

# Montgomery Ward Building

753 South Main Street, Del Rio, Texas 78840

by

Doug Braudaway

*This is a text that I had hoped would lead to a historical marker application. It never happened, but the building is beautiful and has some cool history behind it.*

Del Rio's San Felipe Agricultural, Manufacturing & Irrigation Company was the original landowner for this property as it was for much of early Del Rio. (The land was part of the James Mitchell Grant from the State of Texas, but neither Mitchell nor his heirs ever occupied the tract of land.) The Irrigation Company bought the tract in 1868 and started the town.<sup>1</sup>

The company sold this tract of land on the northwest corner of the Madre Canal and Main Street to Max Stool in 1929. Stool constructed the building at 753 South Main Street specifically for Montgomery Ward & Company with the intent of signing a long term lease.<sup>2</sup> The first lease ran ten years; the cost \$9,240 per year for the first five and \$10,160 per year for the second five.<sup>3</sup> The lease was renewed several times.

The specifications for the structure included the "Spirit of Progress" icon on the building's façade above the front door. The icon was based on a seventeen foot statue that Ward placed on top of his new Chicago headquarters in 1899, and it appeared on company catalogs in the 1930s and appears to have been part of the retail side of the business when Ward began the

---

<sup>1</sup> The Texas Historical Commission and Val Verde County Historical Commission have placed a marker for the canal system in Del Rio. At the time, Madre Canal was uncovered as a cut across the downtown lots. Max Stool's purchase of the land included a provision for covering the canal while doing nothing to impede the flow of water.

<sup>2</sup> The location was also listed as 755 South Main.

<sup>3</sup> VVC, Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 75, pages 41-47, dated July 31, 1929.

storefront part of the company. Other recently restored Wards Buildings across the country are also topped with the symbol, one recognized as the “trademark of the Roaring 20's.”<sup>4</sup>

This store was opened as part of the Ward company’s transition from a strictly mail order business to one that sold product out of storefronts. The mail order company started in 1872; founder Aaron Montgomery Ward went into storefront business “reluctantly” in 1926. Having made that decision, Ward targeted his stores at communities of 10,000 to 15,000. During 1928 the company built 208 stores and in 1929 built 288. Del Rio likely would not have had a Ward store if Stool had not gotten the contract when he did. The Great Depression followed the stock market crash of 1929, and Ward opened only 49 stores in 1930. After this time most new Ward stores were opened in much larger cities while stores in smaller markets were subject to closure from the 1930s through the 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

Del Rio’s Montgomery Ward store appears to have fallen victim to a company policy during the 1950s that catalog stores should replace retail stores in unprofitable or marginally profitable markets. The Ward store closed entirely in 1951 (or early 1952). When the company returned to Del Rio, it was in the form of a catalog store, which had opened in a smaller, less expensive structure on the 800 block of Main Street. By 1963 half of all Ward’s stores were

---

<sup>4</sup> “Graveyards of Chicago, <[www.graveyards.com/rosehill/ward.html](http://www.graveyards.com/rosehill/ward.html)>; Plymouth [Indiana] Area Chamber of Commerce, Issue 162, Dec. 1997, <[www.plychamber.org/newsmoonth/dec97/decpage1.html](http://www.plychamber.org/newsmoonth/dec97/decpage1.html)>. The “Historic Downtown Statesville [North Carolina] tourist pamphlet includes a Montgomery Ward building complete with the icon and decorative façade brickwork similar to that on the Del Rio building. “Called “the Spirit of Progress,” it depicts a woman in flowing robes balancing on a globe and holding a torch in one hand and a staff in the other. The statue is an adaption of an earlier sculpture by Augustus Saint-Gaudens that at one time topped Madison Square Garden in New York and at another the Agriculture Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.”

Robert Sharoff, “New Roles for Montgomery Ward site,” New York Times News Service, October 21, 2001, <[www.naplesnews.com/01/10/realestate/d664738a.htm](http://www.naplesnews.com/01/10/realestate/d664738a.htm)>.

<sup>5</sup> Cecil C. Hoge, Sr., *The First Hundred Years Are The Toughest: What We Can Learn From The Century Of Competition Between Sears And Wards*, Ten Speed Press: Berkeley, California, 1988, pages 1-9, 101-119, 158-163, 178, 207, 222.

catalog stores like Del Rio's.<sup>6</sup>

Other buildings had been on the lot before 1929. Two of them, including a John Taini stone building, may have been torn down to make way for this construction. The Wards building was built to be thoroughly modern in every aspect. The property owner was to “furnish sufficient heat” to keep the premises at seventy degrees when open for business and at all other times above freezing. An elevator was included for freight, but people generally used the stairway. Clauses about electricity and sidewalks were detailed and required Stool to make certain that the customers had a clean, safe shopping experience. The completed building was large—three stories tall—and one of Del Rio's largest.

Stool owned the land property until his death in 1972. Daughter Golda Stool Giss inherited the building (identified in the will as the Lanes' Department Store building) as well as the Kress Building, the subject of an upcoming VVCHC marker application. In 1980 Giss sold the building to a three-man partnership called LUCARLU: Carlos Lidsky, Luis Lidsky, and Simon Lidsky. The purchase was made over time, but not completed until 2001. Giss had died in 1986, and the purchase was made from her estate. The LUCARLU firm then sold the building to Eduardo Castaneda who is the current owner and operator of Daniela's.<sup>7</sup>

The building has had few owners and just as few stores over the years. Montgomery Ward & Company occupied the structure from its creation in 1929 until 1951 (or possibly 1952). The building was vacant for a short time but was soon occupied by Hicks Haywood clothing manufacturer (perhaps better known by a more recent name—Hicks-Ponder). This company occupied the structure from 1953 until 1956 when it moved to the north side of the railroad

---

<sup>6</sup> *1872-1972, A Century of Serving Consumers: The Story of Montgomery Ward*, published by Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc., 1972, pages 83-89.

<sup>7</sup> VVC, Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 74, pages 528+; Vol. 239, pages 23+; Vol. 363, pages 330+; Vol. 778, pages 766+; Vol. 778, pages 798+.

tracks (100 Ave. T) out of the downtown district. Lane's Department Store moved in during 1953, occupying the building until 1978. Another short vacancy lasted until 1980 when International Fabrics of Del Rio moved in. This store remained through 1989, after which, the structure fell vacant for a decade. In 2001 Eduardo Castaneda, who chose the site for its historic presence, opened Daniela's, a new clothing store which remains in operation at this time.<sup>8</sup>

As part of Del Rio's newly initiated Main Street Program, Castaneda offered the Montgomery Ward Building for the THC's first architectural rendering to give the Main Street owners and merchants an idea of how a historic structure can be restored and/or rehabilitated into productive use. The Montgomery Ward Building is worthy of a historical marker—for itself and for the success of Main Street.

---

<sup>8</sup> Del Rio City Telephone Directories, [various years]; Del Rio and the Winter Garden Telephone Directories, [various years].

## Bibliography—

Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc. *1872-1972, A Century of Serving Consumers: The Story of Montgomery Ward*. Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc., 1972.

Del Rio City Telephone Directories. [various years].

Del Rio and the Winter Garden Telephone Directories. [various years].

“Graveyards of Chicago.” <[www.graveyards.com/rosehill/ward.html](http://www.graveyards.com/rosehill/ward.html)>; Plymouth [Indiana] Area Chamber of Commerce, Issue 162, Dec. 1997.

“Historic Downtown Statesville, North Carolina.”  
<[www.plychamber.org/newsmoth/dec97/decpage1.html](http://www.plychamber.org/newsmoth/dec97/decpage1.html)>.

Hoge, Cecil C., Sr. *The First Hundred Years Are The Toughest: What We Can Learn From The Century Of Competition Between Sears And Wards*. Ten Speed Press: Berkeley, California, 1988.

Sharoff, Robert. “New Roles for Montgomery Ward site,” New York Times News Service. October 21, 2001. <[www.naplesnews.com/01/10/realestate/d664738a.htm](http://www.naplesnews.com/01/10/realestate/d664738a.htm)>.

Val Verde County, Clerk’s Office. Deed Records.

## Attachments—

Two photos of the Montgomery Ward & Co. Building, most likely shot in the early 1940s.

Image of Montgomery Ward catalog from 1931-1932 showing the “Spirit of Progress” icon.

Three Sanborn Fire Insurance maps: 1917, 1924, 1930. The first two show the property prior to the construction of the building; the last shows the building in place as well as the downtown area in a recognizable form.