

Woolworth Building

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The Woolworth Building is one of the oldest structures on Del Rio's commercial Main Street but also one of the first buildings of modern Del Rio. This one-story building does not stand out as clearly as the multi-story Kress Building or have the icon art like the Montgomery Ward Building, but those stores had been built because of Woolworth's. Woolworth's was the store to beat.

Max Stool arrived in Del Rio in 1904, opened a retail department store, and, after leasing space for a decade, began buying property. The first property was near the railroad tracks, but Stool must have concluded that Main Street near the courthouse would be a better location for retail business.

In 1916 Stool bought this property, Lot 1, Block 3, Range 1 of North Del Rio.¹ In 1922 he signed a lease with F.W. Woolworth to build a structure on that site to Woolworth's specifications. In exchange Woolworth signed a fifteen year lease. Only six years into the lease Woolworth's contracted to have a two story extension added to the rear of the building. "Papa" Max and wife Anna Stool owned the property until her death in 1934. At that time Max and their children divided Anna's estate. Ownership passed to son Joseph in 1936. Joseph and wife Fannie W. owned the site and structure until his death, at which time Fannie sold it to daughter Ann Elizabeth Stool. She and husband Edward William kept the Woolworth Building in the

¹ Deeds sometimes state it is on Lot 7 as marked on a specific City of Del Rio map.

family until 1998 when they sold it to the current owners John and Yon Conrad.²

Woolworth's was "the five and ten pioneer."³ Frank Winfield Woolworth, after several jobs in retail, opened his first store in 1879 in Utica, New York and his second that same year in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. After building a retail empire, Woolworth went public under the name F.W. Woolworth and Company in 1911. The company founder died in 1919 before the opening of the Del Rio store.

The "Great Five-Cent Store" was popular, selling a variety of goods including back to school items, holiday gifts and decorations, small pets—turtles were a favorite—and things for newlyweds. Musical scores and films were based on the company name and the fact that the store was a popular dating venue. Woolworth's was such an American icon that a North Carolina store was selected as the public target for lunch counter sit-ins protesting segregation. While all remaining Woolworth's closed in 1997, that lunch counter is now in the Smithsonian.⁴

The Del Rio Woolworth Building has been occupied by only four businesses. First was F.W. Woolworth and Company from 1922 through 1938 (or shortly thereafter). The Building was possibly vacant for a short time during the late-1930s.⁵ No sign of Woolworth's, Morrison's or any other occupant is found in the 1944 and 1946 telephone directories; however, a World War II era photo at the Whitehead Memorial Museum shows a Morrison & Co. sign above the canopy. C.G. Morrison and Company occupied the structure and continued operations there from the 1940s through 1980. Morrison's occupied the structure for a long enough time that some people refer to the structure as the Morrison Building.

² VVC, Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 52, pages 129+; Vol. 70, pages 4+; Vol. 91, pages 390+; Vol. 377, pages 400+; Vol. 684, pages 424+.

³ 1872-1972, *A Century of Serving Consumers: The Story of Montgomery Ward*, published by Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc., 1972, page 69.

⁴ Karen Plunkett-Powell, *Remembering Woolworth's: A Nostalgic History of the World's Most Famous Five-and-Dime*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, pages 4, 11, 31-46, 71-76, 133, 157-163, 178-1194, 201, 211.

⁵ The limited available sources make date confirmation difficult.

After a short vacancy (1981 and probably part of 1982) Mangel's women's retail clothing moved in, redesigning the front façade with aluminum panels above the awning. Mangel's continued to operate until 1998. The building was vacant until the Conrads bought it and opened Toni's Flower Shop, the current occupant.⁶ Property owner John Conrad has recently removed the non-historical panels revealing the original façade with decorative brickwork. The brickwork is similar to that on the Old Ross Building (800 block of Main) and to a building façade now covered but shown in a Second World War era photo showing the Guarantee (next door on the 700 block of Main).

Del Rio was designated a Main Street city in 2002. The Woolworth Building is one of the early brick buildings that began to define Del Rio's Main Street architecture in the 1920s (as opposed to the stone construction from the previous twenty years). The Woolworth Building deserves a historical marker for itself and for the further promotion of the Main Street Program.

⁶ Del Rio City Directories, various years [1962-1999].