

THE VOLKS, A DALLAS PIONEER FAMILY

When two brothers from Baltimore, Leonard and George Volk, opened Volk Brothers shoe store at 250 Elm Street in Dallas in 1889, Dallas was an agricultural trade center. By the turn of the century, the city was becoming a center for banking, insurance and retailing; and for eighty years the Volk family played a major role in fashion retailing, first in the Dallas central business district, then in the suburbs.

The Volk brothers were no strangers to the shoe business. Their great grandfather was the royal shoemaker to the Bavarian court, and their father was a custom shoemaker in Baltimore. George and Leonard built their business on the superior quality of their shoes, resulting in a growing and loyal customer base. As a result, Volk's became the largest shoe retailer in the South and Southwest.

As its business grew, so did Volk's line of merchandise and need for more space. In 1921 Volk's bought land located at 1806-1810 Elm Street for a new store. George died in 1922, and Leonard's son, Harold, oversaw the construction of a six story building designed by Dallas architect George Dahl, and it was the first totally air conditioned department store in the United States when it opened in 1930. What had started as a shoe store had morphed into a department store, selling furniture, jewelry, cosmetics, men's and women's clothing, with one floor dedicated solely to women's fashions.

When Leonard Volk died in 1935, Harold had already taken the reins of the company; and under his leadership, Volk's was the first downtown department store to expand into the suburban markets. In 1935 it opened a children's shoe store in the Highland Park Village. In 1940 Volk's expanded into a new location in the Village, offering children's and women's clothing, a larger line of shoes, and a merry-go-round for children. Volk's opened its second suburban store in Lakewood in 1949, and from 1951 to 1965 it opened stores in Oak Cliff, Irving, Mesquite, and Preston Royal in north Dallas.

In 1970, with the younger generations of the Volk family pursuing interests other than the family's retail business, Harold sold Volk's to Colbert's, a Dallas based women's wear store; and the name of the business was changed to Colbert-Volk. Since Colbert-Volk's customers were suburban women, the downtown location was closed in 1973 and was later sold and then demolished while its nomination to the National Register of historic buildings was pending.

The story of the Volk family goes beyond its retail business. In 1924 Leonard bought 41 acres of land in University Park and later transferred it to Brookside Development Company. Brookside prepared the land for sale in large lots intended for the construction of homes for the wealthy. Only a few lots were sold and had homes built upon them prior to the Depression. One was a Tudor style home designed by Hal Thomson for Leonard Volk and his wife at 6920 Turtle Creek Boulevard. Early in the Depression, Leonard put Harold in charge of developing the rest of the land. While many of the lots had sold by the end of the Depression, homes were not built on some of them until after the end of World War II. Today Volk Estates is one of the most desirable and exclusive neighborhoods in the Park Cities.

But how did Volk Estates acquire its name since it was never named or marketed as such? The answer is the standing of the Volks in the community. Leonard was a “leader among the old guard of merchants” who started the growth of the Dallas business community. Then Harold guided the family store and real estate development through the Depression, pioneered fashion retailing into the suburbs, became a mainstay in the Dallas civic community and was undoubtedly one of the leaders who transformed the Dallas business and civic communities into what they have become today.

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