

Warner Building

536 South Main Street, Del Rio, Texas 78840

by

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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.

The Warner Building, at 534 South Main Street on the northeast corner of Main and Losoya Streets, is one of the oldest structures in Del Rio.

The building is named for Albert and Cordelia Warner, early and long-time owners of the structure. The Warners bought Lot 1 (the corner on which the building now sits) and Lot 2 on Block Five on July 6, 1895, and bought the adjacent Lot 3 on November 13, 1897.¹ Both purchases were made from Frank and Mary Greenwood, early Del Rioans, for whom Greenwood Ave. and Greenwood Park are named. At some time as early as the 1920s but probably earlier, the Warners made their residence at 516 South Main, probably on the third lot. Husband Albert willed a great many properties to wife Cordelia before he died, and so she alone was associated with the building for many years.²

The building was built during the Warners' ownership of the property. The 1900 Sanborn Map shows a smaller building on the site. This must have been demolished by the Warners to make way for this building. A carved stone over one of the doorways says 1905

¹ VVC, Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 6, pages 115+; Vol. 7, pages 282+. The deed, as well as later ones, includes the term Range 3, but later records note that the Range is identified on the City maps as Range 3/5, as it is.

² VVC, Deed Records, Vol. 25, pages 108+.

along with the name John Taini, a stonemason responsible for many old Del Rio buildings.³

Norvell and March Brothers is the earliest known business to have occupied the site (in the first decade of the 1900s. Norvell and March Brothers was burned out of a previous building, and had moved into their “new quarters” in the “Warner Building.” The move occurred in 1903 before the larger, current building was erected; the new business may be why the building was expanded or replaced by the larger structure. The size (and expense) of the ads suggest a profitable enterprise. Norvell-March sold spring suits, shoes, belts, shirts, skirts, laces, ribbons, parasols, hosiery, and fans.⁴

The building next became the home of the Del Rio branch of the J.C. Penney & Company store in 1924. James Cash Penney started his first retail store in 1902 in Wyoming. In 1906 he had two stores; in 1911 he had expanded to twenty-two stores, each called “Golden Rule Store.” He incorporated in 1913 under the laws of Utah. In 1924 Penney opened his 500th store, the same year he opened the Del Rio store. The Del Rio store was part of the incredible 1920s growth in the chain and was part of the spring 1923 company policy to move into the South. The store was opened shortly after the name change (in 1919) to “J.C. Penney & Company.” By the end of the Second World War, the company had over 1600 stores, most of them in towns of 25,000 or smaller like Del Rio.⁵

³ Interestingly, Warner’s Grocery may never have moved into the building. Albert Warner offered a great many food products including several one might think would not be available on the edge of desert: “City Meat Market: Beef, Pork, Mutton, Veal, and all Kind of Sausage – Bacon, Hams, Spare Ribs, Pig’s Feet, Etc., Fish and Oysters, All Kinds of Vegetables, Butter, Lard and Eggs.” The fact that Warner had bought and slaughtered eighteen cows was a newsworthy event, and the fact that the meat was in refrigerators was news to the newly urbanizing town. Still, a 1906 Noah Rose photo (included in the attachments) shows Norvell and March Brothers occupying the 1905 building, while the Grocery and Meat Market remained in the building next door to the north Advertisement, *Del Rio Daily News*, December 4, 1905, no page number; Untitled article, *Del Rio Daily News*, December 4, 1905, no page number.

⁴ Advertisement, *Del Rio Record*, July 31, 1903, no page number; Advertisement, *Val Verde County Herald*, May 4, 1906, no page number.

⁵ Norman Beasley, *Main Street Merchant: The Story of the J.C. Penney Company*, New York: Whittlesey House Publishers, 1948. pages 47, 60, 80-82, 126, 223; Mary Elizabeth Curry, *Creating an American Institution: The Merchandising Genius of J.C. Penney*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, pages 93-95, 183, 214, 247.

The Warners signed the lease in 1923 with the lease to begin in spring of 1924. The lease strictly adhered to the Prohibition of the day—the building “shall not be used for the sale or distribution of intoxicating liquors.” Apparently, the 1905 structure did not have modern amenities because the lease agreement required the Warners to install two toilets, two lavatories, and electrical wiring in addition to remodeling the streetfront to include two doors with seven-foot show windows. The building was extended in a second, 1926 lease; the one-story extension was painted with a Penney’s ad, but the original stone was left untouched.⁶ In the late 1930s, Penney’s moved two blocks south into the heart of downtown, probably to better compete with the new Montgomery Ward’s (1929) and the five-and-dime Kress store (1926).⁷

Mrs. Warner deeded the property in 1940 to W.E. Whitehead as payment of a debt. He and wife Mary Bell turned around and sold the property to members of the family: W.R. Whitehead, Lois Nell Whitehead, and Louis D. Whitehead. These three sold the property in 1944 to Manuel de los Santos, owner of Del Rio Furniture Company.⁸ De los Santos then moved his business from up the block into the building. De los Santos sold out to L.M. and Mary E. Cartall in 1959, and they sold it to Philip A. and Leota Ricks in 1962. Ricks sold it to Orville and Annie Newson in 1968.⁹

In 1981, after Orville Newson died, the non-resident Annie sold the Warner Building to A & A Realty Company which in turn sold it to a company partner, Arthur H. Speier, in 1985. Three days later he sold it to George and Violette Farhat. This is the same year Sam’s Boot

⁶ VVC, Deed Records, Vol. 56, pages 2+; Vol. 60, pages 575+.

⁷ “Eight ‘scouts’ investigated and reported on potential sites. Good locations were sought, but not the most expensive ones. Proximity to a 5 cent and 10 cent store or department store had proven helpful. A middle of the block site on ‘Main Street’ was fine [like the new site], but corner locations [like the Warner Building] on the same street were too expensive.” Curry, page 251. “Ever since 1935, however, Penney stores had faced increasing competition for customers from Sears...and Montgomery Ward & Co.” Curry, page 271.

⁸ VVC, Clerk’s Office, Vol. 16, pages 428+; Deed Records, Vol. 106, pages 422+; Vol. 97, pages 363+; Vol. 19, pages 153+.

⁹ VVC, Clerk’s Office, Deed Records, Vol. 154, pages 419+; Vol. 167, pages 258+; Vol. 197, pages 65+.

Corral opened. Sammy G. Farhat bought it from George in 1994 and currently owns the building and operates the business.¹⁰

The Warner Building was a centrally located, prominent building for businesses to attract customers. Attorney Walter Gillis operated out of an upstairs office as early as 1905; Dentist C.D. McDowell was in there the next year. The Del Rio Telephone Exchange also leased space in the building during the winter of 1905-1906. Other space was leased eventually. Second floor occupants during the 1920s included—

Val Verde County Abstract Company;	Dr. A.W. Olson (chiropractor);
Dr. L.H. Rogers (dentist);	L.F. Harza, Consulting Engineer;
Dr. W.P. Meredith (physician);	Eagle Loan Company;
Burnett Ware Engineers;	D.H. Brunner (unclear occupation).

Occupants of the upper floor during the 1930s continued to be a diverse collection of businesses: Eagle Loan Company, Val Verde County Abstract Company, and Inter-National Advertising Agency. A much more prominent tenant came in the form of Dr. John R. Brinkley, a nationally known doctor and radio personality whose clinic occupied two floors of the nearby Roswell Hotel. In 1933 Doctor Brinkley's XER, Office & Studio were operating from the structure, and sometime during the late 1930s, Doctor Brinkley moved his Book-keeping Office and Business Office into the Warner Building.¹¹

The 1940s and 1950s found the upper floor packed, very often with 100% occupancy. The Warner Building was given its own address in telephone directories separate from the first floor store with its Main Street address. The upper floor offices were listed at "100 Warner

¹⁰ VVC, Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 392, pages 276+; Vol. 449, pages 236+; Vol. 449, pages 239+; Vol. 594, pages 835+.

¹¹ Advertisement, *Del Rio Daily News*, December 11, 1905, no page number; Advertisement, *Del Rio Daily News*, January 31, 1906, no page number; Untitled article, *Del Rio Daily News*, December 4, 1905, no page number; City Directory, 1929; City Directory, 1933-1934; Del Rio Kriss-Kross Telephone Directory, 1936; Polk's City Directory for Del Rio, 1938; Del Rio & Winter Garden Telephone Directory, 1939. XER was "The Voice of Two Nations" and promoted the Del Rio/Acuna area nationally.

Building, Room ___” on Losoya Street; the different street name was a result of the second floor access coming off of Losoya up a stairway built into the rear of the structure. The occupants included—

Randolph H. Gutierrez (lawyer);	Ralston Watch Repair Shop;
Jones & Jones (engineers & surveyors);	W.T. Jones, County Surveyor;
J.E. Ward (engineer);	H. Conger Jones (unclear);
Mexican Consul/Consulate;	Del Rio Retail Merchants Association;
Studio Girl Cosmetics;	Housing Authority of Del Rio;
Texas Prudential Insurance Company;	Bell Loan Company;
Cristobal Aldrete (lawyer);	Rodney B. Horton & Company (accountants);
H.C. Jones (civil engineer);	International Office of Odd Fellows Val Verde Lodge #4;
American Red Cross (listed as the Red Cross Surgical Dressing Rooms in 1944). ¹²	

The year 1962 seems to be the last year the upper floor of the building was occupied. Ralston Watch Repair Shop rented Room 6, and Bell Loan Company rented Room 11. Rooms 1-5, 8-10, and 12 were listed as vacant. (Room 7 may have been an extension of 6.)

From that time, only the street level floor has been open for business. During the life of the building, the street level has been occupied by—

Norvell and March Brothers	1905 – unknown date
E.S. Block Grocery and Hardware	indeterminate dates, 1910s to 1918 ¹³
J.C. Penney & Company	1925 – 1938;
Eidson’s Dry Goods	1938 – 1939 (or later); ¹⁴
Del Rio Furniture Company	1945 – 1966;
vacant	1967;
Newsom Jewelers	1968 – 1972;

¹² Del Rio & Winter Garden Telephone Directory, 1944; Del Rio & Winter Garden Telephone Directory, 1946; Del Rio & Winter Garden Telephone Directory, 1948; Polk’s City Directory for Del Rio, 1948-1949; Polk’s City Directory for Del Rio, 1951-1952; Polk’s City Directory for Del Rio, 1959.

¹³ A 1918 postcard (in possession of the author) shows this store in the building.

¹⁴ This store may have been upstairs at one point, but the directory listing suggests it was a street level store. The odd spelling is correct.

Mill Outlet	1973 – 1981;
La Quemazon Inc. [fabric shop]	1982 – [1983 or 1984];
Sam’s Boot Corral [western wear]	1985 – present. ¹⁵

Del Rio’s Warner Building is distinctive as a result of several factors in combination.

The stone construction, while common in Del Rio one-hundred years ago, is very rare today, and few examples of this kind of work remain, much less remain in use in 2003. Additionally, the changing times forced a great many downtown buildings to be razed to make room for modern structures, whereas the Warner Building’s owners and operators made serious efforts to keep the building in use without eliminating all the historic elements of the structure. And while newer, fancier buildings have been constructed along Del Rio’s Main Street, the Warner Building has stood on this corner of Main (once named Perry Street for the first businessman in town) and Losoya (named for wife of Del Rio’s founding family) reminding us that historic structures and modern business are compatible and complementary.

¹⁵ Polk’s City Directory for Del Rio, [various years]; GTE Del Rio Telephone Directory, [various years]; City of Del Rio Tax Records, [various years].

Bibliography—

Beasley, Norman. *Main Street Merchant: The Story of the J.C. Penney Company*. New York: Whittlesey House Publishers, 1948.

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Del Rio Kriss-Kross Telephone Directory, 1936.

Del Rio *Record*.

GTE Del Rio Telephone Directory, [various years].

Polk's City Directory for Del Rio, [various years].

Val Verde County, Clerk's Office.

Val Verde *County Herald*.

Attachments—

A 1906 Noah Rose photograph showing the Warner Building at right and the Warner Meat Market.

A 1907 Noah Rose photograph of the 500 block of South Main Street, looking north.

A photograph of a parade marching up Main Street.

A 1914 Noah Rose photograph of the 500 block of South Main, also looking north.

Two postcard views of downtown. The top photo is supposedly dated to 1912 or thereabouts; the bottom is undated

A photograph shot between 1916 and the mid 1920s showing the back of the Warner Building of the downtown commercial district (at that time).

A photograph of the Warner Building after J.C. Penney & Company moved in.

The rear of the building shows (and still does) the roofline that once topped the front of the structure.

Penney's contracted with Warner to build this one-story extension to the building. The extension remains onsite.

This aerial 1930s photograph shows the Warner Building being overtaken in size by new, modern construction.

Four Sanborn Fire Insurance maps: 1905, 1909, 1924, 1930.