

# Belk Remains A Business Leader

Belk got its start when 25-year-old William Henry Belk opened a small bargain store in Monroe on May 29, 1888. The first store measured only 22 by 70 feet, and Belk called it New York Racket because he thought it would make the store sound big and attract business.

In 1891 he persuaded his brother, Dr. John Belk, to leave the medical profession and join him as a partner in the Monroe store, beginning a remarkable 37-year business association. The company became Belk Brothers Co.

The brothers opened a second store in 1893 in Chester, S.C., and a third in 1894 in Union, S.C.

The first Statesville Belk's store, the 11th of the Belk chain, opened in 1912. It was in September of that year that The Landmark carried a full-page advertisement announcing "Belk's of Charlotte" had bought out the W.H. Allison stock and would conduct a sale in the Allison stand at 125 W. Broad St.

With the announcement of Belk's connection with the sale, conjecture within the community immediately became abundant about whether the company would locate here permanently; leading business folks of the community hoped mightily that they would, seeing fairer promise for the growth of the town with Belk's as part of its material structure.

The next year the store location was moved to S. Center St., a site Belk was to occupy for six decades, though business leaders still wondered at that time whether Belk would be a permanent addition to the local business community.

On Feb. 3, 1913, came the long-awaited announcement: "We have come to stay." There were only 10 other Belk stores at that time.

That spring, A.B. Johnson was transferred from Charlotte to Statesville to become the first "manager" of the store, a post he held until 1922. He is remembered as a most genial, wide-awake business man with a community spirit and an enterprise that left its mark in the town.

In 1914 Belk Brothers occupied the Center St. building formerly occupied by the R.M. Knox Co. to open a clothing and gents' furnishings business.

Between 1922, when Johnson's tenure as store manager ended, and 1932, Belk was managed by Grier Roberson, P.P. Scarborough, Cy White, C.M. Menscer and Harry Padgett.

In 1932, when the Statesville Drug Co. on S. Center relocated, Belk expanded, taking over the building and making it a men's store with a main floor and a basement. In a time of depression, this was the only news story of progress.

That same year, Belk was taken over by a new manager, J.H. (Horton) Doughton of the Doughton Group, who held that position until his death in 1962.

In September 1956, Belk announced the purchase of controlling interest in Efir's Stores, which Belk operated until Efir's closed in 1972. Belk also bought a small store in Love Valley in 1957 which carried western wear, but it closed shortly thereafter.

In 1958 the store once again expanded to the south; the new addition became a family shoe department with its own S. Center St. entrance. And in August 1960, Mayor J. Garner Bagnal cut the ribbon for the official opening of the newly remodeled Belk store in downtown Statesville.

Between 1962 and 1966, A.C.

Craven, Sam Jordan and Tom Davidson were store managers. They were succeeded in September 1966 by Robert Holloway, who remains the store manager today.

The big Belk store on S. Center St. is remembered as the center of the city's retail community, and when Belk committed to its present Signal Hill Mall location in 1973, other merchants quickly followed to create the area's largest shopping center.

Belk's larger facilities at the mall nearly tripled the size of the old store to more than 78,000 square feet. Employees increased in number from 45 to 125.

The store completed a major remodeling project in October 1977, with the budget store being integrated into each department and the home store area being expanded into the former budget store location. Since then, several departments have been renovated as well.

In January 1984, the store changed from the Kerr Group to a part of the Belk Brothers Co. of Charlotte, with Leroy Robinson becoming supervising partner.

Today, even as it was when it arrived in 1912, Belk remains a fashion leader in Statesville and Iredell County.