

From monument to relic

What to do with Hypermart?

It was to be a wonder of modern retailing and its name would reflect that promise — Hypermart USA.

Garland was chosen as the site of the inaugural store, grandly opening after several delays on Dec. 29, 1987, on a 24-acre triangular tract bounded by Garland Road (now South Garland Ave. just north of its intersection with IH 635), Kingsley Road, and Shiloh Road.

It was the first of three super stores launched by Wal-Mart Stores founder Sam Walton and in partnership with Dallas-based Cullum Companies, owners of the Tom Thumb grocery chain. The gigantic store — 222,000 square feet with a huge 1,600-space parking lot — brought an opening day crowd estimated at 40,000 confused, bargain-hunting shoppers. Walton, who had already
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Garland Landmark Society.
One of three main entrances to abandoned Hypermart.

He helped Walmart become a leading U.S. grocer

Richard Bennett sees red at the sight of wilting greens.

Or any grocery produce that seems past its prime. Bennett knows his turnips — and his lettuce and his tomatoes and his squash. He can't help it. Fresh vegetables have been his passion since high school and his first job in a Garland grocery store.

Bennett (Garland High School Class of 1962) eventually became produce manager for Wal-Mart's first Hypermart in Garland in 1987. It was a position he earned through years of training and supervising at



Garland Landmark Society
Richard Bennett with an absolutely fresh salad.

Safeway, A&P, Tom Thumb and Minyard's grocery stores.

Now 71 and confined to a wheelchair, Bennett retired in 1991. But he still turns an eagle eye toward produce on visits to grocery stores.

"Look at this," he says earnestly as he pulls a prepared salad from the refrigerator at his home in southeast Garland. "Lettuce is crisp, tomatoes are perfect. That's the way vegetables should look." Bennett has a solid grocery — and Garland — heritage, which
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From retail wonder to white elephant

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mastered discount retailing in his Wal-Mart chain, added aisles of groceries to the new concept, with Cullum providing the expertise in that area.

A *Dallas Morning News* story of the opening described Hypermart as a “combination supermarket, discount department store and fast-food outlet, with specialized services thrown in,” where shoppers could “drop off their kids in a supervised playroom, get some auto work done, buy major appliances, eat lunch, browse jewelry counters and buy the evening’s groceries.”

A twin store would be opened in Arlington later, and a third, still later, in Kansas City.

The retailing experiment was successful, but not “hyper” successful. Cullum Companies sold its share of the Hypermart partnership to Walton in September, 1989, less than two years into the venture. In 1990, Wal-Mart closed its Garland and Arlington Hypermarts and staged “grand reopenings” and renaming them Wal-Mart Hypermarket USA. But no more such stores were planned. The gigantic space had been a big success — and a disappointment. Sales were fine, but never reached the projected figures based on space and inventory.

Several years later, Wal-Mart deserted the old Hypemart and moved into its newly built Garland Walmart Supercenter at 1801 Marketplace farther south off IH 635, a store designed from the ground up to meet the needs of Hispanic shoppers. It followed the general concept of Hypermart, but with much reduced square footage and some changes in stock to reflect its nod to the fast-growing Spanish-speaking population.

The behemoth that was the old Hypermarket has remained empty since then, a drag on the city’s tax base, and unattractive to developers of the types of retail business that the city would like to have.

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Groceries _ and Garland _ are his heritage

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includes one of the city's early grocers. His maternal grandfather was P.H. Burluson, manager of Garland's first chain grocery, an A&P store on Garland's Square in the 1920s. His father-in-law was owner of a Jimmy Clark Grocery on Garland Road, near the present-day Dallas Arboretum, which Richard managed for a while after graduating from high school.

His father was an accountant at Garland's Resistol Hat Co. His uncle was Wade Bennett, employed by Garland State Bank for many years.

But his first association with the grocery business was in high school, when he worked part-time at an early Safeway store on Ninth Street.

It was at Jimmy Clark's that he really learned about buying and displaying fresh vegetables. He remembers a Greek emigre named Bardis who handled produce at the Clark store and was insistent on fresh produce. "He was meticulous in buying and handling fruits and vegetables," Bennett recalls. "It had to be locally grown, hand-picked, washed and trimmed. I think I learned more about produce from him than anyone."



The budding produce expert thought about college, but gave up the idea because he figured he was learning more on the job about the vocation he had chosen than he could in college.

He kept moving up year by year, supervising produce departments at Minyard grocery stores in Dallas, Mesquite and Garland. By accident — literally — he left Minyard's to work for Tom Thumb. While working at Minyard's, he was injured in an auto accident, and no one from the store called or came to visit during his hospital stay, he said. So much for employe relations. A supervisor from Tom Thumb offered him a position as produce supervisor and in 1973 he

took charge of quality control at Tom Thumb's central warehouse in Dallas.

There he remained until Cullum Companies (owners of Tom Thumb) joined Walmart in the Hypermart experiment in 1987 and invited Bennett to supervise its grocery produce department.

Sam Walton, Walmart founder and its leader until his death in 1992, took a personal interest in the new Hypermart stores. Walton visited the Garland store from time to time, and on one occasion asked Bennett along on one of his flights to inspect the property from the air, his favorite way of seeing how things were going.

Bennett was a great admirer of his chief.

"He knew most employees by their first names," said Bennett. "He liked to check out everything, make sure everything was working just right. His workers loved him."

Walton flew his own plane, and Bennett remembers one flight over the Garland Hypermart when Walton counted cars in the parking lot, pleased when he saw few spaces left empty. Walton's venture with the Cullums in the Hypermart operation was a first step for Walmart into the grocery business, and though the partnership didn't last long, Walton learned a lot.

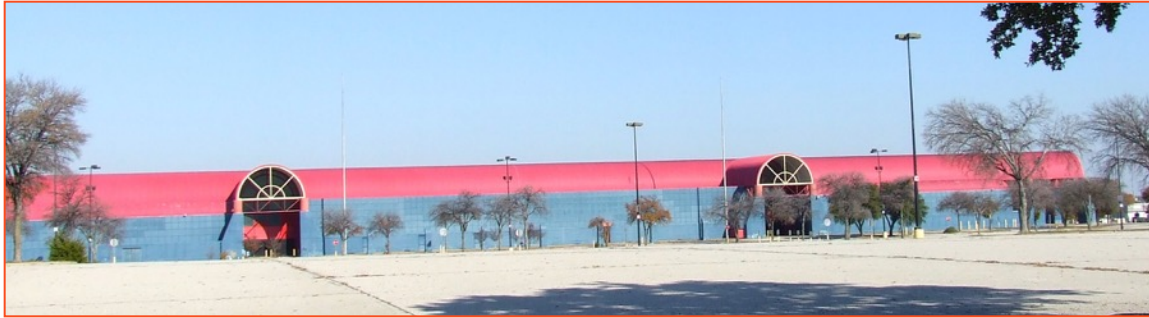
Bennett learned, too.

"Volume is the word in grocery business. Sam Walton taught me that. And Dallas-Fort Worth is one of the hottest markets in the country. It's an ideal location — in the middle of the country, midway between the two largest fruit and vegetable growing areas of the country, and adjacent to Mexico, another great source of fresh produce, on the south."

"Walton learned the grocery business from Tom Thumb, and learned to do it better," Bennett said, smiling one of his infrequent smiles.

Bennett is proud to have had a part in that.

For now, property's future is uncertain



Garland Landmark Society.
Hypermart-Garland: Once proud retail experiment has been vacant since 2008.

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Last month, a developer's proposal to turn the facility into mini-warehouses, with a promise to later add some sort of sports facility, was rejected by the city, after its plan commission already had turned thumbs down on the proposal.

The city hopes that eventually the acreage can be developed in accordance with its Envision Garland plan, adopted in 2012, that would make the South Garland Avenue entranceway to the city a more attractive retail zone, replacing the stretch of used car lots, auto repair shops and similar businesses.



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