

J.C. Penney's:

Sometimes the story of one business can mirror the story of a town. The story of Hayward's J.C. Penney closely reflects the growth that has taken place in Hayward from the Great Depression through the 1960s. So let's start at the beginning.

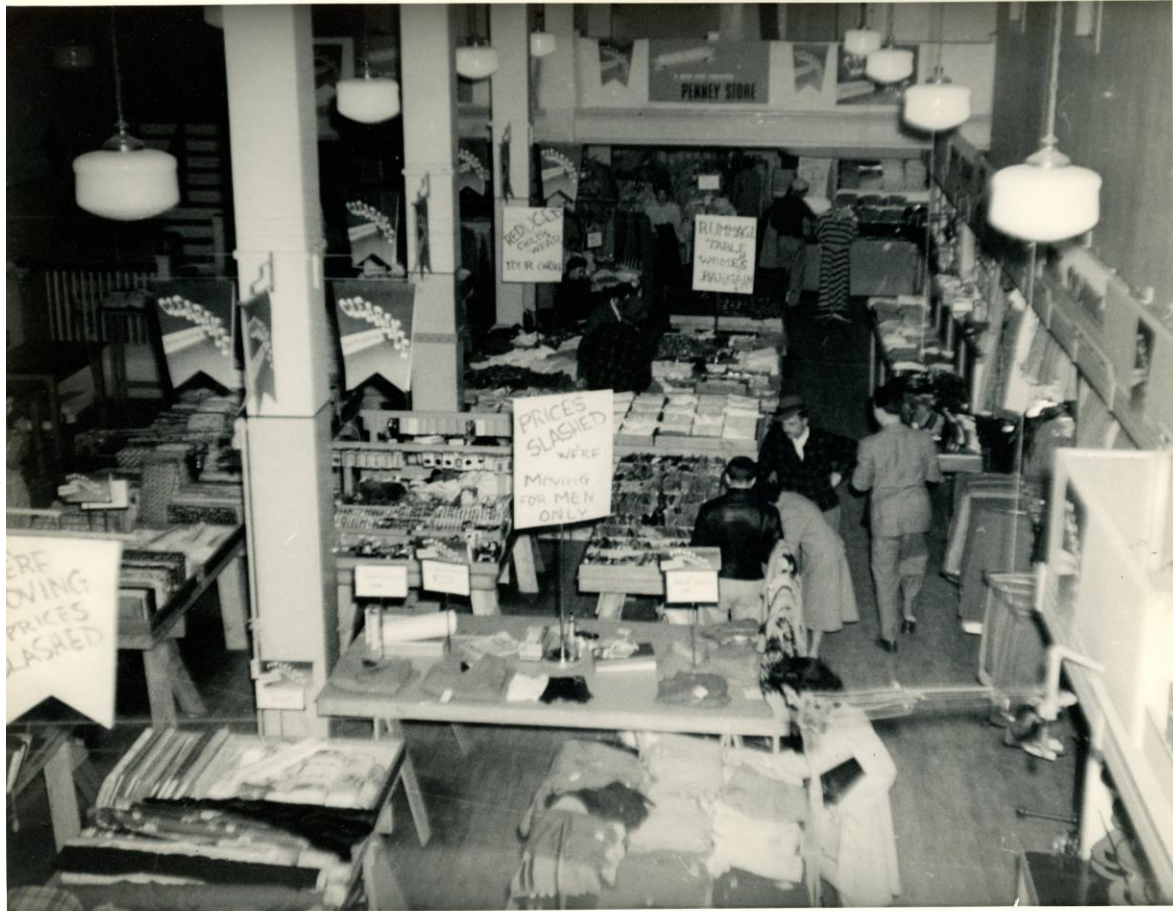
In the 1920s B Street was a mix of older wooden buildings and more modern concrete structures. Seeing an opportunity to attract a nationwide, chain department store, J.C. Penney's, local resident C. Adolph May commissioned a new concrete building to be built at 1030 B Street. Oakland contractor H.E. Tupper and Hayward's own E. Guy Warren (of Cal State East Bay Warren Hall fame) headed up construction of the new facility. The local newspaper at the time noted that in order to build the new store, a 50-year-old sidewalk would have to be removed. The sidewalk was believed to be the first paved sidewalk in Hayward. That first sidewalk itself was built by Adam May, C. Adolph's father. Once completed the new building had basement and street level sales floors and office space on the second floor.

Hayward's first J.C. Penney opened in March of 1929. The J.C. Penney company, which started in Wyoming, expanded rapidly across the country in the 1920s. The 1030 B Street site opened its doors as store number 1069. When it opened, about 12 local residents were hired to staff the operation. It was managed by Lester Griggs, who had worked for a number of years at another J.C. Penney's in the Central Valley.

The new store quickly became popular with locals. And even as Hayward and the nation entered the Great Depression of the 1930s, the 1030 B Street store sustained a successful amount of business. The store co-sponsored many local events such as the rodeo parade, the pet parade, and more. In the early 1940s, the B Street J.C. Penny's was remodeled to the delight of shoppers. The local newspaper remarked that "manners of displaying merchandise have so changed that the whole new plan cannot but strike even the most unobserving as lending an entirely different tone to shopping, from the days prior to Pearl Harbor."



The exterior of the B Street Store, during a Western Week Rodeo Parade, c. 1940.



The interior of the B Street location, c. 1949

As World War II ended, Hayward began changing rapidly. Little old First Street was widened in 1947 and soon new, large, modern stores were constructed along the section of town that would become known as "The Strip". Seeing an opportunity for a larger store to serve more customers, J.C. Penney's decided to relocate to the new shopping area on the Strip, just a couple blocks up from their B Street store. In March of 1949, a new, larger, modern J.C. Penney Store opened to a large crowd at 540 First Street (22540 Foothill today). The new store enjoyed a great first month of business, until disaster struck.



The grand opening on "The Strip", March 1949



A display at the new store, March 1949.

On the night of May 19, 1949, the new \$500,000 J.C. Penney caught fire—likely caused by the use of an onsite incinerator. Store Manager, Darrell Parkin ran to the store from his home a few blocks away on Prospect Street, and had to be restrained by firefighters and he tried to run into the burning building. The blaze had grown so intense that the Hayward firefighters needed the help of nearby Ashland and Cherryland fire crews to put out the blaze. After two and a half hours, the fire was finally put out. The building was a total loss.

In the aftermath, Parkin and other store employees salvaged what they could from the wreckage and opened a temporary store across the street in an older building. The aptly named J.C. Penney "Fire Sale" helped keep the store afloat while the store was rebuilt in the same location.



The fire seen from behind the building May 19, 1949

MAIN FLOOR - NEXT DAY



The destruction on the ground floor, May 20, 1949



The flooded basement, May 19, 1949. Some of this merchandise was recovered and sold in the temporary store



The Temporary J.C. Penney opened across the street within weeks of the fire.



Shoppers hunt for bargains in the temporary store.

It took only six months to rebuild the store and a grand reopening was held on September 3, 1949--just in time for the holiday season. After surviving the fire and its aftermath, "The Strip" J.C. Penney's continued to do good business in Hayward through the 1950s. The store competed with other general department stores like Joseph Magnins, Smiths, and others.



The rebuilt Foothill Boulevard store in the upper left, February 26, 1960.

But once again, times were changing. Hayward was growing exponentially at this time. New housing tracts were popping up in west and south Hayward. The city was becoming more decentralized and downtown Hayward was less of a focal point. Seeing an opportunity, several stores began leaving downtown to be closer to these new suburban pockets. Perhaps the greatest symbol of the new Hayward was Southland Mall.

In 1963 the large, enclosed Southland Mall was under construction. Surrounded by the new Palma Ceia and Winton Grove housing tracts, the mall was a more convenient location than downtown Hayward for many shoppers and featured a vast, 8,000 space parking lot to accommodate visitors from Fremont and Oakland. Once again seeing an opportunity, J.C. Penney made plans to close its downtown location and move to the mall.

On October 22, 1964 a new 175,000 square foot Penney's opened at Southland Mall. Personnel Manager Blanche Avellar, hired more than 400 people to staff the new store's 37 departments. Since 1964, the store has been remodeled several times and updated as times have changed.

Long gone are the candy counter, music department, and auto repair departments. What has remained the same? 91 years later there is still a J.C. Penney's in Hayward.



Southland Mall, as it appeared August 1972.



J.C. Penney in the mall in 1985. It was around this time that the store was remodeled once again.

Interesting note: The former location of J.C. Penney's on Foothill Boulevard was most recently home to Chalk it Up Billiards. On August 31, 2020, a fire once again swept through the building, affecting multiple businesses. Once again, the Hayward Fire Department had a challenging fire on their hands but successfully contained the fire and saved surrounding businesses. Strange that the same location caught fire in the last 70+ years!