

Memories

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The new store on Roberts Avenue was built to specifications of the nationwide chain. It is on the site of Gresham's first City Hall.

Phyllis Matz, an office worker at the store, came to work in there in 1961.

Like Kerslake, she started in the stock room.

"I've done a little bit of everything," she says. I've done alterations and fitted men's suits. I didn't even know how to sew. But don't say that, we'd have people bringing suits back after 20 years."

Matz and Kerslake remember

that the local store in pre-Lloyd Center days was a full-line store selling everything from men's clothing to wigs.

"You had to fit gloves on the ladies just so," remembers Matz.

"And you ran your hand up the hose to show how sheer they were," adds Dorothy. "It was all very elegant."

Shopping centers spelled the end of the hometown Penney stores. A large-scale J.C. Penney store at Lloyd Center, built in 1960, was the first of many to put a crimp in local stores. The opening of the

Clackamas Town Center store in 1981 resulted in the closure of stores at Oregon City, Lake Oswego, Hillsboro and Hood River. The Eastport Plaza store closed last year. Gresham's turn came in August when the Penney district manager announced the closure because the store "was experiencing an unacceptable level of sales."

Ironically, the local Penney store is filled with merchandise and customers these days because other stores in the chain are sending their overstock to Gresham to be sold at sale prices.

Manager Joe Farnsworth, the eighth store manager Kerslake has worked for, has said that closing sales will continue through Jan. 10 on fashion items. Basic goods, such as underwear, will be transferred to other Penney stores.

The company has said that employees will be moved to other Penney stores, if possible.

Still, Kerslake and Matz are saddened by the store's closure.

Kerslake appreciates the lure of large, new shopping centers but, she adds, "I still like the feel of a small store."

J.C. Penney holds final sale

Dec. 1986

Downtown fixture to disappear, but memories remain

by SHARON NESBIT
of The Outlook staff

A faded photo of James Cash Penney still hangs in the office that overlooks Gresham's J.C. Penney store.

"James Cash" the store employees call him. It harks back to the time when Penney himself was the leader of a network of stores as common to small communities as the corner gas station and the post office.

"And it was cash in those days," says Dorothy Kerslake, veteran employee of the local Penney store, which will close Jan. 10. "Until 1960 when the store started charge cards it was all cash."

Gresham's Penney store has been a fixture here since March 13, 1930, when it opened on Main Avenue as the 1,412th store in the chain. The first J.C. Penney store was opened in Kemmerer, Wyo., in 1902.

"Especially worthy of note are the three large, well-lighted display windows at the front where window shopping can be done in real city fashion," reported The Outlook of the Gresham emporium.

Kerslake, whose job these days is in merchandise control, remembers that first store. She was fresh out of high school and green as grass when



Staff photo by Terry Farris

Tangled mannequins occupy window of J.C. Penney store, which will close for good Jan. 10.

she started work in the basement stockroom in 1949.

Kerslake graduated from Corbett High School and laughs when she thinks of going to work "in the big town of Gresham." She was scared to death that first day because she got her work done early and did not know what else to do.

The original store, located on the

site of the present Gresham Business Machines and Stationery, was equipped with pulley devices that delivered small containers to the upper office. In that office, clerks made change, issued receipts and sent the containers back to the main floor.

"We didn't get cash registers until we moved to this store (on Roberts Avenue). I think it was in 1952,"

Kerslake remembers. "We were so excited to have cash registers."

Cash registers ended the fun the male clerks used to have with the old pulley system. An unwary office worker might open the tube to find it full of water or jumping with a live frog.

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Gresham's first J.C. Penney store was on Main Avenue. This view looks south on Main.

Gresham Historical Society photo

J.C. Penney leaves relatives behind

If department stores had family trees, then W.R. Hicks Co. would be a shirt-tail cousin of Gresham's J.C. Penney store.

Ray Bergeron, who first came to Gresham in 1930 to be assistant manager of the town's new Penney store, managed several stores in the Penney chain before he returned to Gresham in 1949 to buy an interest in W.R. Hicks.

Bergeron died last year, and these days W.R. Hicks is run by his sons, Bob and Jim Bergeron.

But there is still evidence of kinship between the two stores. For one thing, Bergeron still has the Penney company record books his father used to keep his accounts.

When W.R. Hicks moved to its

present store at Second Street and Roberts Avenue just a half a block away, Penney ran an ad welcoming Hicks to the neighborhood.

And Bob Bergeron remembers a time in Sandpoint, Idaho, when James Cash Penney himself visited the Bergeron home.

"He came for dinner," Bergeron remembers. "We kids never said anything but grace."

Bergeron regrets the Jan. 10 closure of Gresham's Penney store. It hurts downtown Gresham to lose an anchor that size, he says.

"As long as most people have lived in Gresham, there's been a Penney's store. But it's not Gresham's fault that we're losing our store.

Downtown Portland doesn't even have a Penney's anymore," Bergeron points out. He blames that on the company's decision to move its stores to regional shopping centers.

The next obvious question is how a store such as W.R. Hicks can continue to operate in downtown Gresham if Penney cannot make it.

"There will always be a place for the independents," Bergeron says. "We can move faster and get on trends faster. But even our store has changed. We used to have towels and sheets and fabric. We're just clothes and shoes now."

Though it's a blow to lose a store

that close because one attracts business to the other, Bergeron does not see the loss of Penney as a decline in downtown Gresham. He points to GI Joes and the Emporium, which will anchor the new shopping center on the former Gresham fairgrounds. He sees Roberts Avenue developing as Gresham's financial center with small, upscale shops clustering on Main Avenue.

"Downtown Gresham won't be a giant place. But maybe that's what's so nice. We're comfortable down here... We're going to be unique. You can have shopping malls all over but there is only one downtown Portland. Well, there is only one downtown Gresham."

11-1-62

Penney Store Taps Alexander

John B. Alexander, formerly manager at Enterprise, has been promoted to manager of the J. C. Penney store at Gresham.

He replaces R. B. Bachelder who is being transferred to Lebanon after 10 years here.

Alexander, graduate of Oregon State University, joined the company in 1949 as a salesman in Coos Bay. He was successively promoted to assistant manager in Pendleton in 1954; and to manager in Enterprise in 1958.

The Penney Co., whose store managers and other personnel share in company profits, has a long - standing policy of promotion from within.

Alexander's community activities include Elks, Lions, and Toastmasters. A native of Portland, Alexander, his wife, Vera, and their two children, John, 9, and Scott, 6, hope to find a home to buy in the near future.

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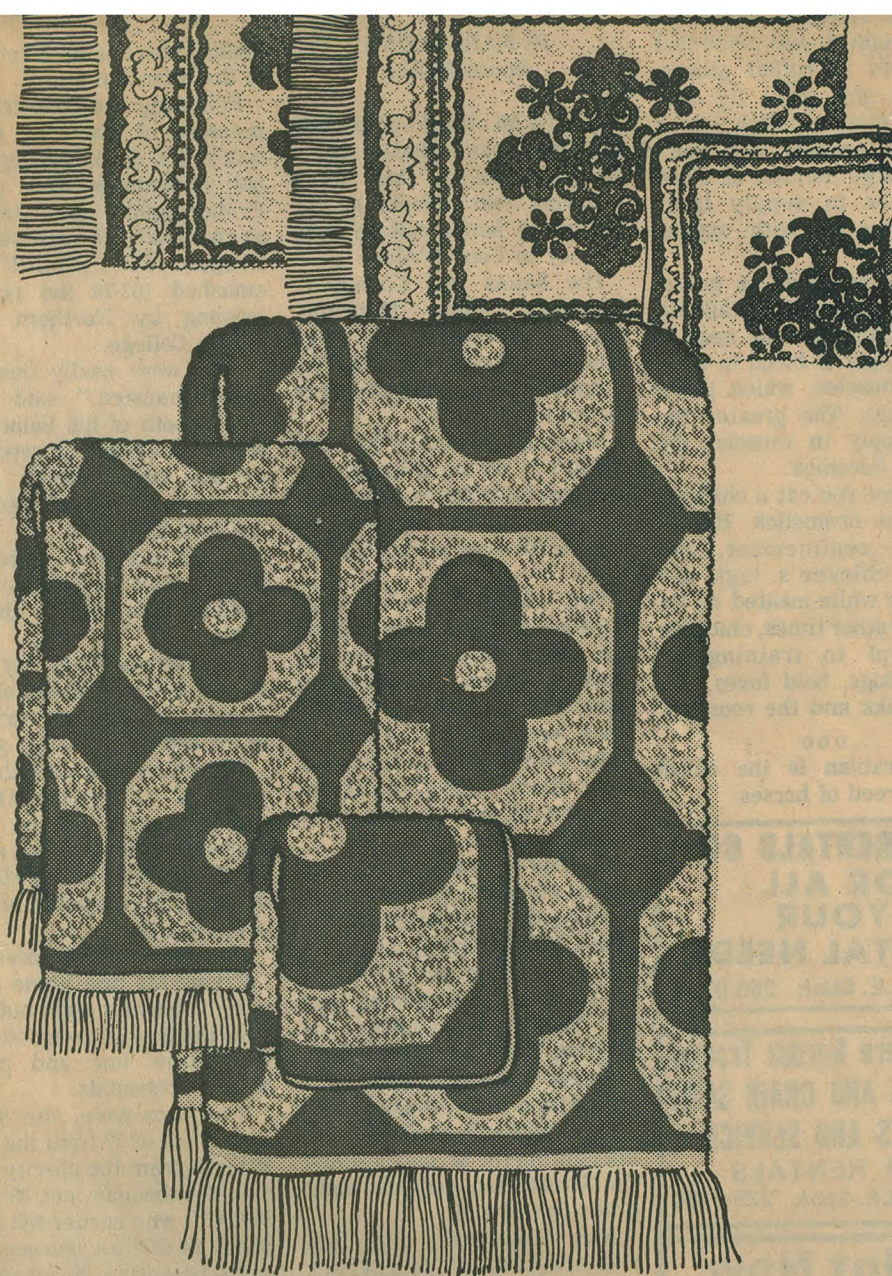
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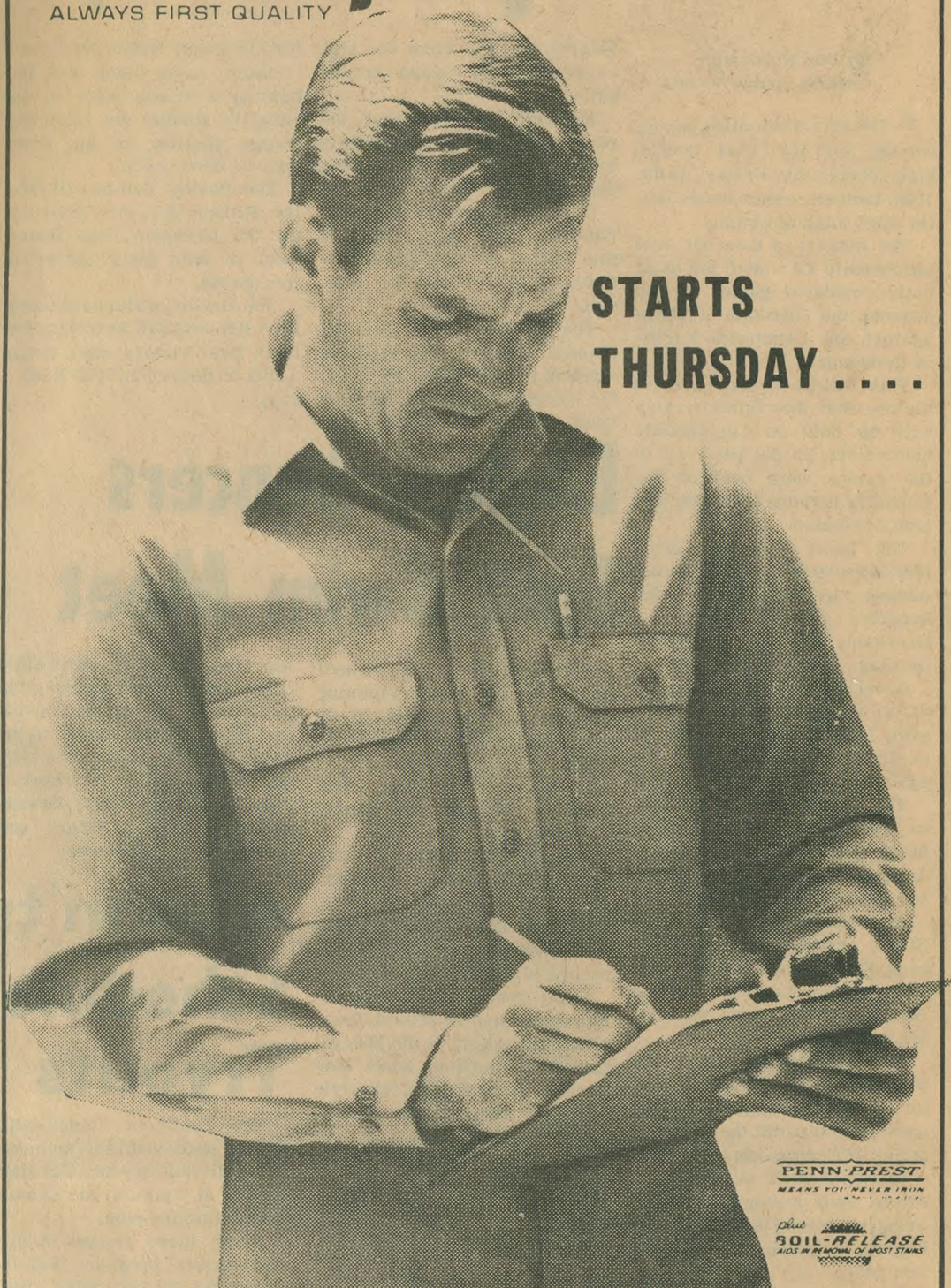
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3⁸⁸

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Women's Petti Pants . . . Nylon . . . **99c**
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**25% off all m ns
swimsuits in stock**

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Fine suede-finish FUR FELT fashions these jaunty hats. And the feather trimmings give them a dashing note of color. New Fall shades.

J.C. PENNEY CO. INC.

DEPARTMENT • STORE

MAIN AVE.

Penney's 'family' puts store memories to rest

By **RICK BELLA**
of The Oregonian staff

GRESHAM — Dorothy Kerslake looked down through the old-fashioned wooden louvers in her second-story office at J.C. Penney and studied the near-empty sales floor below.

"A little sad," she said. "Just a little sad."

Gone was the crush of shoppers padding over the beige carpet to poke through seasonal sales on Towncraft button-downs, Plain Pocket jeans and windup alarm clocks.

Gone was the snappy sales crew that could measure a hem, advise on Boy Scout merit badges and guess a girl's glove size at just a glance.

Gone. All gone, except for a skeleton crew to close up shop for good.

On Saturday, for the first time since the Great Depression, Gresham will not have a J.C. Penney Co. Inc. store downtown. And with the closure, a seemingly immovable anchor on Northeast Roberts Avenue will disappear.

For 58 years, the old store was one of the few constants in the changing scene — a throwback to the days before shopping malls and trendy boutiques, when downtown truly was the city center.

Over the years, Ivy's Service Station and Mealey's Jewelry across the street yielded to the new Benjamin Franklin Savings & Loan, and the old parking lot was gobbled up by the expanded First Interstate Bank of Oregon.

But J.C. Penney — "Penney's" to most people — remained virtually unchanged, offering a wide line of clothing, household items and catalog orders to a loyal following. Oh sure, the old pulley system was retired — the pre-cash register, pre-computer system for carrying customers' change from the cashier in the second-story cage. But store, itself, endured.

For Kerslake and her friends, the final days were something like a divorce after a long marriage — or even a death in the family.

Each look over the barren shelves and bare-bones sales racks brought back a flood of warm memories of friends and associates, past and present. So many memories, in fact, that Kerslake dug out the staff's scrapbook, which didn't start too much after Kerslake signed on in 1949.

"Look, Phyllis," said Kerslake, 56. "Remember when we had the Christmas party in Kay Clark's rec room?"

Phyllis Matz remembered well.

"Sure," said Matz, also 56. "That was the year that Eva Mae Roberts' son, Ron, dressed up like Santa Claus."

"But do you remember when we all dressed up in old-timey costumes for the Bicentennial?"

Of course, Kerslake remembered because the crew always did more together than simply punch in and out each day.

"We used to have potlucks every Thursday," Matz said. "Some pretty good cooks here, too. We'd also



Dorothy Kerslake (from left), Phyllis Matz and Pauline Dempsey look at Penney's store scrapbook.

The Oregonian/ROGER JENSEN

Oregonian - Jan 10, 1987

get our families together and go out to dinner once a month or so to Biff's."

The ringing telephone cut through the memories like a razor.

"J.C. Penney's Gresham, may I help you?" Matz said. "No, sir. No — I'm sorry. I'd advise you to call our Lloyd Center store..."

Matz recited her advice with the only certainty that emerged from all the real uncertainties the staff faces.

With closure bearing down on them, the staff is facing layoff.

Sudden and final.

The company, which is based in New York City, hasn't offered transfers or relocation, and the situation has created some problems.

"Well, I guess I'll retire," said Sally Smoke, who specialized in Boy Scout uniforms. "I'll be 65 next Christmas. But I'll miss this place."

"I remember one time a couple of young newlyweds walked around the store, then kissed. I asked them if I could help them, but he said, 'No, I just wanted to

show my wife where my grandmother used to take me to shop.'"

Downstairs, in the basement that once was packed with children's clothing, catalog-sales manager Pauline Dempsey held her own private rites for the store, wishing each of her longtime customers a special goodbye.

"We knew everyone by name," said Dempsey, 63. "It was a personal touch that I don't think they'll get anywhere else. But it looks like people will be forced to go to shopping centers."

"I guess that's progress."

Gresham Penney's store to close doors on an era

Oregonian, Jan 10, 1987

By ERIC GORANSON
of The Oregonian staff

GRESHAM — Nearly six decades of history in Gresham will end Saturday when J.C. Penney closes its doors at 19 N.E. Roberts Ave. for the last time.

Launched in 1929 when many area farmers still came to Gresham by horse and buggy, the store has served three generations of many East Multnomah County families.

J.C. Penney is the fifth oldest retail store still operating in the Gresham area, according to the Gresham Area Chamber of Commerce. Only W.R. Hicks Co. launched in 1923, Gresham TV & Radio in 1923, the Gresham Drug-Rexall store in 1903 and Zim's IGA grocery store founded in the late 1880s are older.

The store opened at a site on North Main

Street in a store now occupied by Gresham Business Machines & Stationery. It moved in 1952 to its current site, which had been the location of Gresham's first City Hall.

In the early days, customers who purchased goods would have to wait for change to be returned from the store office by a pulley system. It wasn't until Penney moved to its Roberts site that sales clerks began using cash registers.

Except for the store manager, the entire operation has been run by women employees for the past 20 years, said Phyllis Matz, who first joined the store in 1961. Termination of the operation will put about 11 regular employees out of work, Manager Joe Farnsworth said. In earlier days as many as 25 people had jobs in the Gresham store, Matz said.

All of the laid-off workers have been promised cash settlements based on their longevity with the store. Others are expected to be offered employment in other J.C. Penney Co. Inc. stores if available, Matz said. However, as of midweek no one had come to explain the options, employees said.

Closure of the store was announced in August and had not been entirely unexpected since the company had been shutting numerous smaller outlets throughout the nation in favor of operating larger ones in major regional shopping centers.

Penney's stores at Eastport Shopping Center and in Oregon City, Hillsboro, Hood River and Lake Oswego were closed in recent years.

Employees said replacement of longtime manager Harris Bateman in May 1986 by

Farnsworth was the first indication the closure would follow. Farnsworth had been employed at other Penney stores that were closed. Bateman was transferred to The Dalles.

Matz said the demise of the Gresham store dates back to 1960 when J.C. Penney opened a major store in Lloyd Center. Opening of another Penney store with the launching of Clackamas Town Center in 1981 was the final nail in the coffin.

Wayne M. Mohn, district manager for all smaller Penney stores in Oregon and Washington, said shoppers shifting to regional stores coupled with declining sales in Gresham spelled the doom for the Gresham outlet. Based on shopper ZIP codes, it became clear shoppers preferred the large stores, he said.

Business

All sales are final

After several weeks of clearance sales, the goods were as sparse as the customers Friday at the Gresham J.C. Penney store. The store is closing its doors today, ending more than 56 years in Gresham. Shopping malls such as Lloyd Center and Clackamas Town Center have siphoned off business from the store, which opened March 13 1930, prompting management to close down the Gresham facility.

Staff photo by Terry Farris

