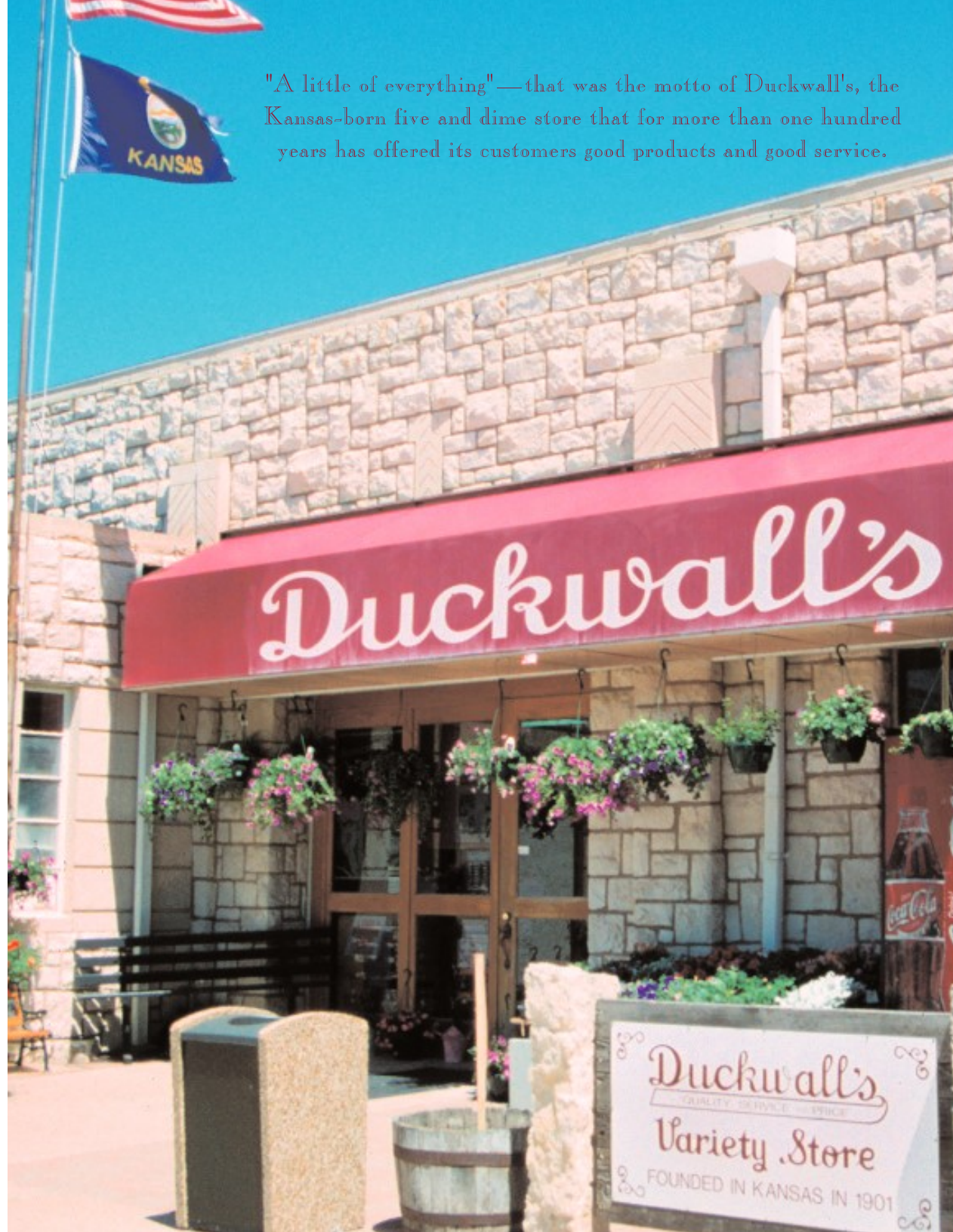


"A little of everything"—that was the motto of Duckwall's, the Kansas-born five and dime store that for more than one hundred years has offered its customers good products and good service.



# Come Back to the Five & Dime

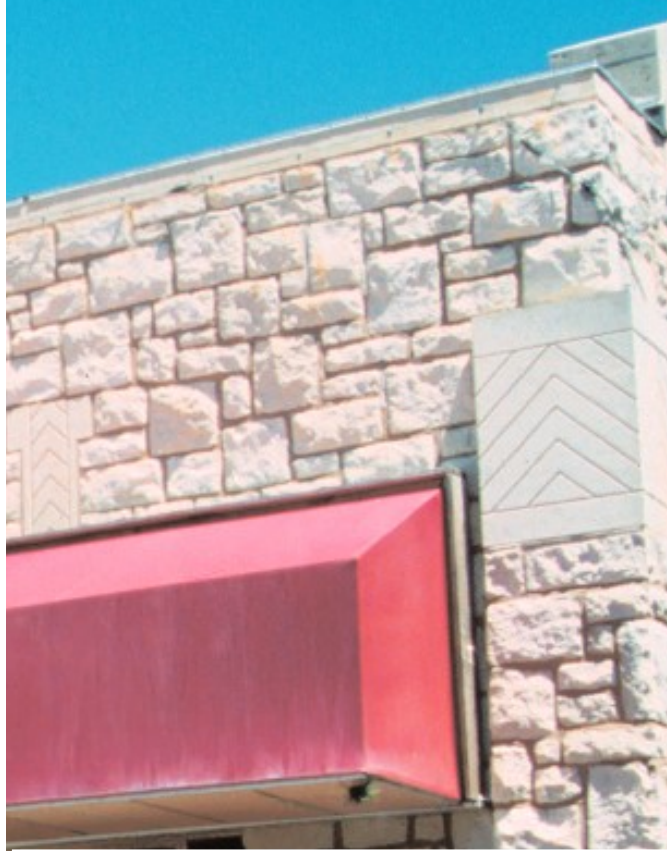
by David A. Haury

**F**or more than a century many Kansans enjoyed the convenience, and for the younger family members excitement, of shopping in the local five and dime store. This was the place to find inexpensive household items, buy a discount bag of candy, relax at the soda fountain with a cherry coke, or, in the case of this author, select the best plastic models to assemble.

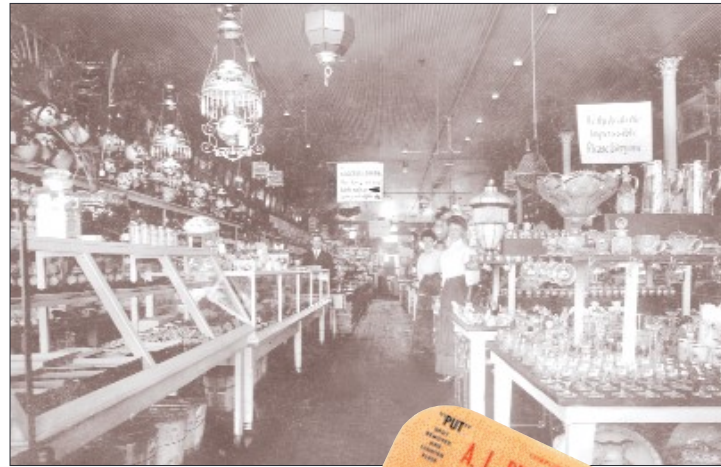
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*Duckwall's variety store in Cottonwood Falls. The earliest Duckwall's began in 1901 in Abilene as a "racket" store, similar to this store (inset) photographed in 1909, probably in Manhattan.*

All photographs courtesy Duckwall-ALCO Stores, Inc.



Some younger Kansans may have missed this pleasure as during the last quarter of the twentieth century many downtown five and dime stores have closed and been replaced with larger discount stores, usually on the outskirts of town. The home-grown Duckwall's (and later ALCO) chain, based in Abilene, fortunately has been with us now for more than a hundred years, and during that time it has



(ABOVE) Interior of a Duckwall's racket store in Salina, photographed in 1908. (RIGHT) Advertising fan presented to customers, compliments of A. L. Duckwall Stores, ca. 1930. (BELOW) A. L. Duckwall, founder of the well-known variety store chain.



Alva Lease Duckwall was born on a farm in Ohio in 1877, and in 1898 moved to Greenleaf in north-central Kansas where he opened a sewing machine and bicycle sales and repair shop. In 1901 he sold his store, moved to

Abilene, and for about four hundred dollars purchased and began managing a "racket" store. Racket stores might best be described as discount variety stores with a focus on the smaller and less expensive items used to furnish a home. Its name originated from the tin peddler carts of old, whose pots and pans clanged and rattled on their hooks, creating a great racket as they were pushed through the streets. In 1888 the first racket store was opened and named by William Belk in Monroe, North Carolina, and the Belk chain still operates some two hundred department stores in the southeast and mid-Atlantic regions.

By the turn of the century the racket name had caught on, and city directories and newspaper advertisements reveal racket stores, where a housewife could find all of the furnishings necessary for her home, throughout Kansas. However, for some reason, the racket name did not survive, and this type of houseware store largely disappeared. Duckwall also dropped the racket name and within a few years chose for his enterprise the more popular five and dime genre, which was exploding across the country.

The five and dime started in 1879 when Frank Winfield Woolworth opened his first five-cent store in Utica, New York. When it immediately failed he tried again, this time with a five- and ten-cent store in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. This attempt was quite successful, and he and his brother Charles opened five and dimes throughout the country. In 1911 the company incorporated with nearly six hundred Woolworth's stores.

The original five and dimes purchased inexpensive merchandise in large quantities and offered low prices on a wide variety of items such as candy, toys, glassware, Christmas ornaments and other seasonal items, stationery, crafts, and much more. Dime stores differed from earlier general stores not only by carrying just inexpensive items but also by placing fixed prices on each item and having most goods out for the shopper to handle. The older general store kept almost everything, even the candy jars, on shelves behind the counter, and customers pointed or provided lists of goods for the clerk to assemble, price, and bag. The new concept proved exceptionally popular. The



played a prominent and successful role in the evolution of the dime and discount store phenomenon.



## Candy Department

Our Candy Department probably has more outstanding features than any other of our Departments. It is the only candy case in this county in which a saleslady is employed for that department only. The only case with running water and a gas burner for heating water in the case so that the case may be clean at all times. It is one of a few that has the scales exposed so that the customer can see how much he is getting for his money. The only case where the cash register, bags, etc., are at the customer. A case where the saleslady is in spotless white cap and apron always while on duty. A case with chutes for eliminating galls, cartons and refuse of any kind—AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST—WITHOUT A SHADOW OF DOUBT, THE CLEANEST AND MOST SANITARY CANDY CASE TO BE FOUND.

five and dime  
stores soon drove other  
variety stores out of business, and  
before long most main streets in towns

large and small boasted one or more five and dimes.

Meanwhile, back in Kansas, A. L. Duckwall added a second store in Salina in 1906, followed by others in Manhattan, Clay Center, Concordia, Junction City, and Great Bend between 1910 and 1914. The company incorporated its seven stores in 1915, and by 1937 Duckwall operated forty stores, thirty-five in Kansas and five in Colorado. In 1961 eighty-five stores could be found in five states. Duckwall's never reached the scale of Woolworth's, but with Woolworth's and competing Kresge's stores located mainly in larger Kansas communities, Duckwall's dominated this segment of the market in medium to smaller towns in Kansas.

The lunch counter soon became another popular fixture of the five and dime. In 1951 when Duckwall's celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by moving to a new 37,500-square-foot office and warehouse complex, fifteen of its

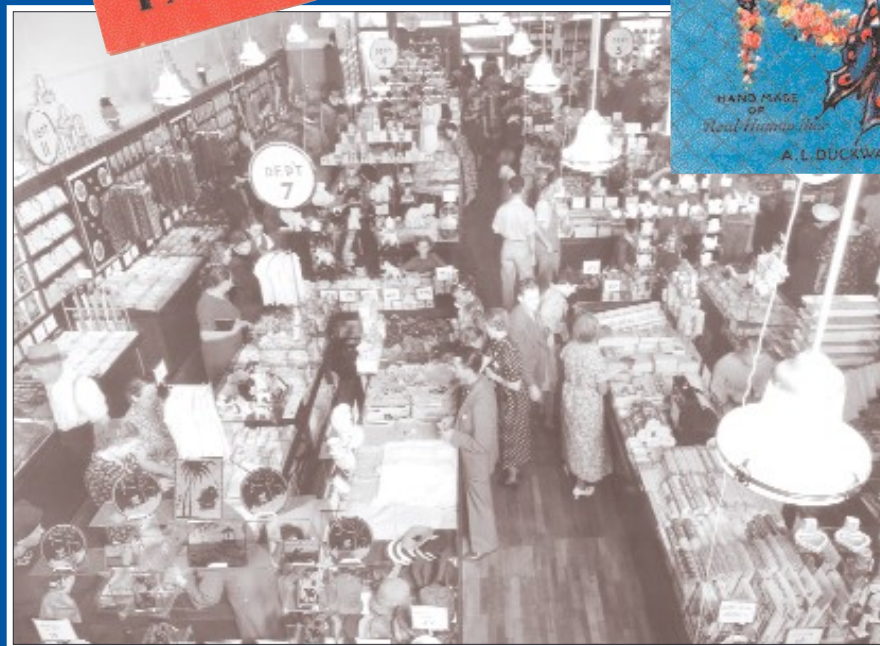
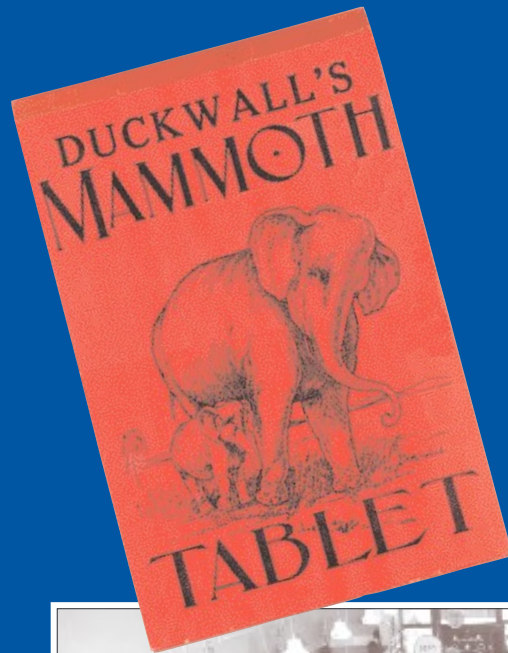
(ABOVE) Employees behind the candy counter in the Sabetha Duckwall's store, which opened in 1927. As stated in the Duckwall's Personnel Policy Manual for 1929, the employees at the candy counter should be "Snappy Girls." The manual suggested that "the bright, smiling, substantial, healthy girl who is reasonably careful of her appearance is the kind to be desired as a clerk, as contrasted to the fluffy, doll type girl, or the dull, unattractive, unhealthy looking girl. The candy girl should be specially attractive." "Choose Your Candy Girl Carefully," the instructions advised. (LEFT) Description of the candy department, excerpted from a Duckwall's advertising handout, ca. 1920.

stores offered luncheonettes, as they were first called.

Duckwall's thrived by maintaining modern storefronts and fixtures and operated with current management and marketing practices. Managers were groomed and rose through the ranks, and they and their stores became active in the communities, not wanting to be outsiders who took from and did not give back to the community. The Abilene office had a showroom of new products where buyers and managers carefully watched customer reactions to trial selections of goods. More than a half century later these practices are still fundamental management and marketing techniques of discount chains.

In the 1960s the five and dime store evolved into the much larger discount store. Kresge's opened its first Kmart in 1962. Woolworth's began its Woolco discount chain the same year, and Target and Wal-Mart also opened their first stores. Regional chains soon followed, in-

# “A Little of Everything”

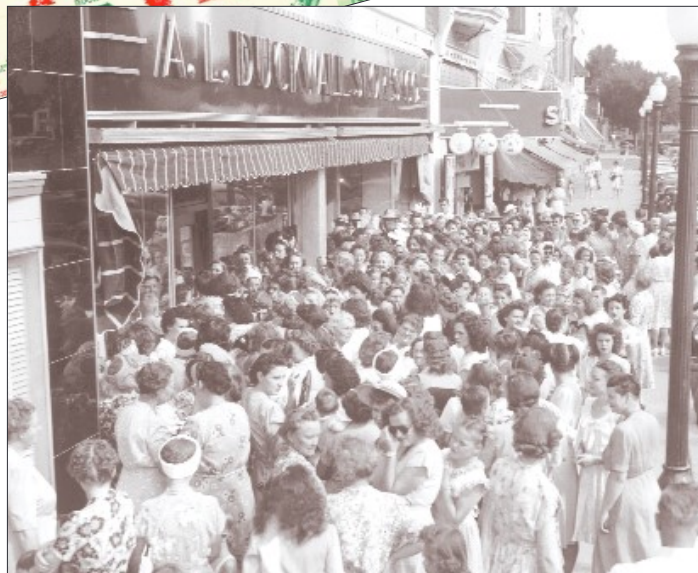


(LEFT) Shoppers browsing in the Hays Duckwall's (ca. 1935) find a wide selection of goods attractively displayed in convenient departments. (ABOVE RIGHT) The luncheonette, which became popular in the Duckwall's stores as early as the 1930s, offered hearty meals for reasonable prices. This lunch counter served customers in the Manhattan store.





(LEFT) Abundant advertising, such as this full-page holiday display from a 1938 Abilene newspaper, attracted both attention and crowds to the reasonably priced merchandise. (BELOW) No one wanted to miss a grand opening, with its accompanying sale items, as is evident in this photograph from Lyons (ca. 1950).



company's sales. Eighty-five Duckwall variety stores garnered the remaining 8 percent.

When A. L. Duckwall passed away in 1937, his older brother, W. F. Duckwall, became president of the company, and Alva's

son, A. L. Jr., served as vice president and then president from 1969 to 1975. In 1972 the company went public, and by 1983 it had more than two thousand shareholders. A. L. Duckwall was recognized for his long-time contributions and successes when he was inducted into the Kansas Business Hall of Fame in 2000.

Much has changed since the days when Duckwall stores stayed open late on Saturday nights to accommodate the local farmers coming to town to shop, or when A. L. Duckwall drove through the countryside on Sunday afternoons asking those same farmers if he could take his bucket of paint and place a store ad on their

cluding Gibson's and David's, which began as a single small discount appliance shop in Wichita. In 1968 Duckwall's joined the trend and opened its first ALCO discount store in Newton. Unlike Woolco, Gibson's, and David's, which failed to survive into the twenty-first century, ALCO found a formula for success. Although the company briefly struggled, filing for chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1989, ALCO, much like Duckwall's had done during the first half of the century, targeted smaller communities not served by the larger chains such as Kmart or Wal-Mart, and it has prospered in these markets.

By 2003, thirty-five years after opening its first ALCO discount store, Duckwall-ALCO had 177 ALCO stores, which accounted for 92 percent of the

barns. However, the Duckwall mission of serving small-town Kansas communities with quality merchandise and competitive prices is still the same.

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