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A BARGAIN AT ANY COST: THE RISE OF DOLLAR GENERAL

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in Southern Studies

The University of Mississippi

Frances Evelyn Barrett

August 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Dollar General Corporation has grown into a retail titan with more than 15,000 stores across the continental United States. The first chapter of this thesis traces the history of this multibillion-dollar firm since its founding as a family-run business in Scottsville, Kentucky in the late 1930s. Situating Dollar General's history within the evolving contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries illustrates that Dollar General stores succeed when the economy staggers. Neoliberalism and global finance capitalism have only exacerbated the geographic expansion and profitability of the company as the second chapter begins to explore. Although Dollar General stores open at a rate of three new stores per day, communities do not always welcome Dollar General. The three case studies of localized anti-Dollar General movements documented in the third chapter show that organizing in opposition can slow the spread of the corporation. In "A Bargain at Any Cost: The Rise of Dollar General," Frances Barrett demonstrates that the history of Dollar General—and the dollar industry at large—reveals important insights into the lives of vulnerable shoppers, workers, and community members as well as the effects of national policy on the practices of low-end retailers in the U.S.

## DEDICATION

*For all who work long hours on concrete floors.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thanks to my advisor, Jessica Wilkerson, who models intersectional feminism through her teaching and mentorship daily. For your work as a listener, guide, advocate, and scholar, I am eternally grateful. In this place, which can be challenging, devastating, and sometimes beautiful, your work, voice, and activism serves as a constant reminder of the immense difference that one person can make to improve a community.

Thank you to my committee members, Kirsten Dellinger and Darren Grem, as well as the inimitable Southern Studies Graduate Advisor, Kathryn McKee, for the gifts of your time, insights, and encouragement. Many thanks to my peers, Hooper Schultz, Thomas Porter, Kaimara Herron, Katelyn Frazer, and Jessica Johnson, for thoughtful feedback and hours of commiseration. Thanks also to my constant friend and sounding board, Maggie Radack. To Margaret Mairéad Gaffney, I am eternally grateful for the space you provided for me to write.

I would also like to thank the activist communities of Oxford and the University of Mississippi: OUTGrads, UCW-MS, Students Against Social Injustice, UM Pride, Black Student Union, #UpWithIda, OUTOxford, and many other groups both established and new. Thank you for your work to create a better South and world. You inspire me to do the same.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their infinite love and support. I am grateful to have been taught to care for people first, work second. To my sister Tracey, thank you for being my role model and forever friend. To my parents, thanks for always encouraging me to do and be my best. Y'all hold me up.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I share that I am studying Dollar General, friends, family, and even strangers have responded in ways that reveal their own direct or indirect experiences with Dollar General Corporation or one of its stores. Some have praised Dollar General for the important role its stores can play in isolated rural communities, citing an online think-piece on the topic or personal experience growing up in a community where the only retail option was a Dollar General store. Others condemn the corporation's negative effects on communities and especially local businesses. For example, upon hearing the topic of this paper, one of my great-aunts immediately launched into a dramatic telling of how Dollar General's entrée into a small town in upstate New York—her and her husband's regular vacation spot—drove a long-standing, local grocer out of business after only a few months. Most recollect vaguely having seen a news article about one of the (many) court cases brought against Dollar General. These cases relate to topics including workers' rights disputes, jurisdictional conflicts related to store sites on American Indian reservations, or ADA violations during the rapid construction processes of building its new stores. And, perhaps my favorite response, one of my friends indignantly and conspiratorially exclaimed, "you know that not everything costs a dollar there, right?!"

With these diverse experiences of Dollar General stores and the company's impact, I know that my thesis cannot thoroughly explore every facet of the company's business model and



its effects on the lives of individuals and communities. However, in the following text, I assert that this corporation—and the broader dollar store industry—is a subject worthy of critical scrutiny and attempt to make an initial contribution to this effort. In particular, I trace Dollar General Corporation’s history as well as a few of the anti-dollar store activist movements that the company’s recent, rapid expansion has sparked. This thesis explores how Dollar General Corporation’s business model—which adapts to profit off of others’ economic misfortunes—has thrived within the shifting economic contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## **The Growing Dollar Store Industry**

If the U.S. retail industry were to be imagined as an ecosystem, the dollar channel of the retail industry (or the lower end of the “discount market”) would be the scavengers. Scraping together goods from manufacturers, suppliers, wholesalers, and other retailers, dollar stores gather in bulk discounted, rejected, overstock, imperfect, and cheaply-made goods to sell at a low cost to consumers on limited budgets. As this thesis will demonstrate, when and where other businesses fail, opportunistic dollar store companies profit. Likewise, when and where the economy fails, dollar stores thrive.

The dollar store industry has had significant financial growth and success nationwide over the past several decades. Since the turn of the century, three brands have dominated the dollar channel of the United States retail market: Family Dollar, Dollar Tree, and Dollar General, making up over 52.3 percent as of 2011—a number which has surely grown with the continued, rapid growth of these three brand name stores.<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, when Dollar Tree acquired Family

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<sup>1</sup> Deloitte Research, “Dollar Store Strategies for National Brands: The evolving dollar channel and implications for CPG companies,” (UK: Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, 2012).

Dollar, the two discount corporate giants Dollar Tree Stores, Inc. and Dollar General Corporation have led this retail sector. While in 2011 an independent research company reported that there were an estimated 20,000 stores of these three leading brands of dollar stores in the U.S., today that number has risen to almost 30,000.<sup>2</sup>

Out of the three leading corporations only the Dollar Tree brand stores operate on a set-price store model or one in which everything costs one dollar storewide. While Dollar General and Family Dollar utilized a one dollar set-price store model at some point in their corporate histories, these two brands have since shifted away from this format, citing inflation and inflexibility as contributing factors for this change. Although no longer officially “dollar stores” in practice, many, including myself, still use the term to encompass the three leading corporations in this sector and other low-price-oriented businesses in part because these stores still cultivate their brand identities on their low, mostly round-number pricing systems.

Dollar General Corporation is the oldest of the three leading dollar store brands. Since its inception in 1939, Dollar General has grown into a retail titan with more than 15,000 stores across the country. In 2018, the firm ranked 123 on the Fortune 500 list and its net income was 1.539 billion dollars. Tracing the history of Dollar General Corporation reveals that, as the national economy staggers, Dollar General stores thrive. Likewise, the confluent rise of U.S. neoliberalism and global financial capitalism have created an economic marketplace wherein cheap-centric businesses like Dollar General flourish. In the following thesis, I document the history of Dollar General, explore its business model and practices, and tell the stories of several community movements to prevent new dollar stores from opening.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Impact of Dollar Stores and How Communities Can Fight Back (Fact Sheet),” Institute for Local Self-Reliance, last modified December 6, 2018, <https://ilsr.org/dollar-stores/>.

## **Literature Review**

While the company is fast-growing and financially thriving, there is a lack of scholarship on dollar stores in general and Dollar General in particular. While many scholars have examined larger retail corporations like Wal-Mart, Dollar General has, thus far, flown under the radar of academics with few exceptions. In social science studies related to food access, Dollar General, and other dollar stores, have been included as a specific retail environment category. Stores like Dollar General, Family Dollar, Dollar Tree, and others are often included within the umbrella terms “small box” stores (in contrast to “big box” stores like Wal-Mart or Target) or “discount stores.” While these studies collect information in which dollar stores are one category of record, the dollar store industry is not, itself, the topic of analysis.

Some independent research organizations have studied the dollar industry. The Institute for Local Self Reliance (ILSR) has generated reports on the impact of dollar stores both nationally and on the local level. ILSR is a non-profit organization which investigates the connection between the health of local economies and democracy. The ILSR website professes, “Across all of our initiatives, we’re fighting unfettered corporate control in all its forms, from giant tech platforms to monopoly utilities, Wall Street banks to garbage incinerators.”<sup>3</sup> ILSR has identified that dollar store mega-corporations like Dollar General pose a threat to “local self-reliance” or healthy local businesses and economies. Thus, the ILSR has conducted a number of surveys on dollar stores, aiming to document the threat that these stores pose to local businesses. Similarly, the private research firm Deloitte Development, LLC has conducted market research

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<sup>3</sup> Institute for Local Self-Reliance, “About ILSR.” <https://ilsr.org/about-the-institute-for-local-self-reliance> (accessed April 24, 2019).

of Dollar General Corporation and the dollar channel.<sup>4</sup>

While there is a lack of academic-affiliated scholarship on Dollar General or other corporations within the dollar channel, there is a plethora of scholarly writing which explores the relational interaction between corporations and society. Wal-Mart, in particular, has garnered the attention and scrutiny of historians, economists, sociologists, and scholars of other fields. Several of these works prove useful models for my efforts to understand the history of the Dollar General Corporation. Bethany Moreton's *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* is one of the best-known works of scholarship on the company.<sup>5</sup> Her book explores the company's populist roots as well as its strategic shifts over time to remain appealing to smaller, anti-big business U.S. communities in spite of its increasing size and success. In *Wal-Mart: The History of Sam Walton's Retail*, Sandra S. Vance and Roy V. Scott present the company's history within the broader history of the U.S. retail industry, showing how the emergence of and reiterations of Wal-Mart reflected evolving standards and expectations for retailers.<sup>6</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein has written extensively on Wal-Mart, editing an anthology on the company, co-authoring *A New World of Retail Supremacy: Supply Chains and Workers' Chains in the Age of Wal-Mart*, and authoring *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business*.<sup>7</sup> His anthology *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First Century Capitalism* includes a chapter authored by historian Susan Strasser, "Woolworth to Wal-Mart: Mass

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<sup>4</sup> "Dollar store strategies for national brands: The evolving dollar channel and implications for CPG companies," *Deloitte Development, LLC*, 2012, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/consumer-business/us-cp-dollarstorestrategies-092512.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Stringer Vance and Roy Vernon Scott, *Wal-Mart: A History of Sam Walton's Retail Phenomenon*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Appelbaum and Nelson Lichtenstein, "A New World of Retail Supremacy: Supply Chains and Workers' Chains in the Age of Wal-Mart," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 70, no. 1 (October 2006): 106-25.

Merchandising and the Changing Culture of Consumption,” which has proved particularly useful as I examine the early history of Dollar General Corporation in my first chapter.<sup>8</sup> Like these works on Wal-Mart, I aim to similarly relate a single corporation’s development and success within a broader, evolving national context.

There are several works of scholarship that outline the history of the U.S. retail industry more broadly, tracing its evolution into the heavily-corporatized contemporary model as well as the history of consumer culture, both of which prove invaluable to understanding the evolution of Dollar General and the success of the dollar store market. One example is Peter Scott and James T. Walker’s “‘The Only Way Is Up’: Overoptimism and the Demise of the American Five-and-Dime Store, 1914-1941,” which follows the U.S. five-and-dime store industry through the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Another work that constructs a useful timeline of U.S. retail practices is Tracey Deutsch’s *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century*.<sup>10</sup> Deutsch outlines the shift from primarily independent food sellers and local chains to modernized supermarkets operated by regional or national corporations. Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* explores the relational evolution of postwar culture and economics, as changing popular economic policies and ideologies informed citizens’ attitudes about consumption and their identities as consumers.<sup>11</sup> In *Blessings of Business: How Corporations*

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart: Mass Merchandising and the Changing Culture of Consumption,” in *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (New York: The New Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Scott and James T. Walker, “‘The Only Way Is Up’: Overoptimism and the demise of the American five-and-dime store, 1914–1941,” *Business History Review* 91, no.1 (2017): 71-103.

<sup>10</sup> Tracey Deustch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2003).

*Shaped Conservative Christianity*, Darren Grem demonstrates the interconnectedness of evangelical Christian, business, and government interests within twentieth century U.S. history.<sup>12</sup> This context proves especially useful when examining Cal Turner Jr.'s conflation of capitalist markets and God's will in his memoir. Bryant Simon's *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives*, which uses a single workplace tragedy in a small North Carolinian town to tell a broader story about the rise of neoliberalism in the late twentieth century, proved to be an essential source.<sup>13</sup> Simon skillfully shifts between local, regional, and national occurrences to develop a multilayered understanding of the numerous factors leading up to the workplace fire.

Intricately entwined with the history of the retail industry, consumer activist history is another area of scholarship that proves especially useful to understanding community responses to the corporation's expansion. Both Deutsch and Cohen incorporate the history of consumer activist movements in their aforementioned historical monographs. In *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, Meg Jacobs traces the evolution of consumer activist movements within the U.S.<sup>14</sup> Jacobs aims to highlight the continuity of consumer activism over the course of the twentieth century, as the concept of "purchasing power" was always considered a tool for effective activism and advocacy for change. Michael Foley's *Frontporch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and*

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<sup>12</sup> Darren Grem, *The Blessings of Business: How Corporations Shaped Conservative Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Bryant Simon, *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

*1980s* counteracts the widely-held belief that activism declined after its height in the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Foley argues that activism shifted in its iterations, as citizens organized in response to issues that threatened their local communities and homes—their symbolic and actual “front porches.” These important studies of consumer activism illustrate how economic, cultural, and social factors all interact to shape the course of U.S. retail history.

While in the past decade, economists, journalists, and bloggers have written about the enormous recent success of the dollar store industry—and Dollar General in particular—few others have yet endeavored to detail the history and impact of this particular retail sector. Dollar General and the dollar store industries are subjects ripe for academic analysis with a wealth of unexamined primary documents, work environments, and interstate and international networks. Analysis of the dollar industry can be understood within a broader tradition of working class and labor scholarship aimed at understanding the experiences and culture of U.S. working-class individuals as well as the institutions, policies, and systems which shape their lives. Dollar General’s business model has long relied upon the labor and spending of financially insecure workers and shoppers. More than 78 percent of Dollar General’s shoppers earned less than \$70,000 as of 2011.<sup>16</sup> While this number suggests that certainly some middle- and upper-class individuals shop at the company’s store on occasion, dollar stores’ primary consumer base is bargain-conscious by necessity. Thus, critical examination of Dollar General and the dollar store industry may provide useful insights into systemic poverty in the U.S. as well as the experiences of working-class Americans.

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Stewart Foley, *Frontporch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Jack Hitt, “The Dollar Store Economy,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/the-dollar-store-economy.html>.

## Geography and the Dollar Store Industry

In 2011, *New York Times Magazine* reporter Jack Hitt wrote “we are awakening to a dollar store economy.”<sup>17</sup> While the dollar channel has not yet to receive in-depth scholarly attention, the rapid expansion of Dollar General has garnered significant media attention over the last decade. As new Dollar General stores open across the country at a rate of three per day, geographically disperse communities are finding the topic newly relevant. Mini-documentaries, feature news pieces, and blog posts have emerged, exploring the role of Dollar General and dollar stores in the U.S. today. Although Dollar General for several decades operated on a regional level with its stores concentrated in Kentucky and Tennessee, the company has evolved into a national phenomenon, expanding into forty-four states in the continental U.S.

While dollar stores have spread across the nation, these stores are not distributed equally throughout the United States.<sup>18</sup> The highest concentration of dollar stores, termed “the dollar store belt,” can be mapped along a stretch of land that encompasses the U.S. South, roughly tracing the line of the Appalachian Mountain Range although extending beyond its reach.<sup>19</sup> Although dollar store companies may not characterize themselves as southern companies, several of the most successful of these companies are products of southern entrepreneurial endeavors and have been propelled by the shopping habits of southern communities. The subject of this thesis, the dollar store giant Dollar General, emerged out of Scottsville, Kentucky, falling within the overlapping area of the widely-accepted boundaries of Appalachia and the South. The other

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<sup>17</sup> Hitt, “The Dollar Store Economy.”

<sup>18</sup> Tanvi Misra, “The Dollar Store Backlash Has Begun,” *City Lab*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/12/closest-grocery-store-to-me-dollar-store-food-desert-bargain/577777/>.



two largest brand names of the dollar store industry also emerged out of towns in the South: Family Dollar was founded in the urban center of Charlotte, North Carolina and Dollar Tree in the beach town of Norfolk, Virginia. Three of the four states with the highest concentrations of dollar stores fall within the widely-accepted boundaries of the U.S. South, specifically the Deep South: Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama.<sup>20</sup> These business's successes and the prevalence of dollar stores within the U.S. South illustrate that, while the dollar store industry is not exclusive to the South, dollar stores have grown out of and thrived within southern communities.

Since the University of Georgia's Professor Bennett H. Wall stated that "historians of the recent South have largely neglected many aspects of southern economic life" in 1988, many scholars of the South have turned their attention to the subject, producing a wide berth of scholarship that has made Wall's claim wholly obsolete.<sup>21</sup> This thesis fits within the tradition of Southern Studies scholarship in that—drawing from the theory and method of multiple disciplines—it critically considers the impact of place and place identity on the evolution of Dollar General as a brand, business, and workplace. In this thesis, I draw primarily on methodologies of History and Cultural Studies; however, my background in Gender Studies also informs my scholarly lens and approach.

## **Chapter Outline**

### *Chapter One: From General Store to Dollar General*

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<sup>19</sup> Zara Matheson, "Dollar stores distribution map across US," *The Martin Prosperity Institute*, Joseph L. Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, in Andreas C. Drichoutis, et al., "Food environment and childhood obesity: the effect of dollar stores," *Health Economics Review* 5, no. 37 (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Andreas C. Drichoutis, et al., "Food environment and childhood obesity: the effect of dollar stores," *Health Economics Review* 5, no. 37 (2015), 2.; West Virginia is the fourth of these leading states.

<sup>21</sup> Sandra S. Vance and Roy V. Scott, "Sam Walton and the Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.: A Study in Modern Southern Entrepreneurship," *The Journal of Southern History* (May 1992), 231.

Chapter One of this thesis has two distinct sections. The first draws from a variety of sources to trace the history of Dollar General Corporation from its origins as a small Kentucky retail and wholesale outlet in 1929 through 2001 when the Turner family's leadership of the company came to a close. As I began to recreate the history of Dollar General Corporation, I visited the archives of Western Kentucky University (WKU), where several primary documents on the company are housed. There, an archivist presented me with a clippings file which contained news stories on the corporation dating back as far as the 1950s. The WKU library also held a near-complete inventory of the Dollar General Corporation's newsletter "Dollar General Story" from the years 1984 to 1990. While an in-depth textual analysis of the newsletters' contents was not possible within the time constraints of my thesis project, these documents proved to be fascinating reads and valuable sources. Finally, the WKU archives had among its collection a company-produced history of Dollar General from 1989, the company's fiftieth anniversary; this booklet provides a narrative history of the company up until that date. Each of these sources proved essential to my endeavor to reconstruct the historical timeline of the firm.

Under three generations of Turners, the Dollar General Corporation survived and thrived through the economic fluctuations of the twentieth century. To situate this success within a broader national context, secondary sources served the essential function of laying out retail, consumer, labor, and business histories during Dollar General's rise. The company emerged during the economic devastation of the Great Depression, turning the failures of surrounding small retailers into opportunities for growth. The founder James Luther Turner and his son, Hurley Calister "Cal" Sr., entered a business partnership under the name J.L. Turner and Son Wholesale ten years later in 1939. The business prospered in the postwar buyers' market.

Maintaining a focus on a low-income target consumer base, discount retailers like J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale were able to turn a profit through bulk purchasing and heavily discounted sales. Around the same time, the innovation of the supermarket grocery format, geared toward upper- and middle-class Americans, left a vacuum within the industry for discount retail models like J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale. After the company began experimenting with a fixed-price one-dollar store model as Dollar General, the company gradually took on this name as its centralized brand identity. In the late 1960s, the transition to the third generation of Turner family leadership occurred, as Hurley Calister “Cal” Turner Jr. entered the executive team. In the decade that followed, while the nation’s economy staggered, the company saw rapid growth through mergers and acquisitions of struggling companies. Throughout its history, the company’s fixation on maintaining cheap prices through low overhead costs proved the key to success, establishing a business model that thrives when the national economy falters.

The second section of this chapter draws upon cultural studies methodology to explore the distinctions between Dollar General Corporation’s history and the narrative which Cal Turner Jr. has crafted during his time since leaving the company in 2001. In 2018, Cal Jr. released a memoir titled *My Father’s Business: The Small-Town Values that Built Dollar General into a Billion-Dollar Company*.<sup>22</sup> Cal Jr.’s book proved useful in the recreation of the company’s historical timeline. Due to his personal investment and entanglements with the company, Cal Jr. crafts a company narrative that credits the business’s success to the exceptional entrepreneurship of the company’s founding family, the commercialization of its regional identity of origin, and divine Christian intervention. His portrayal masks the unsavory reality that Dollar General’s cut-

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<sup>22</sup> Cal Turner, Jr., *My Father’s Business: The Small-Town Values That Built Dollar General into a Billion-Dollar Company*, (New York: Center Street of Hachette Book Group, 2018).

throat, bottom line-centered approach has led to the company's success. Delineating between history and Cal Jr.'s storytelling enables an understanding of the rise of Dollar General as related to the strategic business decisions of its leaders and evolving historical contexts rather than as a successful capitalist endeavor of the exceptional Turner founding family.

### *Chapter Two: The Neoliberal Landscape of Dollar General*

Dollar General Corporation's recent, monumental rise aligns with the emergence of global finance capitalism and U.S neoliberalism. Considering the corporation's spatiality, this chapter uses the concepts of place and space as entry points through which to understand the manifestations of these economic ideologies. Specifically, I analyze the corporation's standardized construction and employment practices to understand how Dollar General impacts the places the corporation enters. I also draw on individual and collective experiences of shoppers and workers within Dollar General stores—reported through online comments, court documents, and news reports—to identify common themes which, seen together, provide a glimpse into the corporate control of every aspect of Dollar General's spaces. While Dollar General, a large corporation with a sprawling geographic presence across the nation, holds multiplicities of place and spatial realities, this chapter begins to uncover the extent to which the Dollar General Corporation's business model impacts places and creates spaces that prioritize and perpetuate cheap.

### *Chapter Three: Local Movements of the Dollar Store Resistance*

The third chapter explores community resistance efforts to prevent Dollar General (and

other dollar store corporations) from opening new stores. Through an examination of three regional case studies, I examine how place and place identity informs and complicates community organizing efforts against Dollar General store openings. After reading news coverage of dozens of local movements of resistance of new Dollar General stores, I selected three local activist movements. These stories stood out for their distinct geographic locations, relative success in curbing Dollar General's expansion into their communities, and the wealth of news coverage and government records documenting the events which unfolded at each locale.

First, I tell the story of Dry Creek, West Virginia, an unincorporated community in the Appalachian Mountains. Dry Creek community members organized to prevent a Dollar General store from opening down the road from a locally-owned, longstanding general store. The community activism of Dry Creek shows a narrative of middle-class activism in a region usually defined solely in terms of its working-class struggles. The second case of community activism occurs in Advance, North Carolina. Like Dry Creek, this community also aimed to prevent the building of a new Dollar General store. Citing the historical value of an existing structure as well as concerns about the impact on their quality of life, community members successfully convinced Davie County Commissioners to deny the rezoning required to build a store on the site. Lastly, I examine the organizing efforts of North Tulsans in Oklahoma who sought to stop the building of not one future Dollar General store, but all future dollar stores in their community. Unlike Dry Creek and Advance, there were many dollar stores already operating in North Tulsa at the time of this surge in community activism and a local history of racism evident in the city's unequitable economic development. Indeed, regional histories, identities, and power structures impacted each community's activist movement to prevent the spread of Dollar

General's corporate reach into their areas. While all three efforts were successful to some extent, the local politics of each area influenced local organizers' abilities to accomplish goals.

### *Epilogue*

This thesis concludes with a brief synopsis of Dollar General's history, contemporary impact on places and spaces, and the major takeaways from the anti-Dollar General community movements. I also identify areas where this thesis leaves avenues of research unexplored. Specifically, I recognize the need for further analysis on Dollar General's transnational and colonial implications, relationship to issues of community health and food access, effects on individuals with disabilities, and the relevance of identity to the corporation's effects. While there are many questions still to be answered, I begin to explore in this thesis the ways that the rise of Dollar General—and the dollar industry more broadly—reflects the economic and political developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which created a context in which profit-oriented businesses, built around an ideology of cheap, could thrive.

## CHAPTER ONE: FROM GENERAL STORE TO DOLLAR GENERAL

*“The fun part of this business is haggling. First you haggle on the price, then you haggle on the terms.” – Cal Turner Jr.<sup>23</sup>*

Hurley Calister “Cal” Turner Jr. was born into dollar store royalty. His father and grandfather founded a wholesaling business before his birth, which evolved into the Dollar General Corporation. After learning the ropes about how to haggle for the best, or at least cheapest, prices and terms under his father and grandfather’s instruction, Cal Jr. joined the Dollar General executive team in 1977, becoming the third generation of the Turner family to make his mark on the company’s trajectory. In 2018, Cal Jr. wrote a memoir, which told the story of Dollar General’s beginnings and evolution through his time as CEO, which ended in 2001. In the following chapter, I—like Cal Turner Jr.—trace Dollar General’s evolution over the years since its founding eighty years ago, leading up to and including Cal Jr.’s time as part of the company’s leadership. Although Cal Jr.’s book proves a key source in my attempt to recreate the company timeline, I also turn an analytical gaze on his memoir to explore how his retelling relies and builds upon legends about himself, his father, and his grandfather as well as capitalist ideologies.

While some journalists profess to be “awakening to a dollar store economy,” the eighty-year history and persistent success of Dollar General demonstrates that the U.S. economy has

been long-suited for a booming dollar channel.<sup>24</sup> In fact, throughout the twentieth century, the haggle-oriented retailing-style of the Turner family has gained traction with almost consistent financial success and expansion. Dollar General's growth and financial health in times of national economic hardship over the past century highlight the firm's dependence on lower-class consumers as well as struggling property owners, manufacturers, and competing retailers.

Although the current absence of documentation about Dollar General's history is significant, instances in which this history *has* been told—often through avenues affiliated with the company's branding—are similarly fascinating and revealing. In the second section of this chapter, I analyze one retelling of Dollar General's history in particular—Cal Turner Jr.'s memoir, *My Father's Business: The Small-Town Values that Built Dollar General into a Billion-Dollar Company*. Cal Jr.'s crafted narrative alongside the details of how and when Dollar General emerged reveal the ways that Cal Jr. hides the business's reliance upon and exploitation of economic stability behind a portrayed façade of a Christian, southern, family-oriented free market capitalist enterprise.

### **The History of Dollar General**

On the Dollar General Corporation's official website, the company claims its founding as the establishment of a wholesale partnership between James Luther "J.L." Turner and his son Hurley "Cal" Calister in 1939. However, the Turner family's significant retail experience—and related prosperity—predated this joint venture. New technological developments of the late nineteenth century ushered in rapid changes to the retail industry, notably mass production and,

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<sup>23</sup> "Hagglings" Article, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>24</sup> Hitt, "The Dollar Store Economy."



in turn, mass distribution. This shift and the increased, reliable access to goods empowered retailers to imagine and create new store formats. Thus, the early twentieth century shepherded in new, diverse store models, including department stores, chain stores, and variety stores as well as significant changes to U.S. retail practices. The emerging self-service retail format was an important and lasting example of these changes. Previously, employees had always played a hands-on role in stores: fetching goods, negotiating prices, and addressing shopper concerns. While self-service formats were not adopted immediately or universally, self-service retail enabled stores to operate with fewer staff members and gave shoppers new agency within the shopping process as they could evaluate and choose between store goods. It was during these times of retail transformation and innovation that J.L. Turner opened Turner's Bargain Store on South Court Street in Scottsville, Kentucky in 1929.<sup>25</sup>

Turner's Bargain Store was J.L. Turner's second attempt to launch a store of his own. Nine years prior, J.L. had made his first attempt to run a store; however, soon after its opening, the post-WWI recession in 1920 hit the business hard and the endeavor failed. J.L. returned to work as a retailer and wholesaler for others' businesses until he was able to save enough money to try his hand once again at opening a store. When a nearby general store went under, J.L. saw his chance. Buying up the store's goods for reduced prices at the store's bankruptcy sale, J.L. used these items to stock and open Turner's Bargain Store.<sup>26</sup>

Only months after J.L. Turner opened the doors to Turner's Bargain Store, the economy took another turn for the worse and the Great Depression swept the nation. As nearby stores increasingly struggled to pay base operational costs during the depression, J.L. acted on his

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<sup>25</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 3.

belief that “where there was failure, there was opportunity.”<sup>27</sup> He traveled around the region replenishing the store’s inventory with the goods of other failing businesses, scavenging at bankruptcy sales across the region. J.L. acquired bank loans to fund his larger bulk purchases, using “merchandise as collateral for a short term bank loan” and then liquidating “the entire stock quickly at greatly reduced prices.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to frequenting bankruptcy sales to replenish his stock, J.L. established standing agreements with manufacturers to buy their overstock, irregulars, and “thirds, a grade of merchandise below irregulars,” in bulk.<sup>29</sup> Having acquired large quantities of goods, he sold bulk quantities at reduced prices to other retailers to make a profit through rapid stock turnover, “a crucial principle in mass merchandising.”<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, J.L.’s son Cal, who had often helped him during his trips around the region to bankruptcy sales as a child, began experimenting with his own retail endeavors. After a year at Vanderbilt University, Cal decided not to return to school, but instead to try his hand at retailing. He opened a store in Dupontonia, a Dupont manufacturing company town outside of Nashville. His store there quickly went under. Fortunately, Cal had the family business to fall back on and returned to work for his father in wholesaling. After a long courtship, Cal married Laura Goad of Scottsville’s prosperous Goad family.<sup>31</sup> In his memoir, Cal’s son Cal Jr. remarks, “In a social sense, the Goads were above the station of the Turners, no matter how far they had come from that Tennessee farm.” While it is unclear whether he saved up funds from his work or inherited them through this new connection to familial wealth, shortly after his marriage to Laura, Cal

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<sup>27</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> “‘34 Years of Progress’: This section tells the history of Dollar General,” *The Allen County News*, 23 August 1973, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>29</sup> Donald M. Houghton, “Dollar General has trouble boosting its stock price,” *Louisville Times Business Editor*, May 23, 1976, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>30</sup> Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart,” 37.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 7.

Turner Sr. scraped together enough money to launch a joint business endeavor with his father. This joint enterprise would grow over the decades that followed into present-day Dollar General.

In 1939, J.L. and Cal each contributed \$5,000 and opened J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale.<sup>32</sup> Their company model was predicated upon the growing need of businesses who survived the economic hardships of the Great Depression to gain access to cheap merchandise. The father and son pair practiced aggressive buying, having learned from past experiences that wholesaling was most profitable when buying in bulk. Soon Cal and J.L. realized that the area's retailers could not move the large volumes of goods they were regularly purchasing. The pair decided to create their own retailing outlet where they could discount stock significantly enough to entice shoppers and keep stock moving off the shelves.

The Turner family hometown of Scottsville was the desired location for their store, but strong retail competitors, like Karl Stark's general store downtown on Main Street, sent J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale looking for a storefront elsewhere. The first retail store under J.L. Turner & Sons Wholesale opened in Albany, Kentucky in 1946. Cal Sr. reflected on the process of this first store's opening, "The initial idea was 'selling the good stuff to the rich folks, but we were late getting into retailing and Mr. Karl Stark was already doing that in Scottsville. So, we had to sell the cheap stuff to the poor folks. It was just the business we had to get into.'"<sup>33</sup> Cal's forthright acknowledgement of the store's key shopper demographic reveals that, from the company's inception, the target customers for J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale's stores were individuals who lived on low incomes or were financially insecure. While the choice was originally one of strategy in response to the available market in the town of Scottsville, over

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<sup>32</sup> Joe Creason, "Turners of Scottsville Quietly Build a Merchant Empire," *The Courier Journal*, February 1, 1956, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

time, this target consumer base gave Dollar General the market edge that enabled the company to ride out future periods of economic hardship and expand across the country.

After the initial success of the first store in Albany, J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale opened other stores in Horse Cave and Russell Springs, Kentucky in 1948, both of which were experiencing significant population growth at this time.<sup>34</sup> Through joint-leases with local businessmen as partners, the Turners expanded their reach while increasing their profits. Stores' profits were split equally between J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale and the local businessman, who often worked in the role the store manager. Aside from the distribution of responsibilities and labor the arrangement secured, this partnership-based store model also diffused the economic risk for J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale. The local store manager would have an equal or greater investment in the success of the store as well as the local positioning to work towards that goal. Over the next decade, J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale continued to initiate new partnerships throughout the region and open new stores, even buying out the Scottsville store location from the aforementioned Karl Stark when his business failed.<sup>35</sup>

The growth of J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale's retail outlets over the next decade reflects a national surge in retail following World War II and a retail landscape in which discount retailers thrived. As historian Lizabeth Cohen demonstrates, wartime propaganda and government policies increasingly linked the rights and obligations of consumers and "good citizens." Thus, "the good citizen who had the public interest at heart would restrain

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<sup>33</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> "Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790 to 1990," U.S. Census Bureau, Part III, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/pop1790-1990.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 10.

consumption now and indulge it later.”<sup>36</sup> The thriving mass consumption economy which followed World War II exceeded the expectations of even the most optimistic postwar economic forecasters. Consumer spending was “longer lasting and more universally enjoyed than ever before in American history.”<sup>37</sup> The middle-class grew and more people had money to spend. As historian Susan Strasser documents, rising disposable income, with the rising expectations and standards of living promoted by the new products and by the developing advertising industry meant that more individuals were frequenting stores.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, mass production expanded rapidly. As Cohen records, “National output of goods and services doubled between 1946 and 1956, and would double again by 1970, with private consumption expenditures holding steady at two-thirds of gross national product (GNP, the total market value of final goods and services produced by the nation’s economy) over the era.”<sup>39</sup> Retailing grew so dramatically within this context of postwar economic prosperity that some have characterized the period from 1948 to 1962 as a “retailing revolution.”<sup>40</sup>

Due to the confluent factors of excess production and a wave of newly empowered consumers, discount merchandisers in particular, like J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale’s affiliate stores, grew in popularity during this time. Out of wartime necessity, manufacturers had streamlined their processes, creating more efficient, rapid production systems. When demand slowed after the war, this increased production resulted in an excess of goods, creating a buyer’s market in which savvy wholesalers like the Turners could make a significant profit. The rise of discount retailing was not lost on those attuned to the retail scene. In an interview, Sam Walton

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<sup>36</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart,” 31-56.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 121.

remarked of this period, that “I had only two choices left: stay in business, which I knew was going to be hit hard by the discounting wave of the future, or open a discount store.”<sup>41</sup> Walton’s decision to follow in the footsteps of discount retailers like the Turners’ through the founding of Wal-Mart paid off and enabled him to ride “the discounting wave of the future,” growing his own multibillion dollar retail empire. In urban centers, this discount retail wave appeared in the form of “bargain basements” affiliated with large, successful department stores. Perhaps the most famous example of an early twentieth century urban discount outlet is the Filene’s Department Store’s Bargain Basement in Boston.<sup>42</sup> Kmart and Woolco, discount chains affiliated with Kresge and Woolworth, were other popular examples of this emergent discount retail phenomenon. In less-urban areas, without established department stores to provide affiliated clearance sections or short-term sales, discount wholesalers like the Turners connected manufacturers that were overwhelmed with overstock goods to communities of consumers who sought bargain prices. Due to their important role as a link between manufacturers and consumers, wholesalers held significant power in this type of retail arrangement.

In 1955, J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale officially filed for incorporation. By this time, the firm had grown and now held thirty-five affiliated stores across Kentucky and Tennessee. It was a momentous year for the Turner family business as it was also in 1955 when J.L. and Cal first experimented with the set-price store model wherein every item costs only one dollar. This model, from which the company’s “dollar store” categorization originates, was implemented at a store in Springfield, Kentucky—the first to hold the name “Dollar General.” While the company’s telling of this story suggests that this type of business model was revolutionary, a

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<sup>40</sup> Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 43.

“set-price” store model was not unheard of when Dollar General first appeared.<sup>43</sup> As early as the 1890s, prominent retail leaders like Frank Woolworth had “built his business on fixed prices.”<sup>44</sup> Woolworth’s stores operated on a model in which all goods were priced at a nickel and later a dime, inspiring the name “five-and-dime stores.” Inflation and rising prices account for the shift from a nickel-based model to a dime-based model and, by the time that the Turners began experimenting with set-price stores in 1955, a dollar-based model. This set-price model meant that all inventory was sold at a one-dollar price point or, when relevant, multiple sets of the same item were grouped together and sold for a dollar. Like traditional general stores or variety stores, the stores stocked a selection of goods ranging from clothing to household supplies. Unlike traditional store models, however, these dollar stores’ stock varied significantly based on current, regionally-available goods. For example, Dollar General purchased pink corduroy pants from a Nashville manufacturer’s overstock, and soon these pink pants became a clothing staple of the men of Springfield.<sup>45</sup> As this anecdote suggests, the first dollar store launch was incredibly successful. Soon, the Turners began opening new stores with the same Dollar General name and one-dollar pricing model.

While J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale experimented with a variety of retail formats including its fixed-price model (which would eventually become the corporation’s centralized store brand), the shape of food retail was also going through drastic changes. Chainification, technological advancements, and fine-tuned mass production and distribution systems resulted in

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<sup>42</sup> Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Scott and James T. Walker, “‘The Only Way Is Up’: Overoptimism and the Demise of the American Five-and-Dime Store, 1914-1941,” *Business History Review* 91 (Spring 2017): 71-103.

<sup>44</sup> Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart,” 32.

<sup>45</sup> Cal Turner, Jr., “The Value of a Dollar: How a simple pricing idea launched the retail giant Dollar General,” *Vanderbilt Magazine*, November 19, 2018, <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/vanderbiltmagazine/the-value-of-a-dollar-how-a-simple-pricing-idea-launched-the-retail-giant-dollar-general/>.

a newly standardized, modern grocery shopping experience. New supermarket environments were said to fulfill the desires of women consumers—specifically the desires of urban, white, upper- and middle-class women. Historian Tracey Deutsch has explained: “As grocers converged around the policies that defined the modern supermarket, emphasizing top-down organization, economies of scale, and streamlined service, they quite simply moved away from poor neighborhoods and the unsteady, difficult customers who lived there.”<sup>46</sup> The shift of grocery stores to address the needs of upper- and middle-class women and their families created a vacuum in the retail market. Discount retail options like the stores of J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale filled this need, catering to poorer customers who new, modernized grocery stores left behind.

Over the next three years, the number of J.L. Turner and Son Wholesale affiliated stores shrunk from thirty-five in 1955 to twenty-nine, twenty of which were located in Kentucky and nine in Tennessee. This reduction in store numbers reflects the Turners’ willingness to close an unprofitable store rather than to spend capital, time, and energy working to make a struggling store profitable, a practice that remains a part of the business’s model to this day. Cal Jr., who worked alongside his father and grandfather throughout his youth before joining the company’s leadership, reflected in his memoir: “After three years, if a store wasn’t making money, we closed it, and while it took us four days to open a store, we could close one in a day and move on!”<sup>47</sup> It is for this reason that J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale negotiated short-term leases for its stores as these “short leases enable[d] DG to buy out a lease of a struggling store.”<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>46</sup> Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*, 223.

<sup>47</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> “Dollar General Serving Small-Town America,” *Clothes*, October 1, 1977, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.



business model was not (and is not) predicated upon the success of a particular store or stores. This gave J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale a competitive advantage because there were multiple avenues for financial gain as well as quick exit strategies for sources of financial drain. While the Turners did not shy away from closing struggling stores, it became apparent that continued expansion would be necessary to remain competitive in the evolving retail market. Historians Roy V. Scott and Sandra S. Vance have documented that “Discount merchandising still included many small entrepreneurs in 1966, but their importance was declining as the industry was becoming increasingly dominated by larger chains.”<sup>49</sup> Dollar General aimed to survive and become a dominant retail chain.

However, at this point, J.L. Turner and Son Wholesale’s stores did not operate on a standardized retail model. Fourteen of the affiliated stores were best characterized as self-service, dry goods stores with a set maximum price of ten dollars per item. The remaining fifteen stores were self-service “Dollar General” stores, operating on a fixed-price one-dollar model.<sup>50</sup> Initiating a franchise agreement with Gibson Products Company of Seagoville, Texas, was one way that J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale continued to expand and seek out new markets. Beginning in 1965, J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale ran “Gibson’s Discount Center” department stores, these stores sold a wider variety of items than the company’s usual array of goods and were on average seven times larger.<sup>51</sup> The lack of standardization highlights that, despite the

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<sup>49</sup> Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 35-36.

<sup>50</sup> Joe Creason, “Turners of Scottsville Quietly Build a Merchant Empire,” *The Courier Journal*, February 1, 1956, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>51</sup> “Tiny Scottsville Base for 345-Store Business,” *Courier-Journal*, January 19, 1969, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.; Dollar General Corporation 1969 Annual Report. VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.; There is also a connection between Gibson’s Discount Center and Wal-Mart as documenting by Nelson Lichtenstein in *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business*. Understanding the dollar store industry’s relationship to

firm's incorporation and its role as an overarching corporate entity for far-flung stores, the company was not operating on a standardized model. This would soon change as the company began to shift away from a multi-partnerships business model to establish a standardized, corporate brand identity.

The process of the company's brand centralization would occur in tandem with managerial changes. James Luther Turner died in 1963, leaving Cal Sr. behind to run a company named for their father-son business partnership. It would not be long until another father-son business dynamic would become central to the company's leadership. In 1966, Cal Jr. officially joined the business after a stint in the U.S. Navy.<sup>52</sup> The managerial visions of Cal Sr. and Cal Jr. would guide the company into its next iteration as Dollar General Corporation.

In 1968, the former J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale officially changed its name to Dollar General Corporation and went public, selling 45 percent of the company's shares. Over the past decade, the company had grown and financially thrived, more than quadrupling its number of stores. As of the company's 1969 Annual Report, Dollar General had 402 retail outlets across seventeen states, had opened thirty-nine new stores, and had closed fourteen stores because they "did not meet [Dollar General's] standards of profitability."<sup>53</sup> Even as the economy faltered over the second half of the twentieth century, Dollar General continued to perform well and steadily grow. In an interview in 1969, Cal Jr. predicted Dollar General's resilience through the impending national economic difficulties, citing Dollar General's target demographic. He said, "We feel, however, that Dollar General Corporation will fare well even if the many predictions

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Gibson's, a large and influential discounter which was founded within a decade of J.L. Turner and Sons Wholesale, will be crucial for further research on the history of this sector.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 65.

of an economic slowdown in 1970 become a reality. During such periods, people are more conscious of cost and quality and we would expect to gain customers seeking better bargains than those offered by conventional retail stores.”<sup>54</sup> As family and consumer budgets tightened during the economic downturns of 1974-1982, Dollar General and other low-end discount merchandisers became the most viable retail option for the budget-conscious.

While some businesses failed under the pressures of the nascent recession, Dollar General fared well. The firm saw an increase in its target low-income customer base and the number of competing stores sent into financial distress. Dollar General cheaply acquired struggling properties, or their retail markets, and established new Dollar General stores. The early 1970s saw rapid, significant growth in Dollar General’s store numbers as well as its store reach. In 1972, there were five hundred Dollar General stores. By the next year, the company had gained over a hundred more. In addition to its individual store-by-store expansion, Dollar General began acquiring small store chains, procuring multiple new stores at once. For example, Dollar General bought thirty stores from Carps, Inc. of St. Louis and seventy stores at once from Silco.<sup>55</sup> These buyouts reflected the inability of other companies to survive economic setbacks, as the average rate of profits for businesses fell by 29 percent between 1965 and 1973.<sup>56</sup>

Although Dollar General reaped the financial benefits of a faltering economy, many Americans and businesses struggled to make ends meet at the end of the extended post-war economic boom. Widespread financial insecurity coupled with an influx of new workers—as

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<sup>53</sup> Dollar General, 1969 Annual Report, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>54</sup> Dollar General, 1969 Annual Report, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>55</sup> “Dollar General to purchases 30 Carp Stores,” September 20, 1973. VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

women, African Americans, and other racial minorities gained access to paid work through activist movements—resulted in a resurgence of labor organizing evident in the “nearly five million private-sector workers who voted in NLRB elections and pushed to form unions in the 1970s.”<sup>57</sup> In 1976, these efforts reached Scottsville, capturing the attention of Dollar General’s executives when the company’s truck drivers voted in favor of Teamsters Union representation.

This was not the first attempt of Dollar General workers to organize. A decade before, in 1962, Dollar General employees in Scottsville began discussing the possibility of forming a union. At this point, Cal Sr. was running the company since J.L.’s health had declined significantly. Cal Sr.’s reaction to the news that there were talks about a workplace union was swift and severe. In Cal Jr.’s memoir, he briefly recollects of his father’s response to rumors of organizing attempts which reached them during a family trip. “Dad went home and pulled out all the stops. He was ready for major warfare because he felt it was clearly so wrong for the company ever, ever, ever to have a union.”<sup>58</sup> Cal Sr.’s actions reflect the strong antiunion sentiment prevalent among business leaders throughout the South. As Bryant Simon points out, the South “was late to industrialize, lacked investment, and didn’t attract as many highly capitalized auto or steel plants and railroad facilities as some other parts of the country.”<sup>59</sup> In order to attract new industry, southern boosters relied upon the promise of cheap labor to compete, attracting industries and businesses away from other regions with unionized workforces. By the time of this first organizing attempt, the Turner family, and Cal Sr. in particular, had accumulated significant influence and power in Scottsville and the surrounding

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<sup>56</sup> Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 58.

<sup>57</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, 28

<sup>58</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 59.

area, making it easier to utilize his weight in the community to quell union organizing efforts. For one, Cal Sr. was the controlling stockholder of the largest bank in town and therefore “in a position to imply that loans might be a lot harder to come by if that union came in.” Cal Jr. reflects on his father’s choice to use his significant clout to quash employee discussions around creating a union, “That may have been illegal, and I’m not sure if Daddy knew whether it was or wasn’t at the time, although if he had, I don’t know that it would have mattered, he was so livid.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Cal Sr.’s open condemnation of union activity and outright threats were certainly illegal actions under federal labor law. Through these drastic, unlawful measures, Cal Sr. sought to effectually deter future attempts of Dollar General employees to organize. As Cal Jr. frankly concludes his recollections of this 1962 organizing attempt, “In any case, the union effort failed.”<sup>61</sup>

While Cal Sr.’s efforts to intimidate employees from organizing again in the future was successful for a time, in the summer of 1976, Dollar General truck drivers voted for Teamsters Union representation. Since the purchase of its first two trucks in 1957, Dollar General had owned and operated a fleet, gaining control of stock distribution in addition to stock purchasing and sales. From the company’s Scottsville-based warehouses, Dollar General’s truck drivers (who primarily lived in southern Kentucky) made regular trips to its stores, sprawling as far away as Oklahoma, Delaware, and Florida. Teamsters’ outreach to Dollar General truck drivers was part of a broader wave to organize truck drivers across the country. By 1978, 80 percent of

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<sup>59</sup> Simon, *The Hamlet Fire*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 60.

<sup>61</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 60.

U.S. truck drivers were unionized through Teamsters.<sup>62</sup> As Dollar General’s truck drivers were among the lowest compensated of the industry, it was logical that the Teamsters would connect with the firm’s workers to aid in negotiating higher rates of pay and benefits. After the drivers voted in favor of Teamsters’ representation for the purpose of collective bargaining, Dollar General’s warehouse workers scheduled a union vote as well.

By this point, Cal Jr. had joined his father at the helm of the business. Dollar General’s executive team responded again in vehement opposition to workers’ unionizing. As historian Lane Windham demonstrates in *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, “the steep decline of union density in the United States was not a natural process”; rather, as the National Labor Relations Board gradually ceded its role as referee, “employers” —like the Turners— “then pressed their advantage, starting in the 1970s.”<sup>63</sup> For proponents of and stakeholders in business and the “free market,” labor organizing presented a threat to the market’s invisible hand. “Labor costs, in this [globalization] context, were something that managers could more easily control and squeeze than the intangible forces of the global marketplace.”<sup>64</sup> Since the Dollar General business model relied so heavily on calculated cost-cutting measures like low salaries and benefits for hard-worked employees, “[Cal Sr.] didn’t want anyone telling him how to run his business. He wanted to determine whom to hire, what to pay them, and what their jobs were.”<sup>65</sup>

Windham demonstrates how employers strategically crushed union organizing efforts of their employees, utilizing “a new set of techniques to fight union organizing, promulgated through business schools and the vastly expanded ‘union avoidance’ industry.” The story of

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<sup>62</sup> Anne Balay, “‘It Gets You Off Your High Horse, Really’: Queer Truckers and Rolling Sexualities,” March 18, 2019, Lecture.

<sup>63</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, 23.

<sup>64</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, 59.

Dollar General's executive response to the 1976 unionization efforts starkly illustrates Windham's claims. Dollar General turned to the "union avoidance" industry, hiring an Atlanta-based law firm with a reputation for suppressing workers' attempts to organize.<sup>66</sup> The firm promised to manage the discussions with the truck drivers' representation as well as to run a campaign to deter warehouse workers from voting for union representation. Nationwide, illegal strategies of worker intimidation grew in popularity as business leaders realized that state penalties were uncommon and, when enforced, not severe.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in consultation with legal representation, businesses were able to learn how to "press their legal advantages."<sup>68</sup> The firm's anti-union campaign was successful in the warehouse. Using a number of stunts—including dividing each worker's paycheck into two different documents to reflect the financial impact of union dues while simultaneously reminding the workers who wrote their checks—Dollar General and its hired consultants intimidated workers and ended warehouse advocacy for union representation. Under corporate pressure and coercion, the Dollar General warehouse workers voted against Teamsters representation.

Quelling dissatisfaction among truck drivers who had already gained union representation proved more difficult. Dollar General staunchly opposed negotiations with the union. Dollar General took a hard line against the Teamsters' requests for better driver benefits and pay. Cal Jr. recounted, "there was a huge gap between what we...could pay and what they were demanding." He echoed budgeting concerns which arose during the earlier organizing efforts, claiming, "The

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<sup>65</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> It is also likely that through Cal Jr.'s participation in the American Management Association's management training, he was exposed to anti-union ideology and management strategies. While I have not had the opportunity to search for AMA documents, it is likely that these trainings incorporated the newly emergent business ideology Windham pinpoints which "linked remaining 'union free' to good management."

<sup>67</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 24.

<sup>68</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 24.

whole model of low-cost retailing that gave low everyday prices to the customer and allowed us to succeed in the first place was in jeopardy. Raising their pay and benefits that much would lead to similar demands from our warehouse workers and store employees.”<sup>69</sup> Cal Jr. believed that the entire Dollar General business model was predicated upon exploitative labor practices and believed that the customer’s best financial interest was fundamentally at odd with the worker’s. In the eyes of Dollar General executives, an organized workforce posed a threat not only to the business’s operations but also its financial viability.

On September 1, 1976, Dollar General truck drivers walked out, beginning a strike.<sup>70</sup> The strike reflected an increase of trucker strikes over the second half of this decade, culminating in 1979 when seventy-five thousand independent-owner truckers went on strike, parking their vehicles and leaving their perishable goods to expire.<sup>71</sup> One Dollar General driver was Plymouth Eaton, who walked out on September 1. “We’re here to stay,” he explained “until we get a contract, even if it takes five years.” Consistent with the anti-union stance of the company, Cal Jr. retorted, “They may be on the line for five years.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Dollar General continued to resist negotiations, turning instead to an external transportation company in Nashville to break the strike, creating a “fissured workplace.”<sup>73</sup> An agreement was reached that Liberty Contract Carrier, Inc. would take over full responsibility for Dollar General’s trucks, drivers, fuel, and insurance. While outsourcing such responsibilities was in itself a win for Dollar General, it also preserved the company’s reputation as a workplace with zero tolerance for union organizing (while ensuring that deliveries would be made).

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<sup>69</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 124.

<sup>70</sup> “Teamsters picketing Dollar General Store headquarters,” *The Paduchah Sun*, October 6, 1976, Newspapers.com.

<sup>71</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> “Teamsters picketing Dollar General Store headquarters.”



Breaking the drivers' strike erased any potential for the former Dollar General drivers to retain their jobs, not to mention to collectively bargain for better terms. On the first day that contract drivers hit the road for Dollar General, the company hired armed guards to accompany the trucks. In the subsequent fallout, there were a series of incidents of property destruction and attempted violence towards Liberty Contract Carrier and Dollar General executives; however, no one was ever harmed nor was anyone caught. Cal Jr. remembers, "there was probably as much tension in that little town of 4,000 as there had ever been or would ever be again. There were four times as many Wackenhut guards in Scottville as there were city policemen."<sup>74</sup>

In October 1976, when the National Labor Relations Board ruled in support of Dollar General's decision to hire Liberty Contract Carrier, Inc.'s drivers, the former Dollar General truck drivers' hopes were dashed. Picketing finally ceased at Dollar General's offices in Scottsville. Bitter sentiment ran through the divided small Kentucky town.

In 1977, the year after the Teamster labor conflicts, Cal Jr. took over as the CEO, replacing his father, who remained on as the chairman of the corporate board.<sup>75</sup> Under Cal Jr., Dollar General continued to expand at a rapid rate. During the first year of his leadership, Dollar General acquired the failed United Dollar Stores company based out of Dumas, Arkansas. At the time of its bankruptcy, United Dollar Stores had 88 stores in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi and a warehouse in Dumas, all of which Dollar General absorbed. Around the same time, Dollar General bought out one of its franchisees, the Rankin Company of Columbia, Mississippi, gaining 176 stores in the process. These acquisitions transformed Dollar General

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<sup>73</sup> Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 130.

<sup>75</sup> "Turner's Life was a generous blessing," November 17, 2000, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

from a one-warehouse operation based out of Scottsville, Kentucky into a two-warehouse corporation serving half of the continental U.S.

Throughout the 1980s, Dollar General continued to expand through large-scale acquisitions. In 1983, Dollar General purchased 280 stores from P.N. Hirsch scattered across the U.S. Midwest and South. Shortly thereafter, Dollar General acquired 206 Eagle Family Discount stores located in Florida from Interco. For the first time, the corporation struggled to absorb its new stores and transition all of the locations from their prior formats into Dollar General stores. Converting Eagle Family Discount stores to Dollar General stores proved especially difficult because of the differences between the two brands' target markets and stock: Eagle Family Discount stores had stocked primarily hardware goods, tobacco products, and cleaning supplies whereas Dollar General stores carried predominantly soft goods like clothing and household items.<sup>76</sup> In response to these growing pains, Cal Jr. initiated long-term "strategic planning" and sought consultations from prominent business leaders. When Cal Jr. had undergone management training through the American Management Association (AMA), he had been particularly impressed with the abilities and perspective of Larry Appley, the former chairman. In the wake of the Eagle Family Discount Stores acquisition, Cal Jr. asked Larry to join Dollar General as a consultant. This decision created conflict within Dollar General's leadership as Larry and Cal Sr. disagreed frequently on the best strategy for growing the company.

After years of speculative journalism, Dollar General made the controversial announcement that it would relocate its corporate offices to Green Hills, Tennessee, an upscale

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<sup>76</sup> Steve Massey, "Dollar General Buys Florida Discount Chain for about \$30 million," *The Courier Journal*, February 5, 1985. VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

area of Nashville in 1996. Cal Jr. framed the company's move as a market inevitability.<sup>77</sup> This sentiment is mirrored in his video message announcing the move to employees and stakeholders. In it, Cal Jr. says, "Why? In a word—taxes. Specifically, state, county, and city income taxes. Today our Scottsville office employees pay \$2 million in annual income taxes which they would not pay if our offices were located in Tennessee. And our company pays \$1 million more in income taxes."<sup>78</sup> The move from Scottsville to Goodlettsville made starkly transparent a truth of the Dollar General model first felt during the earlier Teamsters strike: Dollar General's top priority would always be maintaining the lowest possible overhead, regardless of the non-monetary costs even in Scottsville. In his study of the geographic mobility of RCA, Jefferson Cowie illustrates that "industrial capital has been engaged in a continuous struggle to maintain the social conditions deemed necessary for profitability."<sup>79</sup> This struggle has appeared in corporations' strategic deployment of "capital flight" or relocating operations in the search for "new reservoirs of controllable labor."<sup>80</sup> Dollar General's decision to relocate its headquarters is one instance of strategic capital flight, rather than an inevitable response to the mysterious, external forces of the free market.

The financial incentives motivating Dollar General's move to Tennessee reflected the century-long, competitive southern state boosterism which characterized the late industrialization of the "New South" over the course of the twentieth century. As historian Elizabeth Tandy Shermer summarizes, "executives played one locale off against another, generating a spiral of

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<sup>77</sup> "Taxes Drive Dollar General's move of 310 Scottsville jobs to Tennessee," *The Daily News*, November 20, 1996. VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>78</sup> "DG to Move 185 Jobs South," *Citizen Times*, November 21, 1996, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>79</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York: The New Press, 1999)

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<sup>80</sup> Cowie, *Capital Moves*, 4.

demands and counteroffers that distorted American politics, as well as the geographical distribution of economic activity.”<sup>81</sup> No doubt, Dollar General’s relocation fits within this broader political and geographic distortion of state economies. While firms moved from state to state based on where the savings were best, these relocations did not always serve communities. In the words of Bryant Simon, “The men of the New South...built state structures that prioritized business growth and job creation ahead of protecting the vulnerable and providing social security.”<sup>82</sup> The tax breaks incentivizing Dollar General’s move to Tennessee can be understood within this broader interstate competition for industry and business.

Despite the relocation’s obvious detriment to the town’s economy (as it would withdraw over a hundred jobs from the area), Cal Jr., in a feat of rhetorical gymnastics, recast the headquarters move as a decision which would benefit the town of Scottsville, saying “I will do anything that is important to the company’s best interest because that’s in Scottsville’s interest too.”<sup>83</sup> This claim reveals that Cal Jr. had come to equate the town of Scottsville with the company it had housed for over five decades and its leadership rather than viewing the community of Scottsville as its community members. Undoubtedly, the recent geographical expansion of Dollar General’s stores emboldened the company to face the likely regional fallout in Kentucky from the decision to move. Yet, the company still attempted to soften the blow of its corporate relocation with the additional news that, while white-collar jobs would leave Scottsville, the distribution center in the town would be expanded to create more blue-collar

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<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “‘Take Government out of Business by Putting Business into Government’: Local Boosters, National CEOs, Experts, and the Politics of Midcentury Capital Mobility”, in *What’s Good for Business: Business and American Politics Since World War II*, ed. Kim Phillips-Fein and Julian E. Zelizer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 91.

<sup>82</sup> Simon, *The Hamlet Fire*, 51.

<sup>83</sup> “Dollar General will remain in Scottsville,” September 21, 1987, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

work. The relocation held significant symbolic and economic consequences. It communicated the message that blue-collar jobs belonged in Scottsville while white-collar jobs were better suited for a city center like Nashville. Since its inception, Dollar General had proudly claimed its hometown of Scottsville as a central part of its brand identity. In fact, just a few months before the announcement, Cal Jr. had proudly remarked, “There have been a number of predictions that the company would have to relocate to Louisville or Nashville. But we’ve proved them wrong!”<sup>84</sup> However, these comments proved apocryphal, and the company, which had long boasted of a unique, intimate understanding of the needs of rural Americans due to its home in Scottsville, left the town for another southern state’s promises of cost-efficiency. In the years to come, Dollar General would continue to reconcile its self-proclaimed identity as “America’s neighborhood general store” and its multibillion dollar corporate headquarters set in Nashville’s urban sprawl.<sup>85</sup>

While Cal Jr. held the CEO position at this point, he was not the only member of the third generation of Turners to hold a role on the Dollar General executive team. In the 1980s, Cal Jr.’s younger brother Steve Turner joined the company’s leadership. With Cal Sr. still operating as the chair of the corporate board, Cal Jr. as the CEO, and Steve as the COO, there were three different Turner personalities within the Dollar General Corporation during this time. The Turners did not all share the same perspective about how to run the company. Over time, tensions heightened between the siblings. Cal Jr. reflects, “Plain old sibling rivalry was part of the deal. It wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t his. We just viewed the world differently, and had different visions for the

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<sup>84</sup> Jane Massey, “Where a Dollar is Still a Dollar,” *BG Magazine* 6, no. 2, 1986. VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>85</sup> Dollar General Corporation, “About Us.” <https://aboutus.dollargeneral.com> (accessed November 18, 2018).

company that couldn't be reconciled."<sup>86</sup> In January of 1988, Cal Jr. fired his brother.<sup>87</sup> In November, after disagreements between Cal Sr. and the remainder of the executive team began to occur, Cal Jr. forced his father out of his position as the board chair.

While the years of Cal Jr.'s leadership were marked by dramatic management changes, corporate relocation, and significant store expansion, one component of the business model which remained constant was Dollar General's target consumer. While in 1977 the majority of Dollar General customers lived on \$10,000 or less and in 1992 the "average customer [was] a working class, 25- to 45- year old woman earning less than \$25,000 a year," Dollar General's target customers remained low-income individuals.<sup>88 89</sup> While there was significant change over time within the business and the national economy (reflected in the inflation the salary differential between 1977 and 1992), Dollar General continued to target individuals in the U.S. who lived off of the lowest incomes. This reality was also evident in Dollar General's acceptance of food stamps in 1995, while continuing to refuse to accept credit cards for several more years. Catering to individuals in the U.S. who live off of the least amount of money has proven incredibly profitable for Dollar General. As Cal Jr. succinctly summarized, "In times of economic stress, the middle market produces a lot of corpses. We were fortunate in our stubborn determination to stay at the low end and serve the low-income consumer."<sup>90</sup> What was unsaid but implied in Cal Jr.'s comment was that Dollar General's fortune also relied upon the constant presence of individuals who lack fortune, the persistent presence of a U.S. lower-class.

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<sup>86</sup> "Dollar General Up 19 Percent," October 13, 1985, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>87</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 176.

<sup>88</sup> "Dollar General Serving Small-Town America," *Clothes*, October 1, 1977, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>89</sup> "Dollar General Chain Simply Excels," *The Courier Journal*, March 3, 1992. VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

By 1990, Dollar General had grown to encompass 1,378 stores in 23 states and to employ over 7,000 people.<sup>91</sup> The company had no intention of slowing its rate of expansion. A newspaper article from 1989 noted a shift in the corporation's expansion model to target more urban areas: "The company intends to put more stores in larger cities."<sup>92</sup> Additionally, the company planned to further saturate markets within the current geographical reach of its stores. The article continued, "there are still 1,500 to 2,000 smaller communities in Dollar General's 23 distribution states that don't have Dollar General Stores. 'The numbers say that you could double the store population you have just by going into those untapped communities, Turner Jr. said.'<sup>93</sup> Dollar General was prepared and aiming for accelerated store expansion with no end in sight.

### **Storytelling Dollar General**

To tell the story of any business is to delineate between events of the past and the ways that past events have been retold in order to craft a marketable origin story for company promotion within a capitalist society. In the first section of this chapter, I undertook the task of parsing fact from fiction, gathering information from a variety of sources of varying levels of reliability to reconstruct the company's timeline. In the following section, I analyze Cal Turner Jr.'s memoir *My Father's Business: The Small-Town Values that Built Dollar General into a Billion Dollar Company*, published in 2018. As I endeavored to recreate the timeline of Dollar General's evolution over the past eighty years, Cal Jr.'s memoir proved a vital source, highlighting moments of historical importance, providing selective and subjective information

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<sup>90</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 193.

<sup>91</sup> Dollar General, 1990 Annual Report, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

about discussions occurring on the executive level, and presenting data to demonstrate Dollar General's growth. However, the limitations of memory and Cal Jr.'s investment in the company's success historically and today limits his ability to act as a reliable narrator of this history. Cal Jr.'s memoir is a carefully and strategically crafted document that is, by its very nature, highly political. This document is useful not only for its factual content, but also for the ideologies reflected in the way that the story of the corporation is told.

Within a neoliberal context, storytelling has become a monetized practice, one intricately linked to the financial success of a business. This reality is evident in the booming brand development and management industries as well as the plethora of how-to books which teach entrepreneurs how to effectively—and profitably—tell the story of their company.<sup>94</sup> Sam Walton's *Made In America: My Story* is one notable forerunner of Cal Jr.'s text, utilizing the genre of memoir to solidify a corporate origin-story. Walton's memoir inspired critical acclaim from a *New York Times* book review which called it "a sure-fire all-American success story" as well as critical scrutiny from at least one cultural scholar.<sup>95</sup> As a former company spokesman and American businessman, no doubt Cal Jr. was aware of storytelling's ability to spur financial success. Thus, Cal Jr.'s narrative depiction of the evolution of Dollar General provides content ripe for analysis, reflecting his conscious and unconscious efforts to shape a compelling, profitable story of the company. Thus, in addition to this text's usefulness as an aid to recreating the Dollar General historical timeline, it provides a glimpse into the mind of Cal Jr. and the story

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Prather, "Dollar General steadily turns financial corner," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, May 15, 1989, VF Dollar General Corp., Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>93</sup> Prather, "Dollar General steadily turns financial corner."

<sup>94</sup> Alexander Freund, "'Confessing Animals': Toward a Longue Durée History of the Oral History Interview," *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 1 (2014): 18.

<sup>95</sup> Utut Kurniati, "The Myth of Material Success as Reflected in Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story," *Eltin Journal* 2, no. 1 (2015).



of Dollar General that he would like told—and sold.

*The Turner Men: Exceptional Capitalist Icons*

Cal Jr.'s telling of Dollar General's founding could be briefly summarized as a rags-to-riches tale. Cal Jr.'s depiction of the lives and work of his father and grandfather serves to establish these men as exceptional embodiments of the entrepreneurial spirit, the type of men who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. In Cal Jr.'s portrayal, both men are extraordinary, possessing the traits of a successful capitalist businessman: an independent streak, persistence, a willingness to work hard for long hours, intelligence, and the traditional masculinity of an upright patriarch. In doing so, Cal Jr. compels readers to approach the story of Dollar General's rise as a capitalist "Cinderella story" of sorts, situating the business's history and that of its leaders alongside other widely regarded entrepreneurial giants like Sam Walton. If the Turner family patriarchs are understood, like these other business leaders, as exceptional examples of U.S. entrepreneurship, then Cal Jr.'s self-reflection and family history are elevated in importance as an instructional text for others who possess the desire to attain success within capitalism.

True to the capitalist ideal of one who pulls themselves up by their bootstraps, Cal Jr. presents James Luther Turner as a self-starter. Cal Jr. centers J.L.'s childhood in the narrative of his text. He describes how J.L. worked to support his siblings after his father's death, helping with the family farm and selling goods in town. Not only is J.L. exceptional for his ability to work and succeed through significant poverty and adversity, but he is also presented as having exceptional intelligence. Cal Jr. writes that his "grandfather, James Luther Turner, was one of the

smartest men I have ever known.”<sup>96</sup> In particular, J.L.’s intentional frugality is presented as a signifier of his intelligence as well as a central component of his business acumen. Cal Jr. recounts his grandfather’s advice, “you need to save something from every paycheck”—advice only applicable for those who have already enough money to meet their basic needs. Finally, J.L. is painted as an original, independent thinker who “wasn’t much for bosses.”<sup>97</sup> While, as Cal Jr. attests, things never came easily to J.L.—in addition to his difficult childhood his first business endeavor failed—he adapted to his circumstances and struggled to overcome adversity, embodying the hardworking capitalist ideal.

Like J.L., within Cal Jr.’s text, Hurley Calister Turner, Sr. is also a remarkable and noteworthy businessman. If Cal Jr. presents J.L. as exceptionally brilliant, he paints Cal Sr. as a veritable genius. According to Cal Jr., with only an eighth-grade education, Cal Sr. became an invaluable asset to his father’s work as a wholesaler and was “especially good with numbers.” Unlike J.L. who worked to develop a relevant skillset, Cal Sr. is presented as an intuitive, natural-born businessman. Cal Jr. attributes his father’s success to a superhuman, natural inclination towards effective business practices. He writes of his father’s decision to experiment with the fixed-price store model: “Cal Turner Sr. was the classic entrepreneur—he followed his gut, and his gut told him this would work.”<sup>98</sup> This representation of Cal Sr. as successful due to his inherent talent for business obscures the role that J.L.’s prior financial success played in Cal Sr.’s rise to prominence. The financial safety net of his father’s successful wholesale operation enabled Cal Sr. to experiment with new retail formats. Similarly, the financial and cultural capital Cal Sr. accrued when he married into the wealthy, prominent Goad family is downplayed

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<sup>96</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 2.

in his son's memoir.

Depicting his father and grandfather as distinctly exceptional businessmen, Cal Jr. preserves the belief underpinning capitalism that financial success reflects inherent potential and talent. Rather than acknowledging systemic inequalities, he reifies the idea that capitalism rewards merit, that those who attain the American dream—or, in this case, accrue significant familial wealth through business ownership—deserve their earned reward.

Secondly, through the portrayal of his father and grandfather as capitalist icons, Cal Jr. situates himself within a patriarchal, genealogical lineage of exceptional, hardworking business entrepreneurs. Successful business practices and hardworking entrepreneurship runs in Cal Jr.'s blood. This line of thinking naturalizes Cal Jr.'s wealth as simultaneously inherited and earned. The connection Cal Jr. draws between genealogy and the mythic hard work required for financial success within capitalism, ultimately reifies ideology of the “culture of poverty,” a social theory which links poverty to engrained cultural and familial practices used to justify systemic, patterned class inequalities. Presenting his familial line as exceptional and his role as the next in the Turner line, Cal Jr. established himself as uniquely equipped and qualified for his inherited role as a financial capitalist.

Finally, these portrayals of Cal Sr. and J.L. as exceptional talents also erases the historical context of Dollar General's meteoric success. As the Turner patriarchs are credited with exceptional abilities that made the company successful, Cal Jr. downplays the influence of evolving external factors related to the regional, national, and global contexts for the business's success. This portrayal also dissuades readers from critically examining the business's practices—like union busting, the firm's impact on the individuals who have shopped or been

employed in its stores, or the effects on communities Dollar General expands to reach.

*Dollar General: Just a Small-Town, Southern Business*

Throughout his memoir, Cal Jr. emphasizes both the small-town roots and southern origin of both Dollar General Corporation and the Turner family. Indeed, in the very title of the book, Cal Jr. claims that “small-town values” are responsible for building “Dollar General into a billion-dollar company.” Cal Jr.’s mother was a “Southern lady,”<sup>99</sup> and his father “a real Southern gentleman.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, the Turner family members in Cal Jr.’s estimation embody distinctly white, southern identities. Dollar General is presented not only as a family business, but as one characterized by its town and region of origin. Emphasizing Dollar General’s southern and rural roots, Cal Jr. marks the company’s history as one of regional interest while also creating an escape route through feigned ignorance when the company cuts legal corners like falsifying the company’s year-end records.

At various points throughout his memoir, Cal Jr. highlights the southern identity or small-town connections of Dollar General. The corporation’s link to a small, Kentucky town—especially prior to the relocation of the corporate headquarters—set Dollar General apart from other large corporations. Cal Jr. recounts, “Analysts would come to town and ask directions to the headquarters of Dollar General. ‘I don’t know,’ someone would tell them, ‘but the Turner place is down East Main Street, next to Bob Graham’s furniture barn.”<sup>101</sup> The connection to southern small-town life distinguished the company, rendering it somehow more wholesome in comparison to metropolitan firms.

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<sup>99</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 11.

<sup>100</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 29

Playing up the corporation's regional affiliations to rurality—defined in opposition to urbanity and the big business, development, and capital it connotes—and to the South—defined in opposition to the north and its historical prominence as a leader industrialization and as a national economic hub—enables Cal Jr. to set the corporation apart from other national corporations as well as the Turners from other businessmen who might be perceived as more savvy or strategic. Drawing on stereotypical traits associated with small-town life or the South enables Cal Jr. to distance the Turners and Dollar General from full accountability for business practices that are shady or illegal. For example, Cal Jr. narrates his discovery of his father's habit of falsifying financial records. "Sometimes when we bought an item for, say, \$6 a dozen, he'd make an entry that said we paid \$8 for them. That created an overage that would offset some of the inevitable shrinkage, giving him a cushion he could bring to bear on the year-end numbers. If he overdid it, though, our auditors would come to him about our warehouse overage for the year. He'd say, 'Well, we don't need to show that much profit,' and he'd start subtracting from the overage and save it for the next year." However, Cal Jr. dismisses this behavior with an "aw shucks" attitude, citing his father's, likely feigned, ignorance of the law. Much like he dismissed illegal actions in response to union organizing, he continues, "Was that legal? We didn't know and didn't think about it."<sup>102</sup> The reader is meant to look past the strategy behind Cal Sr.'s falsified recordkeeping and accept that a southern, small-town business should not possibly be held to the same legal and regulatory standards as other, "savvier" companies.

*Cal Turner Jr.: A True Believer in Christian Free Enterprise*

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<sup>101</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 103

<sup>102</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 89

Although following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, Cal Turner Jr.'s leadership typified a generation of business leaders who increasingly entwined corporate interests with the interests of evangelical Christianity as Darren Grem documents in *The Blessings of Business: How Corporations Shaped Conservative Christianity*. After the “long push to align corporate money, institutions and interests with the evangelical faith” over the course of the twentieth century, emphasis on the faith-driven element of a public figure or business became a way to garner popular support. The complex entanglements between the corporate world, government, and Christian interests set the stage for the success of George W. Bush’s gubernatorial and presidential campaigns, which won, in large part, due the support of a “‘base’ of faith.”<sup>103</sup> Cal Jr. seems similarly set on securing the support of the Christian faithful throughout his memoir, presenting his family as a traditional Christian family, himself as a servant leader, and his business as a “mission-driven entity.”<sup>104</sup>

The centrality of religion to Cal Turner Jr.’s memoir is evident in his chosen title as well as the passages which bookend the text. Beyond elevating his forefathers as capitalist geniuses, Cal Jr. rhetorically blurs the line between his own biological father and the Holy Father of the Christian tradition through capitalization of the term “Father” within the title as well as the introductory and concluding passages. In the introduction Cal Jr. writes, “I hope that within [this book] you will find keys to exploring your own life and becoming everything you are capable of being as you pursue your Father’s business.”<sup>105</sup> Here, Cal Jr. shows that this ambiguous phrasing is wholly intentional and, as an evangelical Christian businessman, he invites the reader to join

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<sup>103</sup> Grem, *The Blessings of Business*, 237.

<sup>104</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 143.

<sup>105</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, xiv.

him in in their own endeavor of “Christian free enterprise.”<sup>106</sup>

As historian Bethany Moreton has explained in relation to Wal-Mart, the ideology of Christian free enterprise offered “a new basis for family stability and masculine authority even as the logic the market undermined both” as the nation shifted towards a service economy.<sup>107</sup> Moreton contends that “Although free market economic theories captured the hearts and minds of elite policymakers in the later twentieth century, the animating spirit of Christian free enterprise shaped the outcome.”<sup>108</sup> In addition to animating the outcome of twentieth century policy, the spirit of Christian free enterprise is present throughout Cal Jr.’s text as he reconciles his life and business choices with his Christian faith.

Patriarchal hierarchy is central to both evangelical Christianity and Cal Jr.’s representation of the Turner family dynamic. To emphasize the presence of traditional Christian “family values,” Cal Jr. constantly reasserts and reifies traditional, heteronormative, binary gender roles within his own family as well as Dollar General’s business structure. Cal Jr. continually defines his family members in relation to essentialist assumptions about binary gender categories. Specifically, Turner matriarchs are described for the traditional femininity each embodies. Cal Jr. describes his mother thus: “Mama was very much the Southern lady. She was a pretty woman with dark brown hair, blue eyes, and a fine complexion. She was a great homemaker and cook, but no matter how busy the day had been, she met my father at the door just out of the bath, wearing fresh lipstick and looking her absolute best.”<sup>109</sup> From this telling, the reader concludes that his mother, Laura Goad, fulfills the standards of idealized white

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<sup>106</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*.

<sup>107</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 270.

<sup>108</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 11.

womanhood, performing labor within the domestic sphere as well as maintaining the proper aesthetics of traditional southern femininity. Likewise, Cal Jr. describes his grandmother as “the hardest-working lady I ever met... She canned fruits and vegetables from her garden, kept a spotless house, and quilted, knitted, and crocheted.”<sup>110</sup> Like his mother, Cal Jr.’s grandmother’s performance of domestic labor is linked to her designation as a “lady.” While Cal Jr. is not effusive in his description of his grandmother’s aesthetic labor, she, in his eyes, serves as an example of good Christian womanhood in addition to an example of traditional feminine traits associated with good housekeeping. Cal Jr. praises his grandmother’s regular devotional practice and claims her as a religious role model. Through these naturalized descriptions of his female relatives’ lives within the domestic sphere, Cal Jr. underpins gendered division of work.

In addition to passive allusions to his female relatives’ relegation to the domestic sphere to perform unpaid labor, Cal Jr. also explicitly refers to the correlation between gender and the divide between public and private spheres within his family culture. He attests, “My dad was the boss at work; [my mother] was the boss at home.”<sup>111</sup> Here, Cal Jr. emphasizes not only his mother’s assumed designation to the private sphere, but also his father’s correlational role in the professional workplace. Additionally, Cal Jr.’s text reveals his father’s active enforcement of traditional feminine and masculine work categories. Cal Jr. narrates an instance in which his father came home from work to find his son completing household chores. Cal Sr. indignantly reacts with the exclamation, “Cal Jr. is not going to be doing any more women’s work.”<sup>112</sup> This anecdote marks the beginning of Cal Jr.’s paid work for Dollar General.

Throughout his memoir, Cal Jr. extends the stereotypical binary gender roles of

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<sup>110</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 13-14.

<sup>111</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 12.



evangelical Christianity beyond his family unit to encompass the Dollar General Corporation as well. On the first page of his acknowledgements, Cal Jr. writes, “I am grateful to the thousands of company partners, especially those working in the stores and warehouses, who helped make Dollar General Corporation a family.”<sup>113</sup> In positioning the company as a family, Cal Jr. brings with him his assumptions about what a proper, Christian family unit and gender roles should be—characterized by men’s public leadership and women’s unpaid labor behind the scenes. This projection is evident in Cal Jr.’s claims, “Just as my grandmother was the strength behind my grandfather and my mother was the strength behind my father, the women who were the vast majority of our store managers and customers were the backbone of the company.”<sup>114</sup> Identifying his family as a Christian family and hoisting his traditional family gender expectations upon the company, Cal Jr. establishes Dollar General as a business of Christian free enterprise. Both within the Turner family and the broader Dollar General “family,” men operated in the public eye, while women were relegated to background, lower-valued roles.

In addition to ascribing traditional, binary gender roles to the company’s business model, Cal Jr. emphasizes the Christian nature of the corporation through its financial success within a free market context over which, he attests, God’s will presides. He writes, “We learned at an early age that retailers desperately needed God’s cooperation,” reflecting his belief that the invisible hand of the free market is a godly one.<sup>115</sup> Within this conceptual framework, Dollar General Corporation’s financial prosperity is evidence of divine endorsement.

After establishing his family as a proper Christian family and his business as a proper

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<sup>112</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, xi.

<sup>114</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, ix.

<sup>115</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 27.

Christian business, Cal Turner Jr. attempts to establish himself as a Christian entrepreneur and servant leader. Indeed, Cal Jr. wholeheartedly believes in the godliness of his work within the business sector. He describes his professional entry into the family business as a “calling” rather than a decision. He reflects, “I came to realize that maybe I could have much more effect on the lives of our customers day in and day out in our stores than I ever could have as a preacher conducting three services a week. *Maybe, I thought, I have a greater calling here.*”<sup>116</sup> The idea of working as a leader of a for-profit corporation as a “calling” paramount to ministering as a religious leader reflects Cal Jr.’s investment in the idea of Christian free enterprise. Ignoring the inherent profit-driven nature of the corporation, Cal Jr. imagines he was called into a ministry of free enterprise and thus, his business “serves” and he is its “servant leader.” Servant leadership is an ideology that rose to prominence in the late twentieth century and “made the patriarchy safe for postindustrial society.”<sup>117</sup> Moreton contends that “by the early 1990s, the specific formula of ‘servant leader’ became hard to escape.” Sam Walton succinctly summarizes his perspective on the practice of servant leadership: “As servant leaders, we must do all we can to exceed our associate-partners’ expectations daily, one-on-one.”<sup>118</sup> Within a servant leadership model, accountability and authority slips through the cracks as “one’s position of power within a system became de facto evidence of service, with no reference to the external structures that determined the distribution of power.”<sup>119</sup> Due to the ideology’s prevalence during Cal Jr.’s time as Dollar General’s CEO, it is no surprise that he clings to this servant leader ideology and conceptualizes his corporate leadership style as such.

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<sup>116</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 51.

<sup>117</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 124.

<sup>118</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 107.

<sup>119</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 107.

One manifestation of Cal Jr.'s servant leader identity is the corporate charitable initiatives he launched through Dollar General in 1986. This initiative would provide literacy programming and GED support to communities surrounding Dollar General stores. Corporate charities are a common public relations strategy wherein a business trades a small percentage of its substantial profits to build goodwill in the community and gain new shoppers. Dollar General's charity initiative reflects paternalistic attitudes towards low-income individuals. Dollar General's initiatives to increase adult literacy and aid community members in attaining their GED do not address or deign to counteract the structural inequalities or oppressions these individuals and communities face. Instead, these charities better train potential members of Dollar General's workforce with the basic literacy needed to work efficiently as well as potential Dollar General shoppers with skills to attain a low-wage job, and income with which to acquire basic goods at Dollar General stores. This charitable model fails to reckon with the reality Moreton highlights that "once education [is] widely available and service industries the major employers, the result [is] an educated working class in service jobs, not a universal middle class. Someone still [has] to stock the shelves."<sup>120</sup> Thus, Cal Jr.'s charity, rooted in ideology of service leadership, serves some community members living under the poverty line, but does not address the systemic nature of poverty, for to do would call into question the very model of the Dollar General business. In 1988, Ronald Reagan's administration awarded Dollar General the Presidential Award for Private Sector Initiatives for its GED and literacy programs. Undoubtedly, these initiatives reflect the privatization of public services that Reaganomics encouraged and neoliberal attitudes about an individual's responsibility for their own financial security or insecurity.

A noteworthy manifestation of the influence of religion on Cal Jr.'s leadership decision-making surrounds his decision to fire his brother in 1988. Cal Jr. writes, "My personal mission was God-honoring change and my highest value was reconciling love, which pursues the change that honors God. I had to ask myself how committed I was to both precepts."<sup>121</sup> This introduction of an issue of familial conflict within the corporation situates the problem not as a managerial dilemma, but as a spiritual one. Cal Jr.'s method of counsel during this time further emphasizes his perception of the spiritual nature of his problem. Prior to his conflict with his brother, Cal Jr. recounts that he was not "a daily Bible reader, as a good Methodist is supposed to be." But "in the face of that crisis," he took solace in reading scripture—which he terms a "crying inquiry." Before long, Turner "got the conviction" he needed in order to navigate the conflict with his brother when he came across the following passage from the fifteenth chapter of John: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so that it may bear more fruit." Turner concluded: "That seemed to be God's marching orders regarding my father's business, and it involved both Turner brothers... Only with that kind of pruning could we as a company bear more fruit."<sup>122</sup> Thus, Cal Jr. uses the justification of divine intervention through scripture to cast himself as God and "prune" his brother from the company. Sanctified motivations, in a sense, clear Cal Jr. of blame (and perhaps guilt) for his decision to fire his brother. In Cal Jr.'s interpretation of Christianity, corporate "fruit" holds greater import than family harmony. Cal Jr. reflects on the incident, "It was a matter of seeing that the company had gotten bigger than our

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<sup>121</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 173.

<sup>122</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 174-5.

family, and that it needed more expertise and resolve than we could bring to it as a family.”<sup>123</sup>

Thus, Cal Jr. assumes the role of spiritual leader for a new, corporate family whose needs outweigh those of his own biological family unit.

Cal Jr. reflects on his career at Dollar General, “It turned out I was called into true ministry—ministry that matters in the real world, the world of hurt and pain and error and sin, which to my mind was an even higher calling than the institutional ministry.”<sup>124</sup> Throughout Cal Jr.’s memoir, it is evident that he views his role as a capitalist leader as an opportunity to preach the gospel of Christian free enterprise and fulfill Dollar General’s mission to “serve others” through business. The overlapping themes of capitalism and Christianity in Cal Jr.’s memoir reflect the complicated, interconnectedness of evangelical Christianity, business, and government in the decades leading up to his time at the company, as well as his attempts to fulfill the role of a Christian free enterpriser during his time as Dollar General’s CEO.

Both my research and Cal Jr.’s text outline the history of Dollar General, starting in 1929 and following its evolution into a massive corporation stretching across the majority of the continental U.S. A critical examination of Cal Jr.’s memoir reveals a crafted narrative which highlights the positive traits of the Turner patriarchs and skates over their questionable practices under the guise of small-town, southern business naiveté. Cal Jr. uses his book as an opportunity to present the company, his family, and himself as entities of Christian free enterprise, associated with traditional, evangelical Christianity whose God, in Cal Jr.’s mind, governs the free market. This portrayal of the company and the Turner family as fundamentally aligned with Christian, southern, and capitalist ideals shows another all-American success story, like Sam Walton’s, a

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<sup>123</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 184.

<sup>124</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 53.

success story that obscures the harrowing reality evident in the company history that the Dollar General business model fundamentally relies upon the existence and propagation of U.S. poverty.

As the company's success during and following the recessions of the late twentieth century demonstrates, Dollar General Corporation benefits when individual financial security within the United States staggers. Thus, the Great Recession of the early twenty-first century proved another important launching point for the Dollar General Corporation. For the 2008 fiscal year, Dollar General's annual sales were 2.85 billion dollars and the company operated more than 8,400 stores.<sup>125</sup> At the start of the 2009 fiscal year, then-Chief Executive Officer Richard Dreiling said of Dollar General's upcoming year, "I am confident that Dollar General's business model is resilient and will remain adaptable throughout this difficult economic time... Most importantly, we remain focused on helping our customers make the most of their time and money by offering them quality products that they want at prices they need in locations convenient to them."<sup>126</sup> Ten years later, on the other side of the Great Recession, Dollar General's annual sales had risen to 25.6 billion dollars and its store count to 15,370.<sup>127</sup> The monumental rise the company's annual sales in particular reflects that, as the economy worsens and budgets tighten, individuals who might otherwise shop in-bulk at big-box stores seek out cheaper retail options like dollar stores to meet the basic, daily needs in the short-term at the lowest possible price. Likewise under financial strain, the providers of Dollar General's already-discounted goods and property rentals are likely to even further reduce their prices, enabling the

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<sup>125</sup> "Dollar General Corporation Reports Fourth Quarter and Fiscal Year 2008 Financial Results," Dollar General Newsroom, March 24, 2009, <https://newscenter.dollargeneral.com/news/dollar-general-corporation-reports-fourth-quarter-and-fiscal-year-2008-financial-results.htm>.

<sup>126</sup> "Dollar General Corporation Reports Fourth Quarter and Fiscal Year 2008 Financial Results."

corporation to reduce its already minimal overhead. Thus, for Dollar General, a struggling national economy and burgeoning lower-class means higher profit margins.

Notably, while the company had been expanding since its inception, Dollar General's shift to a rapid growth model occurred in conjunction with the onset of globalization and the resurgence of free market capitalism under its new name, neoliberalism. The influences of neoliberalism and a global finance capitalist market are evident throughout the history of the company from the 1970s to the present. The firm's prioritization of cheap—cheap labor, cheap products, cheap distribution, cheap prices, etcetera—is at the center of this economic restructuring. Businesses like Dollar General, which were already modeled around cheap, maintained a competitive advantage throughout this shift.

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<sup>127</sup> “Dollar General Corporation Reports Fourth Quarter and Fiscal Year 2008 Financial Results.”

## CHAPTER TWO: THE NEOLIBERAL LANDSCAPE OF DOLLAR GENERAL

On a cold, clear day in February, I drove about twenty miles out of the way on a trip to the Western Kentucky University archive in Bowling Green, Kentucky. I had wanted to see with my own eyes the iconic Scottsville Dollar General storefront, the outline of which had once graced the corporation's printed materials. From a distance, there was a pleasant aesthetic contrast between the yellow painted sign and the picturesque stately courthouse building across the road from the Dollar General store on the corner of Main Street and Court Street in downtown Scottsville. The store sign had not been updated to match the latest neon yellow that is characteristic of the Dollar General brand today.

As I drew closer, I could see that the storefront was cluttered with summer plastic: brightly colored lawn chairs, hula hoops, and pool noodles were stacked on one side of the store entrance. On the other, kiddie pools leaned haphazardly against rows of clothing, although the freezing weather seemed to deter shoppers from perusing these racks. The store windows were papered with posters featuring products and sales promotions. I recognized Marlboro Reds' logo on one pane from a few blocks away. Drawing nearer, I noted trash littering the stained concrete in front of the store. A crumpled Dollar General plastic bag sat in a vacant parking spot, recognizable by its characteristic yellow with black text. As I spotted it, a processed pastry wrapper slid out of reach under a parked van. Here I stood, in front of the Turners' hometown



Dollar General store.

In this chapter, I aim to draw similarly nearer to the Dollar General Corporation to get a sense of the “unaccounted for costs of cheap” which litter the wake of the business’ steady expansion across the United States over the past several decades.<sup>128</sup>

Chapter One recreates Dollar General Corporation’s history largely through a “top-down” telling. Through a critical examination of the company and its leaders, the chapter outlines the corporation’s founding as well as its navigation of the economic highs and lows of the past eighty years. Indeed, moments of national economic instability propelled Dollar General’s success, as the company reaped the benefits of a growing lower-class consumer base, desperate manufacturers, and struggling competitors. Finally, the chapter turns a critical lens upon Cal Turner Jr.’s memoir to better understand the narrative he creates about Dollar General as well as his time at the helm of the business, a period of rapid growth and dramatic redirection that launched the company into its modern-day status as a multibillion-dollar corporation. In contrast, this chapter examines the places Dollar General affects and the spaces Dollar General creates, exploring how the influence of neoliberalism and financial capitalism manifest in and within Dollar General stores. Examining Dollar General’s recent history and contemporary business practices “from the ground up” reveals the effects of contemporary economic ideologies on the corporation and the subsequent impact on the individuals whose lives it affects daily, individuals who hold little or no power within the corporate structure.

Dollar General’s monumental expansion, accelerating over the past several decades, has occurred in tandem with the rise of neoliberalism within the United States. Operating under a logic of capitalism that the “natural” course of the free market will ultimately serve public

benefit, neoliberalism blurs the line between state and corporate interest. In the words of economic theorist David Harvey, “the fundamental mission of the neo-liberal state is to create a ‘good business climate’ and therefore to optimize conditions for capital accumulation.”<sup>129</sup> In order to create optimal conditions for capital accumulation, the shift to a neoliberal economy in the U.S., beginning in the 1970s and escalating as the turn of the millennia drew nearer, brought to bear the deregulation of the private sector, the privatization of public services, and the promotion of free trade to prevent government interference with the free market.<sup>130</sup> Historian Laura Briggs describes neoliberalism as “a political revolution...in which corporate America and Wall Street have reset government priorities to shrink spending on the well being of actual humans—from schools to housing to child welfare programs like AFDC—in order to keep corporate taxes low and profits high.”<sup>131</sup> Briggs’ scholarship tells the story of “how neoliberalism has changed our political and economic system,” and yet tells that story “from inside families.”<sup>132</sup> This chapter aims to similarly illuminate the effects of neoliberalism through an examination of a smaller entity—not the family unit—but Dollar General Corporation through its stores’ places and store spaces.

Due to its relationship to the promotion of free trade and unhindered markets, U.S. neoliberalism flourished within a context of rapid globalization at the end of the twentieth century, as new technological advances enabled the instantaneous exchange of thoughts and ideas and facilitated a widely-accessible global economy. Since neoliberalism also entails “the

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<sup>128</sup> Simon, *The Hamlet Fire*, 236.

<sup>129</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2019), 25.

<sup>130</sup> Some economic theorists have demonstrated that neoliberal politics predated the late twentieth century rise to prominence in U.S. partisan politics.

<sup>131</sup> Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* (Oakland: University of California, 2018), 8-9.

financialization of everything,” this global economy was increasingly one of finance capitalism.<sup>133</sup> Within this system, “the relocation of the power center of capital accumulation to owners and their financial institutions at the expense of other factions of capital.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, state powers facilitate economic growth through private firms rather than emphasizing public services. Within finance capitalism, “Raising the price of its stock becomes the objective of corporate operations.”<sup>135</sup> Dollar General has excelled at this objective.

After Cal Turner Jr.’s 2001 departure from the firm’s executive team, the company continued to thrive. That is, until 2006 when the company’s profit margins dipped. In its annual report, Dollar General executives blamed this poor performance on the company’s decision to sell “virtually all current-year non-replenishable merchandise” in an effort to discontinue its existing “inventory packaway management model,” as well as to begin desperately needed upgrades to its existing store base.<sup>136</sup> The corporation announced a proposed merger in which “affiliates of Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co., L.P,” an investment firm, would purchase the common stock, taking the company private.<sup>137</sup> Presumably, Dollar General’s executives viewed the financial cushion the investment firm’s immense capital could provide as necessary while the company restructured to actualize the proposed changes. In July of 2007, the merger occurred. Some have speculated that, during this time as a private company, Dollar General realigned its business model to better compete with Family Dollar and Dollar Tree corporations in urban

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<sup>132</sup> Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*, 9.

<sup>133</sup> Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 24.

<sup>134</sup> Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 24.

<sup>135</sup> Richard Peet, “Contradictions of Finance Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* 63, no.7 (2011): 18.

<sup>136</sup> Dollar General, 2006 Annual Report, <https://investor.dollargeneral.com/static-files/0d8b7500-d4d8-4c57-a76c-35e787823702>.

<sup>137</sup> Dollar General, 2006 Annual Report, 2.

markets.<sup>138</sup> After two years, Dollar General Corporation went public on November 13, selling shares of Dollar General (DG) stock at \$22 per share. In 2013, the “entity controlled by investment funds affiliated with Kravis Roberts & Co. L.P.” sold its remaining shares of DG common stock. Almost one decade after Dollar General went public for the second time, the firm’s stock value has more than quadrupled. As of April 23, 2019, DG stock valued at \$126.38 a share. Last year, Dollar General Corporation ranked 123 on the Fortune 500 list.<sup>139</sup>

### **Dollar General Navigates Place**

In addition to the corporation’s financial success, Dollar General’s growth can be measured in terms of the company’s geographic expansion. The spread of Dollar General through the opening of new stores has been a long-occurring phenomenon although in recent years, the rate of the company’s spatial spread has increased. In 2018, the corporation expanded at a rate of three new stores each day and estimations for 2019 suggest that this rate will continue.<sup>140</sup> At the close of the 2018 fiscal year, Dollar General operated sixteen distribution centers for non-refrigerated merchandise spread across fifteen different states. This year, Dollar General anticipates the opening of a new distribution center in Amsterdam, New York, the first in the state. Each new distribution center will serve an estimated one thousand Dollar General stores.<sup>141</sup> In a 2018 television interview, former CEO Cal Turner Jr. recited the overwhelming statistic that 75 percent of the population of the continental U.S. lives within five miles of a

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<sup>138</sup> Kris Hudson, “Dollar General Lags Behind Rival: Family Dollar Makes Successful Approach to Urban Markets,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB117487984155448688>.

<sup>139</sup> Dollar General, 2018 Annual Report, <https://investor.dollargeneral.com/static-files/3a775a9d-4291-424c-8bbe-3ae948d06da4>.

<sup>140</sup> Nathaniel Meyersohn, “Dollar General will open 975 stores this year,” *CNN Business*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/14/business/dollar-general-stores-family-dollar/index.html>.

Dollar General store.<sup>142</sup> With such a vast geographic reach, the story of Dollar General's relationship with place cannot be simply or wholly told; however, an examination of the corporation's established construction practices, store designs, buying/selling strategies, and employment practices provide a glimpse into the firm's impact upon the places its stores inhabit.<sup>143</sup>

Dollar General has both physically and symbolically traveled far from its place of origin, Scottsville, Kentucky. Some corporate chains with roots in the U.S. South like Cracker Barrel and Mast General Store have branded their buildings' aesthetic off of tropes associated with southern and small town life.<sup>144</sup> However, Dollar General has expanded without maintaining or monetizing aesthetics tied to its regional identity of origin. Instead, the Dollar General store embodies only the aesthetics of cheap. In the words of Cal Turner, Jr., "We [Dollar General] avoided froufrou. We knew it was harder to convince the customer she's getting a bargain if she sees carpeting and a boutique setting. That's part of why our furnishings were so sparse."<sup>145</sup> Aside from the feminization of low-end consumers that this quote reflects, Turner's statement demonstrates the company's belief that its low-income shoppers will look past—if not embrace—the stores' standardized, minimalist design for the hyper-frugality it reflects. For Dollar General, the building serves merely as a temporary shelter for the cheap goods the store sells to low-income consumers.

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<sup>141</sup> Bob Hallmark, "Longview Lands Dollar General Warehouse," *KLTV.com*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.kltv.com/story/37130033/longview-lands-dollar-general-warehouse/>

<sup>142</sup> Cal Turner, Jr., "Small Towns have defined Dollar General," Interview by Maria Bartiromo, *Mornings with Maria*, March 23, 2018, video, 7:19, <https://video.foxbusiness.com/v/5788623057001/#sp=show-clips>.

<sup>143</sup> Due to the constraints of this thesis, I examine this topic on a national scope. Dollar General does have links to other countries, which require further study.

<sup>144</sup> Susie Penman, *Cracker Barrel's Culture: Exporting the South on America's Interstate Exits* (University of Mississippi: Thesis, Center for the Study of the South, 2012).

<sup>145</sup> Turner, *My Father's Business*, 141.

New Dollar General stores are either leased store fronts—often in strip malls, although sometimes in free-standing buildings adapted for this purpose—or newly-built structures which have been quickly constructed using an adaptation of one of the company’s standard store blueprints. When constructed anew, Dollar General stores are assembled quickly and often out of the cheapest available materials. The stark exteriors of Dollar General stores reflect executives’ ideas about the target Dollar General consumer, namely that low-income shoppers do not need anything except for low prices to entice them to enter a store. Dollar General stores’ facades are lined with sheet metal, concrete, or brick—or a combination of these materials—all of which reflect the buildings’ economical construction. The quick, cheap construction of Dollar General stores become especially evident when store buildings have had structural issues. In one extreme example in Lawrence, Indiana, a Dollar General’s overhanging awning fell from where it was attached to the store façade, crushing a car parked in front of the store. The local fire department reported after this incident that the building was not structurally sound.<sup>146</sup>

Dollar General is able to steadily open new stores because the corporation outsources a significant amount of the labor and financial risk associated with opening a new store to local firms, initiating partnerships with development companies based within or near target communities. Working in coordination with these developers on the ground, Dollar General lends its brand name and a store design from its catalogue of templated blueprints—which, like every aspect of the business’s model, prioritize affordability over all else—to the project. Dan Nieser, senior vice president of real estate and store development, describes Dollar General stores as using “bare-bones specifications” which are reflected in the affordability of opening a

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<sup>146</sup> “Cars damaged after partial collapse at Dollar General,” *WTHR.com*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.wthr.com/article/cars-damaged-after-partial-collapse-dollar-general>

new store.<sup>147</sup> The cost to open a new Dollar General store averages at \$250,000 which is low compared to big box stores. Wal-Mart, for example, requires at least \$15 million to build a new supercenter.<sup>148</sup> Meanwhile, the local development company handles the work of scouting out the potential location for the store, navigating local bureaucratic processes necessary to build for commercial use, and acquiring needed construction labor.

Decisions about when and where Dollar General builds new stores are calculated based on a number of factors including the availability of local development partners, the complexity of local bureaucratic processes, and—arguably most important—the presence of a market of prospective Dollar General consumers. Ideal locations have untapped communities of potential target consumer base, which, since Dollar General’s founding, has been predominantly low-income shoppers. This target consumer aligns with the demographic reality of the majority of dollar store shoppers. In 2011, then-CEO Rick Dreiling reported that “22 percent of his customers make more than \$70,000 a year.”<sup>149</sup> While Dreiling aimed to highlight the rising appeal of dollar stores to consumers of all income brackets, this statistic also shows that—even with the growing number of middle- and upper-class shoppers the report claims—the vast majority of Dollar General’s consumers earn under \$70,000 each year.

As Dollar General CEO Todd Vasos frankly stated in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, “the economy is continuing to create more of [Dollar General’s] core consumer.”<sup>150</sup> Dollar General’s geographic expansion reflects the growing lower-class within the U.S. under

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<sup>147</sup> Sarah Nassauer, “How Dollar General Became Rural America’s Store of Choice,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-dollar-general-became-rural-americas-store-of-choice-1512401992>.

<sup>148</sup> Mya Frazier, “Dollar General Hits a Gold Mine in Rural America,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-10-11/dollar-general-hits-a-gold-mine-in-rural-america>

<sup>149</sup> Hitt, “The Dollar Store Economy.”

<sup>150</sup> Nassauer, “How Dollar General Became Rural America’s Store of Choice.”

neoliberalism. Many scholars have challenged and disproven the fundamental assumption underlying neoliberal thought that the free market will improve society. Indeed, the explosive rise in income inequality in the U.S. since 1968 suggests that neoliberal politics exacerbate existing class inequalities.<sup>151</sup> Some have termed the widening gap between U.S. incomes the “Great Divergence.”<sup>152</sup> According to a 2011 Congressional Budget Office report, this divergence is a result of uneven growth as the income levels of the wealthiest 1 percent of U.S. households’ income has grown by 275 percent since 1970, while all other household incomes have grown at significantly lower rates.<sup>153</sup> In their study of the effects of neoliberalism on income difference, sociologists David Jacobs and Lindsey Meyers found a positive correlation between the nation’s rising income inequality with financialization and the declining strength of unions, two major indicators of neoliberal national policies.<sup>154</sup> Dollar General’s consistent growth since the 1970s, which has escalated in recent years, also correlates with the growing lower-class within the U.S. neoliberal economy, a lower-class of consumers who turn to Dollar General stores for a price-conscious retail option to stretch their limited budgets.

Dollar General boasts that its expansion creates new jobs. However, the jobs that Dollar General brings to new places may further contribute to income inequality. Over the course of the twentieth century, the U.S. economy has deindustrialized, shifting to a service-based economy. As of 2009, the service sector made up 80 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product

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<sup>151</sup> David Jacobs and Lindsey Myers, “Union Strength, Neoliberalism, and Inequality: Contingent Political Analyses of U.S. Income Differences since 1950,” *American Sociological Review* 79, no. 4 (2014): 752-74.

<sup>152</sup> Samuel P. Huntington is widely credited with coining the term in *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

<sup>153</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Trends in the Distribution of Household Income Between 1979 and 2007*, October 25, 2011, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/42729>.

<sup>154</sup> Jacobs and Myers, “Union Strength, Neoliberalism, and Inequality,” 767.



(GDP).<sup>155</sup> Retail plays a significant role in this service-based economy, directly creating 29 million jobs.<sup>156</sup> The category of retail work is broad, encompassing a range of jobs. Although retail plays a significant role as “one of the largest parts of the service sector,” the industry “generates some of the worst jobs.”<sup>157</sup> Many retail jobs are among the worst compensated in the nation. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that retail wages averaged at less than \$10.00 per hour.<sup>158</sup> The majority of Dollar General’s store employees make even less hourly than this national retail average. Glassdoor’s anonymous salary reporting indicates that Dollar General stores’ “sale associates,” “cashiers,” and “stockers” across the country make between \$7 and \$11 per hour, but these self-reported hourly rates average at \$8.<sup>159</sup> Company records confirm the low earnings of the majority of its employees. In 2018, Dollar General reported that the “annual total compensation of the median employee (a part-time associate) of [its] temporary, part-time, and full time employee base” was \$13,773 significantly below the national poverty line. In contrast, CEO Todd Vasos’ compensation was valued at \$10,602,517; thus, the company’s pay ratio for 2018 was 1 to 770.<sup>160</sup> Dollar General’s low employee wages reveal the company’s commitment to maximizing profits through cheap labor.

The low pay rates of Dollar General store workers, and retail workers generally, can be understood as part of a societal devaluation of this labor as “low-skilled” or “unskilled” work,

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<sup>155</sup> John Ward “The Services Sector: How Best To Measure It?,” U.S. Department of Commerce International Trade Administration, Accessed April 2019, <https://2016.trade.gov/publications/ita-newsletter/1010/services-sector-how-best-to-measure-it.asp>.

<sup>156</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, “The Economic Impact of the U.S. Retail Industry,” National Retail Federation, 2014, Accessed April 2019, [nrf.com/retailsimpact](http://nrf.com/retailsimpact).

<sup>157</sup> Christine L. Williams and Catherine Connell, “‘Looking Good and Sounding Right’: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality in the Retail Industry,” *Work and Occupations* 37, no. 3 (2010): 349-377, <http://wox.sagepub.com>.

<sup>158</sup> Williams and Connell, “Looking Good and Sounding Right,” 350.

<sup>159</sup> “Dollar General Salaries,” Glassdoor, accessed April 18, 2010, <https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Dollar-General-Salaries-E1342.htm>.

<sup>160</sup> Dollar General, 2018 Annual Report, 42.

meaning that little specialized training is required to fulfill the responsibilities of this role. It is no coincidence that the tasks which make up retail work overlap with the traditionally considered “feminine” work of domestic labor, which has long been unpaid and devalued within capitalist societies.<sup>161</sup> One major responsibility of the store associate is as a customer service representative. In other words, store employees must serve the customer, facilitating a positive shopping experience, ensuring that customers feel satisfied, attended to, and welcome. Another main component of customer service work within a retail context is maintaining a tidy, pleasant store aesthetic. This might require cleaning, organizing, or sorting. Additionally, the workers themselves can perform “aesthetic labor,” which encompasses “a worker’s deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness.”<sup>162</sup> Aesthetic labor contributes to a store’s aesthetic through the employee’s very appearance. Store employee dress codes reflect the expectation that retail workers will perform aesthetic labor. The extreme devaluation of the tasks which make up retail work reinforces the idea that anyone is qualified to enter this field, as there are no widely recognized “specialized skills” required to complete the job responsibilities. The “continual deskilling and automation of discount retail labor from its inception to present” further demonstrates the devaluation or degradation of this labor.<sup>163</sup> Retail labor is considered so unskilled that a human should not be necessary to execute it; however, corporations continue to require human workers to fill these devalued positions.

Due to the low monetary and societal value assigned to this labor, retail work is highly

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<sup>161</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 58-59.

<sup>162</sup> Lynne Pettinger, “Gendered Work Meets Gendered Goods: Selling and Service in Clothing Retail,” *Gender Work and Organization* 12, no. 5 (September 2005): 350.

<sup>163</sup> Thomas Jessen Adams, “Making the New Shop Floor: Wal-Mart, Labor Control, and the History of the Postwar Discount Retail Industry in America,” in *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (New York: The New Press, 2006), 218.

precarious, and even more so when that work takes place within a store environment of a low-end retail corporation like Dollar General and an economic context of neoliberalism, both of which prioritize the financial bottom-line over human well being. The precarity of working in a Dollar General store exists on both individual and storewide levels. As Dollar General's history (as outlined in the first chapter) revealed, if a store is not profitable, then that store will be eliminated and, with it, the jobs the store creates. In 2018, while Dollar General opened nine hundred stores, it also closed sixty-four.<sup>164</sup> Although Dollar General seeks to expand across the country, the company only maintains stores that are profitable and quickly discards stores which are not. Likewise, if an individual does not meet the expectations of a store manager or strictly abide by corporate policy, that individual can be fired. Within the Dollar General model, both stores and employees are disposable.

From both the feminization of the retail industry as well as the feminization of low-income Dollar General shoppers that the company's previous executive's comment reflects, Dollar General's effects on place are not identity-neutral. The firm's practices reveal assumptions about gender, race, class, and ability. Evidence suggests that Dollar General Corporation's business practices and overarching model reinforce structural inequalities along class, race, and gender among other identity categories. The identity-based patterned effects of the Dollar General Corporation should be explored further in future research on the company. As Dollar General Corporation creeps across the continental U.S. and enters new places, the company brings with it construction processes, purchasing and sales strategies, labor practices, and aesthetics that reflect the firm's focus on cheap to maximize profit.

## Navigating Dollar General's Spaces

As Dollar General has expanded across the U.S. landscape, the corporation has entered new communities, impacting new places and creating new spaces. Dollar General stores are spaces of work and spaces of consumption, spaces of public interaction and spaces of private enterprise. These spaces act as a microcosm of neoliberalism since corporate policies centered on the bottom line regulate the physical layout of stores, the items on the shelves, as well as the experiences of individual store workers and shoppers. Within a corporation with as vast a reach, there is no singular, universal experience of its spaces. However, drawing on shoppers' and workers' individual and collective experiences of the corporation's spaces, the influence of neoliberalism can be identified and explored within the Dollar General store. In their teaching text, *Spaces of Work: Global Capitalism and Geographies of Labor*, Noel Castree et al. point out that "in this era when capitalism is an increasingly global phenomenon, we need to appreciate that what happens to workers in one place is incomprehensible without paying heed to the inter-relations extending across space."<sup>165</sup> Building off of this claim, an examination of individual and community experiences of Dollar General Corporation's spaces and the objects these spaces contain provide insight into the practices of the corporate entity as a whole.

Even before entering a Dollar General store, shoppers are greeted with a panoply of brightly colored plastic. When I visited the store in Scottsville, summer seasonal supplies meant that plastic pools, plastic swim noodles, and plastic chairs sat out in front of the store. These featured seasonal items, like the other items in the store, share one unifying trait—cheapness. To make a profit while keeping prices competitively low, Dollar General stores buy stock from

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<sup>165</sup> Noel Castree, Neil M. Coe, Kevin Ward, and Michael Samers, *Spaces of Work: Global Capitalism and Geographies of Labour*. (London: Sage Publications, 2004), xiii.

companies' overstock, irregulars, and limited runs as well as purchasing "core items," which are always in stock at each store. Recently, Dollar General has also launched a few of its own brands for in-store products under its subsidiary Dolgencorp. Unfortunately, with the exception of the Dollar General brands, there is no way for shoppers to differentiate between the different categories of purchased goods.

Due to its bargain-oriented buying practices, Dollar General's goods are not always of a superior quality. In several instances, Dollar General has sold faulty items which were bought in bulk only to have these items later recalled. The "Motor Oil Lawsuits" of 2018 were the outcome of one such instance. Lawsuits were filed in several different states after Dollar General sold an obsolete motor oil that irrevocably damaged customers' cars.<sup>166</sup> In another case, Dollar General sold a batch of infant cough syrup which was recalled because of potential contamination.<sup>167</sup> Certainly, product recalls are not a phenomenon specific to Dollar General or the dollar store industry; however, the industry's desire for cheap merchandise might result in the company turning a blind eye where overstock or irregulars are available for a cheap, bulk purchase. At the Dollar General store, cheap costs trump value.

In addition to quality, Dollar General stores' goods have a distinct relationship to quantity. While Dollar General offers low prices in a sense, these low prices are not necessarily low unit prices. While big box stores like Wal-Mart offer goods like household supplies, in a variety of sizes or quantities, dollar stores usually only offer one size or a limited selection of each product's size. While the price of the item(s) available is cheap, the size or amount of the

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<sup>166</sup> Sarah Messer and Gio Benitez, "'GMA' Investigates: Dollar General Stores Facing Multiple Lawsuits Over Allegedly 'Obsolete' Motor Oils," *Good Morning America*, February 12, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/gma-investigates-dollar-general-stores-facing-multiple-lawsuits/story?id=36876976>.

product is usually more selective than would be found elsewhere.<sup>168</sup> Dollar General stores do not always list the unit price for their products. In this way, Dollar General curtails shoppers' ability to compare prices. In actuality, dollar store shoppers often pay a higher unit price than other shoppers who are able to purchase their daily supplies in bulk at other stores. Since the target Dollar General store shopper is low-income and likely struggles to make ends meet, a smaller upfront price for necessary goods is preferable to spending more money initially to save on the item cost in the long-term. Thus, dollar stores like Dollar General profess to help with customer savings while actually promoting frequent, short-term spending. Since 2013, Dollar General has also sold tobacco products, items which—by their addictive nature—encourage frequent store returns for re-purchase. Dollar General's company slogan, "Save Time. Save Money. Every day!®," resonates in the sense that smaller portions, addictive products, and convenient locations of stores mean that Dollar General shoppers are likely to stop in and pick up needed items frequently or "every day" rather than buying in bulk.

Once inside, Dollar General stores are cluttered with stock. As the dollar store industry makes its profit through rapid product turnover, each store aims to move items off the shelves rapidly and to quickly begin pushing the next shipment of goods. There is limited time to unpack goods and organize shelves between shipments. The resulting effect is a store packed with items and an aesthetic more chaotic than ordered. In Oneonta, New York, store clutter resulted in one store shopper filing a lawsuit against the company. Jennifer Rossman who uses a wheelchair, was unable to shop within her local Dollar General store because repeatedly "large stocking

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<sup>167</sup> "Baby cough syrup sold at Dollar General stores recalled for possible contamination," *Telegraph Herald*, March 23, 2019, [http://www.telegraphherald.com/news/public\\_announcements/article\\_8ba03270-e366-5720-9014-ebf3fb03d8f7.html](http://www.telegraphherald.com/news/public_announcements/article_8ba03270-e366-5720-9014-ebf3fb03d8f7.html).

carts, cardboard displays and merchandise stacked in aisles and outside the store's entrance" prevented her ability to navigate the store.<sup>169</sup> While the lawsuit is not yet decided, Rossman's experience demonstrates that Dollar General stores are run on a cheap, mass produced, "one size fits all" model that assumes an able-bodied consumer and resists adaptation to human needs. In this way, the store spaces reflect the neoliberal belief that private interests outweigh the needs of human bodies. Regardless of the money saved through low construction costs, a minimalist aesthetic, and cheap bulk purchases of goods, not all customers can physically shop within Dollar General stores.

In addition to impairing customers' ability to navigate the stores, Dollar General's crowded shelves and packed merchandise have had implications on store safety. Since 2010, the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has cited the firm for more than one hundred health and safety violations at Dollar General stores across the nation.<sup>170</sup> Specifically, the company was found to have repeatedly obstructed emergency exits with store merchandise and equipment. For an infraction in November of 2016, OSHA assessed \$117,579 in proposed fines for a Dollar General store in Pioneer, Ohio. In a press release Kim Nelson, OSHA's area director in Toledo, stated, "Dollar General's continued pattern of ignoring its responsibility to protect its employees and its customers in all of its stores is cause for real concern." One might argue that OSHA's findings of safety violations reflects the government's continued regulation of business, a contradictory finding within a neoliberal context. Historian

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<sup>168</sup> Kate Taylor, "America's greatest grocery-store bargains are unattainable for poor shoppers," *Business Insider*, March 2, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/retail-bargains-unattainable-for-poor-2016-3>.

<sup>169</sup> Denise Richardson, "Dollar General sued over lack of accessibility," *The Daily Star*, May 16, 2018, [https://www.thedailystar.com/news/local\\_news/dollar-general-sued-over-lack-of-accessibility/article\\_c3f5a33e-859b-5625-a6f8-fb596e4fe90e.html](https://www.thedailystar.com/news/local_news/dollar-general-sued-over-lack-of-accessibility/article_c3f5a33e-859b-5625-a6f8-fb596e4fe90e.html).

<sup>170</sup> "OSHA News Release - Region 5," *U.S. Department of Labor*, November 15, 2016, no. 16-2144-CHI, <https://www.osha.gov/news/newsreleases/region5/11152016>.

Bryant Simon outlines the way that, since the 1980s, OSHA has increasingly come to represent the evils of big government in U.S. political discourse. Consequently, the agency has seen significant federal budget cuts, impairing its ability to effectively enforce safety regulations when confronting corporate giants like Dollar General.<sup>171</sup> Dollar General's flagrant, repeated disregard for regulatory safety requirements reflects the ineffectiveness of OSHA as well as Dollar General's belief that violations will not cost the firm as much in fines as would changing the business practices that create unsafe working environments.

As workspaces, Dollar General stores operate under tight corporate control through store policies that outline, at times impossible, responsibilities for store workers. One way Dollar General's spaces are controlled on the corporate level is through highly regimented weekly scheduling and payroll budgets. Most Dollar General stores operate with a staff of between six and ten workers; this number varies according to the store's size and hours of operation.<sup>172</sup> Usually, a store's staff consists of a salaried general manager, an assistant manager, a lead sales person (or key holder), and several sales associates. Each store's general manager is responsible for managing the location's weekly work schedule, ensuring that all shifts are covered while not exceeding the small allocated budget for the store's employee pay.

The experience of Dawn Hughey, a former general manager of a Dollar General store in Flint, Michigan, highlights the challenges this role's requirements present. Hughey was hired as a general manager in 2009 at a salary of \$34,700. She was told that she would be expected work around forty-four hours each week. However, she quickly found that in order to create a full work schedule that did not exceed allocated funds for workers' pay Hughey had to cover

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<sup>171</sup> Simon, *The Hamlet Fire*, 177.



additional work shifts.

I was given approximately 126 hours a week for payroll. That's not with mine. You have an assistant manager and key holder and you want to give them their full time because they are your backbone. That's eight hours. So what I had left was about 46 hours for about three or four individuals... I'm the free help. I'm the one that [has] got to take over."<sup>173</sup>

As Hughey learned from firsthand experience, salaried general managers are the only employees whose hourly labor within the Dollar General store does not detract from the allocated weekly budget for payroll. Thus, general managers, under pressure from corporate to remain under payroll budget and ensure the store is fully staffed, often fill in scheduling gaps, working extended shifts with no additional compensation since their salaries disqualify them for overtime pay. Hughey reflects, "The forty-four-hour weeks quickly stretched into sixty and seventy hours with no overtime compensation. Thirteen-hour shifts from open to close became common. At one point, I worked four straight weeks without a day off."<sup>174</sup> Hughey's store demonstrates that corporate policies and expectations rule the lives and choices of store employees at every level, even individuals who hold relative positions of power in the store hierarchy. While managers in title, these employees are beholden to the limited, dehumanizing policies of the corporation. An employee echoes this sentiment in the comment, "Store managers are just pawns."<sup>175</sup> Frugality and the policies it inspires, rather than any one store manager, run the Dollar General store.

Dollar General store workers have few opportunities to rise within the company ranks to

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<sup>172</sup> Alejandro Lopez, "Dollar General starts converting Dollar Express stores in South Florida," *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/business/fl-bz-dollar-general-conversion-20170706-story.html>.

<sup>173</sup> Dawn Hughey, "Dawn worked 70 hours a week and didn't earn overtime. It's time to fix this." interview, *Economic Policy Institute*, video, <https://www.epi.org/multimedia/dawn-worked-70-hours-a-week-and-didnt-earn-overtime-its-time-to-fix-this/?fbclid=IwAR1bom4MwObY0HBF0K6LUKzv-cggjaGxvsxErHadzmCr8khPkECQLNWkL4Q>.

<sup>174</sup> Hughey, interview.

<sup>175</sup> Cashier/Stocker in Fremont, NE, "not enough pay, stores are prone for theft with primarily 2 people in smaller communities. It's a revolving door of employment," review on Glassdoor.com, posted July 16, 2014,

secure a position at corporate. While a determined, dedicated employee might successfully climb the rungs of store leadership from sales associate to lead sales associate, from lead sales associate to assistant manager, and from assistant manager to general manager, there is a wide gap between the leadership within individual retail stores and the employees of Dollar General's corporate offices. One associate laments that there is "not much room for advancement"<sup>176</sup> within Dollar General's hierarchy. Due to the precarity of Dollar General store employment and limited opportunities for career advancement, many workers observed high employee turnover or what one described as "a revolving door of employment."<sup>177</sup>

In addition to the precarity of the work, there are health risks associated with retail work, especially within highly corporatized environments. Store associates at Dollar General face potential negative health outcomes from the nature of their work requirements and store environment. During a shift at Dollar General, workers are expected to juggle a variety of responsibilities: aiding customers, operating the cash register, maintaining the cleanliness of the store, unloading the supply truck, and replenishing stock. Some of these activities are physically strenuous and could lead to injury from strain or repetitive motion. In fact, Dollar General's own newsletter the "Dollar General Story" acknowledged the risk of workplace injury from conducting required work tasks in an article titled "Safety Corner" from the 1989 May/June issue. It begins: "It is estimated that injuries cost employers 1 billion dollars every year through

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[https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342\\_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier](https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier).

<sup>176</sup> Cashier/Stocker, "Not much room for advancement, customers always got mad when you ask to see their ID when they way over the age of needing to, never enough employes working at one time," review on Glassdoor.com, October 16, 2016 posted, [https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342\\_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier](https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier).

<sup>177</sup> Cashier/Stocker in Fremont, NE.

increased employee turnover and lower production.”<sup>178</sup> The passage continues to outline preventative measures that Dollar General employees can take to simultaneously avoid injury and continue to fulfill the job requirements that might lead to injury. This article clearly demonstrates that, from the corporate perspective, company expense is the number one motivation for worker injury prevention.

In addition to the strain and forced physical limitations of the employee requirements, work at Dollar General stores requires long periods of being stationary. Work shifts often entail extended periods of standing on concrete floors, which could also lead to chronic pain. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers in “Wholesale and Retail Trade” have a greater number of missed work days due to work-related musculoskeletal disorders than most other laborers.<sup>179</sup> While the factors contributing to this type of injury may vary from person to person, it is clear that retail work takes a physical toll on workers’ bodies. As neoliberalism shifted the onus for maintaining benefits, including health insurance, from employers to individual workers, corporations like Dollar General have little incentive or financial investment in maintaining the health of employees.

Corporate control of Dollar General store workers through store policies create an environment in which workers are sometimes unable to meet their bodily needs. Food, restroom, or emergency breaks are limited during a work shift. As many workers attest, often, a single Dollar General employee is the only staff present during a store’s open hours.<sup>180</sup> The potential

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<sup>178</sup> Greg Benefield, “Safety Corner,” *Dollar General Story* 6, no. 3 (May/June 1989), 3, Special Collections, Western Kentucky University Library.

<sup>179</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses requiring days away from work,” 2010, *US Department of Labor*, [http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/osh2\\_11092011.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/osh2_11092011.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> Cashier/Stocker in Rossville, GA, “The managers are sucky and corporate doesn't give a dang about its employees.” review on Glassdoor.com, October 16, 2016 posted, [https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342\\_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier; Cashier/Stocker in Fremont, NE](https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier; Cashier/Stocker in Fremont, NE).

health risks and bodily constraints of the Dollar General job description play out to the extreme in the story of Linda K. Atkins of Maryville, Tennessee. Atkins worked at a Dollar General store from 2009 until 2012. She was considered a “hard worker” and “trustworthy” employee.<sup>181</sup> Thus, she was promoted to the position of lead salesperson, which came with additional responsibilities including handling the store’s cash, becoming a key holder, and closing the store.<sup>182</sup> Atkins lives with Type II Diabetes, a condition which requires that she monitor her blood sugar level to avoid a hypoglycemic episode. To address her low blood sugar, Atkins would consume a measured amount of orange juice, which has a predictable amount of sugar per serving.<sup>183</sup> In order to attend to the needs of her body on the job, Atkins requested that she be granted permission to keep a small container of orange juice at the register with her during her work shifts; however, her request was denied because keeping food or drink at the counter was against company policy.

One day in late 2011, when Atkins was working a shift alone at the store, she experienced low blood sugar. Since the store was busy and she could not excuse herself to the backroom, Atkins grabbed an orange juice from a nearby refrigerator so as to attend to her health and avoid leaving the front of the store unattended. This happened a second time at the start of 2012. In both cases, Atkins was able to regulate her blood sugar level, continue working, and retroactively purchase the drink. In March, District Manager Scott Strange and Regional Loss Prevention Specialist Matt Irwin visited the store to conduct an evaluation. When stories of Atkins’ post-consumption purchases of these two bottles of orange juice—each valued at \$1.69—arose, Strange and Irwin terminated Atkins from her position, arguing that these two instances violated

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<sup>181</sup> *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Linda Atkins v. Dolgencorp, LLC*, F. Court of Appeals, 17-6278 Court document, (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2018). <http://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/18a0163p-06.pdf>.

<sup>182</sup> *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Linda Atkins v. Dolgencorp, LLC*.

the company's "'grazing policy,' which forbids employees from consuming merchandise in the store before paying for it."<sup>184</sup> After her firing, Atkins filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC investigation led to a lawsuit against Dollar General under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The court ruled in her favor. Atkins was awarded reimbursement for her legal fees as well as \$27,565 in back pay and \$250,000 in compensatory damages. Even after this ruling, Dollar General Corporation appealed the court's decision. However, the original decision was upheld.

The story of Atkins' wrongful termination from Dollar General, and the company's violation of the ADA's reasonable accommodation policy, illustrates the inflexibility of this retail environment and its incompatibility with meeting the bodily needs of individuals. The regional corporate executives who evaluated Atkin's case as well as the central corporate leadership and legal representation that continued to challenge the matter in court demonstrate that Dollar General believes that its employees should follow company protocol at all times rather than taking measures to address potentially life-threatening medical emergencies. Instead of valuing the humanity of its workers, the company sees workers' value in their work alone.

In addition to risk of physical injury and the inability to meet basic bodily needs, many Dollar General and dollar store industry employees are victims of or witness crime while on the job. In Bibb County, Georgia alone, seven Family Dollar stores have been robbed in a period of six months according to the sheriff's office.<sup>185</sup> Dollar General stores in Bibb County have also been robbed during that time as Mildred Walker of the area can attest. She survived two

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<sup>183</sup> Rolando Zenteno, "Dollar General facing \$250 bill over 2 bottles of juice," *CNN*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/30/us/diabetes-supermarket-lawsuit-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>184</sup> *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Linda Atkins v. Dolgencorp, LLC*.

<sup>185</sup> Jayla Whitfield, "'Right in my face': Macon Dollar General employee recalls being robbed at gunpoint," *WGXA*,

robberies at the Dollar General store where she works since starting the job in 2015. In one of these instances, Walker was held at gunpoint. The negative effects of these thefts on Walker lasted long after the incidents occurred. She said, “Afterwards it took me like two, three months that I was not freaked out every time the door opened.”<sup>186</sup> Walker cited her need to provide for her children as the reason she continues to work at the store, in spite of her fear of future violence. Walker connects the robberies she experienced with the company’s standard store operational practices. Specifically, she said that “dollar stores are easy targets because employees are trained not to fight back, not to look the suspect in the eye and just give criminals what they want.” Walker is not alone in this belief. Other current and former employees echoed this sentiment with observations like “stores are poorly setup so shoplifters run rampant”<sup>187</sup> and that “Shoplifting is expected.”<sup>188</sup> Thus, many Dollar General store workers across the country share in Walker’s feelings of insecurity and anxiety about experiencing violence on the job.

Within the context of neoliberalism, labor in the retail sector is largely unorganized and employers have gone unchecked, enabling corporations like Dollar General to operate with harmful and precarious working conditions. If the Dollar General store in Auxvasse, Missouri is any indication, this may be starting to change. In spite of the history of the Dollar General Corporation quashing its workers’ attempts to unionize (which I detailed in the previous chapter), Dollar General’s employees have not been wholly dissuaded from organizing. On

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February 14, 2019. <https://wgxa.tv/news/local/right-in-my-face-macon-dollar-general-employee-recalls-being-robbed-at-gunpoint>.

<sup>186</sup> Whitfield, “Right in my face.”

<sup>187</sup> Stocker/Cashier in Norman, OK, ““Stores are poorly setup so shoplifters run rampant,” review on Glassdoor.com, October 12, 2015 posted, [https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342\\_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier](https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier).

<sup>188</sup> Stocker/Cashier in Jacksonville, FL, ““Shoplifting is expected,” review on Glassdoor.com, June 28, 2016 posted, [https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342\\_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier](https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Dollar-General-Reviews-E1342_P2.htm?filter.jobTitleExact=Stocker%2FCashier).

December 8, 2017, a 4 to 2 vote in favor of unionizing of the eligible six employees took place, meaning that the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 655 would represent the store's employees.<sup>189</sup> After the store employees' vote to gain union representation, Dollar General filed an objection with the National Labor Relations Board, claiming that two of the votes in favor of union had been coerced through threats and bribes.<sup>190</sup> The spokesperson for UFCW Local 655 countered that these claims were "lies" and that "Dollar General is doing everything they can now to stand in the way of a free and fair election that was held."<sup>191</sup> On February 8, 2018, the NLRB board officer for this case recommended that Dollar General's claims be dismissed.

Refusing to drop the issue, Dollar General requested a review of the NLRB's ruling in favor of the UFCW Local 655 on April 13, 2018. Five days later, the UFCW Local 655 filed in opposition of this review.<sup>192</sup> The union representative Collin Reischman said, "We remain confident for a very simple reason. We have the truth on our side."<sup>193</sup> Indeed, a federal ruling affirmed the employees' union representation in June. Even after this federal ruling, Dollar General representatives remained stubborn in their assertion that a union "is not in the employees' best interests." A statement issued by Crystal Ghassemi, a Dollar General spokesperson, read, "As part of our mission of serving others, Dollar General strives to provide a

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<sup>189</sup> Brendan Crowley, "Labor board upholds Auxvasse Dollar General union vote," *The Columbia Missourian*, June 22, 2018, [https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/local/labor-board-upholds-auxvasse-dollar-general-union-vote/article\\_0966b9dc-7653-11e8-bea8-ef7da8660c7f.html](https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/local/labor-board-upholds-auxvasse-dollar-general-union-vote/article_0966b9dc-7653-11e8-bea8-ef7da8660c7f.html); Helen Wilbers, "Dollar General requests union vote recount," *Fulton Sun*, December 17, 2017, <http://www.fultonsun.com/news/local/story/2017/dec/17/dollar-general-requests-union-vote-recount/704687/>.

<sup>190</sup> Brendan Crowley, "Labor board officer legitimizes Dollar General vote," *The Columbia Missourian*, February 9, 2018. [https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/missouri\\_business/labor-board-officer-legitimizes-dollar-general-union-vote/article\\_9055cc42-0dc3-11e8-8f7e-17359dd73472.html](https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/missouri_business/labor-board-officer-legitimizes-dollar-general-union-vote/article_9055cc42-0dc3-11e8-8f7e-17359dd73472.html).

<sup>191</sup> Wilbers, "Dollar General requests union vote recount."

<sup>192</sup> Helen Wilbers, "Dollar General requests review of Auxvasse union case," *The News Tribune*, April 27, 2018, <http://www.newstribune.com/news/local/story/2018/apr/27/dollar-general-requests-review-auxvasse-union-case/723769/>.

work environment built on respect and opportunity.”<sup>194</sup> Unfortunately for store employees, Dollar General’s existing desire to use respect and opportunity as guiding workplace principles did not translate into improved working conditions.

While Auxvasse store employees’ right to organize was legally confirmed, organizing across the physical and geographical divides between different Dollar General store workplaces has proven to be a difficult task, especially given Dollar General’s extreme hostility to labor organizing. A general manager twenty miles down the road in Glasgow lost her job in the wake of the union vote for posing questions about the Auxvasse store employees’ actions. During a company conference call, Margeorie Nation posed the question, “What does the unionization of this [Auxvasse] store mean for our store and other employees?”<sup>195</sup> Four days after the original vote to unionize in December of 2017, Nation also shared a post documenting the news of the Auxvasse union on her personal Facebook page to solicit the opinions of her social media connections.<sup>196</sup> Subsequently, Nation was fired. The company claimed that she had violated “the company’s social media policy by posting confidential information about the company,”<sup>197</sup> although Nation denied knowingly sharing any information that was not available to the public. Dollar General Corporation’s swift, drastic response to Nation’s inquiries for information about the situation in Auxvasse sent a clear message to Dollar General employees at other stores and, thus far, has deterred labor organizing efforts beyond the Auxvasse store. The recent events in Missouri show the extreme efforts Dollar General is willing to take to quell store workers from unionizing. While the company has over 15,000 stores in forty-four states, a union effort of four

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<sup>193</sup> Wilbers, “Dollar General requests review of Auxvasse union case.”

<sup>194</sup> Crowley, “Labor board upholds Auxvasse Dollar General union vote.”

<sup>195</sup> Wilbers, “Dollar General requests union vote recount.”

<sup>196</sup> Wilbers, “Dollar General requests union vote recount.”



store employees in Auxvasse, Missouri launched the corporation into a full-scale response involving legal action and one employee's termination to discourage a ripple-effect from occurring among geographically disperse stores.

While the company professes to “serve others,” the very employees who are recruited to fulfill this mission find themselves in devalued, precarious, and high-risk work. The heightened precarity of working for a company that prioritizes maintaining low overhead costs in order to make a profit while selling cheap goods to low-income consumers situates Dollar General store employees among the most vulnerable retail employees. Without union representation, these individuals do not have the power or means by which to resist their inhumane treatment, although it is certainly felt. Rather than providing a route out of poverty through job creation, Dollar General recruits vulnerable individuals into expendable positions at low wages with little chance of career advancement, knowing that the outcome of this exploitative labor model will boost profits.

### **Dollar General on a Mission to “Serve Others”**

In 1993, Dollar General Corporation revisited its mission statement, coming up with the following message: “The Company's mission is ‘Serving Others’! Serving Our Customers...with greatest everyday value. Serving Our Shareholders...with superior return on investment. Serving Our Employees...as partners in total development.”<sup>197</sup> The experiences of devalued Dollar General employees who work inconsistent hours within spaces heavily regulated through corporate policies focused on the firm's bottom line illustrate that the company is not serving its

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<sup>197</sup> Helen Wilbers, “Dollar General requests union revote,” *The News Tribune*, December 17, 2017, <http://www.newstribune.com/news/local/story/2017/dec/17/dollar-general-requests-union-vote-recount/704812/>.

workers anything more than cheap jobs at cheap wages.

If workers are not being “served” under the Dollar General business model, then one might situate consumers as the benefactor of worker exploitation as Cal Jr. does in the following quote: “grueling store hours [and other working conditions] were essential to serving our customers with the greatest everyday value.”<sup>199</sup> Dollar General is not the first to pit the interests of consumers against interests of workers. In fact, presenting workers’ and consumers’ needs as fundamentally irreconcilable has been long-used within a U.S. context to foil labor and consumer movements as well as economic reform.<sup>200</sup> In the case of Dollar General, the interests of its stores’ shoppers and workers are fundamentally linked, as the store intentionally recruits from its target consumer base. The company’s decision to hire from communities of low-income people was an intentional shift which Cal Turner Jr. claims responsibility for in his memoir. He writes, “I thought, *Wait a minute! What if we could recruit from our customer base?...* They would understand our customers because they *were* our customers.”<sup>201</sup> By Cal Jr.’s logic, to understand the low-income target customers, Dollar General store employees would need to remain among this target customer base. However, just as the firm failed to deliver its promise of service to store employees, Dollar General’s construction practices and purchasing habits serve customers only cheap goods in cheap stores.

While an examination of Dollar General’s relationship with places and control of spaces reveals that the company fails in its mission to serve customers and employees, Dollar General does keep its promise to serve a third constituency, its “shareholders... with superior return on

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<sup>198</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 203.

<sup>199</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 204.

<sup>200</sup> Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*.

<sup>201</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 52.

investment” as its monumental growth and increasing stock prices suggest.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, the company ensures superior return on investment to its shareholders through the manipulation of these other two constituencies and a persistent focus on buying, employing, and selling cheap.

When Dollar General Corporation opens a new store, it carries symbolic weight of a bottom-line centered business-model. With stores’ cheap appearances, cheap labor practices, and cheap goods, not all communities welcome new Dollar General stores. While some have embraced new stores as a sign of economic revitalization in their communities, others have opposed new Dollar General stores or described the corporation’s interest in the community as a harbinger of impending, localized economic crisis. The next chapter zooms in on three instances of community resistance to Dollar General stores and the symbolic weight that this low-end retailer has come to embody within neoliberalism and global finance capitalism.

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<sup>202</sup> Turner, *My Father’s Business*, 203.

## CHAPTER THREE: LOCAL MOVEMENTS OF THE DOLLAR STORE RESISTANCE

Over the past year, the Dollar General Corporation has spread across the United States at a rate of three new stores a day. While rapid and widespread, Dollar General’s expansion has not gone unnoticed or unopposed. Though Dollar General may be set upon becoming a retail option in every community in the U.S., many communities have not welcomed the company with open arms. Perhaps as frequently as Dollar General’s press releases announcing new stores’ openings are local editorials that call for fellow community members to take action to prevent new stores’ openings. Across the country, communities have organized to express their opposition to proposed Dollar General store locations. These local efforts to resist the national corporation have been described by one reporter as “the Dollar Store Resistance—a plucky little movement that barely exists, can’t win, but, by God, it tries.”<sup>203</sup>

### **Three Plucky Little Movements**

In the following chapter, I tell the stories of three community efforts to resist Dollar General’s expansion at the local level in Dry Creek, West Virginia; in Advance, North Carolina; and in North Tulsa, Oklahoma. These three communities differ in their varied geographies, population sizes, demographic information, and regional histories. However, they are united in

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<sup>203</sup> Arthur Delaney, “Meet the Dollar Store Resistance,” *The Huffington Post*, November 21, 2018. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/dollar-stores-small-town-businesses\\_us\\_5beefe6ae4b0f7192ca9342e](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/dollar-stores-small-town-businesses_us_5beefe6ae4b0f7192ca9342e).

their belief that further encroachment of Dollar General and similar dollar store chains into their area would be detrimental to their communities. Thus, all three cases of anti-Dollar General activism can be understood through the framework of “front porch politics.” In Michael Foley’s examination of activist movements in the 1970s and 80s, Foley focuses on how these movements originated out of individuals’ needs “to defend their home, hearth, and livelihood in circumstances where government had failed to do so.” Front porch politics are “existential and emotional” and in response to “an immediate sense of threat—from government, corporations, the law, or other citizens with opposing interests—that required something more than a vote.”<sup>204</sup> Rather than organizing around issues related to electoral politics, community members who participate in front porch politics mobilize in opposition of threats to their lives, families, and communities. Each case of anti-Dollar General activism falls within this framework of front porch politics, as fears about the imminent threats Dollar General stores would pose to their community’s well-being catalyzed community members into action.

These three examples are not the first or only stories of activism in response to Dollar General’s steady expansion into new communities or increasing market saturation of communities. I chose these places, in part, due to their relative success in achieving their objectives. Each community was able, to some extent, to deter Dollar General from opening a new store—or, in the case of North Tulsa, from continuing to open additional stores. Although the mechanisms enabling communities’ successes differed from place to place, each community sent a clear message to the Dollar General Corporation: consumers here do not want or need your services. News coverage of community resistance to Dollar General amplified this message, broadcasting the actions of these communities that organized to influence local development and

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<sup>204</sup> Foley, *Frontporch Politics*, 5.

prevent new dollar stores from opening. Successful mobilization of the media, as much as consumers' preferences appear to have contributed to Dollar General's retreat in each case, albeit temporarily, since the corporation has demonstrated that it will expand wherever it can make a profit regardless of whether or not its stores are needed or wanted. In each case, Dollar General spokespersons scrambled to clarify the corporation's best intentions and singular, benevolent desire to serve communities. From a practical standpoint, the local and national coverage of the efforts in Dry Creek, Advance, and Tulsa's anti-Dollar General activism coupled with publicly-available local government records enabled me to reconstruct the chronology of each case and to gain a sense of the evolving multiplicities of community sentiment.

Another reason for examining these particular examples of community resistance to Dollar General is the diverse geographies and populations the three represent. Often place-oriented scholarship situates findings within the binary categories of rural and urban. Dollar General's rhetoric around its own expansion contributes to this binary categorization of spaces as either urban or rural. The corporation professes to expand strategically into rural areas where retail goods are desperately needed, providing retail service to communities in need. The imagined prospective Dollar General town is low-income, set apart from urban areas, and without corporate retail options. These three case studies of actual prospective Dollar General locations simultaneously fulfill and challenge this proclaimed expansion model. The town of Dry Creek best fits the archetype of a prospective Dollar General target locale. An unincorporated area in the Appalachian Mountains, Dry Creek's residents shop at the local general stores for day-to-day needs and travel to neighboring towns to stock up on other goods occasionally. Dollar General and its local development partner viewed the area as ripe for a new corporate retail

location. However, the Dry Creek community's determination that a Dollar General would be superfluous challenges the company's claim that a Dollar General store will be a welcome and necessary service provider to rural communities.

Examining these three geographically diverse communities' experiences of Dollar General's impending encroachment also illustrates how Dollar General's reputation as a rural savior obscures its perpetuation of systemic poverty in rural, suburban, and urban communities alike. The case studies in Advance, North Carolina and Tulsa, Oklahoma—which do not fit the imagined, archetypal Dollar General target community—illustrate that Dollar General's expansion is not an exclusively rural phenomenon, but also impacts urban and exurban areas. Indeed, the case of Tulsa might suggest that Dollar General stores have had the most profound effects on the landscapes of urban and exurban communities. While the residents of Advance—like Dry Creek—aimed to preserve their dollar store-free community, residents in Tulsa had already been inundated with dollar stores at the time of the community's organization to protest the presence of the corporation. Concerned Tulsans sought only to slow the dollar store corporations' continued market saturation. These three geographically diffuse instances of community resistance illustrate that there is no one story of Dollar General Corporation's expansion. The firm's spread is more geographically complex than its public image might suggest.

Although each individual instance of community resistance to Dollar General may appear merely a futile struggle against Dollar General's unrelenting expansion, seen together, localized stories of opposition reveal the power of individuals to resist the discount corporatization of their communities. Since every community has a distinct local history, diverse motivations for

opposing dollar stores, and different methods for resistance, each place's story reveals the unique potential for locals to enact effective opposition to Dollar General Corporation's seemingly unstoppable expansion.

### **Case Study 1: Dry Creek in Raleigh County, West Virginia**

*"I don't understand why they think they would need a Dollar General."*

Situated squarely in southern West Virginia, Dry Creek sits on the northern edge of the "dollar store belt," a stretch of the most highly concentrated dollar stores in the U.S. running from the gulf coast of Mississippi through the Appalachian Mountains.<sup>205</sup> Corporate dollar stores like Dollar General have replaced local general stores across the dollar belt and in other towns throughout the country. However, no retail corporations have yet infiltrated the unincorporated community of Dry Creek in Raleigh County, situated squarely within the coalfields of West Virginia. Although there is not extensive data available about Dry Creek since it is an unincorporated area, the community's population is small by any measure. According to one online gazetteer, the zip code of Dry Creek has an estimated population of around 265.<sup>206</sup> Raleigh County has an estimated population of 75,000, of which around 20 percent lives below the poverty line.<sup>207</sup> The average commute time of twenty-four minutes reflects that many of these residents drive into towns from nearby rural areas like Dry Creek for work.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Richard Florida, "What Dollar Store Locations Reveal About America," *City Lab*, February 7, 2012, <https://www.citylab.com/life/2012/02/what-dollar-store-locations-reveal-about-america/1115/>.

<sup>206</sup> "Dry Creek, WV 25062 Data & Demographics" West Virginia Gazetteer, WV Home Town Locator, last updated July 1, 2018, <https://westvirginia.hometownlocator.com/zip-codes/data,zipcode,25062.cfm>.

<sup>207</sup> Population Estimates Program (PEP), July 1, 2017, *United States Census Bureau QuickFacts Database*, accessed February 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/raleighcountywestvirginia,wv/PST045218>.

<sup>208</sup> American Community Survey (ACS) and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS), 2013-2017, *United States Census Bureau QuickFacts Database*, accessed February 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/raleighcountywestvirginia,US/PST045218>.



The dollar store industry is not the first industry to propose entry into Appalachia for remote financial gain; nor is Dollar General the first corporation. The extractive lumber, textile, steelworks, and—most visibly—coal mining industries have all heavily influenced the course of Appalachia’s history, shaping the lives of southern West Virginians. From the Eccles Mine Disaster in 1914 to the most recent Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster in 2010, a number of catastrophic, violent workplace tragedies in Raleigh County and the immediate surrounding area have left their mark on generations of the community’s residents. Considering the long, local history of labor exploitation, tragic industrial accidents, and failures of past efforts to resist the amassed power of extractive corporations, one might assume that residents of West Virginia would welcome economic diversification by any means necessary. However, the following story of Dry Creek landowners’ successful organizing efforts to stop Dollar General complicates and challenges this assumption.

The community of Dry Creek is largely set apart from the corporate retail world. The community’s singular retail option is the Charles B. Jarrell General Merchandise Store, which sells a variety of goods, situated on the main road through town. The local Jarrell and Barrett families have owned and run the store for over a century.<sup>209</sup> The small store houses the town’s post office and acts as a community center of sorts. About two miles away from the general store, in neighboring Rock Creek, sits a Marathon gas station with a small convenience mart as well as a Family Dollar store. However, at present, the Charles B. Jarrell General Merchandise Store seems to be surviving even with this corporate competition down the road. At “Charlie’s” (as the locals affectionately refer to the store), one can find retail practices which have been

long-abandoned elsewhere in the U.S. For example, the store still extends store credit, a business practice rooted in community familiarity which largely fell out of fashion when department and chain stores came on the U.S. retail scene in the early nineteenth century, ushering in standardized prices and new customer service practices.<sup>210</sup>

In early 2018, Dry Creek property owner Patsy Gwinn and Cross Development, a development company based out of Cincinnati, submitted a request for a conditional use permit for a lot on Coal River Road (also known as Route 3) a few blocks from Charlie's. Cross Development proposed to build a store on the site for Dollar General to lease, bringing the national chain to Dry Creek.<sup>211</sup> Since the lot sits in an R1 zoning area—or area designated “rural residential”—a “conditional use” permit would be necessary in order to sell the property with the intent of using the building for commercial use.

The permit request was first reviewed at a Raleigh Zoning and Planning Commission meeting on March 20, 2018. Zoning Officer Billy Michael reported after this first meeting that, “Everybody in Dry Creek showed up and didn't want it.”<sup>212</sup> Among the opposition was Dry Creek landowner Elizabeth Barrett who voiced concerns about the proposal at this initial Zoning and Planning Commission meeting. A descendant of the general store's Barrett family, Barrett still owned property in the Dry Creek area, although she currently resided in Florida. She traveled from her home there to attend the meeting. Barrett feared “that the Dollar General will put Gary's store out of business.” However, her strong investment in the zoning board's decision

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<sup>209</sup> Jessica Farrish, “Dollar store faces strong opposition,” *The Register-Herald Reporter*, April 15, 2018. [https://www.register-herald.com/news/money/dollar-store-faces-strong-opposition/article\\_e7d8c65e-1794-5848-ae6c-045bd2827338.html](https://www.register-herald.com/news/money/dollar-store-faces-strong-opposition/article_e7d8c65e-1794-5848-ae6c-045bd2827338.html).

<sup>210</sup> “Guest editorial (Beckley): Dollar General is a warning flag on economy” *The Register-Herald Reporter*, August 20, 2018. [https://www.wvgazettemail.com/opinion/daily\\_mail\\_opinion/daily\\_mail\\_editorials/guest-editorial-beckley-dollar-general-is-a-warning-~~ag~~-on/article\\_18c46079-42e0-5507-9356-b47f8eef2836.html](https://www.wvgazettemail.com/opinion/daily_mail_opinion/daily_mail_editorials/guest-editorial-beckley-dollar-general-is-a-warning-<del>ag</del>-on/article_18c46079-42e0-5507-9356-b47f8eef2836.html).

<sup>211</sup> Farrish, “Dollar store faces strong opposition.”

went beyond her connection to the threatened general store. Her Dry Creek property sits in close proximity to the lot in question. Speaking from her standpoint as a landowner, Barrett articulated her vehement opposition to the Dollar General store's construction. Citing Dollar General stores' cheap aesthetic, Barrett appealed to the commission, "Who would want to look out their window a look at a Dollar General? I prefer looking at the mountains that are there." She continued, "I don't understand why they think they would need a Dollar General!" This comment reflects Barrett's awareness of the Dollar General target consumer—low-income shoppers—and resistance to this label being assigned to her community in Dry Creek.

While Barrett spoke as a landowner who has since left the area, other Dry Creek residents echoed her sentiments at the hearing. Due to the overwhelming community opposition presented during this initial discussion, the board unanimously voted 5-0 to deny the request.<sup>213</sup> After the commission's ruling, determined to proceed, Gwinn and Cross Developers filed an appeal of the decision to the West Virginia Circuit Court. Just as determined, locals committed to preventing a Dollar General store mobilized community opposition efforts. Elizabeth Barrett was at the forefront of this movement again. During her time in West Virginia to speak at the prior zoning board meeting, Barrett was injured in a car accident. While recovering in nearby Beckley Rehab Center, she spoke to the local newspaper, reaffirming her dedication to preventing a Dollar General store from entering the community. She reported having set up "an unofficial headquarters to oppose the development" from her room at the rehab center.<sup>214</sup>

Rather than deciding the issue in court, Judge John Hutchison remanded the appeal back

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<sup>212</sup> Farrish, "Dollar store faces strong opposition."

<sup>213</sup> Adeena Balthazor, "Land in Dry Creek could have been used for a new Dollar General," *59 News, Nexstar Broadcasting, Inc.*, April 16, 2018, updated April 17, 2018. <https://www.wvntv.com/local-news/raleigh-county/land-in-dry-creek-could-have-been-used-for-a-new-dollar-general/1126296327>.

to the Raleigh Zoning and Planning Commission.<sup>215</sup> On July 10, the Raleigh Zoning and Planning Commission met again to revisit their prior decision that refused the conditional use permit for the lot in Dry Creek. The organizing efforts of both sides of the debate which had taken place since March were evident in the proceedings of this second meeting. Those in favor of the permit and proposed store presented a petition with six hundred and forty-four signatures in support of a new Dollar General store. Notably, the number of signees outnumbered the residents in the Dry Creek area, suggesting that Cross Development called upon supporters in the surrounding area to outvote the residents of Dry Creek who the changes would most affect. The language of the petition was ambiguous as well. Rather than specifying the details of the site and proposed construction, the petition merely asked, “Would you like a Dollar General store?” Despite its impressive number of signees, the petition was disregarded due to its unclear phrasing and failure to demonstrate a significant number of supporters within the Dry Creek community.

While Appalachia has a rich and often-studied history of working-class activism, there is less written about its middle-class political movements. The anti-Dollar General movement in Dry Creek can be best understood as an instance of Appalachian middle-class activism. Residents and landowners who opposed Dollar General’s proposed presence in the community expressed their concerns about the potential negative impact of a Dollar General store on the Dry Creek community’s existing business, property values, and rural aesthetic. The most vocal opponents of the new store cited their desires to preserve local aesthetics and values, echoing Barrett’s earlier concerns about the stereotypes and aesthetics Dollar General might bring to the

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<sup>214</sup> Farrish, “Dollar store faces strong opposition.”

<sup>215</sup> Jessica Farrish, “Raleigh zoning denies Dollar General petition again,” *Register-Herald Reporter*, July 14, 2018. [https://www.register-herald.com/news/raleigh-zoning-denies-dollar-general-petition-again/article\\_8e25bbdc-c3e7-5fba-828a-ab5d96348eb4.html](https://www.register-herald.com/news/raleigh-zoning-denies-dollar-general-petition-again/article_8e25bbdc-c3e7-5fba-828a-ab5d96348eb4.html).

community. Opponents cited worries about increased traffic and argued that the store would stand out as a commercial eyesore. As one resident said, “This conditional use permit will negatively affect me and my neighbors directly, to devalue our property to the point of not being able to sell it, if we choose to do so. It will destroy our rural, residential lifestyle we value. I don't want to look out my kitchen window... and see a Dollar General.”<sup>216</sup>

The contrast between the arguments of the proponents and opponents of the new Dollar General store highlight the influence of class on residents’ perspectives toward the proposed Dollar General store. Around thirty individuals attended the second hearing.<sup>217</sup> Although the majority spoke against the proposal, a few argued in favor of the Dollar General store.<sup>218</sup> Beckley resident Priscilla Acord was one such supporter. As she has relatives in Dry Creek, Acord reflected, “We really need it. We have never had anything in our area like this. It would be so great to have the store. It would help the working people and elderly in our community.”<sup>219</sup> Others echoed her concern about the “long commute into town to get day-to-day goods,” arguing that a conveniently located dollar store would help the community.<sup>220</sup> Another supporter was 75-year-old Elizabeth Burnette of Dry Creek. Burnette emphasized the benefits of Dollar General’s low prices to vulnerable community members. “Most people my age is on a fixed income,” Burnette said, “and that is a good place for us to shop.”<sup>221</sup> Members of the Cross Development

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<sup>216</sup> Jessica Farrish, “Another battle brewing along Coal River Road,” *Register-Herald Reporter*, August 12, 2018, [https://www.register-herald.com/news/another-battle-brewing-along-coal-river-road/article\\_ce677564-e09d-5e4a-aebd-c26b96d4e271.html](https://www.register-herald.com/news/another-battle-brewing-along-coal-river-road/article_ce677564-e09d-5e4a-aebd-c26b96d4e271.html).

<sup>217</sup> Farrish, “Raleigh zoning denies Dollar General petition again.”

<sup>218</sup> CBW, July 14, 2018, comment on Farrish, “Raleigh zoning denies Dollar General petition again,” *Register-Herald Reporter*, July 14, 2018, [https://www.register-herald.com/news/raleigh-zoning-denies-dollar-general-petition-again/article\\_8e25bbdc-c3e7-5fba-828a-ab5d96348eb4.html](https://www.register-herald.com/news/raleigh-zoning-denies-dollar-general-petition-again/article_8e25bbdc-c3e7-5fba-828a-ab5d96348eb4.html).

<sup>219</sup> Farrish, “Raleigh zoning denies Dollar General petition again.”

<sup>220</sup> Farrish, “Raleigh zoning denies Dollar General petition again.”

<sup>221</sup> Farrish, “Raleigh zoning denies Dollar General petition again.”; Burnette did not attend the meeting herself. Her daughter-in-law attended on her behalf.

team also emphasized the convenience and possible benefits of a Dollar General store in Dry Creek. Manager Josh Allen argued that since "this is about the only property that's not in the floodplain along this road," it would make "a good spot for a store to serve the community." These perspectives reflect the success of Dollar General in garnering a reputation for serving the rural poor. Some struggling community members sought to save money and time and were willing to surrender the community's "aesthetic" and "values" in exchange for an affordable retail option.

At the conclusion of the hearing process, the board ruled again to deny the conditional use permit and subsequent construction of a Dollar General store in Dry Creek. Despite Cross Development and Dollar General's persistent attempts to add a location in Dry Creek, organized community resistance successfully delayed the entry of the national chain into the community. Why was the Dry Creek movement to stop Dollar General successful?

Community class divisions played a key role. Middle-class landowners with financial investment in their property and cultural investment in maintaining a particular rural aesthetic that includes the old-fashioned "Charlie's" general store and excludes a low-end corporate retailer like Dollar General spearheaded the movement to stop the new store. Many Dry Creek residents rejected Dollar General and the corporation's embodiment of a business model centered on cheap goods, cheap labor, and cheap expenses as well as the image that a low-end retailer like Dollar General might impose upon the community. In their ruling to deny the permit, governing officials in the Raleigh County seat of Beckley showed that they gave weight to the viewpoints of these Dry Creek landowners who came to the hearings, arguably more so than the secondhand appeals of family members of low-income or fixed-income Dry Creek residents who sided with

Cross Development. Reactions to the decision in the Beckley newspaper were mixed. Although many Dry Creek landowners celebrated this front porch political victory against Dollar General, one guest editorial painted the decision as a missed opportunity for community economic revitalization concluding with the question: “How long before the Dollar General stores close their doors on Raleigh County?”<sup>222</sup>

### **Case Study 2: Advance in Davie County, North Carolina**

*“I don’t see this encouraging a high quality of life.”*

While not geographically mountainous, the case of Advance, North Carolina is another tale of Appalachian resistance to Dollar General, as the community sits just within the southeast boundary of Appalachia as outlined by the Appalachian Regional Council. Advance, in the state’s Piedmont Triad region, has rapidly grown in population since the 1970s.<sup>223</sup> As nearby cities have expanded—notably, Winston-Salem, which is about twenty minutes to the east—new jobs have attracted an influx of workers to the unincorporated area. As a result, the once sleepy rural hamlet of Advance has been enveloped within nearby cities’ extensive suburban sprawl. The landscape of Advance is spotted with gated community developments that house city workers, who commute an average of twenty-six minutes to work in more urban settings.<sup>224</sup>

In April 2016, Venture Properties VII LLC, a commercial real estate development company, and Blue Ridge Environmental Consulting, an engineering firm working on the property, hosted a drop-in meeting to gauge community interest in a new Dollar General store

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<sup>222</sup> “Guest editorial (Beckley)”.

<sup>223</sup> “Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790 to 1990,” U.S. Census Bureau, Part III, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/pop1790-1990.html>.

along NC 801 near downtown Advance.<sup>225</sup> As with Dry Creek, a nearby development company, in this case Venture Properties of Wilkesboro, NC, proposed to act as the middleman, building a structure which Dollar General could then lease. The Advance residents' responses were overwhelmingly negative to this proposal at the initial interest meeting. Before a rezoning request was even formally issued, in the early summer of 2016, the community of Advance had already begun organizing in opposition to a new Dollar General store. A group of concerned Advance residents founded the organization Stop Dollar General to communicate their concerns about a Dollar General store opening in Advance at the proposed site. One resident created a website for the organization to share information and employ digital organizing strategies.<sup>226</sup>

By the time that the first county-led hearing occurred to discuss the proposed store, community members had been organizing for months and were prepared to mobilize.<sup>227</sup> On June 28, the Davie County Planning Board held a public hearing before their vote on Venture Properties' request to rezone the lot. Fifty people attended the hearing. Of those in attendance, fourteen individuals spoke, each expressing concerns about the potential negative effects of a Dollar General store on the community.<sup>228</sup> On behalf of the Stop Dollar General group, Jody Everett presented a petition with over four hundred signatures against the rezoning. Everett, an

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<sup>224</sup> American Community Survey (ACS) and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS), 2013-2017, *United States Census Bureau QuickFacts Database*, accessed February 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/daviecountynorthcarolina,raleighcountywestvirginia,US/PST045218>.

<sup>225</sup> Lisa O'Donnell, "Drop-in meeting set for proposed Dollar General," *Winston-Salem Journal*, April 13, 2016. [https://www.journalnow.com/journal\\_west/news/drop-in-meeting-set-for-proposed-dollar-general/article\\_06546918-11c0-521c-b128-2305045bb894.html](https://www.journalnow.com/journal_west/news/drop-in-meeting-set-for-proposed-dollar-general/article_06546918-11c0-521c-b128-2305045bb894.html).

<sup>226</sup> The website was formally hosted at [www.stopdollargeneraladvance.com](http://www.stopdollargeneraladvance.com). Unfortunately, the site was not captured by any internet archival service.

<sup>227</sup> Lisa O'Donnell, "Board will hear Dollar General request," *Winston-Salem Journal*, July 27, 2016. [https://www.journalnow.com/journal\\_west/news/board-will-hear-dollar-general-request/article\\_680ce305-02d1-5487-84db-b62e2b5ab4a0.html](https://www.journalnow.com/journal_west/news/board-will-hear-dollar-general-request/article_680ce305-02d1-5487-84db-b62e2b5ab4a0.html).

<sup>228</sup> John Hinton and Lisa O'Donnell, "Dollar Store plan in Mocksville brings criticism," *Winston-Salem Journal*, July 3, 2016. [https://www.journalnow.com/news/local/dollar-store-plan-in-mocksville-brings-criticism/article\\_344275b2-9ad7-5436-8b5f-86f76edffad3.html](https://www.journalnow.com/news/local/dollar-store-plan-in-mocksville-brings-criticism/article_344275b2-9ad7-5436-8b5f-86f76edffad3.html).



Advance resident and fervent opponent of the proposed store, had become an unofficial spokesperson for the organization. Everett claimed that Dollar General was “not appropriate for Advance.” After listing examples of the harm a Dollar General might cause within the Advance community, Everett ventured, “I will live with what is there now and take my chances with it.”<sup>229</sup>

Echoing Everett’s prior sentiment, residents expressed concerns that Dollar General posed a threat to Advance’s existing culture and aesthetic as well as fears about what might replace the status quo. In particular, residents viewed Dollar General as a threat to the economic stability and cultural hegemony of the community. Davie County is a relatively affluent community compared to other North Carolina counties with similar population sizes. The poverty rate is below the North Carolina average at 12.2 percent countywide rather than 15.4 percent statewide. The average income in Davie County is \$53,493. The area is predominantly white.<sup>230</sup> Throughout the debate around building a Dollar General store in Advance, both opponents and proponents of the rezoning employed rhetoric laden with assumptions about race and class. While never explicitly stated, Advance residents’ rhetoric indicated that the status quo they sought to protect was that of a prosperous, culturally-homogenous, white exurb.

Residents repeatedly emphasized their desire to preserve the “historic” nature of the Advance community. At the site for the proposed Dollar General store, there sat a two-story house built in the 1880s that had since fallen into disrepair. Several Advance residents bemoaned the potential loss of a historical landmark. Francis Dudley lamented, “I wish Preservation NC” —a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to restoring old buildings— “had known about this structure before now. It’s ripe for rehabilitation... To have a brick box placed in what I

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<sup>229</sup> “Zoning Map Amendment 04-16 Venture Properties,” Davie County Commission, June 28, 2016, ZMA 04-16 2046, [http://daviecountync.igq2.com/Citizens/Detail\\_Meeting.aspx?ID=1062](http://daviecountync.igq2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=1062).

consider a historic district would be a tragedy.”<sup>231</sup> Community members’ concerns about preserving the historic elements of the community ran contradictory to the town’s absent tourism industry. There were no tourist destinations formally listed in Advance as of March 2019—historic or otherwise. While some old buildings have been preserved in the area, there was no official “historic district.” Thus, residents employed the term to establish a history of the area, a particular type of history that reifies the contemporary homogenously prosperous culture of the community. The meaning implicit in the lamentation of the site’s history reflects not only a fear of what might be lost, but also a fear of what undesirable aesthetic, consumers, and behaviors associated with Dollar General’s emphasis on cheap might be their replacements.

The language residents used to advocate for maintaining the status quo reflected their desire to preserve the present state of the Davie County community’s racial and economic makeup. One resident reflected, “I have not seen a Dollar General [that is] not in a strip mall, and—I don’t want to say trashy—but [it’s] not a nice store. It is horrible and I don’t think it should be in this area.”<sup>232</sup> This reference to strip malls—an inexpensive real estate option—combined with the word “trashy” conjures an image of a run-down storefront and an undesirable, dilapidated store. Residents alluded to an imagined, undesirable Dollar General store and, with it, a consumer antithetical to the status quo of Advance, presumably poor, criminal, and not white (or at least not practicing whiteness “correctly”). Residents referred to fears about potential crime and risks to resident safety—frequently racially-coded language employed to maintain the racial segregated housing. Everett and others articulated concerns about criminal activity the store might attract to the community. In one hearing, Everett brandished a recent news article on a

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<sup>230</sup> According to 2017 U.S. Census data, 90 percent of the county identified as “white only.”

<sup>231</sup> “Zoning Map Amendment 04-16 Venture Properties.”

robbery at a Dollar General store in Mocksville, North Carolina, saying this is the “type of activity that [Dollar General] brings into the community.”<sup>233</sup> Through references to Advance’s current historic value as well as to what the future of Advance might hold should a Dollar General store be built, residents demonstrated their investment in the racial and economic status quo. Hank Wade, who lived near the site appealed, “think about those children. We don’t need it there and we don’t need it in Advance.”<sup>234</sup> Here, Wade evokes a rhetorical appeal characteristic of the movement of the Religious Right in the 1970s, which Anita Bryant and her organization Save Our Children spearheaded alongside Jerry Falwell. Bryant, and others who followed in her footsteps like the California Defend Our Children Committee, situated anti-gay activism as a fight to save the next generation from recruitment into the “homosexual lifestyle.” Their use of this “parental front porch rhetoric” set a precedent for future activists, like these Davie County residents against Dollar General, who draw a direct connection to how the issue threatens the well-being of children to lend additional weight to their political stance.<sup>235</sup>

Despite the demographic differences between the two towns, opponents of Dollar General in Advance echoed a sentiment frequently expressed in Dry Creek: why would their community even need a Dollar General store? In frustration, Susan Parker exclaimed, “We have been opposed [to a new Dollar General store] for the last couple of years. Why are they still trying? They have no concern for our community.”<sup>236</sup> Even more so than in Dry Creek, Advance residents already had other retail options: a consignment shop, a music shop, a hardware store, a medical supply store, and the Advance Country Store gas station. In Bermuda Run, about five

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<sup>232</sup> “Zoning Map Amendment 04-16 Venture Properties.”

<sup>233</sup> O’Donnell, “Board will hear Dollar General request.”

<sup>234</sup> Mike Barnhardt, “County says no to Dollar General in Advance,” *Davie County Enterprise Record*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.ourdavie.com/2016/08/04/county-says-no-to-dollar-general-in-advance>.

miles north, there was a Dollar General store as well as several other retail options.<sup>237</sup> Residents of Advance enumerated the unique, personal services provided by the town's local grocer that a corporation like Dollar General would not extend. "These small businesses do for the community what Dollar General will never do. They will never furnish pies to loved ones grieving, they will never furnish ice to Shady Grove football, or provide flowers for school events."<sup>238</sup> Community members feared losing the benefits of a locally-owned, community-invested retail option to big-name store competition. Advance residents shaped their community identity around the rituals and relationships associated with the locally-owned businesses in the area, not the impersonal, standardization that a cheaper, corporate store would bring. Cindy Meeker captured this sentiment as she cautioned, "You bring in Dollar General, you will lose Advance."<sup>239</sup>

Representatives of Venture Properties interjected intermittently to answer questions and attempt to address concerns residents raised. Specifically, representatives emphasized the ways that the Dollar General's exterior could be adapted to reflect desired affluent aesthetic of the community, pointing to a recent store design in Statesville, North Carolina. As to the residents' concerns about negative safety ramifications, Venture Properties' representatives assured residents that traffic changes would be minimal because construction would meet the requirements of the Department of Transportation. Dismissing claims about the value of the existing building, developer representatives claimed that the structure was "an eyesore and a threat" and would imminently collapse, posing a safety concern in itself. Overall, Venture

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<sup>235</sup> Foley, *Frontporch Politics*, 90.

<sup>236</sup> "Zoning Map Amendment 04-16 Venture Properties."

<sup>237</sup> According to the search results of the Dollar General website's "Find a Store" function on May 1, 2019, [http://www2.dollargeneral.com/About-Us/pages/storelocator.aspx?\\_ga=2.36000420.563026902.1556844515-1624637547.1518120683](http://www2.dollargeneral.com/About-Us/pages/storelocator.aspx?_ga=2.36000420.563026902.1556844515-1624637547.1518120683).

<sup>238</sup> Cindy Meeker, "Zoning Map Amendment 04-16 Venture Properties," Davie County Commission, June 28, 2016, ZMA 04-16 2046, [http://daviemountync.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail\\_Meeting.aspx?ID=1062](http://daviemountync.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=1062).

Properties claimed that Dollar General would provide a necessary service for the community and add value to the area. Disregarding what the residents expressed, Venture representative Walsh said, “A small-scale grocery is appropriate to this site. We feel like this property is very compatible to that community.”<sup>240</sup> However, at the conclusion of the hearing, the developers had not succeeded in convincing the planning committee that this was the case nor in turning public sentiment towards the project. The planning committee voted 4-1 to deny the permit.<sup>241</sup> Venture Properties appealed the decision to the Davie County Commissioners.

On August 1, 2016, the Davie County Commissioners held another public hearing. Ten Advance residents opposed the request while, like before, only the developer’s representatives spoke in favor of the rezoning.<sup>242</sup> Several previously-stated concerns about the proposal were reintroduced. Speakers now expressed frustration that the developers had not adequately addressed their stated concerns since the initial community meeting in April. One commissioner exclaimed, “It was my understanding that the store was going to be designed in keeping with the historic look of Advance.”<sup>243</sup> The speaker felt that the proposed store design did not fulfill this promise. To counter the overwhelming resistance to the proposed Dollar General store, the property developer representatives employed capitalist ideology to advocate for the rezoning. Walsh of Venture Properties claimed that a Dollar General store would “offer choice to area consumers,” continuing, “within capitalism, businesses compete.”<sup>244</sup> Another member of the Venture team Dan Barrero argued the county should grant the rezoning. “Let the people decide

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<sup>239</sup>“Zoning Map Amendment 04-16 Venture Properties.”

<sup>240</sup> Hinton and O’Donnell, “Dollar Store plan in Mocksville brings criticism.”

<sup>241</sup> Barnhardt, “County says no to Dollar General in Advance.”

<sup>242</sup> Barnhardt, “County says no to Dollar General in Advance.”

<sup>243</sup> Lisa O’Donnell, “Davie County commissioners say no to Dollar General,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, August 3, 2016. [https://www.journalnow.com/journal\\_west/news/davie-county-commissioners-say-no-to-dollar-general/article\\_3677d52b-6d9a-55dc-942d-2f2136276042.html](https://www.journalnow.com/journal_west/news/davie-county-commissioners-say-no-to-dollar-general/article_3677d52b-6d9a-55dc-942d-2f2136276042.html).

with their wallets who succeeds and who doesn't." Despite these appeals, Davie County Commissioners acted on the public's request to prevent the rezoning, voting to deny the request.<sup>245</sup> County Board Chairman Terry Renegar reflected on the board's decision, "Given the public outcry, I don't see this encouraging a high quality of life."<sup>246</sup> His statement reflects several of the earlier sentiments expressed by Advance residents and, in particular, concerns about decreased community value and a wide array of unsavory effects of a Dollar General store.

Since the Davie County Commissioners ruled against the request and, in doing so, exerted governmental power to regulate business, local government officials scrambled to reconcile their actions with their pro-capitalist political stances. Resident Dan Robertson stated, "People in Advance aren't against business or capitalism. I think they've just chosen the wrong site. No one here is anti-business. It's just the wrong site."<sup>247</sup> Commissioner Board Chair Terry Renegar echoed this sentiment and added, "capitalism should not be chilled, but not at the cost of quality of life."<sup>248</sup> Despite utilizing government power to infringe upon the invisible hand of Advance's local economy—a decidedly anti-free-market move—County Commissioners and community residents rejected an anti-capitalist identity. Although the desire to protect their community from corporate exploitation outweighed the community's investment in the free market in this single instance, anti-Dollar General Davie County residents, many of whom had financially prospered within capitalism, rushed to make clear their ideological (and likely financial) investment in neoliberalism for the long-term—and perhaps more importantly, for somewhere else. The events in Advance show that residents and leaders of the community would

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<sup>244</sup> Barnhardt, "County says no to Dollar General in Advance."

<sup>245</sup> O'Donnell, "Davie County commissioners say no to Dollar General."

<sup>246</sup> O'Donnell, "Davie County commissioners say no to Dollar General."

<sup>247</sup> Barnhardt, "County says no to Dollar General in Advance."

prefer to live with the dissonance of a big-government intervening action rather than the effects of a Dollar General store.

Like the Dry Creek case, local authorities and residents of Advance felt empowered to prevent this particular Dollar General because of existing zoning laws of the property in question. In both cases, the local governing officials responded to residents' concerns, preventing Dollar General's encroachment into each community.

### **Case Study 3: North Tulsa in Tulsa County, Oklahoma**

*“Let us determine what we want in our community, at least every now and then.”*

On August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council held a public hearing in preparation of a vote on a proposed city-wide moratorium on the construction of new dollar stores. Whereas the Dry Creek and Advance communities fought to preserve their towns from the danger that discount dollar stores might pose to their communities' futures, sections of Tulsa had already been overrun with not only Dollar General, but also Family Dollar and Dollar Tree stores. Rather than opposing a single, proposed Dollar General store, residents of Tulsa sought to diversify the city's retail market, specifically in areas where dollar stores were the only food retail option. Additionally, Tulsan activists highlighted the interconnectedness between their anti-dollar store activism and anti-racist work, raising awareness of the overlap between the issues of systemic racism and corporate exploitation.

Residents of North Tulsa, in particular, grappled with the ramifications of the dollar store retail monopoly in their area as these stores thrive in—but do not necessarily correct—urban food deserts. The USDA defines food deserts as “parts of the country vapid of fresh fruit,

vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers."<sup>249</sup> Convenience stores and dollar stores are usually not included in the calculations of food desert mapping because their standard models offer too few healthy food options to qualify as a healthy food provider. Instead, these stores provide a wide variety of discounted processed foods. Due to the limited healthy food retailers in the area, some residents of North Tulsa traveled significant distances from their homes to shop for fresh foods in other areas of the city. However, others, who did not have the means to travel beyond their immediate area, were not afforded this option. Within the city of Tulsa, issues of food access and race cannot be separated as—like many cities in the U.S.—Tulsa has a long history of residential racial segregation. Thus, recurring discussions of race, class, and food access were all central to the arguments both in favor and against the moratorium.

The proposed moratorium was the culmination of months of concerned citizens' appeals for the city government to intervene to halt the continual, unwanted construction of dollar stores in North Tulsa. During its 180-days in effect, the proposed temporary ordinance would halt the issuance of "building permits or certificates of occupancy that would allow construction on, or use of, property for certain retail sales of convenience goods or consumer shopping goods, herein described as a 'small box discount store'" throughout the city of Tulsa.<sup>250</sup> The ordinance also specified that there must be a one-mile radius between new and existing small box discount

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<sup>249</sup> Mari Gallagher, "USDA Defines Food Deserts," *Nutrition Digest*, 38, no. 2, American Nutrition Association. <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>.

<sup>250</sup> "8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2," August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.



stores.<sup>251</sup> Public discussions were held in June as well as on August 2 and 9. After months of debate over the advantages and disadvantages of various government intervention strategies to address the issue of Tulsa’s dollar store saturation, the moratorium had been suggested as a way to buy time for city officials and residents to come up with a long-term solution to the issue of Tulsa’s uneven food access. Each meeting on the issue brought out more Tulsans who opposed new dollar stores. At each meeting, an overwhelming majority of the rotating residents in attendance pleaded for the local government officials to implement strategies to prevent small box stores from continuing to propagate.

By the August 30 City Council meeting, community members were frustrated and tired. The moratorium was scheduled as issue “7b” on the meeting’s agenda. After more than two and a half hours, when the council chair called a brief recess, the issue of the moratorium had not yet been introduced. By the time the dollar store issue was called, tensions ran high in the room. Stanford Pape, a supporter of the moratorium, exclaimed, “to have these people wait for two and half hours to tell you what their needs are...I think that is ridiculous.” Pape continued on to highlight the personal sacrifices some individuals made in order to attend the meeting. “You have families here who...have to get babysitters to come down here and then you listen to a couple of multi-billion dollar corporations argue.”<sup>252</sup> Indeed, an earlier item on the meeting agenda was a zoning debate which had taken up almost an hour of the meeting, featuring speakers on each side of a proposal to build a multi-story storage unit facility in a residential area, a request that was, for the moment, denied due to the concerns of area residents. Pape’s

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<sup>251</sup> Sam Blotch “Tulsa says no more Dollar General, curbing exploitation of black neighborhoods,” *The New Food Economy*, April 12, 2018. <https://newfoodeconomy.org/tulsa-dollar-general-stores-food-insecurity>.

<sup>252</sup> Stanford Pape, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

statements were met with applause from the waiting crowd; the frustrations he voiced about the council processes echoed the sentiments of individuals on both sides of the moratorium issue.

In addition to resentments of council procedures, the tensions in the room also reflected the ideological divisions and conflicts at the root of the issue at hand. The proposal, intended to address dollar store oversaturation, had been originally introduced in April. Since that time, the majority of the Tulsa City Councilors had expressed their objections to the moratorium, disregarding the many residents of Tulsa's strong support for the ban. For those who lived within food desert areas, the issue of North Tulsa's dollar store oversaturation was one of life or death, and the city councilors' opposition to the moratorium symbolized significant class and race divisions within the Tulsa community—and especially the divide between those in positions of power and those in these disenfranchised areas of North Tulsa.

During the public statement period at the August 30 council meeting, twenty-one individuals spoke in support of the moratorium, citing issues related to limited food access, widespread poverty, regional inequity, and long-term health concerns. Three spoke in opposition to the moratorium. Opponents acknowledged the issues presented by the moratorium's supporters. However, they argued that the moratorium was not a satisfactory solution and could cause further damage to the area's economic development.<sup>253</sup>

As city councilors prepared to vote on the city-wide moratorium, it became clear that the ordinance did not have the support necessary to pass. In his statement, Councilor Kimbro of the Ninth District swore that, since the moratorium would not be a long-term solution, he would not support it, claiming “I do not want to provide a Band-Aid for a community that I've watched us

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<sup>253</sup> “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

provide Band-Aids to since long before I was born.”<sup>254</sup> Council Chair America stated that she would not vote for a moratorium so long as it applied for the entire city of Tulsa. She cited that legal restrictions prevented her from voting in favor, but claimed that “when there is a legal path to letting you make that choice, even if it is not the choice I want, it is your community and you get to make that choice.”<sup>255</sup> America’s determination to follow the safest bureaucratic avenues outweighed her desire to enact the will of the residents of North Tulsa. Although the overwhelming sentiment of the speakers voiced their support of the moratorium, it seems that America did not credit these attendees as representing the will of the people.

Responding to the lack of council support for a city-wide moratorium, Councilor Vanessa Hall-Harper, the representative of the district most affected, made a motion to add a “friendly amendment.”<sup>256</sup> She and Councilor Ewing, another supporter, amended the moratorium so that it would only apply to a specified area of northwest Tulsa. While other councilors who opposed the moratorium on economic principle attempted to force the issue to a vote without the newly-added geographic bounds, the majority voted to allow the amendment. These new changes would require that the proposal return to the City Attorney’s office for review and revision. This newly revised version would have to make its way through the local legislative process again the next month. At the end of the over four-hour meeting, nothing had been accomplished. The moratorium would not yet go into effect.

Longstanding racism (and racism’s intersection with class inequity) was an undercurrent of the discussion around dollar store oversaturation within specific areas of Tulsa at this meeting

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<sup>254</sup> Councilor Kimbro, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

<sup>255</sup> Council Chair America, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

and others. The area most inundated with dollar stores was northwest Tulsa, encompassing sections of Districts Four and Three as well as the entirety of District One. Represented by Councilor Hall-Harper—the only non-white member of the city council—District One is an area of North Tulsa that encompassed the historic Greenwood neighborhood. Greenwood, the area in question just north of downtown, was once a flourishing center of Black business in Tulsa, often referred to as “Black Wall Street.” Rigid laws enforcing racial segregation inadvertently facilitated the financial success of Greenwood around the turn of the century. Since Black citizens of Tulsa could not shop at businesses owned by white people, Black businesses had a guaranteed customer base, ensuring that capital stayed within the community. The prosperity of the Greenwood area was violently destroyed in a 1921 domestic terrorist attack on the area. Groups of white citizens attacked this affluent Black neighborhood, murdering hundreds of Black residents and creating a wide wake of destruction in their path. In addition to the community’s loss of life, white mobs’ violence and intentional property destruction left thousands of Black Tulsans homeless. Many Black Tulsans fled the city that night. The economic, psychological, and social costs of this massacre are immeasurable. This white supremacist violence, often referred to as the “Tulsa Race Riots,” has had negative effects on the community that have rippled across the decades that followed.

Tulsa’s history of white supremacist violence and that violence’s enduring effects were repeatedly evoked during the city council meetings on this issue: in references to the disparate life expectancy rates between North and South Tulsa as well as the unhealthy economic development of the North Tulsa area. Yeilbonzie Charles Johnson, a resident and native of North

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<sup>256</sup> “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

Tulsa, talked about his own growing into awareness of the area’s history of white supremacist violence and the Black prosperity which preceded it. Johnson connected the changing retail landscape of North Tulsa to the lost prosperity of Black business, “we’re about to get to the point in Tulsa where you cannot measure what Black Wall Street was, what Greenwood was, and to put this little box store on the edge of Carver and Dunbar—the things that some of us know and can measure—is doing violence again to the community.”<sup>257</sup> Johnson drew a direct line between dollar store expansion and the erasure of the neighborhood’s history of Black success.

Nate Morris, who spoke at the city council meeting in support of the moratorium, connected the city’s history of racist violence and the geographical inequalities exemplified in North Tulsa’s current lack of access to healthy food. He stated:

...the history of North Tulsa is rooted in Black excellence and in Black Wall St. and is rooted in the most prosperous black community history of this country and was destroyed by people who look like me—and a lot of you—in the greatest act of domestic terrorism in the history of this country. So, it’s difficult to find a ‘why’ when that ‘why’ is not rooted in practicality, it’s actually rooted in systemic racism and systemic injustice that is still so prevalent in our city today...And it shows itself in the eleven-year life expectancy gap from North Tulsa to South Tulsa, which is a real thing. And it also shows itself in the lack of access to healthy food because food is everything.<sup>258</sup>

Morris’ comments were greeted with enthusiastic cheers of support from the galley where dozens of waiting and previous speakers sat. As Morris points out, the quality and length of life of this predominantly Black area was linked intricately to residents’ access to healthy food.

While there were more than ten retail “options” in District One, not one provided a wide range of healthy food options. There were no grocery stores within the district, all ten of the

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<sup>257</sup> Yeilbonzie Charles Johnson, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

<sup>258</sup> Nate Morris, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

existing stores were small box discount dollar stores.<sup>259</sup> Residents and local representatives argued that the competition posed by a retail market oversaturated with dollar stores dissuaded full-service grocery stores from opening in the area. The urgency of this food access issue was repeatedly evoked in the city council meeting. In the words of D’marria Monday, “What we need is sustainable economic development. What we need is grocery stores to address the food scarcity in our neighborhood. What we need is access to fresh fruits and vegetables to diminish the life expectancy gap.”<sup>260</sup> Discount dollar stores like Dollar General did not serve the community the fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat options needed for a healthy diet.

Both residents and city officials acknowledged dollar store corporations’ motivation to make a profit in areas desperate for local food shopping options. Councilor Hall-Harper stated in a news interview, “their business model is to seek out food deserts and communities that have no other options, and then they can make it more difficult for other retailers to come in and be successful—particularly quality, full-service grocery stores.”<sup>261</sup> In her time on the stand, resident Beatrice Graham illustrated the failure of dollar stores to serve the community, as well as the potential of these companies to make a positive impact on the community. Using data from a Forbes article on Dollar General, Graham noted the difference in speed between Dollar General’s shift towards selling fresh food and selling tobacco products. “Fourteen years and only a hundred and sixty stores have fresh produce and meat, but gave 6,000 stores liquor and tobacco in one summer.” Graham continued to argue that, if Dollar General wanted to continue its growth in the

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<sup>259</sup> “Why Dollar General is putting grocery stores out of business,” *Vice News Tonight on HBO*, Video, 6:38, [https://video.vice.com/en\\_us/video/why-dollar-general-is-putting-grocery-stores-out-of-business/5aab0f9bf1cdb37a1d02d7b3](https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/why-dollar-general-is-putting-grocery-stores-out-of-business/5aab0f9bf1cdb37a1d02d7b3).

<sup>260</sup> D’marria Monday, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

<sup>261</sup> Blotch, “Tulsa says no more Dollar General, curbing exploitation of black neighborhoods.”

Tulsa area, “Make us one hundred and sixty-one [of the stores selling fresh food].”<sup>262</sup> Graham aimed to hold Dollar General to its promise of “serving others.” Both Councilor Hall-Harper and Graham’s quotes reflect the community’s awareness that capitalism has not operated in the best interest of the most vulnerable populations of the Tulsa community. Or, put simply, “the free market has not been effective in dealing with food deserts.”<sup>263</sup>

Yet, the fervent opposition to the moratorium voiced by several city councilors reflects a stubborn dedication to the belief that the free market will fix the problems it creates. One opponent Lana Turner-Addison argued that “the city council should focus on how to stimulate economic development, and how to increase the income of residents who live in the community, because increased income leads to increased options and choice.”<sup>264</sup> At the heart of the discussion was the issue of community autonomy. Would the predominantly white city councilors respect and support the will of predominantly Black community residents? Or would they paternalistically assert their own beliefs about how to proceed on the community? Christopher Brown, a supporter of the ordinance, emphasized this element of the discussion, “It’s weird that you talk about how bad someone’s community is, and you don’t give them the opportunity to decide what comes in. Let us determine what we want in our community, at least every now and then.”<sup>265</sup> Whereas, in North Carolina, Davie County Commissioners took on the mantle of anti-Dollar General community members and then reconciled their actions with capitalist ideology, Tulsa City officials prioritized their interpretations of the best practices of capitalism over the desires of the area’s community members.

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<sup>262</sup> Beatrice Graham, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

<sup>263</sup> Amy Shelton, “8-30-17 City Council Regular Meeting Part 2 of 2,” August 30, 2017, Tulsa City Council Meeting, video, accessed February 2019, <https://cityoftulsa.viebit.com>.

The temporary moratorium reappeared in front of the Tulsa City Councilors on September 20. With the new spatial restrictions written into the ordinance, the measure passed, representing a bittersweet win for the Tulsa community. More so than in Dry Creek or Advance, there had been a real concern that representatives would ignore community members united against dollar store expansion. While the passing of the ordinance was a step towards community autonomy, the city councilors had ignored the will of the people, requiring addendum after addendum before a version of the moratorium satisfied the majority of the Tulsa City Councilors.

However, even this bittersweet victory was short-lived. Not even a week after the moratorium passed, construction continued at a site that had been recently purchased for development into a Dollar General store in the North Tulsa area. The site developers had attained the required permits to build the store prior to the passing of the city-wide moratorium on September 20; thus, there was no legal recourse to halt the store's construction. The unrelenting expansion of Dollar General after such a hard-fought battle on the city council floor exemplified the hopelessness many residents felt about saving their neighborhood from the corporate discount retail market over-saturation.

Yet, rather than succumbing to a sense of futility, residents of North Tulsa organized once again in opposition to the store. These organizing efforts focused on preventing the store location from succeeding financially. Drawing on rhetoric of past consumer movements, organizer Greg Robinson said, "it's the people's decision...to vote with our pocketbooks." He continued, "we are hoping that this dollar store is the least profitable among all the dollar stores." The store was scheduled to open on February 28. North Tulsa neighborhood activists organized a

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<sup>264</sup> Blotch, "Tulsa says no more Dollar General, curbing exploitation of black neighborhoods."

<sup>265</sup> Blotch, "Tulsa says no more Dollar General, curbing exploitation of black neighborhoods."



“Grand NOPening” protest, including a neighborhood boycott of this Dollar General location coupled with picketing outside of the store. Residents pledged that they were “only going to support businesses that value us.”<sup>266</sup> A graphic for the Grand NOPening that circulated social media featured a Malcolm X quote as well as the text “North Tulsa said ‘no more’ and they built it anyway... do not shop at this Dollar General.”<sup>267</sup> Residents of North Tulsa emphasized the corporation’s disregard of the will of the community. Leading up to the Grand NOPening, community members installed signs that co-opted the aesthetics of the Dollar General brand for messages of protest. Reading, “Don’t Shop at this Dollar General,” these signs stood as a constant reminder to North Tulsans that Dollar General had disregarded the will of the local community and that, wielding their purchasing power, the community could fight back.

While the temporary moratorium was in effect, the city councilors held two community input meetings on January 29 and February 5 to help decide what additional steps could be taken to find a long-term solution to the area’s retail monopoly. Additionally, public comments were submitted through an online information gathering portal. To address the issue of dollar store oversaturation long-term, Tulsa council proposed to make changes to the city’s zoning code. These changes would designate the area most affected as the Tulsa “Healthy Neighborhoods Overlay” (HNO) and extend the conditions of the temporary moratorium to the HNO area permanently. A permanent moratorium for the designated HNO area passed in March 2018. That

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<sup>266</sup> Joseph Holloway, “Tulsans Start ‘Grand Nopening’ Movement to Protest New Dollar Store,” *News On 6*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.newson6.com/story/37614649/tulsans-start-grand-nopening-movement-to-protest-new-dollar-store>.

<sup>267</sup> Greg Robinson, “Attention North Tulsa: Despite your clear calls for ‘No More Dollar Stores’ and a Moratorium voted on by your Tulsa City Council...The Dollar General at 744 E. Pine St. is set to open March 1st... Let's make it a GRAND NOPENING!!!,” Facebook, February 21, 2018, Accessed January 23, 2019.

same month, the city announced plans to build a full-service grocery store in District One.<sup>268</sup> As of January 2019, the Tulsa Economic Development Corporation had not yet found a grocery operator to agree to lease the space.

The case of anti-dollar store resistance in Tulsa demonstrates ways in which cities can fight back even after Dollar General Corporation and other retail chains establish a dominant presence within a community. Through community advocacy, organized boycotts and picketing, and persistent attendance at public hearings, residents of North Tulsa and allies across the city pressured city officials to actively intervene to counteract the unhealthy economic development of some areas of Tulsa. Unlike Dry Creek and Advance, dissonance between the expressed desire of the community and the decisions of the local government surrounds the debate about dollar stores in Tulsa, reflecting a long history of racial and economic inequality and subsequent community disenfranchisement. While the movement was partially successful and attained legislation to abate new dollar stores in North Tulsa, the story of anti-Dollar General activism in North Tulsa does not have a happy ending. Dollar store chains continue to dominate the designated area of North Tulsa. And the Dollar General store which opened in North Tulsa after the moratorium had gone into effect has not closed.



The perceived risks associated with Dollar General differ in each of the three cases, as each place has a distinct regional history, identity, and culture influencing community members' understandings of and attitudes toward the dollar industry. There are different perceived stakes rooted in differing views of capitalism, community histories, regional identities, and expectations

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<sup>268</sup> Amy Slanchik, "Plans Moving Forward For North Tulsa Grocery Store," *News On 6*, March 2, 2018, <http://www.newson6.com/story/37636237/plans-moving-forward-for-north-tulsa-grocery-store>.

about race and whiteness. However, the three diverse communities all organized to oppose the corporation's presence, pointing to the symbolic weight associated with the discount retailer, as a business focused on maintaining low-costs and high profits regardless of the non-monetary costs.

Each community protested Dollar General's encroachment in a variety of forms. Tulsa residents physically picketed future dollar store locations and enacted store boycotts. Both Advance and Dry Creek communities threatened future boycotts of proposed Dollar General stores. While boycotts have long been a tool of consumer activist groups, against a corporate giant like Dollar General, a store-based strategy does not have the same negative effects as it might against a smaller retailer. Dollar General can sustain losses at one of its locations as its business model relies on regional, rather than local, profits. Though shoppers might avoid one Dollar General store, the profits at nearby stores—especially within highly saturated areas like North Tulsa—can maintain the region's profitability.<sup>269</sup> However, boycotts provide a measurable manifestation of consumers' desires and demands, which, in the case of Tulsa, maintained pressure on the city's officials.

Due to the correlation between Dollar General's rise and neoliberal politics, the decision of resident activists in each location to turn to local government officials is a logical course of action. As the unrestrained free market brought the threat of Dollar General's expansion to the locale, residents call upon local government to act to prevent the corporation from establishing its cheap-centric business model in the community. The variable outcomes of different communities' appeals to local government illustrate that this approach yields distinct results in different places. In Advance, Davie County Commissioners listened and gave weight to the

concerns of fellow members of the tightly-knit, largely homogenous community. Likewise, the Raleigh County Zoning and Planning Board took seriously the concerns of some community residents Dry Creek, although elevating the voices of middle-class landowners over low-income and elderly residents. In contrast, residents of North Tulsa found communicating with city officials a frustrating, time consuming, and often ineffective process; the area's long history of city officials misrepresenting and neglecting North Tulsa and its residents' subsequent disenfranchisement complicated interactions between residents and the local government. However, in all three cases, community organizing efforts prompted local government actions (or deliberate inactions) which ultimately stopped or slowed the expansion of Dollar General.

In recent years, community resistance to Dollar General has occurred in areas other than the three examples outlined in this chapter. In 2016, Mendocino County in California passed a policy to protect its unincorporated areas from dollar stores. In order to open stores in such areas, retailers are now required to hold a public hearing, go through a public review process, and attain a special permit.<sup>270</sup> Also in 2016, community activists took to the streets with signs reading "Stop \$ General" and "Honk to Save 1810" in St. Simon's Island, Georgia. These signs referenced the street number of the proposed site for a Dollar General store. In the time since I began writing this thesis, community organizing has been ongoing in Macon County, Georgia; Bement, Illinois; Greenfield, Massachusetts; Jefferson, New York; and other locales as residents respond to new proposals to build Dollar General stores. Across the country, individuals and community groups are taking notice and taking action to halt Dollar General's expansion.

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<sup>269</sup> James Hoopes, "Growth Through Knowledge: Wal-Mart, High Technology, and the Ever Less Visible Hand of the Manager" in *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (New York: The New Press, 2006).

<sup>270</sup> Marie Donahue and Stacy Mitchell, "Dollar Stores Are Targeting Struggling Urban Neighborhoods and Small

While individual victories have been won on a community-scale, there are also many instances of communities welcoming new Dollar General stores with open arms. Likewise, some anti-Dollar General activist movements fail to prevent the proposed opening of new Dollar General stores. Still, the corporation continues to expand at a rate of almost three stores a day.<sup>271</sup> Where new stores open, some of the worst fears of anti-Dollar General activists have come true. In the case of Merville, Iowa, the town lost its last grocery store in 2008 to a fire.<sup>272</sup> Afterwards, the town raised \$600,000 to build a new grocery store, which ran successfully until 2016 when Dollar General opened a store in the town and the grocery store's sales began plummeting.<sup>273</sup> In Haven, Kansas, a Dollar General store drove a local grocer, Chet's, out of business.<sup>274</sup> These tales illustrate the potential consequences of new Dollar General stores and what is at stake for the plucky community organizers who take on the task of resisting the dollar industry's expansion.

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Towns. One Community Is Showing How to Fight Back," *ISLR.org*, December 6, 2018, <https://ilsr.org/dollar-stores-target-cities-towns-one-fights-back>.

<sup>271</sup> Dollar General, 2018 Annual Report, <https://investor.dollargeneral.com/static-files/3a775a9d-4291-424c-8bbe-3ae948d06da4>.

<sup>272</sup> Barbara Soderlin, "Dollar General is expanding in rural Midwest, presenting a threat to small-town grocery stores," *The World-Herald*, November 14, 2017. [https://www.omaha.com/money/dollar-general-is-expanding-in-rural-midwest-presenting-a-threat/article\\_b1db6929-2e5d-561f-b467-c53fdec4351e.html](https://www.omaha.com/money/dollar-general-is-expanding-in-rural-midwest-presenting-a-threat/article_b1db6929-2e5d-561f-b467-c53fdec4351e.html).

<sup>273</sup> Frank Morris, "How Dollar General Is Transforming Rural America," *NPR Business*, December 11, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/11/569815331/loving-and-hating-dollar-general-in-rural-america>.

<sup>274</sup> Donahue and Mitchell, "Dollar Stores Are Targeting Struggling Urban Neighborhoods and Small Towns."

## EPILOGUE

For its first seven decades, Dollar General operated under the leadership of three generations of the founding Turner family of Scottsville, Kentucky. In his recently released memoir, Cal Turner Jr., the last of the family's Dollar General leadership, retold the company's history. His tale is an all-American success story, emphasizing his and the corporation's Christian faith, the exceptionality of the Turner patriarchs, and the company's small town, southern roots. However, an examination of the company's early history over the course of the twentieth century illustrates that Cal Jr.'s brand narrative obfuscates a less savory reality that Dollar General has intentionally targeted low-income shoppers and implemented discount buying and selling strategies to profit off of moments of economic downturn.

Since the 1970s, Dollar General Corporation has experienced monumental growth, evident in both the company's financial success and geographic expansion through new store and warehouse locations. The advent of neoliberal economic policies within the U.S. and onset of a global finance capitalism facilitated Dollar General's accelerated growth during this time. The neoliberal context provided private enterprises free rein, enabling the company to double-down on its cheap labor practices, cheap buying and selling strategies, cheap construction methods, and cheap aesthetics. These business practices manifest in the places the corporation enters as well as the spaces it creates, impacting the lives and experiences of shoppers, workers, and community

members. The Dollar General business model, centered around cheap, has facilitated the corporation's financial ascent and geographic expansion.

The negative impact and symbolic weight of the corporation's cheap, profit-oriented business model sets the stage for community resistance to proposed Dollar General stores. Three case studies of community activism against Dollar General's expansion highlight the implausibility of Dollar General's professed brand identity as "America's neighborhood store." Residents of each locale voiced opposition to the company's asserted ability to serve their community's needs. These stories of resistance of the Dollar General Corporation illustrate the potential of individual and community action to prevent unchecked corporate growth. Likewise, these stories demonstrate how local history affects community activism. The important role local government plays in each instance illustrates the potential of government intervention as a method to allay the growth of a megacorporation like Dollar General that has proliferated nationwide within neoliberal, global finance capitalism.



There were several specific themes which arose during my research that I could not fit within the scope of my thesis on Dollar General. First, the effects of Dollar General's business practices are not identity-neutral. In addition to the clear class consequences of the dollar store model, Dollar General's employment and retailing strategies appear to have disparate effects on women, people of color, and especially women of color. At this time, I felt unable to make definitive claims about the identity-based implications of Dollar General without further data that substantiates my preliminary, anecdotally-based findings.

During the course of my research, I realized that Dollar General's practices seem to have

exceptionally harmful effects on individuals with disabilities within the U.S. as well. There have been a number of ADA violation lawsuits brought against the company in recent years, some of which I included in my second chapter. These lawsuits range from instances of wrongful termination to the company's failure to provide adequate, accessible public accommodations. My initial findings suggest that an examination of Dollar General Corporation through the lens of disability studies would uncover a plethora of ways that, in the pursuit of cheap, Dollar General Corporation has erased, ignored, and harmed individuals with disabilities.

While the subject came up in relation to Tulsa's anti-Dollar General activism, food is another interesting element of the Dollar General business model, which I was not able to fully explore. Dollar General's choices about when and where to stock perishable food items have complex, multifaceted effects on U.S. foodways. Thus, the subject warrants further critical scrutiny. Specifically, I believe that Dollar General's food sales operate as a form of what sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom has termed a "negative social insurance program." In *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*, Cottom defines a negative social insurance program as one which "positions private-sector goods to profit from predictable systemic social inequalities, ostensibly for the public good."<sup>275</sup> Thus, targeting specific, vulnerable individuals to consume a company product—in her case study, a subpar education paid for with federal student loans—the for-profit college industry leaves these individuals in deeper debt without the promised better future. When it comes to Dollar General, the company is sometimes celebrated as a service provider, credited with counteracting issues of food access within rural and urban food deserts alike. Whereas Dollar General stores' heavily-

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<sup>275</sup> Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 174.



processed food products are staples of the company's inventory, fresh food options are limited and vary from store-to-store. A Dollar General store does not necessarily provide a wide range of healthy food options to a community. Many of Dollar General's consumers and employees, both constituencies that are predominantly low income, rely on government assistance like EBT/SNAP to live. Thus, food purchases at Dollar General stores are often paid for with these government-funded supplements. Through the corporation's intentional targeting of low-income consumers and advertised promise of convenient, affordable food options, Dollar General stores reap profits from community members' EBT/SNAP benefits for food purchases that sustain, but do not nourish, bodies.

Perhaps the most significant weakness of this thesis is its failure to trace and analyze the colonial and transnational implications of Dollar General's business practices. While I attempt to apply spatial analysis to the corporation in the second chapter, I did not explore the relationship between the company and colonization or transnationalism. As Dollar General's expansion has occurred across stolen land, my failure to address the role of colonization requires acknowledgement. The spread of Dollar General and the intense corporate control of its spaces have had rippling effects on the contemporary lives of American Indians, especially those living on Indian Reservations. The court case *Dollar General Corp. v. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians* will have major implications for American Indian land sovereignty. Alyosha Goldstein, an American Studies scholar at the University of New Mexico, has begun research on the case and its repercussions. While I have not yet had the opportunity to read or engage with Goldstein's writing, his scholarship will be essential for future work on the dollar industry.

While, as of 2019, all of Dollar General's stores are located within the bounds of the

continental United States, the company's manufacturing and distribution networks extend beyond U.S. national boundaries. Dollar General employs seventy-three employees who live outside of the U.S. in Hong Kong, other areas of China, Mexico, and Turkey.<sup>276</sup> Tracing and understanding the function of the company's transnational networks would require more time and travel than the limitations of this thesis could enable. However, Dollar General cannot be fully understood without reckoning with the company's transnational connections and impact.

There has been little data collected about the lives of workers within the dollar store industry today. Firsthand data collection (through interviews, in-person or digital ethnography, or surveys) would enrich future research on Dollar General. Drawing from legal documents, news interviews, and internet comments, I have made an attempt to include the voices and experiences of Dollar General store workers in this thesis. However, additional data would provide a fuller picture of these workers' lives both within and outside of their workplaces, building a richer understanding of the Dollar General Corporation and its impact on communities.

Due to the lack of previous scholarship on the subject of the dollar industry and Dollar General, I have been ambitious—and perhaps over-ambitious—in terms of this thesis' scope. I sought to cover as much new ground as possible: delineating Dollar General Corporation's history from brand narrative, exploring the company's impact on places and spaces, and surveying anti-Dollar General community activism. What is clear from my research on Dollar General so far is that the company's model and practices have had widespread effects on the communities all across the U.S.—and likely beyond. In order to understand Dollar General, a thriving business within a neoliberal and global finance capitalist context, and its impact, piecing together and analyzing the company's history seems like as good a place as any to begin.

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Curriculum Vitae  
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**Education**

M.A. Southern Studies, University of Mississippi, August 2019  
Thesis: “A Bargain at Any Cost: The Rise of Dollar General”  
Minor: Women’s and Gender Studies

B.A. Women’s and Gender Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014  
Minor: Art History

**Awards & Honors**

Graduate Achievement Award, University of Mississippi College of Liberal Arts, 2019  
Lucille and Motee Daniels Award, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, 2017 – 2018  
Kullman Award, Critical Paper, Southern Writers/Southern Writing Conference, 2018

**Grants & Fellowships**

Southern Studies Graduate Writing Fellowship, University of Mississippi, 2018 – 2019  
Wikipedia Fellow, Midterms Election Cohort, WikiEdu, 2018  
Honors Scholarship, Southern Studies, University of Mississippi, 2017 – 2019

**Conference Participation**

- 2019 Presenter, Southeastern Women’s Studies Association Conference, *Gender in the Dollar General Store*
- 2018 Presenter, National Women’s Studies Association Conference, *The Promises and Potential Pitfalls of Podcasting Feminism*
- 2018 Presenter, Southern Writers, Southern Writing Conference, *Podcasting Place: Constructing “S-Town”*

- 2018 Presenter, Sarah Isom Conference, *Gendered Violence in Appalachian Murder Ballads and Contemporary Offshoots*
- 2014 Presenter, Southeastern Women's Studies Association Conference, *The Changing Representations of Gendered Violence in "Sweetheart Murder Ballads"*

### **Campus or Departmental Talks**

- 2018 *Queer Mississippi: Oral History Performance*, Radical South Conference & The Northern Mississippi LGBTQ Oral History Project, Oxford, MS

### **Teaching Experience**

- Teaching Assistant, Southern Studies 102, University of Mississippi, Spring 2018
- Teaching Assistant, Southern Studies 101, University of Mississippi, Fall 2017
- Student Instructor, "Gender and Violence in U.S. Music," Carolina Students Taking Academic Responsibility through Teaching program, UNC-Chapel Hill, Spring 2014

### **Research Experience**

- Research Assistant, Stephen Monroe, Chair and Assistant Professor, Department of Writing & Rhetoric, University of Mississippi, May 2018 – August 2019

### **Extracurricular University Service**

- Treasurer, OUTGrads, 2018-2019
- Member, OUTGrads, 2017-2018
- Peer Educator Coordinator, One Act Violence Prevention Program, UNC-CH, 2013-2014
- Student Wellness Intern, UNC Campus Health, Chapel Hill, NC, 2013