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Main Street Empire: J.C. Penney in Nebraska

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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. 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. 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.
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. 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, inately, 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.5

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 Nebraska would have opened 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 farmer, 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.6 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.7

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.8 Foremost Dairies Products was a development that grew out of Penney Farms, with its name coming directly from Penney’s champion Guernsey bull.9 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.10 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, Rosswell 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.
the container was then be called up to the balloon containing a closed container attached to a cable line. The container would then be closed up by the balloon overflowing the sales floor, where another associate would retrieve the cash before sending the container back down with a receipt and correct change.

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 in J. C. Penney stock as collateral for philanthropies. 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.

Farm customers would come in from miles around. They would shop all day, and sometimes we [clerk] would spend as much as half a day with one customer. They would buy their supplies for nearly a year. Consequently, as soon as the acquisition was finalized, the company began converting J. B. Byars stores to J. C. Penney stores. 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. The opening of the Bayard store and the arrival of F. Scott Pulver, a University of Nebraska graduate brought back from Alabama to manage it, became the lead story in Bayard’s newspaper. By the end of 1929, after the Byars and Golden Rule conversions were complete, twenty-five additional J. C. Penney stores lined the 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 store in all 62 counties.

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. Consequently, as soon as the acquisition was finalized, the company began converting J. B. Byars stores to J. C. Penney stores. 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. The opening of the Bayard store and the arrival of F. Scott Pulver, a University of Nebraska graduate brought back from Alabama to manage it, became the lead story in Bayard’s newspaper. By the end of 1929, after the Byars and Golden Rule conversions were complete, twenty-five additional J. C. Penney stores lined the 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 store in all 62 counties.

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 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 Alinosworth and Alton, along with nearly 150 others nationwide. 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.**

**[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.**

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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 purchase and bill of sale were cabled up to the balcony; an associate would send the container down with a receipt and correct change. DeGoyler Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. A2004.007

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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 as well as his complete revulsion with the Co - rporate 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. Laker's help. In spite of these unfavorable con - ditions, the [sales and profit] showing is very satisfactory.31

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, giv - ing him a clearer vision of conditions statewide, and helping associates understand what J.C. Pen - ney himself wanted each of his stores to be.

In 1932, the company opened stores in Chad - ron, Creté, and Seward. In less than two decades after opening his Grand Island store, Penney had brought a J.C. Penney to more than fifty Nebraska main streets, eleven of them in the Pan - handle. 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, 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 mass market store gave the company enough confi - dence to open a J.C. Penney in downtown Omaha two years later. In February 1933, Penney person - ally 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 repre - sentative of Governor Bryan, Mayor Metcalf, Woodyard, and I appeared on one of the pro - grams. The president of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce extended a welcome to the Com - pany on behalf of his organization, to which I responded. The store was 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.32

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 af - ter 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 impos - sible 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. Branders, Woodyard’s chief competitor, came out with full page advertisements featuring goods in their basement, which brought forth consider - able comment from Penney.

After the Omaha grand opening and his en - gagements around the city, Penney traveled on to Lincoln to visit the store there and to formally ad - dress the entire state of Nebraska.

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

When I was in Lincoln, Nebraska, I ven - tured 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 sales in Lincoln. Though it has been quite a task I have answered each of these letters individually, and since so many associates asked for only for information or suggestions regarding salesmanship I have had some of my thoughts on the subject put into one comprehensive book.

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.33 Penney conducted motivational store meetings in Alliance, Chadron, and Scotts - bluff, 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 ven - tured out to Nebraska, conducting a motivational meeting at the Omaha store for over four hundred associates and managers in the region.

Not all of Penney’s Nebraska stores were successful—local economic conditions forced the company to close its locations in Chappell, Hem - ingford, and Lewellen before 1935. However, even in the midst of the Depression, the value-driven pricing and golden rule principles on which Pen - ney had built his business began to attract more and more shoppers to J.C. Penney stores. By the mid-1930s, national sales had completely recov - ered, and fifty-three Nebraska cities and towns still had a J.C. Penney department store in their central business district. In the later half of the decade, the store Penney personally opened in downtown Omaha had become so crowded that the company began planning for a larger, larger location at 102 South Sixteenth Street. Reopening the new Omaha store in 1938 was as big an event for the J.C. Pen - ney 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 newspapers 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 seventi - eth anniversary of the Union Pacific Railroad.

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 Bluefield received new goldenrod signs with black “J.C. PENNEY COMPANY” lettering to update their main street appearances. Stores in Ainsworth and Corral were completely remodeled, and, as growing popu - lations in other towns began to outpace selling space and supply, plans were made for completely
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 Albin and McCook, and had been historically dwarfed by Lincoln department stores such as Miller & Paine, Golds, and Rudge & Guenzel. 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. 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. 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 in downtown Lincoln. Despite Lincoln’s history of being, at the time, the largest J. C. Penney store in Nebraska had survived 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 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 309 West Third. During the store’s grand opening on July 27, 1955, hundreds of customers lined the sidewalks of West Third and Walnut. 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. 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...
As the 1960s began, J. C. Penney continued relocating its Nebraska stores within downtown business districts, to new and significantly larger buildings constructed 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 the 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. As early as 1948, the company had already begun experimenting with J. C. Penney stores located away from downtown business districts.

Under the leadership of then-CEO William “Mil” Batten, J. C. Penney continued to experiment with larger store prototypes in suburban areas. 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 department stores. 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. 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 downtown storefronts. The Southroads and Fremont Mall stores also featured ten-bay automotive centers in their parking lots. However, the reign of these locations as Nebraska’s largest and most modern J. C. Penney stores quickly ended the following year when the Iowa-based chain opened its own suburban center in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

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 downtown area. In May 1968, the downtown Norfolk store was closed and replaced by a location at Sunset Plaza that featured nearly 80,000 square feet of selling space, along with an eight-bay automotive center. The Sunset Plaza J. C. Penney became the third largest J. C. Penney store in Nebraska, behind only the Westroads and Southroads stores.

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, of which there were over 190,000 square feet of selling space, covering and fluorescent lighting was installed throughout the sales floor.

J. C. Penney, shown here in about 1958, remained active throughout his life. Although his death occurred in 1969, he was still able to watch J. C. Penney stores evolve into the shopping mall concept, of which there were over 190,000 square feet of selling space, covering and fluorescent lighting was installed throughout the sales floor.

During his lifetime, J. C. Penney founded the largest department store company in the world, one that carried his name, and that continues to operate in rural downtown locations. In 1975, larger than any other J. C. Penney store in the United States, the company was ready to continue its line of department stores, even into the 1970s. Despite the growing appeal of indoor shopping centers, as well as the completion of Interstate 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

Ultimately, the demise of James Cash Penney loured 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 Selfert and John Howell. The deal 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 could ultimately be, particularly if they could viably continue to operate in rural downtown locations.
The evolution of 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.

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. 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, Dillard’s, 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. 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.

Notes

The author would like to acknowledge Joan Gonsell, Southern Methodist University archivist and former J. C. Penney archivist in charge of the J. C. Penney Collection at DeGolyer Library; Jerry Pribat, former archivist for the J. C. Penney Corporate Archives; Gordon Lambney, 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.

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

2 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 the discount pricing, as well as quality merchandise sold on a cash- and-carry basis.
pete" agreements with other acquaintances from the Golden
throughout his life, even into his eighties. See Curry,
was operated by Penney's eldest son, Roswell. See Curry,
Point Republican,
and be operated by Penney's eldest son, Roswell. See Curry,

Franklin, Geneva, Imperial, Red Cloud, Sargent, Sidney, Supe-

Penney remained mentally galled against selling merchandise on credit, largely based on the damage he had watched could sink retailers and their families during his early days in Wyoming. In the 1890s the J. C. Penney Board of Di-

was provided by J. C. Penney's architectural headquar-
Piano, Texas.

Curry, Creating an American Institution, 209.

This Florida project would eventually surpass 200,000 acres
Papillion, its newest location in Nebraska.

DeGolyer Library.

Penney's first store in Kemmerer, Wyoming.

DeGolyer Library.

Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth

Rutledge, 1999) details Penney's faith and its indelible impact

Penney, Fifty Years. 40

Ancestry of J. C. Penney was a relocation from the Ainsworth J. C. Pen-

Penney, Fifty Years. 40

Penney's first store in Kemmerer, Wyoming.

Chain," DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas,

52 Jerry Probst, interview by author, July 2, 1997. Probst had

in Aurora, converted from other retail chains, as Byars stores in

37 Store History for J. C. Penney Store #1482 – Omaha, NE, Oct.

34 Patty Sitorius, telephone interview by author, November 18,

26 Jerry Probst, interview by author, July 2, 1997. Probst had


43 Lincoln J. C. Penney Store Advertisement,

51 The last J. C. Penney store in Nebraska to re-open in a downtown

58 Curry, Creating an American Institution, 16.

42 "New J. C. Penney Store Will Open Its Doors on Wednesday

46 Grand Island J. C. Penney Grand Opening Advertisement.

57 Store History for J. C. Penney Store #948 – Norfolk, NE, Oct.


The Grand Island J. C. Penney store is still the oldest J. C.


33 Ibid., 11-12.

44 Patty Sitorius, telephone interview by author, November 18,

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49 The last J. C. Penney store in Nebraska to re-open in a downtown

8500 Sign to Keep Penney's." Omaha World-Herald, May 22, 2002, 1D.

48 "New J. C. Penney Store Will Open Its Doors on Wednesday

54 "Second Supercenter to Open in Midland," DeGolyer Library.

38 Within a month of the opening of the Southroads Mall in suburban St. Louis.

Penney, Fifty Years. 55

19 "Clyde Elder has just completed a building for the J. C. Pen-

31 Ibid., 208-12.

30 "Opening of New Penney Building Hailed as Latest Step in

29 "Spread to West," Omaha World-Herald, April 15, 1914, 3.

25 The Ainsworth J. C. Penney store was actually a relocation

18 "Clyde Elder has just completed a building for the J. C. Pen-

17 Jerry Probst, interview by author, July 2, 1997. Probst had

16 "Opening of New Penney Building Hailed as Latest Step in

10 Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth

9 Penney, Fifty Years. 38

24 Jerry Probst, interview by author, July 2, 1997. Probst had

7 Penney, Fifty Years. 38

23 Jerry Probst, interview by author, July 2, 1997. Probst had

5 "Opening of New Penney Building Hailed as Latest Step in

4 Penney, Fifty Years. 38

3 "The risk of consumption had forced Penney's initial move

2 "Penney's faith was a critical factor in guiding him to his opportunities with Thomas M. Cal-

1 Penney, Fifty Years. 38

The risk of consumption had forced Penney's initial move

City Retail Growth,


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70 "Penney Co. Says NO: Decision to Close Store Here Stands,

35 This article does not account for J. C. Penney Catalog Cen-

75 Penney, Fifty Years. 75

74 Penney, Fifty Years. 75

73 This article does not account for J. C. Penney Catalog Cen-

72 Penney, Fifty Years. 75


68 NEBRASKA HISTORY