



*Earl Corder Sams, who may have been as close to a retail prodigy as anyone in the history of the United States, much less the state of Kansas, is pictured in the 1930s. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

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# Earl Corder Sams and the Rise of J. C. Penney

*by David Delbert Kruger*

**A**s the Union Pacific train carried him across the Great Plains in the summer of 1897, James Cash Penney had no choice but to see Kansas as a four-hundred-mile means to a better end. Just four days earlier his hometown doctor, and subsequently his widowed mother, had ordered him to leave the familiar confines of northwest Missouri for the dryer climates of the West. Penney was only twenty-one at the time and heading to Colorado without any thoughts or dreams of someday owning a chain of department stores. His priority was simply to get over a nagging bronchial cough. As the train stopped in Salina, Penney could not have foreseen the impact a teenage farm boy in nearby Simpson would ultimately have on his future, not to mention the stores and company that would someday bear his name. And young Earl Corder Sams could never have imagined how much J. C. Penney, the man and eventually the company, would change his own life, much less the lives of countless Americans. A decade later, fate would bring these two young men together in Wyoming, creating a working synergy that would transform Penney's fledgling enterprise from a two-store mercantile establishment out west to a national retailer headquartered in New York City, with over sixteen hundred department stores across the United States. In the end, Earl Corder Sams would become far more than a business partner to James Cash Penney: he would quietly lead the J. C. Penney Company on the path to becoming a national department store chain and recruit fellow Kansans to join him in its incredible ascension, while bringing a J. C. Penney department store to the main streets of eighty Kansas towns.

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Earl Corder Sams was born in Simpson, Kansas, on April 3, 1884, to Green Lee and Amanda (Day) Sams, both Missouri natives who had come to Cloud County as homesteaders. His father was a harness maker by trade, but settled on a farm northeast of Simpson in 1871. According to the *Cloud County Atlas*, Green Lee Sams established a reputation for being “one of the most progressive farmers of the Solomon Valley,” supporting his family by raising corn, wheat, cattle, and hogs, and supplementing that income by selling his harnesses to other farmers.<sup>1</sup> Earl’s early life was typical for young boys of that era and he and his older brother, Joseph Clyde, helped out on the family farm.

Yet the Sams brothers, even as little boys, had profoundly different interests. Joseph Clyde loved farming and was clearly in line to inherit his father’s operation. While Earl worked just as hard as his brother, he had no passion for agrarian chores, and at a very early age longed for a different profession entirely. He began to discover his calling during childhood trips to nearby Beloit, a town twelve miles to the northwest where his father and mother bought their supplies and dry goods. Earl became fascinated by the world of retail and brought that interest back to the children he knew in and around Simpson. In one of his favorite pastimes Earl would play “store,” setting up a make-believe department store and selling his youthful customers whatever merchandise they wanted. His peers were drawn to his affable charisma and willingly participated in his imaginary emporium. When Earl went off to high school in Beloit, he was quite eager to work in a real store. He persuaded William James Keys, a Beloit clothing and shoe merchant, to give him his first real job as a sales clerk. Sams looked forward to working in Keys’s store at the end of each school day, putting in hours Monday through Friday, as well as Saturdays. He absorbed everything Keys and his assistant manager George G. Hoag had to teach him about the retail business.<sup>2</sup>

After Sams graduated from Beloit High School in 1901, he felt he was more than ready, even as a teenager, to open his own store. Convinced that his hometown could benefit from a local shop, the enterprising boy talked his father and two local brothers, Jacob and James Shanks,

into putting up the money to open a store in Simpson. The operation was named Shanks and Sams after the three investors, and seventeen-year-old Earl ostensibly served as manager. His initial experiences with the store gave him more of a taste of failure than success. Even though Sams was manager in title, the older partners still treated him as a teenage boy and did not give him complete control over the store’s operations. Moreover, at that time Simpson had no newspaper in which to advertise, and Sams did not promote the store in the papers of neighboring towns. After one year, profits at Shanks and Sams had not met his father’s expectations, and Green Lee Sams decided to sell his entire interest to Jacob and James Shanks. With his father out of the business, Earl left Simpson for Colorado City, Colorado, to work for a general store owned by G. W. Ott, an uncle of one of his Beloit schoolmates. Sams spent most of the following year in Ott’s mercantile establishment, perfecting his skills as a sales clerk and learning how to successfully operate a retail business, from developing merchandise selection to boosting sales to placing advertisements. The nineteen year old made good use of his time in Colorado, personally as well as professionally. In addition to developing his retail skills, Sams also met Lula Ammerman, an attractive young lady from Oklahoma, who quickly became the love of his life.<sup>3</sup>

In 1904, at the age of twenty, Earl Sams married Lula Ammerman in Oklahoma City and accepted an offer by the Shanks brothers to return to Simpson and manage their store. Jacob Shanks had moved the renamed Shanks and Company store into a brand-new building, and upon Sams’s return, he gave the young storekeeper greater control over management and merchandising decisions. Sams acted on his convictions that a small Kansas town like Simpson could support a department store and that such a store could be successful if properly merchandised, managed, and promoted. He began furnishing the store with better fixtures from the Grand Rapids Company, including the type of display racks and shelves that were typically found in Kansas City and Denver department stores. Combined with his sales abilities and merchandising decisions, Shanks and Company developed a word-

1. “G. L. Sams,” in *Biographical History of Cloud County, Ks.*, comp. E. F. Hollinbaugh (Logansport, Ind.: Wilson, Humphry & Co., 1903), 698.

2. “J. Clyde Sams Died Sunday—Laid to Rest Yesterday,” *Simpson (Kans.) News*, August 14, 1929; Thomas Tapper, “E. C. Sams,” *Dynamo*, J. C. Penney Company associate newsletter, (May 1919): 3–5; and Eugene F. Tinker, “Up Through the Penney System with Earl C. Sams,” *Success* (June 1922): 57–58. Although the family farm of Green Lee Sams was situated in southwestern Cloud County, Earl and his brother Joseph Clyde were educated primarily in Mitchell County. The town of Simpson straddles both Mitchell and Cloud counties.

3. U.S. Census, 1900, Kansas, Mitchell County, Logan Township; Tinker, “Up Through the Penney System,” 57–58; and Joan Anderson, interview by author, December 9, 2011, Lakeland, Florida. Sams later recruited Roy H. Ott, his Beloit schoolmate and G. W. Ott’s nephew, to join Penney’s company. Roy Ott eventually married James Cash Penney’s sister Letha and became a J. C. Penney Company executive. Anderson’s father Raymond Ammerman was Lula Sams’s younger brother. He lived with Earl and Lula Sams in New York after the death of their parents in Oklahoma City, before moving on to a management career with the J. C. Penney Company.



Earl Sams reported for work at Penney's first Golden Rule Store in October 1907, and quickly began proving himself to his older mentor. Although the store, pictured here in 1907, relocated to its current location in 1929, the Kemmerer J. C. Penney is still in operation and regarded as the "J. C. Penney Mother Store." Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

of-mouth reputation as a fine department store that carried lines of apparel as well as hardware.<sup>4</sup>

After three years, however, Sams became disillusioned with the prospects for additional growth in the store, personally and professionally. As he later recalled:

In 1907, I was operating, with the backing of some friends, a store in my small native town of Simpson, Kansas. I was an independent merchant. The store was equipped with fine fixtures. We bought our merchandise where we pleased or could, usually through jobbers. We operated a good store to the best of our knowledge and I was pretty much my own boss. However, I couldn't see any real opportunity ahead. A livelihood—yes, perhaps—but not much more.<sup>5</sup>

4. "Store Number One Thousand," *Dynamo* (February 1928): 16; and James Cash Penney, *J. C. Penney: The Man with a Thousand Partners* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), 60. Penney quotes an anecdotal description of the Shanks and Company store from one of Sams's boyhood friends in Simpson, whom he does not identify by name. The Shanks store opened at a time when Simpson did not have a newspaper, and it did not receive news coverage from the *Beloit* (Kans.) *Daily Call*.

5. *Excise Tax on Retail Stores*, 76th Cong., 3rd sess., Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Ways and Means, March 17–April 11, 1940, H 1:559.

As a student of retail, Sams was hoping to find a position where employer and employee could mutually grow from each other's ideas and successes, though he was not optimistic that such a position even existed. In the early 1900s national department store chains did not exist, and Sams was keenly aware that the industry he loved was full of dead-end jobs. However, he decided to contact the Business-Men's Clearing House, an employment agency in Denver, Colorado, to see if they could match his skills with any merchant who might provide the opportunities he was seeking.<sup>6</sup>

In 1907 two events profoundly changed the course of Earl Sams's life. The first was the death in March of his father, Green Lee Sams. The second occurred three months later, when the Denver employment agency put him in touch with a young but ambitious entrepreneur in Wyoming. The man was nine years older than Earl, a Missouri transplant named James Cash Penney who was running two tiny mercantile stores at the

6. Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 57; and Earl Corder Sams's application form, Business-Men's Clearing House Company of Denver, May 1, 1907, box 1, A2004.0007, J. C. Penney Company Records, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas (hereafter cited as "JCPCR, DeGolyer Library").



When James Cash Penney met Earl and Lula Sams as they arrived at the Kemmerer train station, the tiny dog that they had brought along was almost a deal breaker. "When Mr. Sams and his wife stepped down from the train in Kemmerer with that queer little dog," Penney recalled in his *J. C. Penney: The Man with a Thousand Partners*, "my first thought was: I wonder if a man who fancies dogs like that has it in him to make it. But if I had my misgivings, Mr. Sams soon dispelled them." Photograph of Earl, Lula, and the queer little dog standing in front of their first Wyoming home courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

time. It turned out that Penney had much in common with the younger Kansan. Penney had grown up on a farm in northwest Missouri, but had also taken a keen interest in retail at an early age. He had also lost his father when he was still relatively young and headed west to start a new life for himself, initially in Colorado before coming into a career with a small chain of stores operating under the Golden Rule nameplate. As a sales clerk in Wyoming, Penney's ambition, work ethic, and intelligence impressed his older mentors, Thomas Callahan and William "Guy" Johnson. They decided to reward him by setting him up with his own store in the mining and sheep ranching town of Kemmerer, Wyoming. Callahan and Johnson offered two-thirds of the investment needed to open the new store, provided that Penney could come up with the remaining third. Penney secured the funds and opened the new store in 1902 as its manager, with profits proportionately distributed amongst the three partners. The partners also left open the possibility of reinvesting

profits to open additional stores together throughout the region as part of an expansive chain. From 1902 to 1907 Johnson, Callahan, and Penney expanded their partnership to include four Golden Rule stores: three in Wyoming, and one in Montpelier, Idaho. This business model, and the success of the Kemmerer store, provided Penney opportunities for immense personal and professional growth.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike national retailers Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward, which at that time were operating strictly via mail-order catalog, the Golden Rule syndicate wanted to bring their department stores directly to rural communities, many with populations of fewer than one thousand. While notable chain stores such as A&P and Woolworth's had been around since 1865 and 1879, respectively, the chain-store system had yet to catch on nationwide at department stores.<sup>8</sup> Even large department

stores such as R. H. Macy and Company, J. L. Hudson Department Store, and Marshall Field and Company were confined to one flagship store in one major city, and although some of their warehouses and organizational infrastructures were located elsewhere, retailing typically did not extend beyond the flagship store. In contrast the Golden Rule syndicate was instrumental in pioneering

7. Green Lee Sams was buried near Glasco, Kansas. For his obituary see "A Simpson Resident Dead," *Beloit Daily Call*, March 23, 1907. Penney, J. C. *Penney*, 20–25; Mary Elizabeth Curry, *Creating an American Institution: The Merchandising Genius of J. C. Penney* (New York: Garland, 1993), 90–100; many of Penney's initial ideas about chain-store merchandising came from his older mentor, Thomas Callahan, whom Penney deeply admired and respected. See Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 65–79.

8. Godfrey M. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America: 1859–1962* (New York: Chain Store Publishing Corporation, 1963), 30–33; and Norman Beasley, *Main Street Merchant: The Story of the J. C. Penney Company* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), 113, 123–25. The Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company had two hundred A&P locations at the time Penney opened his first store in 1902, though the A&P chain was able to expand to over fifteen thousand locations by 1927.

several small chains amongst its participating members, including Penney's mentors, Thomas Callahan and Guy Johnson, as well as J. B. Byars, C. C. Anderson, and Frank S. Jones. As affiliated but autonomous merchants, Golden Rule proprietors agreed not to expand into any town where another Golden Rule merchant was operating. However, Golden Rule chains rarely expanded into more than ten locations prior to 1910, and their proprietors typically had no aspirations to develop beyond their respective regions.

The year 1907 was as much a turning point for James Cash Penney as it was for Earl Corder Sams. That summer, the long friendship of Thomas Callahan and Guy Johnson came to an abrupt and permanent end. Neither man disclosed the details of their disagreement, but both made it clear to Penney they wanted nothing further to do with each other, even though their friendships with Penney remained unaffected. The business partnership of Johnson, Callahan, and Penney had to be dissolved, and Penney asked if he could buy out their interests entirely on a personal note for the appraised value of \$30,000, plus eight percent interest. The partners agreed, and the fact that they did so without involving a single bank or attorney spoke volumes about Penney's integrity.<sup>9</sup> Penney immediately sold off his Rock Springs and Montpelier stores to pay down the debt, knowing that his Kemmerer and Cumberland locations would generate enough profits to repay the balance in roughly one year. His grander plan, however, involved expanding his own chain to about fifty Golden Rule stores, offering partnerships to enterprising young men like himself, with the incentive of giving them the same opportunities Callahan and Johnson had given him five years before. He had hoped to groom one of his salesmen to help carry out this expansion, but had limited success in finding the right man for the job. Penney needed partners who could work as hard as he could while sharing his deep Christian values, which included complete abstinence from alcohol and tobacco.<sup>10</sup> He decided he stood a better chance of finding his ideal candidate by contacting the Denver employment firm where Earl Corder Sams had applied.

By July 1907 Penney and Sams were corresponding back and forth, their letters traveling across the vast open

space between Simpson and southwest Wyoming. Both men seemed increasingly impressed with the other's potential, as Penney evidenced when he wrote to Sams:

I received a very nice letter from the Bush Hat Co., also the Beloit people concerning you, and I only reiterate what I have said previously that if you are the man we are looking for—one who can produce results, this would be the place for you. We want no man who is not competent and ambitious. In other words, we want "a live wire." With your experience, and if you have the ability these people say you have—you certainly could climb just as fast as you like—the faster you climb—the better it suits us. . . . I would be pleased to hear from you again, so I will know what to expect of you.<sup>11</sup>

Sams was so enticed by his prospects with Penney that he personally travelled more than eight hundred miles from Simpson to Kemmerer for an interview. Meeting James Cash Penney face-to-face only reinforced his attraction to the charismatic entrepreneur and the ideas behind his enterprise. As Sams recalled:

I had already been impressed in my correspondence with Mr. Penney of his sterling honesty, his clear vision of business, his definite plan of organization; and, best of all, his desire to give the other man an even chance. My first meeting with him deepened these impressions, and my conversation with him naturally had to do with what opportunity I should find if I concluded to leave Simpson and go to work at Kemmerer. Mr. Penney's enthusiasm, his faith in himself and his plan, and finally his faith in hard work as the handmaid of ambition decided me. I shall never forget one idea Mr. Penney presented. It was this: No man, he said, need limit himself or feel restricted in this business. Here is opportunity for continuous growth. In fact, here is a place *where a man may have all the rope he wants*. It rests with him.<sup>12</sup>

11. J. C. Penney to E. C. Sams, July 14, 1907, box 1, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. When Penney and Sams began their correspondence, the Johnson, Callahan, and Penney partnership was still in effect (hence Penney's use of the word "we"); by the time Sams was hired, Penney was sole owner of their four stores.

12. Quoted in Tapper, "E. C. Sams," 4.

9. Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 109; Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 47–48; and James Cash Penney, *View from the Ninth Decade* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1960), 60. No sources exist that show Johnson and Callahan ever reconciled, but Penney remained in touch with both of them, and eventually bought out each of their Golden Rule chains when they retired.

10. James Cash Penney, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 64–65; and Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 42–44, 49.



*Penney sent the Samses to operate this remote store in 1908, mainly to test Earl's management abilities. The couple lived in the back of the store, which was located a mile from the center of Cumberland, Wyoming. They had no utilities and the nearest water had to be lugged from a muddy creek half a mile away. The \$1,000 that the Samses saved from running this store eventually served as their initial investment in Penney's chain. By 1914 the young couple would comfortably reside in cosmopolitan New York, but often remarked that their year in Cumberland was one of the happiest times of their lives. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

Penney immediately hired Sams, and Sams accepted the offer.

On October 1, 1907, Earl and his wife arrived at Penney's Golden Rule Mercantile to begin their new venture in Wyoming. A month earlier, when Sams had informed Jacob Shanks of his new position and resignation, Shanks immediately predicted that he would despise living out west, and that his position in Simpson would be waiting for him as soon as he came back. Shanks was smart enough to know that Kemmerer was not Kansas; the morning Sams first reported to work was quite frigid even for early autumn, and a thick frost covered the downtown boardwalks.<sup>13</sup> What Shanks could not grasp, however, was the exciting sense of opportunity Sams felt in Kemmerer, especially inside James Cash Penney's store.

When they were not waiting on customers, Penney and Sams discussed merchandising methods and the immense

potential for expansion, feeding off each other's intelligence, excitement, and ambition. Penney referred to Sams as his "associate," preferring that term over "employee," as he believed everyone who worked for his business had a stake in its success. Even so, as a businessman nine years Sam's senior, Penney was clearly in a position of authority over his newest associate. He addressed him as "Mr. Sams," and expected to be called "Mr. Penney."<sup>14</sup> He even required Sams to milk his cow whenever he was out of town on business.<sup>15</sup> Because they worked closely together Penney was able to observe Sams's sales and merchandising abilities firsthand, which reinforced his initial impressions. "As he came along," recalled Penney, "I found him to be a good man behind the counter. People liked him. He made friends easily and kept them. In short, he was a good all round store man."<sup>16</sup> Penney increasingly began to view his Kansas protégé as a future busi-

ness partner, and decided his skills would be better applied as store manager in Penney's other location in Cumberland, sixteen miles from Kemmerer. In 1908 he offered Sams and his wife an annual salary of \$1,500 to manage and operate the store.<sup>17</sup>

Penney knew that managing this particular location was more a test than a promotion. The Cumberland Golden Rule had always been unique in that community residents supported the store, but the Union Pacific Coal Company that employed many in the town did not. Penney's outfit meant competition for the coal company's store that sold merchandise to miners and their families,

14. Penney was extremely formal, and continued to refer to his partner as "Mr. Sams" throughout their working relationship, expecting other associates to do likewise. Only in the last decade has J. C. Penney corporate culture significantly relaxed, with recent J. C. Penney CEO Myron "Mike" Ullman insisting that he be addressed by his first name. See Ellen Byron, "Call Me Mike!," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2006.

15. Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 62.

16. Tapper, "E. C. Sams," 21.

17. Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 58; and Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 64.

13. Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 56; and Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 59.

often at high prices on company credit. To mitigate this threat, the mining company forced Penney to build his store outside the city limits, one mile away from the town center, when he set up shop in 1903.

The crude wooden building housing the store was merely twenty-five feet wide by forty feet long, including a tiny living quarters for the store's manager and his family. There were no utilities within any convenient range, and since the hard Wyoming ground did not allow for an adjacent well, Sams and his wife were forced to haul water out of a muddy creek half a mile away. Often when they arrived back at the store with their loaded buckets, the water was so dirty it had to settle in a barrel before it became clear enough to drink.<sup>18</sup> Most genteel marriages in 1908 would not have survived those bucolic conditions, but the Samses had faith in James Cash Penney's plan. Throughout that time they often reminded each other of an old saying, "There is more pleasure to travel hopefully than to arrive." During the year they ran the Cumberland store, Earl and Lula Sams saved nearly a thousand dollars, money that would be needed in 1909 when Sams became a profit-sharing partner and manager at a new location Penney was planning in Utah. The young couple had no way of knowing they were just six years away from a very successful and civilized life in New York City. Yet even when Earl and Lula Sams finally had those posh surroundings, including memberships in country and yacht clubs and vacation homes in Florida and New Hampshire, they both agreed that their year in Cumberland, Wyoming, was one of the happiest times of their lives.<sup>19</sup>

In 1908 Penney had already begun his expansion without Sams, opening one new store in Bingham Canyon, Utah, with associate Dayton Mudd, and another in Preston, Idaho, with associate Edward Neighbors. Sams's turn would come a year later, when Penney teamed up with him to open a Golden Rule store in Eureka, a Utah mining town of about three thousand people with rail access via the Rio Grande Western Railroad.<sup>20</sup> Just eight years had elapsed since Sams had

persuaded his father to open Shanks and Sams in Simpson. Now, articles of partnership were being drawn up for a Sams and Penney Golden Rule store in Utah. Despite Penney's confidence in Sams, his terms for sustaining the partnership remained formal and firm. Mr. Sams, the papers stated, "shall at all times properly and becomingly demean and conduct himself, and for gross misconduct, intoxication, gambling or other incompetence shall be forthwith removed, and his accounts and interests settled at once."<sup>21</sup> Sams had no trouble agreeing to any of Penney's terms, and he and his wife set out to make the Eureka store a success. The night before it opened, Earl Sams went into the streets of Eureka and distributed handbills until well after midnight; Lula, concurrently, spent most of the evening on her hands and knees, scrubbing and polishing the hardwood sales floor. The store opened in March 1909, and by the end of the year Sams had recorded over \$56,000 in sales and nearly \$9,800 in profits, earning more than both of Penney's stores managed by Neighbors and Mudd, which had been open for a full twelve months.<sup>22</sup>

Penney recognized the success of his store in Eureka, Utah, was due in no small part to Sams's charisma, intelligence, and hard work. Sams worked in the store seven days a week, often in excess of twelve hours each day. He enjoyed interacting with people, was undoubtedly a good salesman, and was unanimously well liked by the Eureka customers he went out of his way to meet and know. The town's predominantly Mormon population also found Sams's personal and professional values to be in line with their own, and as an honest businessman deeply devoted to his own Christian faith, they accepted Sams and his store as part of their community.<sup>23</sup> Despite having no formal education beyond Beloit High School, Sams was an incredibly thorough business manager who was very adept at minimizing operating expenses. Penney was also pleased that Sams had, in his words, "developed into a good buyer with an unerring instinct for goods, quality and price that were exactly right for our stores and our customers."<sup>24</sup>

would become Penney's senior partners as the enterprise moved from an informal, loose-knit chain to a formal company.

21. Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 116.

22. Tinker, "Up Through the Penney System," 58; and Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 116-17.

23. Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 70. Despite being devout Protestant Christians, Sams and Penney were "Gentile" merchants from the perspective of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). However, Mormon residents throughout Utah, Idaho, and southwest Wyoming personally liked both men and supported their stores. Penney later received an honorary doctorate from Brigham Young University, an LDS institution, and Sams's personal friendship with the Marriott family continued throughout his life.

24. Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 60-61.

18. Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 63; David Delbert Kruger, "J. C. Penney: Missouri Man, Wyoming Institution," *Annals of Wyoming* 82 (Spring 2008): 21-22; and Tinker, "Up Through the Penney System," 57-58, 93.

19. Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 64.

20. William M. Bushnell, "Reminiscences of our Early Stores" [Edward Neighbors's Preston, Idaho, store], *Dynamo* (May 1917): 5; Bushnell, "Reminiscences of Our Early Stores" [Dayton Mudd's Bingham Canyon, Utah, store], *Dynamo* (June 1917): 5; Bushnell, "Reminiscences of Our Early Stores" [Earl Corder Sams's Eureka, Utah, store], *Dynamo* (July 1917): 5; and Bushnell, "The Components of the J. C. Penney Co.," *Dynamo* (April 1917): 10-11. Neighbors and Mudd, along with Sams,



What began as an informal partnership in 1908 quickly became a large organization. This first convention of J. C. Penney partners and managers, held in 1913 in Salt Lake City, laid the foundations for what evolved into the J. C. Penney Company, which moved its headquarters from Utah to New York City the following year. Penney is in the second row, fourth from the left, with Sams just to the right of him. Several of Sams's Kansas recruits are also pictured. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

James Cash Penney gave his early managers considerable latitude in selecting merchandise for their stores, with the idea that local managers could best create an inventory that uniquely appealed to local customers. Logically, the more an inventory could be turned over, the higher the profit a store could make. Sams gradually learned from his numerous interactions with local customers how to stock his store with high quality, attractive merchandise that could sell rapidly at reasonable prices. The success of the Eureka store was in part the result of Sams's merchandise selections, and Penney took notice. The retailer generated appealing lines of merchandise based on Sams's inventory from which managers of his other Golden Rule locations could select. In addition Penney began taking Sams with him on merchandise buying trips to Kansas City, St. Louis, and even New York City. By 1909 Penney realized he could no longer oversee his growing chain from his store manager position in rural Wyoming; he relocated his base of operations to the western metropolis of Salt Lake City, to better coordinate merchandise buying and distribution, as well as scout future store locations. Penney also believed that Sams could better serve his organization in a position alongside him, rather than inside a single store. Earl and his wife, now expecting their first child, were soon living in Salt

Lake City, with Earl acting as the senior merchandise buyer for Penney's expanding enterprise.<sup>25</sup>

With Sams's share from the Eureka store profits, he now had enough money to partner with Penney on multiple new Golden Rule locations throughout the West. From 1909 to 1913 Sams and Penney opened eight new stores across Utah, Idaho, and Colorado. Each store in which Sams invested generated an exponential flow of profits that in four years helped Penney expand his chain from five stores to over forty, and put Sams second only to Penney in ownership shares. The Penney chain had already exceeded \$1 million in sales by 1911, and was approaching \$3 million by the end of 1913.<sup>26</sup>

However, Earl Sams was doing far more than generating sales and profits for Penney's business. Penney needed other quality men to open and manage new stores, and Sams began encouraging his boyhood acquaintances from Simpson and Beloit to join the business. As he

25. "Porter, Gladys Sams (Mrs. Dean) (1910-1980)," *Daily (Oklahoma City) Oklahoman*, July 12, 1980. Earl and Lula's first child, Gladys, was born in Oklahoma City. As an adult she became well known throughout South Texas for her philanthropic and humanitarian activities. The Gladys Porter Zoo and Porter High School in Brownsville, Texas, are both named in her honor.

26. "Original Store Partners Chart," reprinted in Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 66-67; and Lebharr, *Chain Stores in America*, tables 5, 17.

told one prospective recruit: "I have worked for Mr. J. C. Penney for 18 mo. as a clerk and always found him square in every circumstance. He is one of the best business men in the west without exception. I am now a partner of his and think more of him than any man on earth."<sup>27</sup> The opportunity in Penney's system practically sold itself. One of Sams's first recruits, George G. Hoag, was formerly the assistant manager of the W. J. Keys store that had first hired Sams in Beloit. In 1909 Hoag was managing a clothing store in Coffeyville and, like Sams, found himself stifled by the opportunities available to him in Kansas. Christian Woidemann, a young Danish immigrant working in Beloit, also contacted Penney as a result of Sams's encouragement. Hoag and Woidemann were both hired by Penney as sales clerks, and quickly worked their way up to the position of "first man," or assistant manager, before being groomed to manage their own stores and become partners. In 1910 Hoag was named manager of Sams and Penney's new store in Provo, Utah, while Woidemann was named manager of their new operation in Malad City, Idaho. After a year, both men were also able to invest and partner with Sams and Penney to open additional stores in their respective states.<sup>28</sup>

As the Penney organization grew, Sams made it clear that he was not recruiting his Kansas peers based on lazy familiarity or nepotism. "There is something about the Kansas atmosphere that makes men," he later explained. "They are made of the right sort of stuff and that is why we have so many of them working with us."<sup>29</sup> In his first five years of working with Penney, Sams brought no fewer than thirty-two Kansas men into the Utah firm. Many of them had been born and raised in and around Mitchell and Cloud counties, and several had wives who had been friends since childhood. All of Sams's Kansas recruits went on to become store managers in Penney's chain; some even advanced to become future company executives. Penney trusted his younger protégé's assessment of potential candidates, and a recommendation by Sams virtually guaranteed that Penney would hire a man as an associate.<sup>30</sup>

27. E. C. Sams to J. F. Deal, October 1, 1909, box 9, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

28. Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 120; and Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 74–75.

29. Quoted in "Men From Beloit, Kans., Head the 371 Penney Chain Stores," *Merchant's Journal* (December 23, 1922), box 7, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

30. "Wife of Early-Day Penney Partner Will Preside at New Store Opening," *Pittsburg (Kans.) Morning Sun*, October 14, 1969; "Store Number One Thousand," *Dynamo* (February 1928): 16–17; and Penney,

From the moment Sams opened the Eureka store in 1909 Penney considered him a senior partner, but by 1913 Sams was clearly regarded as Penney's number-one man. He had not coveted this status, or attained it at the expense of fellow associates. As Penney had mentioned to Sams when they first corresponded, "the faster you climb—the better it suits us."<sup>31</sup> Penney's other partners were more than happy that Sams was part of their team; he was innately likeable and his influence was creating better stores across the chain, which meant more opportunities for them. Sams saw almost unlimited potential in Penney's methods and system. Sams began to envision successful department stores in small towns and large cities across his native Kansas and the rest of the United States, in a plan more ambitious even than the one Penney himself imagined. Without the involvement of Earl Sams, it is very likely that Penney's chain would have stopped at about fifty Golden Rule locations, and extended no further east than Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. "If I had insisted on keeping personal control of the Penney Company," Penney wrote in his 1950 autobiography, "we would still be merely a small chain of stores scattered through the Middle West."<sup>32</sup>

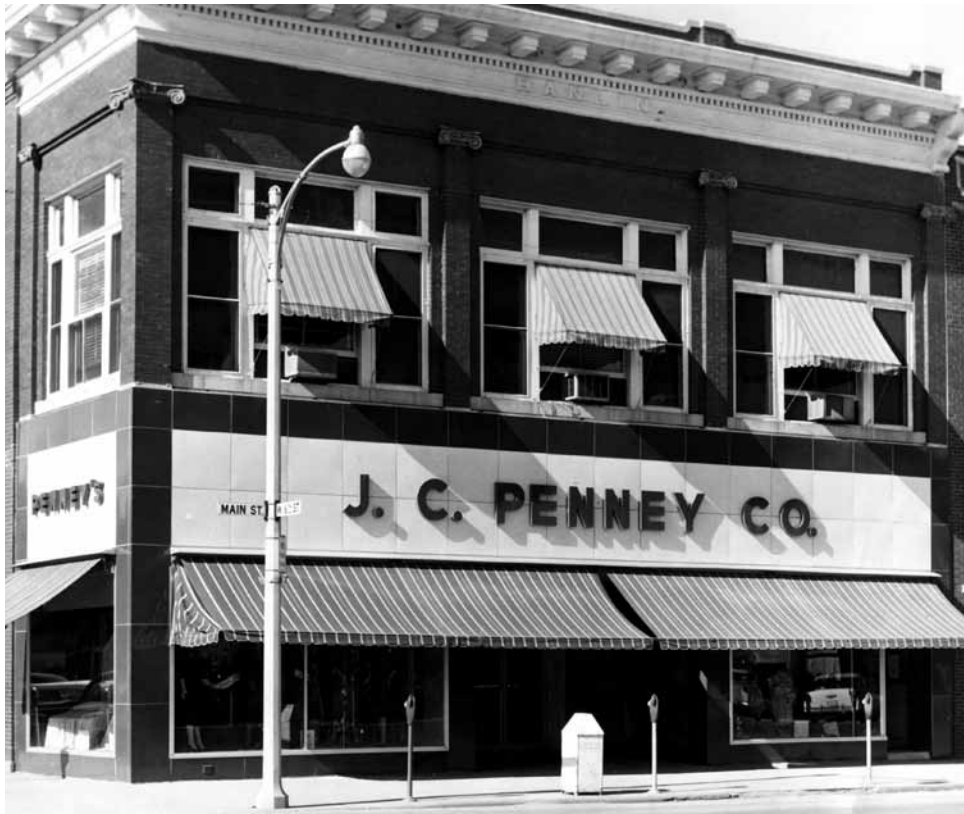
Sams was captivated by Penney's ideas, and used his own merchandising instincts to perpetually refine and improve them. Penney became receptive to Sams's suggestions, particularly standardizing store appearances with better display fixtures and, more importantly, renaming their stores J. C. Penney instead of Golden Rule.<sup>33</sup> Although Sams embraced the golden rule as a business philosophy, he felt that parading it as a trade name was in bad taste, the retail equivalent of a politician shouting "God bless America!" during an election speech. Sams also felt that Penney's chain needed to distinguish itself from other Golden Rule chains, such as those of J. B. Byars and C. C. Anderson, which were concurrently expanding throughout the same region. It is ironic not

J. C. Penney, 68. Although women did not become J. C. Penney managers until 1970, Sams recruited female acquaintances from Beloit and Simpson to bring their husbands into the company, with wives often serving as sales clerks, department heads, or bookkeepers.

31. Quoted in Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 55.

32. Penney, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule*, 95.

33. Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 55, 102; Penney, *J. C. Penney: The Man with a Thousand Partners*, 57–58; and Penney, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule*, 102. Sams often remarked that Penney's earlier Golden Rule stores were always clean but appeared "junky" in terms of merchandise presentation—in many cases Penney had frugally used shipping crates and boxes as cheap, disposable fixtures for displaying merchandise throughout a store. For additional details on early J. C. Penney store designs and their evolution, see David Delbert Kruger, "Changing Times, Changing Spaces: The South Dakota Stores of J. C. Penney," *South Dakota History* 40 (Winter 2010), 295–334.



*Sams first brought the J. C. Penney chain to Kansas in 1916, with this storefront in Newton at Sixth and Main. The store stood in this location for over eighty years and was renovated several times, including not long before this photograph was taken in 1958. The store closed permanently in 1997. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

only that Sams came up with the idea of using the J. C. Penney name, but that Penney himself initially resisted it. As Penney recalled:

The decision was taken to change the name to "J. C. Penney Company" from "Golden Rule Store." Personally I felt reluctant to make the change, because "Golden Rule" was far more than just a name to me; it had a definite significance in relation to the operation of the stores. But the judgment of my associates prevailed. Incidentally, it was Mr. Sams' turn to smile; because the term was abused in many quarters, or at best passively interpreted; from the time he joined me in Kemmerer he had disbelieved in our using it.<sup>34</sup>

34. Penney, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule*, 93. Sams's Beloit friend Lyda Towner recalled another possible reason for James Cash Penney's opposition to using his name on his stores. His reluctance seemed

Other changes were also underway. The partnership structure of store ownership, which had been such an incentive for young men joining Penney's firm, was creating an increasingly cumbersome organization. Penney had initially incorporated the partnerships in 1911 to protect individual partners from unlimited liability, but this incorporation merely brought the existing stores under one name. The J. C. Penney Company of Utah still operated as a loose confederation of partnerships; no stock was ever issued, and the whimsical arrangement obviously raised questions with financial institutions. For a smaller regional chain that wished to remain just that, this limitation would not have been an issue. Up to that point the Penney chain had been relatively independent of financial institutions, using store profits and personal

loans from Penney and Sams to open additional stores. However, if the Penney chain wanted to expand rapidly and nationally, significant financial credit from New York banks would be needed. The company had no choice but to reincorporate in the form and function of a credible corporation that banks could understand and respect.<sup>35</sup>

Inside a Salt Lake City hotel room in 1913, Penney, Sams, and four other partners codified the business philosophy and mission of their new company, creating a document informally known as "The Penney Idea." Emanating from their own Christian beliefs and convictions encompassing the golden rule, this document laid out

valid when she and her husband John opened the Pittsburg, Kansas, J. C. Penney store in 1917 and customers throughout southeast Kansas misinterpreted "Penney" to mean "Penny," thinking that the store was a cheaper "five and dime" operation. See "Wife of Early-Day Penney Partner Will Preside at New Store Opening," *Pittsburg Morning Sun*, October 14, 1969.

35. Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 148-51.

seven uncompromising objectives to fundamentally guide the J. C. Penney Company as it grew:

1. To serve the public, as nearly as we can, to its complete satisfaction.
2. To expect for the service we render a fair remuneration and not all the profit the traffic will bear.
3. To do all in our power to pack the customer's dollar full of value, quality, and satisfaction.
4. To continue to train ourselves and our associates so that the service we give will be more and more intelligently performed.
5. To improve constantly the human factor in our business.
6. To reward men and women in our organization though participation in what the business produces.
7. To test our every policy, method, and act in this wise: Does it square with what is right and just?<sup>36</sup>

The next day, during their first company convention of partners and managers, the new J. C. Penney Company was officially reincorporated, with store partnership equities converted into stock shares and James Cash Penney elected company president and chairman of the board. The collaboration of James Cash Penney and Earl Corder Sams had transformed a small chain of western mercantile establishments into a dynamic corporation poised to become the first transcontinental department store chain in the history of the United States.<sup>37</sup> While giant competitors Sears, Roebuck and Company and

Montgomery Ward could claim customers across the nation, both were still more than a decade away from even planning their first retail stores. Sams had convinced Penney that the J. C. Penney Company could no longer continue to operate and behave like a regional chain out west. In defiance of Horace Greeley's famous exhortation, Penney and his stores needed to go *east*, with a new headquarters in New York City, to capitalize on logistics such as manufacturing, distribution, and access to financial institutions. In 1914 Penney and Sams sold their Salt Lake City homes and relocated their families to New York. George G. Hoag and Roy Ott, Sams's boyhood acquaintances from Beloit, also moved with them to the New York headquarters as junior executives. Fellow Beloit recruit Christian Woidemann soon followed as a senior merchandise buyer.<sup>38</sup>

Earl Corder Sams had always wanted to bring J. C. Penney stores to Kansas and working in New York City did not dampen his resolve to do so; had the opportunities inherent in Penney's chain been available in Simpson or Beloit, he and many of his childhood recruits might never have left. By 1915 he convinced Penney that the time was right for the J. C. Penney Company to establish a presence in the Sunflower State. In April of 1916 Sams's vision was formally realized in downtown Newton, when the ninety-first store in the J. C. Penney chain was unveiled at the corner of Sixth and Main. The first J. C. Penney store in Kansas served as a harbinger of many more to come. Nationwide, the company had opened forty other stores that year, and Sams and Penney felt those successful locations were merely the beginning of an expansion unlike any ever seen in department store retailing. To help organize the company's rapid growth, Sams created a company real estate department and recruited another boyhood friend from Beloit, Glen G. White, to oversee it. White's and Sams's knowledge of Kansas towns, combined with the collective knowledge of other associates who had Kansas ties, made the state especially ripe for new locations. While the Newton store drew in new customers, plans

36. "J. C. Penney Original Body of Doctrine ('Penney Idea')," reprinted in William M. Batten, *The Penney Idea: Foundation for the Continuing Growth of the J. C. Penney Company* (New York: Newcomen Society, 1967), 8.

37. J. C. Penney store location map, *Dynamo* (January 1919): 28. By 1919 the J. C. Penney Company had 197 stores stretching from the Pacific coast to eastern Pennsylvania, and had begun to prominently refer to itself as "a nationwide institution" internally and through its advertisements.

38. Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck, and Company* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 338–57; James C. Worthy, *Shaping an American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 81–82; Frank B. Latham, *1872–1972: A Century of Serving Customers, The Story of Montgomery Ward* (Chicago, Ill.: Montgomery Ward & Company, 1972), 70–73; and Penney, *J. C. Penney*, 127–28. For further details regarding the 1913 incorporation, see Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 149–53.



but from that day forward the J. C. Penney Company would be run by the thirty-three-year-old Kansan.<sup>41</sup>

Just eight years had elapsed between the days when Earl Corder Sams and his wife lugged buckets of muddy water in Wyoming and the morning he walked into his office on Seventh Avenue in New York City as president of the J. C. Penney Company. With the title came new responsibilities, and Penney entrusted Sams to help guide and define the fledgling company as it became a national department store. Sams undertook this challenge at the same time the nation and its resources were becoming entangled in World War I. Yet his new position did not change Sams's character or values.

*Sams strongly advocated for the standardization of J. C. Penney stores, including their layout, merchandise, and displays. This Penney's store in LaCrosse was typical of the narrow, single-room department stores that lined main streets in smaller, rural towns across America. Visible is the standard mezzanine balcony at the rear of the store, which was used both in single-room and double-room layouts, and stairs to reach it along the left side of the sales floor. Skylights in the ceiling and glass-block transom windows above the street entrance offered economical lighting during the day. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

were already being made to open additional J. C. Penney stores throughout 1918 in Arkansas City, Atchison, Pittsburg, and Salina.<sup>39</sup>

As the company ventured into Kansas, James Cash Penney also made a decision that would profoundly affect Sams and the J. C. Penney Company. In late 1916 Penney began to focus more on his own personal health, which had suffered from working long hours indoors. As a result, he believed it was time to step aside from many of his responsibilities and allow a new president to oversee the daily operations of the J. C. Penney Company. At the annual company meeting in January 1917, Penney announced his resignation as president and asked that his successor be determined by a vote of attending partners and managers. Penney and his associates immediately knew who they wanted. As Penney recalled, "I placed [Sams's] name in nomination, and one by one his partners, and mine, made his selection as president unanimous."<sup>40</sup> Penney remained chairman of the board, maintaining his influence and authority over major company decisions,

Beneath the meticulous business suit, he remained a humble Kansas farm boy from Cloud County, befriending associates with his empathic personality and winning their loyalty with his leadership, intelligence, selflessness, and appreciation for their contributions to the growing company. Executives and associates frequently commented that he was much more personable, friendly, and warm than the company founder. Company associates serving in World War I were particularly touched by his attention and appreciation for their military service: despite his busy schedule as company president, Sams took the time and energy to write one personal letter every month to *each* J. C. Penney associate during their military tours.<sup>42</sup>

39. History for Newton, Kansas, J. C. Penney Store #91, electronic files, April 2002, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library; Glen G. White, "Picking Sites for Penney Stores," *Chain Store Age* 1 (July 1925): 5; and J. C. Penney Store Open/Close Date Lists, box 229, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

40. Penney, *View from the Ninth Decade*, 82.

41. Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 101–2; and Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 279. Despite stepping down as president, James Cash Penney remained actively involved with his company and his associates until his death in 1971. He also used his time away from the corporate office to pursue philanthropic interests and large-scale agricultural projects in New York, Florida, and Missouri.

42. See Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 292; and L. J. Sheehan, speech for J. C. Penney Company testimonial dinner honoring E. C. Sams, 1941, 1, Earl Corder Sams Documents, Earl C. Sams Foundation, Corpus Christi, Texas (hereafter cited as "ECSD"). Sams did not draw attention to his highly personable and thoughtful actions for J. C. Penney associates serving in the armed forces, though they were well known within the company.

The national department store chain that Penney and Sams were creating had already caught the attention of the *New York Times* as early as 1914, when it comprised fewer than fifty stores and was still operating out of Utah. By 1921 the chain of 312 small-town J. C. Penney stores had matched the sales of R. H. Macy's New York City behemoth on Thirty-Fourth Street. The difference, however, was that it had taken Macy's sixty-three years to reach that mark, while Penney's chain attained it in nineteen. The visible success of J. C. Penney's department stores also forced the mail order giants Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward to move toward retail stores as well, rather than continuing solely as catalog warehouses. Sears finally unveiled its first retail store in 1925, twenty-three years after Penney opened his first store in Wyoming. Montgomery Ward followed the next year with retail display stores in three smaller towns, including one in Marysville, Kansas, though these stores were largely showrooms for merchandise in Montgomery Ward catalogs and few items could actually be purchased outright from the stores.<sup>43</sup>

When Sams took over as company president in 1917, J. C. Penney had just 127 stores in twenty-two states, generating total sales of \$8.4 million. Sams's leadership during the 1920s led the company to exponential growth and firmly established J. C. Penney as a national department store. By the beginning of 1927, just ten years after he had been elected to lead the company, he had increased the total number of J. C. Penney stores to 747 in more than forty states, with total sales of \$115.7 million.<sup>44</sup> Sams personally and professionally incorporated Kansas into his plans throughout the entire decade. In 1921 he returned to his brother's farm in Cloud County. The visit was brief, but Sams made time to visit the high school in Simpson, where he and Dr. Francis B. Short, head of Penney's educational department, addressed the students. In 1926 he erected and dedicated a chapel on the campus of Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina as a memorial to his parents. Sams also added new J. C. Penney stores to the main streets of nearly thirty Kansas towns in his first



*Penney celebrated his hometown of Hamilton, Missouri, by opening his chain's five hundredth store there in 1924 on the site of what had been the Hale Department Store, where he began his retail career. In similar fashion, in 1927 Sams acquired the W. J. Keys Store in Beloit, Kansas, where he started out in sales and learned the basics of merchandising and customer service. Sams's reopened the location, pictured here, in 1928 as the one thousandth store in the J. C. Penney chain. The store later moved to a larger building on the same block before permanently closing in 1986; the building pictured here in 1928 was demolished in 2011. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

ten years as president, from cosmopolitan Wichita to rural Fredonia.<sup>45</sup>

As J. C. Penney stores competed with independent storekeepers and regional chains in smaller towns, the company capitalized on keeping prices low through volume purchasing, developing best practices in advertising and customer service, and offering incredible opportunities for associates through profit-sharing, education, and advancement. By the early 1920s some of Penney's competitors began to see these practices as

43. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America*, 16–17; "How a Chain of Stores is Run," *New York Times*, February 1, 1914; Emmet and Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters*, 338–57; Worthy, *Shaping an American Institution*, 81–82; Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U.S.A.: The Great American Catalog Store and How it Grew* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 93–94; and Latham, *1872–1972: A Century of Serving Customers*, 70–71. A huge crowd attended the grand opening for Montgomery Ward's retail store in Marysville, though shoppers were displeased that most of the merchandise on display could not actually be purchased at the store.

44. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America*, tables 5, 17.

45. *Simpson (Kans.) News*, October 20, 1921; and Dedication pamphlet of Sams Memorial Chapel, Kansas Wesleyan University, May 30, 1926, ECSP.



Although the J. C. Penney Company suffered sales declines during the Great Depression, Sams still saw opportunity in establishing stores in the downtowns of larger metropolitan areas. These stores were instantly successful, and by the 1950s were booming. Many stores were extensively renovated and expanded during this decade, including this store at 130 North Broadway in Wichita, which was completely reconstructed for a grand reopening in October 1955. With air conditioning and nearly 75,000 square feet of selling space, it became the largest store the company operated in Kansas at the time. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

great an improvement upon the older type of retailing of which I spoke to you in the early part of this address as the motor car is an improvement over the one-horse buggy. . . . You will meet among the criticisms of the chain store the argument that they tend to put the independent retailer out of business, or to impoverish him. The most complete answer to this statement is composed of facts and statistics. These show that ninety per cent of all retail merchants have always failed. That was true before chain stores came into existence. And it is true to-day.<sup>47</sup>

unfair; the nationally expanding chain had advantages that independent merchants could not compete with and they believed Penney's was destroying the fabric of smaller towns. Opponents pushed for anti-chain-store legislation and higher taxes at both state and federal levels.<sup>46</sup> By the mid-1920s, however, Sams was nationally respected not just for his leadership of the J. C. Penney Company but for his expertise regarding the chain-store system of retailing. During a national convention of J. C. Penney associates, Sams responded to the anti-chain movement:

Even in the face of the company's incredible financial success, Earl Sams remained committed to the moral philosophy that had always governed the operation of Penney stores. For Sams, as well as Penney, operating the J. C. Penney Company in accordance with the Penney Idea was far more important than simply bringing more people into the stores and increasing sales and profits. Sams's convictions in this regard were notably demonstrated in early 1924, after an ambitious store manager, Albert Hughes, sought to impress the New York City headquarters by maximizing profit margins in his Penney store in Eureka, Utah, which coincidentally was the location Sams had personally opened in 1909.<sup>48</sup> When Sams reviewed the store's balance sheet for the fiscal year, he was both surprised and disturbed by the numbers. Sams immediately sent Hughes a letter with the following advice:

The best evidence we have concerning the necessity of the chain store form of retailing is shown on the one hand by the enormous growth of chain store organizations themselves and, as I have just said, by the statements of customers testifying to efficient service, to quality of merchandise and to price appeal. Chain store organizations constitute a new method for bringing down the cost of the necessities of life. They are as

I don't want you to get the idea, Mr. Hughes, that we want to make too much profit. There is danger in doing that very thing. There is a certain service that we owe to our community

46. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America*, 125–45. Lebhar chronicles the anti-chain-store movement in the United States from 1923 to 1961. Twenty eight states, including Kansas, proposed such legislation during that period.

47. Earl Corder Sams, "Yesterday, To-day, and To-Morrow," address delivered at the Dallas and Tulsa sessions of the J. C. Penney Company Spring Convention, 1929, 17–18, file 4, box 12, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

48. Batten, *The Penney Idea*, 11–12; and Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 110–12.

and it is one of the fundamental services that we want to give, which is merchandise at a fair profit. I recall a little conversation that we had at our last convention, when you were being urged to sell a certain number of Ladies Silk Hose at 98 cents when, as you said, you could just as easily get \$1.19. When I look over your showing for 1923, I am reminded of this incident and I have wondered if you are doing that thing too generally. Now don't misunderstand me, I am not censuring you, but somewhere in the operations of the Eureka business there is a profit that we owe our public. I realize, Mr. Hughes, that in conducting a business of a volume around \$150,000 it is difficult to have the results tally exactly with the thing we are shooting at. In other words, we are liable to vary around 1 per cent, one way or the other, but when we vary more than that it shows that we are adding on just a little more than we ought to somewhere. As I said above, think this over and write me your impressions.<sup>49</sup>

This was certainly not the accolade Albert Hughes had been expecting, but to say it changed his retailing philosophy and his life is an understatement. Within six years Hughes had become a J. C. Penney Company executive, and he was eventually handpicked by Sams as his successor as company president.<sup>50</sup>

In April 1928 Sams established J. C. Penney's one thousandth store. It was located in downtown Beloit, where Sams had begun his career almost thirty years earlier. He had intentionally kept the company from opening a J. C. Penney store in Mitchell County out of respect for his first employer, William James Keys. When Keys announced his retirement in 1927, Sams persuaded him to sell his entire store and its inventory to the J. C. Penney Company on friendly terms.<sup>51</sup> As the grand-opening ad for the new store explained:

The J. C. Penney Company needs no introduction to the people of Beloit. Its

President, Mr. E. C. Sams, and many others of our personnel, received their early training at Jim Keys' Store. For that reason we have never considered opening a store in Beloit and entering into competition with the Keys store. However, when Mr. Keys decided to retire, we were very glad to buy his entire stock and good will.<sup>52</sup>

Opening the Beloit store was a sentimental milestone for Sams, and he saw it as a way to offer his services to old friends and family members who had remained in Mitchell and Cloud counties. Sams intentionally timed the opening of the Beloit store so that it would become the chain's one thousandth location, just as he had timed the opening of the Penney's store in 1924 in J. C. Penney's hometown of Hamilton, Missouri, so that it was the company's five hundredth retailer.

Unfortunately, the grand opening for the Beloit J. C. Penney was bittersweet for Sams, as his mother Amanda had passed away a year before it opened. In the days prior to her death in March 1927, Sams spent significant time away from the company to stay by her bedside on the family farm, until pressing business matters forced him to return to New York City. His mother's passing, twenty years to the day after the death of his father, occurred less than a week after he had returned to the J. C. Penney headquarters, forcing him to immediately make the long trip back to Kansas for her funeral and burial. Earl's brother Clyde lived long enough to see the Beloit store open, but his health was rapidly declining from epilepsy; his eldest son Wilbur was soon forced to leave a career with J. C. Penney to take over the Cloud County farm. Even as Clyde Sams withered away, Simpson residents described him as "a most patient and cheerful sufferer" until August 11, 1929, when he passed away on the family farm, just as his father and mother had done.<sup>53</sup>

Sams returned to Simpson for his brother's funeral, and Joseph Clyde Sams was laid to rest next to his parents at the cemetery in nearby Glasco.<sup>54</sup> At the age of forty-five, Earl Sams mourned the loss of his only sibling, the last member of his immediate family in Kansas. Nevertheless,

49. E. C. Sams to A. W. Hughes, February 22, 1924, box 9, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

50. Timeline for Albert W. Hughes, J. C. Penney Company executive biographies, box 1, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. Hughes eventually assumed the title of chairman of the board after Sams's death in 1950.

51. "Keys Sells to Penney," *Beloit Daily Call*, January 11, 1928; "Store Number One Thousand," *Dynamo* (February 1928): 16-17; "Penney Store Opening," *Beloit Daily Call*, April 27, 1928; and Penney, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule*, 95. The Bolon Building that initially housed J. C. Penney store #1000 on Beloit's Main Street was demolished in 2011.

52. "The J. C. Penney Company Comes to Beloit!" (J. C. Penney grand opening advertisement), *Beloit Daily Call*, January 12, 1928.

53. "J. Clyde Sams Died Sunday—Laid to Rest Yesterday," *Simpson News*, August 14, 1929; "Deaths: Mrs. Amanda Sams," *Beloit Daily Call*, March 24, 1927; "Deaths: Joseph Clyde Sams," *Beloit Daily Call*, August 13, 1929; and History for Hamilton, Missouri, J. C. Penney Store #500, electronic files, October 2001, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

54. "J. Clyde Sams Died Sunday—Laid to Rest Yesterday," *Simpson News*, August 14, 1929; and author visit to G. L. Sams's family plot at Glasco Cemetery on March 13, 2011.

he continued his leadership of the J. C. Penney Company in New York City, opening an unfathomable five hundred new stores in 1929.<sup>55</sup> Sams's activity in New York was visible across his home state, as new J. C. Penney Company signs above yellow and black storefronts began to appear on main streets from Saint Francis to Oswego.<sup>56</sup> Even though his Beloit friend Glen White had retired from the company's real estate department, Sams was able to replace him with another Kansan, Clearwater native Earl A. Ross. Working with Ross and other Kansas-born associates, Sams brought almost forty *additional* stores to Kansas in 1929 alone, which meant that eighty towns across the Sunflower State had a J. C. Penney department store on their respective main streets. Every Kansan was now within thirty miles of a J. C. Penney department store. Only California, Texas, and Ohio had more Penney stores statewide. By the end of the 1920s, J. C. Penney was operating over 1,400 stores from coast to coast, the highest number of department stores any chain had ever operated, with more Kansas locations than any retailer before or since.<sup>57</sup> In recognition of his contributions to merchandising, Kansas Wesleyan University honored Sams with a doctorate of business administration three years after they had awarded the first one to his well-known business partner.<sup>58</sup>

**D**espite the fact that J. C. Penney had no catalog operations until 1963, the collective buying power of its small-town department stores allowed it to match that of Sears and Wards, which had long mastered the mail-order business but had yet to perfect in-store retailing. In early 1929, on the advice of Chicago financier and retailer Marshall Field, Montgomery Ward proposed a merger with J. C. Penney

to capitalize on their companies' respective strengths. A few months later, Julius Rosenwald, James Cash Penney's counterpart at Sears, Roebuck and Company, tasked his president, Robert E. Wood, to approach Earl Corder Sams with a similar proposition.<sup>59</sup> Sams thoroughly reviewed proposals from both companies, but ultimately terminated negotiations to merge J. C. Penney with either retail giant. "As Mr. Penney has said, so many times," he wrote,

the first duty of a merchant is to serve the public. Feeling that to be our duty, it was incumbent upon us to explore, fully, any proposal that indicated savings to the public. We did so. With all the facts before us we were satisfied that savings to the public would be negligible. . . . I would like to add that the termination of negotiations did not result in loss to Montgomery Ward & Company, to Sears, Roebuck & Company, nor to us. Montgomery Ward & Company and Sears, Roebuck & Company are merchants. Good merchants. They are interested in the same thing that interests us—bringing good merchandise for less money to more customers. In the negotiations representatives of those two companies were given full opportunity to study our methods, and the things we sell. If they learned some things from us that helped them to be better merchants, that was gain for them and gain for their customers. If we learned some things from them—and we did!—we were helped. That was gain for us, and gain for our customers.<sup>60</sup>

In his history of the J. C. Penney Company, New York City author and journalist Norman Beasley suggested that although Sams and Penney could have selfishly sold out to either company for a very comfortable retirement, particularly after the stock market crash and the uncertainty of the Great Depression, they were committed to taking care of their customers, associates, and the company they had created.<sup>61</sup>

The challenges brought about by the Great Depression did not keep Sams from providing sound leadership

55. "Penney Store to Open Here Today," *Anthony* (Kans.) *Bulletin*, October 31, 1929; "J. C. Penney Co. Sign Goes Up," *Sterling Kansas Bulletin*, August 1, 1929; "Change Name Thursday," *Russell* (Kans.) *Record*, July 29, 1929; and "Manager for Penny [sic] Store Appointed," *Girard* (Kans.) *Press*, June 6, 1929. Many of the J. C. Penney locations opened that year were previously part of the J. B. Byars chain, which by 1928 had established 116 stores across western Kansas, southern Nebraska, and Colorado. Penney had personally known Byars from his early days in Wyoming, and negotiated the sale of the chain upon Byars's retirement in 1929.

56. "J. C. Penney Co. Now in Charge," *Saint Francis* (Kans.) *Herald*, August 1, 1929; and "Auspicious Opening for New Store," *Oswego* (Kans.) *Independent*, August 23, 1929.

57. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America*, tables 5, 17. By comparison even retail giant Walmart has seventy-three stores (including Sam's Clubs and Neighborhood Markets) in Kansas at the time of this writing, seven fewer than the number of J. C. Penney department stores Sams established across the state from 1916 to 1939.

58. "Business Genius, Former Kansan, Will Speak Here," *Topeka* (Kans.) *Capital*, October 13, 1930; "A Well Deserved Honor Comes to President Sams," *Dynamo* (July 1928): 8; and Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 214.

59. Emmet and Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters*, 652–53; and Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 126–37.

60. Quoted in Beasley, *Main Street Merchant*, 135–36.

61. *Ibid.*, 137. Norman Beasley (1887–1963) wrote a number of biographies about business pioneers and national leaders. See "Norman Beasley, Author, 76, Dies," *New York Times*, July 4, 1963.

for the J. C. Penney Company. Throughout the Depression, one of the more memorable slogans he expressed to all J. C. Penney associates was: "These are times to keep our shirts on but our sleeves rolled up."<sup>62</sup> This was not an easy task, as J. C. Penney sales nationwide dropped by \$36 million between 1929 and 1931. James Cash Penney's personal finances were in complete ruin, and in 1931 the company founder suffered a nervous breakdown that nearly cost him his life, until Sams and other associates came to his financial and emotional rescue.<sup>63</sup> Sams was able to stabilize and maintain morale for J. C. Penney associates across the nation during the Depression, talking with them at motivational speeches he delivered around the country and using his outstanding skills as a writer to address associates through company newsletters.<sup>64</sup> Sams did not shy away from expanding the J. C. Penney chain into new markets, even in the midst of the Depression, if he saw the opportunity. By 1932 he had taken J. C. Penney stores from small-town main streets to the central business districts of major cities like Seattle, Washington, opening metropolitan J. C. Penney stores that served enormous populations and generated over \$1 million in cash sales during their first year of operation.<sup>65</sup>

By creating metropolitan store prototypes for metropolitan locations, Earl Sams positioned the J. C.



*Extensive modernizations begun during Earl Sams's tenure were implemented throughout the 1950s even in smaller agrarian towns such as Lyons, which reopened this modern J. C. Penney location just northwest of the courthouse square. The store remained in this building until its closure in the late 1980s. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

62. "Earl C. Sams, Gladys Sams Porter, and the Earl Sams Foundation," undated pamphlet, box 7, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.  
 63. Mary Frances Wagley, interview by author, August 18, 2010, Cockeysville, Maryland; and Anderson interview. For further reading on James Cash Penney's experience during the Depression and its impact on his character and faith, see Orlando L. Tibbetts, *The Spiritual Journey of J. C. Penney* (Danbury, Conn.: Rutledge, 1999), 125–65; and Curry, *Creating an American Institution*, 273–74.  
 64. "Business Genius, Former Kansan, Will Speak Here," *Topeka Capital*, October 13, 1930. During one of Sams's speaking trips through Kansas in 1930, the *Topeka Capital* noted his "unusual ability" as an orator.  
 65. Promotional materials for Seattle, Washington, J. C. Penney Store #1457, 1931, box 198, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library; and "New Seattle Store

Penney Company to operate stores wherever American customers were shopping, in farm towns of several hundred or urban centers of several million. In 1934 national sales for J. C. Penney finally topped their 1929 levels. Though local economic conditions forced the company to close three Kansas stores, Sams added new locations in Burlington, Coldwater, Horton, Seneca, and Washington during the same decade.<sup>66</sup> By the end of the 1930s his success in chain-store retailing prompted Congress to call on him as an expert witness against Congressman Wright Patman's anti-chain-store legislation.<sup>67</sup> Sams also continued to diversify his personal holdings. He befriended and mentored a younger entrepreneur from

is Landmark," *Dynamo* (September 1931): 3–4. The downtown Seattle location at Second and Pike was, at the time, the largest department store Earl Sams had ever opened, with over six floors of selling space, plus escalators and elevators.  
 66. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America*, tables 5, 17; and J. C. Penney Store Opening/Closing Lists, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. The only J. C. Penney stores in Kansas that did not survive the Great Depression were locations in Girard, Kiowa, and Oswego.  
 67. *Excise Tax on Retail Stores*, 1:559.



*James Cash Penney himself jovially cut the ribbon at the opening of a new store at 722 Minnesota Avenue in downtown Kansas City in 1958. Even though Penney was eighty-three at the time, he continued a heavy schedule of visiting stores while also balancing a cosmopolitan life in New York City and trips to the Missouri farm where he had spent his childhood. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

Utah, J. Willard Marriott, in whom he saw tremendous potential. Sams strongly encouraged Marriott to expand his small chain of root beer stands, offering \$1 million of his own money as an investment. Marriott accepted his offer, and Earl Sams became the first major partner in what would ultimately become the Marriott business empire.<sup>68</sup>

In 1942 Sams travelled to Salina to deliver the commencement address to graduates of Kansas Wesleyan University. The title of his speech, "Have Faith in Yourself," was apropos for a national business leader whose humble agrarian roots were planted only an hour's drive from the ceremony.<sup>69</sup> Four years later, after Sams had served nearly thirty years as the president of J. C. Penney and

most recently guided the company and its associates through World War II, James Cash Penney asked Sams to succeed him as chairman of the board. It was the highest compliment the company founder could pay his Kansas protégé, who arguably had done more with Penney's brilliant ideas than Penney himself. As chairman, Sams continued to oversee the evolution of J. C. Penney department stores in an emerging postwar consumer economy, where Americans were increasingly buying what they wanted and not merely what they needed. He approved modernizations for nearly all of his main street locations, including fashionable exterior designs, fluorescent lighting, mannequins, and merchandise displays. In 1947 Sams and new J. C. Penney President Albert Hughes began grooming a younger West Virginia associate, William "Mil" Batten, for future leadership of the company.<sup>70</sup> By 1948 Sams and Hughes were able to

68. Robert O'Brien, *Marriott: The J. Willard Marriott Story* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Books, 1981), 171–73, 192–94. J. Willard Marriott was uncomfortable accepting Sams's million dollar loan, so Sams insisted he consider it an investment in his business, which at the time was a small chain of A&W root beer franchises called Hot Shoppes. Marriott did not get into the hotel business until 1957, seven years after Sams's death.

69. Earl Corder Sams, "Have Faith in Yourself," commencement address at Kansas Wesleyan University, May 22, 1942, oversize box 3, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library.

position the first J. C. Penney metropolitan store prototype outside of a downtown business district, in the Hampden Village Shopping Center in suburban St. Louis.<sup>71</sup> Ten years later Batten's leadership of the company began to take J. C. Penney stores from traditional downtowns into sprawling shopping malls, following America's population shifts from the cities to the suburbs.

**A**t the start of the 1950s Sams was giving his energy and expertise not only to the J. C. Penney Company, but the Boy Scouts, the United States Chamber of Commerce, the William Sloane House YMCA in New York City, and the Nations Missions of the Presbyterian Church. He also served as a trustee at Kansas Wesleyan University.<sup>72</sup> In addition to providing his time for charitable causes, Sams committed forty thousand shares of his J. C. Penney stock to establish his own philanthropic organization, the Earl C. Sams Foundation.<sup>73</sup> Even as he celebrated his sixty-sixth birthday in April 1950, he relished the challenges still ahead of him and had no imminent plans for retirement. That summer Sams took a break from his responsibilities to enjoy a round of golf with friends at Wykagyl, a New York country club. On his way back to the clubhouse, he suddenly collapsed, the victim of a massive stroke. Sams was rushed to the hospital in New Rochelle, but died there five days later on July 23, 1950.<sup>74</sup>

Earl Corder Sams's unexpected death devastated his family, his Kansas acquaintances, national businessmen who knew and admired him, and thousands of J. C. Penney Company associates.<sup>75</sup> In reporting his death the next morning, the *Beloit Daily Call* shared the following

70. "Home Town Boy Makes Good: Head of J. C. Penney Board Rivals 'Ike' in Promotion," *Wichita (Kans.) Morning Eagle*, September 28, 1949; and timelines for James Cash Penney and William Milfred "Mil" Batten, J. C. Penney Company executive biographies, box 1, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. As Sams's protégé, Batten would go on to succeed Albert Hughes as chief executive officer of the J. C. Penney Company in 1958 and chairman of the board from 1964 to 1974.

71. History for Saint Louis, Missouri, J. C. Penney Store #1262-5, electronic files, undated, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. The Hampden Village J. C. Penney store in southwest St. Louis is still open as of this writing.

72. "Penney Head Dies in N.Y.: Kansan Was Chief of Chain Store Board," *Topeka Capital*, July 24, 1950; and "Better Leadership Asked for Scouts," *New York Times*, May 18, 1945. The National Council of Boy Scouts honored Earl Corder Sams with their Silver Buffalo Award in 1945 for "distinguished service to boyhood."

73. Bruce S. Hawn, interview by author, February 11, 2011, Corpus Christi, Texas. Earl Sams's daughters, Gladys Porter and Camille Lightner, assumed leadership of the Earl C. Sams Foundation after his death, moving its headquarters from New York to Corpus Christi, Texas, where it is still active. It has given over \$37 million in grants since its inception.

74. Death certificate for Earl Corder Sams, New Rochelle, New York, July 24, 1950, ECSD; O'Brien, *Marriott*, 214.

thoughts on its front page:

Earl C. Sams, 66, chairman of the board of directors of J. C. Penney department store chain and well known in Simpson and Beloit communities, died Sunday, July 23, at the New Rochelle hospital in New York City. . . . He left this community to join with the chain's founder, J. C. Penney. . . . but Mr. Sams never forgot the community of his boyhood and young manhood days. It was only a year ago, in 1949, that he donated a \$13,000 x-ray unit to the Community hospital at Beloit, and this wonderful unit will help serve as a lasting memorial to Mr. Sams.<sup>76</sup>

In New York City a grieving James Cash Penney offered his personal tribute to the man who had been his partner and friend for nearly half a century:

I could tell from the first words he spoke that he was the man for whom I had searched for five years. Mr. Sams combined unusual, I might say almost uncanny, judgment, with unlimited capacity for hard work. He loved the work, because it brought him in contact with people, and he loved people. His greatest gift was his ability to put himself into the other person's situation. Instinctively, he understood people and their problems, and all who came into contact with him felt his warmth and humility. He would not want a long and studied eulogy; he lived his eulogy, and he will not be forgotten by those who knew and loved him.<sup>77</sup>

Unlike his father, mother, and brother, who were buried in Cloud County just a few miles from the family farm, Sams was laid to rest at Beechwood Cemetery near New York City, in the upscale neighborhood where he had spent the last thirty-six years of his life. When his personal estate was finally settled in 1954, the *New York Times* reported its value at over \$9.3 million.<sup>78</sup>

75. "Penney Head Dies in N.Y.: Kansan Was Chief of Chain Store Board," *Topeka Capital*, July 24, 1950.

76. "Earl C. Sams of Penney Co. Dies," *Beloit Daily Call*, July 24, 1950.

77. James Cash Penney, "A Tribute by J. C. Penney," *Pay Day* (J. C. Penney Company Associate Magazine), (July 1950): 2. Penney also dedicated his 1950 book, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule*, to Earl Corder Sams.



*The creation and success of the J. C. Penney Company and its chain of stores was largely due to the synergy between Penney and Sams, who fed off each other's strengths and took turns serving as company president and chairman of the board. Their ideas ultimately transcended J. C. Penney stores, and many retail chains today are still influenced by practices and policies developed by the two men. Walmart founder Samuel M. Walton learned the retail trade as a management trainee in the J. C. Penney Company and repeatedly cited J. C. Penney as an influence in the creation of his chain. Photograph of Sams (left) and Penney (right) at the company's New York headquarters in the late 1940s courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.*

Earl Sams's contributions to Kansas continued even in the years following his death. In 1952 his daughters, philanthropists Gladys Porter and Camille Lightner, laid the cornerstone for the Sams Fine Arts Building at Kansas Wesleyan University, funded by a \$400,000 donation from their father's foundation. In addition, modern J. C. Penney department stores housed in completely new buildings were unveiled on the farm-town main streets of Seneca, Larned, and Lyons, as well as the urban trade centers of Wichita, Kansas City, Hutchinson, and Lawrence.<sup>79</sup> In 1964 Sams's protégé Mil Batten brought the company's

first suburban "full-line" J. C. Penney store to Topeka's White Lakes Shopping Center, with James Cash Penney himself overseeing the grand opening festivities along South Topeka Boulevard.<sup>80</sup> Five years later, when the J. C. Penney store in Pittsburg reopened inside a new shopping mall on the southern edge of town, Earl Sams was again memorialized by Lyda Towner, the ninety-four-year-old emcee at the grand opening ceremony. Sams had personally recruited Towner and her late husband from

78. Death certificate for Earl Corder Sams, New Rochelle, New York, July 24, 1950, ECSD. Lula Sams died in New York three years after her husband and was buried next to him at Beechwood Cemetery in New Rochelle. "Estate of Earl C. Sams," *New York Times*, July 28, 1954. Sams left \$3.7 million of his estate to his charitable foundation.

79. *Wichita (Kans.) Beacon*, June 4, 1952; and J. C. Penney Store Open/Close Date Lists, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. In 1960 a second J. C. Penney department store was opened in Wichita on East Kellogg Avenue at the East Gate Shopping Center; in 1961 a new store followed in downtown Manhattan; and a new store was opened in downtown Salina in 1963.

80. "Penney Reminisces on Early Struggles," *Topeka Capital*, October 15, 1964. James Cash Penney continued to be actively involved with the J. C. Penney Company and its stores until his death on February 12, 1971, at the age of ninety-five.

Beloit to help establish Golden Rule stores in Utah and Wyoming, and eventually they opened a J. C. Penney store in downtown Pittsburg.<sup>81</sup>

Throughout his life Earl Corder Sams saw no value in looking back on his past accomplishments, though they were remarkable even from today's perspective. In the course of his career as president and chairman of the board at J. C. Penney, the native Kansan had taken the company from 127 to over 1,600 department stores, and at the time of his death more than 70 of those stores still operated on Kansas main streets. Over that same period, he also increased company sales by more than 10,000 percent, from \$8.4 million to nearly \$1 billion.<sup>82</sup> Aside from his executive duties, Sams's true role at J. C. Penney was best explained in 1986 by Mil Batten, who by then had gone on not only to oversee the J. C. Penney Company but also the New York Stock Exchange:

Mr. Sams was really the co-founder of the Penney Company. He wasn't just another CEO. And when I think of the Penney Company, I think of the two men as a team.

They really set and maintained the principles of the Penney Company. They shared the same values. Their place in history is a little bit different, but Mr. Sams deserves a lot of the credit.<sup>83</sup>

Of the eighty J. C. Penney stores Sams established across the state of Kansas, only seventeen remain today.<sup>84</sup> The J. C. Penney store he so proudly brought to Beloit has been gone for more than twenty-five years, and his once-beloved hometown has receded to eighty-six residents, with U.S. Highway 24 passing through the remnants of his father's homestead. Yet the company Sams helped create remains a prominent retailer across the nation, still guided by many of his ideas, with annual sales now approaching \$18 billion.<sup>85</sup> The American retail landscape was indelibly changed because a farm boy from Simpson, Kansas, found and answered his true calling in a chain department store miles away from where his life had quietly begun. [KH]

81. "Wife of Early-Day Penney Partner Will Preside at New Store Opening," *Pittsburg Morning Sun*, October 14, 1969. Lyda Towner's husband, John B. Towner, managed the J. C. Penney store in downtown Pittsburg from the time it opened in 1917 until his retirement in 1935. Their son, John J. Towner, managed the same store from his father's retirement until his own retirement in 1961.

82. J. C. Penney Store Open/Close Date Lists, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library; and Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America*, tables 5, 17. In 1951, the year after Sams's death, the J. C. Penney Company broke the \$1 billion sales mark.

83. Transcript of interview with Mil Batten, May 16, 1986, box 7, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. Despite Earl Corder Sams's significant role and service in defining the J. C. Penney Company, the vast majority of his letters, executive papers, and writings were burned by his secretary after his death, in accordance with his wishes.

84. J. C. Penney Store Open/Close Date Lists, JCPCR, DeGolyer Library. The number of J. C. Penney department stores in Kansas dropped significantly from 1960 to 1980 as agricultural industries and the populations supporting J. C. Penney stores in smaller towns declined. Additional downtown store closings accelerated from 1980 to 1998 as newer, larger J. C. Penney stores in shopping malls displaced many of their main street counterparts throughout the region. Although these J. C. Penney store closures were consistent with national trends, they were more pronounced in Kansas given the sheer number of J. C. Penney department stores Sams had established across the state.

85. *J. C. Penney Company 2010 Annual Report*, 4, [media.corporate-ir.net/media\\_files/irol/70/70528/JCP\\_IAR2010/HTML2/default-twopage.htm](http://media.corporate-ir.net/media_files/irol/70/70528/JCP_IAR2010/HTML2/default-twopage.htm).