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Guide to MS317 The Popular Dry Goods Company Records

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Guide to

MS 317

The Popular Dry Goods Company Records



193 linear feet
Prepared by Gloria Meraz
and
Gerrienne Schaad
Curator of Manuscripts
July 1997

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Citation: The Popular Dry Goods Company, MS 317, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, The University of Texas at El Paso, Library

C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department
University of Texas at El Paso Library

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HISTORICAL SKETCH

The Popular Dry Goods Department Store was organized in 1902 by Adolph Schwartz. The Popular remained the largest locally-owned retail enterprise in El Paso until its closure in September 1995. At its height, The Popular occupied four stores and a distribution center, and, throughout its history, employed thousands of local El Pasoans, some of whom worked with the store for fifty years. Providing jobs and "high fashion" to both sides of the border region, The Popular remained both an economic and cultural force in the Borderland throughout its 93 year history.

The Popular was noted for its "New York Style" of wares and fashion. Many national department store chains, such as Dillard's, entered the Southwest marketplace in the 1970s, well behind their presence in other areas. For much of its history, The Popular maintained a stronghold on the sale of high end goods. With customers traveling from the interior of Mexico and across the Southwest, The Popular developed a reputation for its fine goods and excellent service.

The Popular thrived amidst numerous economic and social instabilities, including the Mexican Revolution, the Depression, the world wars, and the devaluation of Mexican currency in the early 1980s. During all of these times, The Popular adapted its credit policies to address the pressing needs of a public short on cash and uncertain about their economic futures. For the most part, The Popular overcame these difficulties with creative consumer programs. However, the interdependence between El Paso and the Northern Mexico regions, which was one of The Popular's strengths, led to the decline of revenue for many borderland businesses, especially an operation like The Popular that specialized in high-end items. While national trends were generally more long lasting, the effects of the unpredictable Mexican economy severely impacted borderland businesses trying to compete with store chains not solely reliant on a local economy. When The Popular closed in 1995, the store had managed to regain much of the ground it lost in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although many reasons exist for the store's ultimate closure, the impracticality of maintaining a "New York style" chain in the borderland at a period of great unpredictability is an important one.

Despite its closure, The Popular remains an important icon of the regional past. Up until 1992, The Popular offered free delivery of purchases and offered several buying services to its customers. These services included Sally Shopper, designed to help immobile or home-bound customers, repair services, and fashion and decorating consulting. Specialized consulting services, an important marketing technique, became a hallmark of the store. The Popular's managers routinely sent letters of congratulations and offers of free help to new parents, brides, new homeowners, and any group they would be in need of the many items available at The Popular. The merchandise included fashions, accessories, fine jewelry, shoes, linens, household products, furniture, and services, such as travel planning and photography, basically anything the store had to offer.

In addition to its commitment to service, The Popular also held a strong cultural role in the community. As a supporter of cultural events, The Popular represented both a social and cultural institution that was tied to the development of the Border Region. By providing fashion shows, bringing in celebrities (such as Bob Mackey, Estee Lauder, Eva Gabor) to the area, The Popular kept the region supplied with current fashion. The

Popular also sponsored many city events including the annual Sun Carnival parades, the Cotton pageant, and other local events.

The Popular also took a civic role in charity work. Through the Popular Foundation, the store and the Schwartz family donated money to the University of Texas at El Paso. The money was donated for various causes, but particularly to scholarship funds and the athletic program. The Popular Foundation, which granted money exclusively to local organizations, also supported both children's and religious organizations.

The Development and Growth of The Popular

Adolph Schwartz left Hungary in 1887 to immigrate to America, where he quickly found work on the railroad as a newsboy. His work for the railroad took him cross-country between Juarez and Mexico City. Schwartz then set up "Las Tres B. B. B."--a store he co-owned with a partner, Simon Picard. The three Bs stood for bueno, bonito, and barato (i.e., good, pretty, and cheap). At the turn of the century, Juarez held a larger population than El Paso and was, accordingly, a more strategic marketplace for retail. However, Adolph Schwartz anticipated the growth and importance of the American border town and decided to open a store in El Paso. With his already well-established connections with Mexican retailers and the community, Schwartz had a ready backing for his new store.

In 1897 Schwartz opened The Fair, a dry goods store on Overland Street in El Paso. His nephew, Maurice Schwartz joined him there in 1898. A short while later, Adolph's cousin, Ignatz Weiss also joined them. In 1902, they sold The Fair, after which Adolph returned to Europe for two years. During his absence, Maurice Schwartz and Weiss, along with Joe Zelman and J.C. Zozoya opened The Popular Dry Goods Company on South El Paso Street at Overland. By 1904, when The Popular was incorporated, Zelman and Zozoya no longer owned a percentage of The Popular and Adolph Schwartz had returned to become president of the company. The store remained under family ownership until its closure in late 1995.

In 1907 The Popular moved to the ground floor of the Masonic building on the corner of Mesa and San Antonio. Within a few years time, The Popular had taken over the entire Masonic building. In 1916, the Masonic building was demolished and a new six-level store was built in its place (a seventh floor was added later). In 1946 an eighth floor was added to the original building and a five-level building on San Antonio Street was connected to the main building over the adjacent alley. In 1960 The Popular opened a new warehouse and distribution center on Duranzno and Stevens Streets. This distribution center was replaced in 1975 by a new building on Reynolds Street.

In 1962 the Bassett location opened. Equipped with its own beauty salon, travel agency, photographic studio, and restaurant, the Bassett Popular proved to be the most successful of all of The Popular's locations. With its strategic central position, the Bassett Popular served the growing El Paso community. At the time it was built, Bassett Center was the only regional shopping area between Dallas, Texas and Phoenix, Arizona. In 1966, however, the success of the two Popular locations coupled with the growing El Paso community provided the incentive to establish another Popular

location.

The site chosen this time was at the Northgate (later Northpark) shopping area that was close to the Fort Bliss military base. Although smaller than the other two stores, Northgate was designed to meet the needs of the expanding military community and thus was able to tailor its wares to suit the clientele. In 1988 the store's location moved to the west anchor of the Northpark Mall.

The final Popular location at Sunland Park Mall resulted only after many years of planning and deliberation. The Popular executives had long considered opening another store. The owners considered possible locations in Juarez, New Mexico, and El Paso. Eventually, the West El Paso location was chosen. Considered a geographic compromise, the Sunland store would draw, it was hoped, customers from all three regions. The establishment of the Sunland location was inextricably tied to the development of the entire mall where the Sunland Popular was to be located. The Sunland store opened in 1988. Regardless of geographic location, The Popular Dry Goods Department Store maintained its reputation for quality items and exemplary service.

Officers of The Popular

Adolph Schwartz died in 1941 and his nephew, Maurice, succeeded him as president. In 1954, Maurice Schwartz died and his cousin, Manuel (son of Adolph) became President of The Popular. In 1959 Manuel died and his brother, Ervin became president. Also that year, Maurice's sons Herbert and Albert were named vice presidents. In 1960, Ervin Schwartz died and Herbert succeeded him as president. Edward Schwartz, son of Ervin Schwartz, was named vice president. Sol Freed (the only non-family member) was elected to the position of vice president and treasurer in 1973. In 1985 Herbert Schwartz was named chairman of the board, and Edward Schwartz succeeded him as president. Edith Schwartz Brannon became vice president/secretary and Richard Alvarado, vice president/treasurer. Bob Brannon was named vice president/general merchandise manager. Upon the retirement of Herbert in 1987, Edward was named chairman and CEO, and Albert was named president. Albert Schwartz retired as president in 1989 and Edith Schwartz Brannon and Richard Alvarado were named senior vice presidents. In 1992, Edith was elected as the store's eighth president while Richard Alvarado was named executive vice president. This administration was kept until the store's closing in 1995.

SERIES DESCRIPTION

The Popular Dry Goods Company Records are arranged in thirteen series:

Series I. Corporate Papers

Arranged alphabetically in four sub-series - Bylaws, Board of Directors, Executive Committee Meetings, and Corporation Stocks. The corporate papers relate to the legal and executive structure and organization of The Popular Dry Goods Company. The

records are primarily minutes from meetings dating between 1987-1995, which detail the operations, financial matters, and the closure of the business. Also, the changes in the corporate structure are reflected in the corporations stock series (1967-1981). Certain files within this series are restricted.

Series II. Officers

Arranged chronologically by officer, and/or office held, in twelve sub-series - Adolph Schwartz, Nandor Schwartz, Ignatz Weiss, Maurice Schwartz, Manuel Schwartz, Ervin Schwartz, Herbert M. Schwartz, Edward F. Schwartz, Albert J. Schwartz, Edith Brannon, Richard Alvarado, and Sol Freed. The records are further subdivided into the following series: correspondence, subject files, photographs, clippings, and printed materials. Amounts of material and subject coverage varies widely per officer, but topics include NAFTA, health care, store openings and downtown planning.

Series III. Stores

Arranged chronologically by date of building in seven sub-series - Popular, Downtown, Distribution Center (Old service building), Distribution Center, Bassett, Northpark, and Sunland. The records document the activities of the individual branch stores, as well as the development of the company from its initial one-store location. The majority of the material concerns the Sunland Park Mall store.

Series IV. Financial Records

Arranged alphabetically and then chronologically into thirteen sub-series - Accounts Receivable, Analysis Review, Annual Retail Trade Report, Auditing, Balance Sheets, Comptroller's Memos, Expenses, Dunn and Brad Street, Ledgers, Letter of Credit (Texas Commerce), Notes Payable, Regulations, and Tax. Materials include general ledgers, general journals, and financial statements. Many of the records are restricted and/or closed.

Series V. Merchandise Records

Arranged in one alphabetical series, the subject files detail the selection, purchase, and operations of the company=s Merchandise Information System. The records regarding the purchase of merchandise are restricted.

Series VI. Vendor Leases and Contracts

Arranged in one alphabetical series, the subject files include individual merchandise vendors and outside services provided through The Popular Department stores. Accounts range from Butterwick Patterns to Giorgio perfume, and from Gucci to Lloyd=s Furs and the Sophia Beauty Salon.

Series VII. Employee Benefits

Arranged alphabetically in five sub-series - Adolph Schwartz Endowment Fund, Comprehensive, Insurance, Pension, and Adolph Schwartz Memorial Savings Plan.

The records include materials on the Adolph Schwartz Endowment Fund and the Schwartz Memorial Savings Plan, as well as pension and insurance coverage. Many of the files are restricted and/or closed.

Series VIII. Employee Records

Arranged in ten sub-series - Bulletins and Memos to Employees, Directories, Files, Incentives, Individual Sales, Labor Relations, Letters, Locator Cards, Newsletters, and Payroll. The records document the company=s policies and communication with employees. The records include newsletters, payroll files, and employee procedures, but primarily consist of individual employee locator cards, which are temporarily closed to the public.

Series IX. Outside Services

Arranged alphabetically in five sub-series - Buying Offices, Insurance Consultants, Investment Consultants, Merchandising Consultants, and Tax Credit Consultants. The records concern the outside services used by The Popular in association with overall business management, retail industry objectives, and cooperative purchasing practices.

Series X. Advertising

Arranged in eleven sub-series - Christmas Catalogs, Company Contributions, Department, Guidelines, Logos and Proofs, Media, Press Kit, Promotions, Research, Store Windows - the Popular Bargain Store, and Photographs. The advertising records are primarily those of the advertising department and deal with promotional events. Materials include several Christmas catalogs, scrapbooks from the College Board, fashion shows, Cotton Maid promotional materials, photographs, and sheets of newspaper advertisements.

Series XI. Associations

Arranged in two sub-series - Corporate and Personal. The records document several of The Popular=s officers= involvement in industry, professional and cultural associations, both at the national and local levels.

Series XII. Popular Foundation

Arranged alphabetically and chronologically into thirteen sub-series - Minutes, Annual Reports, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1991. The records detail the requests and payments made through The Popular=s charitable organization, which focused on local needs. Some of the files are restricted and/or closed.

Series XIII. Ephemera

The series consists of oversized realia, including books, trophies, framed photographs, and printed store materials. There is also realia in other series.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Popular Dry Goods Company Records, MS 317, made up of 296 boxes, 63 volumes of newspapers and 5 drawers of oversized materials, detail the officers, stores, finances, operations, and employees of El Paso=s largest locally-owned retail enterprise. Donated by Edward Schwartz and Edith Brannon (executive representatives for the company) in the spring and summer of 1996, the records constitute the first accession of materials from the company. This donation is the bulk of the extant materials. Gaps in the collection result from a late development of a records management program within the company as well as the transfer and disposal of records after the announcement of the company=s closure in 1995 but before certain materials could be highlighted as having historical interest. The records include correspondence, letters of incorporation, photographs, memos, newsletters, general and journal ledgers, merchandising printouts, and other financial documents.

The **Corporate Papers** relate to the legal and executive structure and organization of The Popular Dry Goods Company. The bulk of these materials are stock proxies.

The **Officers** series is divided by officer then further subdivided into correspondence, subject files, photographs, clippings, and printed materials. The amount of material varies by person, as well as filing style (e.g. some filed by date while others filed by subject). Photographs in this series include portraits, but also document events the in the lives of the officers. Edward Schwartz and Richard Alvarado are the two officers with the bulk of the existing files.

The history of the company is found within the **Stores** series. The files document the activities of the individual branch stores, as well as the development of the company from its initial one-store location. The majority of the material concerns the Sunland Park Mall store from planning stages, through construction, to opening. Researchers with an interest in the 20th century phenomenon of mall building will be advised to look here.

The **Financial Records** document the financial history of the company. Although some material is restricted until 2031 (see Restrictions), this series includes some material relating to financial trends of the U.S./Mexico Border Region. Additional donations of materials from the defunct company will be mostly financial in nature.

The **Merchandise Records** detail the selection, purchase, and operations of the company=s Merchandise Information System. The records regarding the purchase of merchandise are restricted.

The **Vendor Leases and Contracts** provide a partial record of what services were available in the individual branch stores. Accounts ranged from Fidesta Tire Company to Maytag Appliances while services ranged from the photograph department to travel agents.

The **Employee Benefits** document the benefits available to store employees over the years. Of note is the fact that The Popular created and maintained its own pension fund for company employees.

The **Employee Records** include copies of The Popular=s in-house newsletter

Popular Poppins and photographs of individuals and various store events. Also, bulletins and memos which cover a gamut of topics from employee-customer relations to notification of in-store events such as sales. The bulk of the materials are the locator cards that employees had to fill out for address purposes. Access to these cards are restricted, but when open they will be a great source for demographic information to future researchers and genealogists.

The **Outside Services** records concern the peripheral services used by The Popular in association with overall business management, retail industry objectives, and cooperative purchasing practices.

The **Advertising** department was one department that disposed of most of its files before UTEP expressed an interest in receiving The Popular Records, therefore most of the advertising material is no longer in existence. However, there are several examples of Christmas campaigns from the 1980s, logos used in the latter half of the company=s existence, certain promotional campaigns like the Cotton Maid (and only for a few years) as well as photographs of the buildings and some occasions such as anniversaries. The bulk of the material is made up of the newspaper volumes. These volumes are made up of proofs of local newspaper pages, depicting items advertised by The Popular. Because of the sheer bulk of this material (many volumes are four inches thick and represent only a few months of one year) and because UTEP does keep the local newspapers on microfilm, only representative volumes from each decade were selected for retention. The Popular advertised extensively in Juarez and even Chihuahua, but the advertising department included few examples in these newspaper volumes.

The **Associations** series records a few of The Popular=s officers= involvement in industry, professional, and cultural associations. The history of the company is a history of the people who guided the company as well as a history of the times in which it lasted and the city in which it existed. Involvement in these local and national organizations shows the character of the people who led The Popular to success. They also chronicle what charitable aid was available in El Paso, and how it intersected with national efforts.

The **Popular Foundation** was The Popular=s pipeline to give back to the El Paso community. Projects ranged from money for scholarships to supporting local hospitals. Some of the files are restricted and/or closed.

The **Ephemera** series consists of oversized realia. This series was formed because of the physical format. Items include trophies from Cotton Bowl parades, framed photographs of Adolph Schwartz, the 50th Anniversary Scroll signed by all the employees, and renditions of branch stores.

PROVENANCE

In the fall of 1995 UTEP's Special Collections department was contacted by a family member, asking if UTEP was interested in the archives of The Popular Department Store. In January of 1996 Gerrienne Schaad began to inventory the records at the site of the downtown store. At this time it was noted that many records had been destroyed on site. Through the spring, Ms. Schaad labored in the central files of the administrative office, in the storage room behind the conference room, and at the distribution center's records storage room. Negotiations began as to what materials would be transferred. After this was decided the first accession was made in June, the second in early July, and the last in late July of 1996.

RESTRICTIONS

Closed materials include all financial records and information, all computer generated reports and documents, notes of the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of The Popular Dry Goods Company, names of customers in correspondence to and from The Popular Dry Goods Company, and all personnel related records including payroll information and employee locator cards. These materials, dating from 1950 to 1996, will be closed until 2031. Personal information about employees can only be accessed by the employee, or someone to whom the former employee gives written permission, until the former employee's death, even if it is after 2031.

Restricted materials include all financial records and information, all computer generated reports and documents, notes of the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of The Popular Dry Goods Company, names of customers in correspondence to and from The Popular Dry Goods Company, and all personnel related records including payroll information and employee locator cards, dated prior to 1950. The restrictions are in effect until 2031. Please see archivist for procedures on access to restricted items. Closed and restricted materials are indicated by a capital AC@ or AR@ after the folder title.

LITERARY RIGHTS

Permission to publish material from MS 317, The Popular Dry Goods Company Records, must be obtained from the C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, the University of Texas at El Paso Library.

CORPORATE PAPERS

- 1 1 **Bylaws**
- 2 **Board of Directors**
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- 4 Items for Meetings, 6/5/87 - 8/5/95 **C**
- 2 **Corporation Stocks**
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 - 1605 Reviews of El Paso Potential of West and East Side, 1982
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- El Paso Chamber of Commerce
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- 1726 El Paso Market Survey Conference, 1982
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- 1736 National Retail Credit Association
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- 1737 National Retail Dry Goods Association
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- 1739 Downtown Development Committee
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- 1786 Legality of Creating Offstreet Parking
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 - 1830 October 8-11, 1987, Albuquerque, New Mexico
 - Texas Society of Certified Public Accountants
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- 1907 Correspondence, 1969
- 1908 Manuscript Guides
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- 1910 Proposed Letters, Contracts, and Statements
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- 1912 Truth in Lending Interpretations, 1969
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