kemmerer, Wyoming.

<sup>56</sup> Since 1950, J. C. Penney has concurrently operated no fewer than two and as many as three J. C. Penney department stores in Omaha's metropolitan area, in addition to the store in Council Bluffs, Iowa. With the opening of the Southroads and Westroads stores, three J. C. Penney stores served Omaha from 1967 until the downtown Omaha store closed in 1975. J. C. Penney operated a third Omaha store again from 1993, when the Oak View Mall store opened, until 1999, when the Southroads Mall store became a J. C. Penney Clearance Outlet before permanently closing in 2003. Since 2007, J. C. Penney has operated a third Omaha store at the Shadow Lake Towne Center in suburban Papillion, its newest location in Nebraska.

<sup>57</sup> Store History for J. C. Penney Store #948 – Norfolk, NE, Oct. 2001, Electronic Files, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

<sup>58</sup> Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 314.

<sup>59</sup> James Cash Penney, Personal Testimony, 1971, 4, Box C-1, JCPC, DeGolyer Library.

<sup>60</sup> *J. C. Penney: An American Legacy; A 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* (Plano, Texas: J. C. Penney Communications, 1992), 29.

<sup>61</sup> Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 321.

<sup>62</sup> *J. C. Penney: An American Legacy*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> In Grand Island, J. C. Penney joined Brandeis and Miller & Paine in opening department stores at the Conestoga Mall. The Brandeis and Miller & Paine locations have since been taken over by Younkers and Dillards, respectively.

<sup>64</sup> By the end of the 1980s, Dillards would also close Miller & Paine's flagship store in downtown Lincoln just after it had acquired the Nebraska chain.

<sup>65</sup> *J. C. Penney: An American Legacy*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> The Lincoln J. C. Penney store at 13<sup>th</sup> and O streets initially vacated its downtown location in 1986 for a considerably smaller building in the northeast parking lot of the Gateway Mall. In the 1990s, J. C. Penney stores in Lincoln, Kearney, and Norfolk were again relocated to newer buildings within their respective enclosed shopping centers, where they remain at the time of this writing.

<sup>68</sup> The J. C. Penney store in Hastings would permanently close just five years after relocating to the Imperial Mall in 1990. Its 1995 closure marked the first time in Nebraska that a J. C. Penney store had vacated a shopping mall location. The second time occurred in 2003, when the J. C. Penney at Southroads Mall permanently closed, after nearly thirty-seven years in that shopping center.

<sup>69</sup> "Gordon Civic Leaders Plan Campaign to 'Retain Gordon Penney Store.'" *Gordon Journal*, Nov. 13, 1985, 1; "Gordon Trying to Halt Closing of Penney Store." *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 13, 1985, 1D. Gordon's efforts to save its J. C. Penney department store also made national news.

<sup>70</sup> "Penney Co. Says NO: Decision to Close Store Here Stands," *Gordon Journal*, Nov. 27, 1985, 1.

<sup>71</sup> "4000 Sign to Keep Penney's." *Omaha World-Herald*, May 22, 2002, 1D.

<sup>72</sup> The McCook J. C. Penney remains downtown as of this writing. The Grand Island J. C. Penney store is still the oldest J. C. Penney store in the state, although the Conestoga Mall is actually its third location in Grand Island since opening in 1914. The Beatrice J. C. Penney, prior to its permanent closure in 2002, served customers at its Court Street location in downtown Beatrice for nearly ninety years.

<sup>73</sup> This article does not account for J. C. Penney Catalog Centers, which can be operated independently, and are completely different from J. C. Penney department stores in form and function.

<sup>74</sup> Penney, *Fifty Years*, 75.

<sup>75</sup> Even subsequent Nebraska-based retail chains such as Pamida, The Buckle, Cabela's, and the now-defunct Country General have never ventured into as many Nebraska towns as J. C. Penney.

<sup>76</sup> Younkers acquired J. L. Brandeis stores in 1987, while Dillards acquired Miller & Paine in 1988. Younkers has since closed or relocated from every former Brandeis location in the Omaha area, while still operating out of former Brandeis locations in Grand Island and Lincoln. It is worth noting that Walmart founder Samuel M. Walton began his retail career with the J. C. Penney Company in 1940, as a management trainee at the downtown store in Des Moines, Iowa. Penney personally addressed the young Walton during a visit to the Des Moines store, which had a profound impact on Walton's own retail ambitions. See Vance H. Trimble, *Sam Walton: The Inside Story of America's Richest Man* (New York: Dutton, 1990), 32-36.