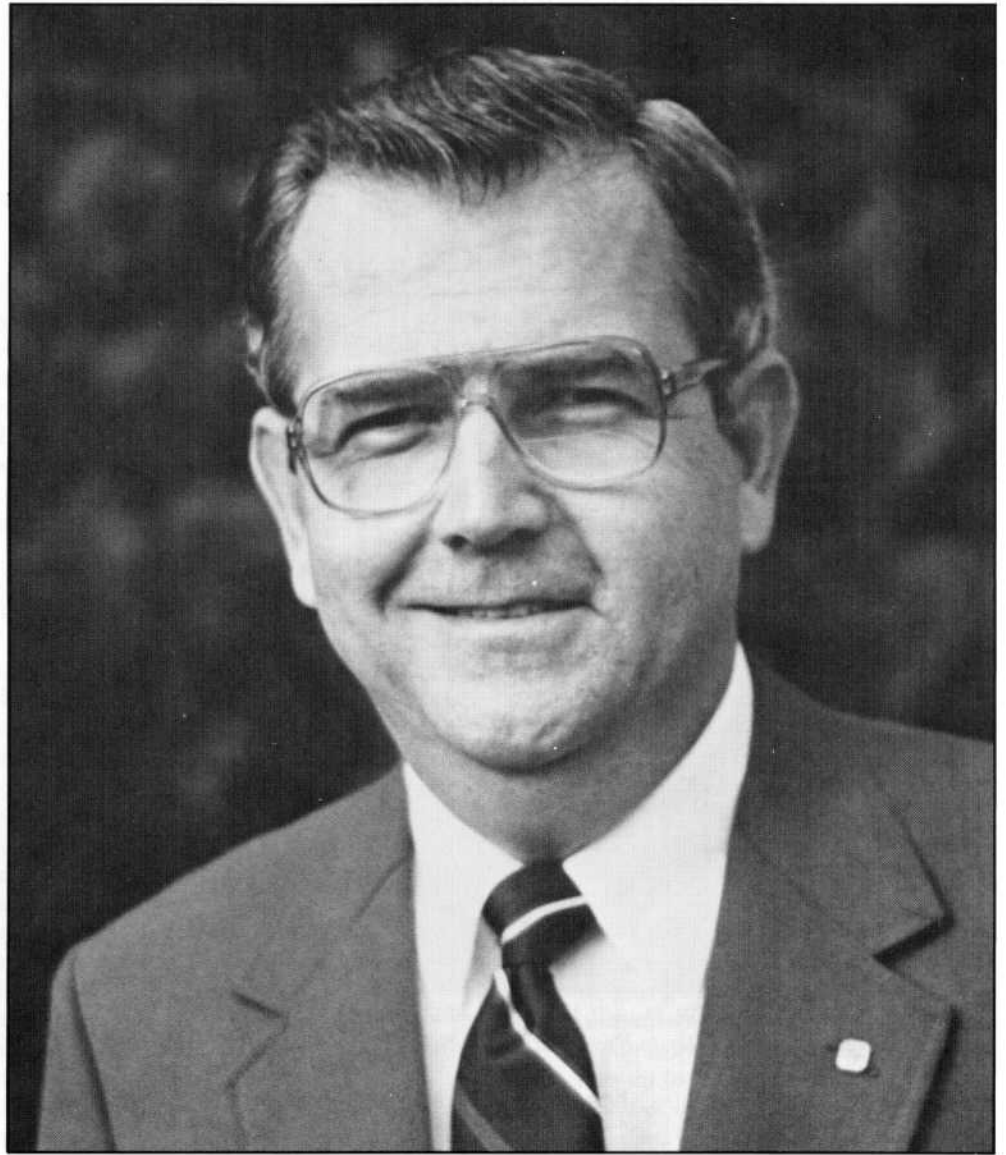


Centennial



Time for Greatness

The Chairman of the Board

William R. Howell. From stock boy to chairman, he always has been a company man. His loyalties shine through in every task he undertakes, whether directing the fortunes of the retail giant JCPenney, carrying out a myriad of civic responsibilities or chairing the Centennial Celebration of the University of Oklahoma.

By PEGGY HEALY

The setting is Dallas' Grand Kempinsky Hotel ballroom transformed into a miniature football field; the occasion, a United Way pep rally for JCPenney. The marching band strikes up, the cheerleaders (Penney associates all) jump into position, and the multi-colored banners unfurl.

As the momentum builds, out runs the referee in his black-and-white striped uniform, blowing a whistle and deftly dropping a yellow penalty flag on the field. The crowd roars. It's William R. Howell, chairman of JCPenney — and chairman, too, of the University of Oklahoma's Centennial Celebration.

What is the chief executive officer of one of America's largest and most successful retail corporations doing refereeing a "football rally?" Long involved in United Way and a member of its board of governors since 1984, Howell is there to reinforce his commitment to raising funds for the community-based charity. (The final results exceeded Penney's Dallas-area goal of \$700,000.)

The scene is illustrative of Howell's depth of commitment to goals and the length of his allegiances. It is illustrative, too, of his lack of pretense and ability to "get down" with people. But make no mistake. While he is able to allow some fun at his own expense, he is nevertheless a man with a serious mission. That mission is to lead JCPenney, an "American institution," as he calls it, with 181,000 employees, 1,400 stores and \$15 billion in gross revenues, safely to the 21st century.

Howell played linebacker in high school for the Claremore, Oklahoma, Zebras, and football might well serve as a metaphor for his career: a team player with clear goals, a competitive stance, a winning attitude.

His career began after Howell's graduation from the University of Oklahoma in 1958 with a B.B.A. in management. Turned off by college recruiters who wanted him to explain why they should hire him, he chose instead to join JCPenney, deciding then to make it his career.

Howell never had a secret ambition to be kingpin of the Penney chain. "I was just another college graduate," he says, "who started on a training program. I was 22 years old. I didn't really

understand what life was all about — that you were supposed to do this or not do that, or that you were supposed to have a lifetime plan in place. I only had an ambition to manage a Penney store, as simple as that might sound to a lot of people. That's all I ever intended to do."

William Robert Howell's desire to become a Penney store manager was a natural one for him. His father managed the Penney store in the family's hometown of Claremore for 29 years until his retirement in 1964. Young Bill grew up hearing the buzzwords of the retail trade, working summers at Penney, sweeping floors and stocking merchandise.

His first official job at JCPenney was as a management trainee in its Tulsa store. He then held a variety of positions in Norman and Oklahoma City, until 1968, when, at age 32, he realized his initial objective by being named manager of Penney store No. 1657 in Tulsa.

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In 1969, when he was promoted to district manager of 40 stores spanning East Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri and Louisiana, he moved to Dallas with his wife, the former Donna Hatch (his high school sweetheart), and their two young daughters, Ann Elizabeth and Theresa Lynn. The next rungs were director of domestic development and head of Treasury, Penney's former discount store division.

Late in 1974, when the national economy was in a slump, Penney along with it, Howell was asked by then chairman Donald Siebert to lead a task force whose mandate was to position Penney for the future. The team of four was given an office and a blank piece of paper.

Asked how he approached this colossal assignment, Howell says, "I responded to my leader. Our charge was to look at the overall performance of

our assets — human, financial, technical and physical—and report back to a steering committee. We developed a list of priorities. We looked at consumer buying patterns in regional shopping centers, where virtually all our medium-sized stores are located, and recommended bringing our merchandise into line with these changing patterns.

"We recommended reorganizing the company along team lines; phasing out automotive centers, appliances, paint and hardware; closing down the Treasury chain. We took a hard look at corporate location and asked why were we committed to staying in New York City where it's difficult to attract and keep talent."

The task force was called Impact, connoting energy and action, but Howell was not to know immediately the extent to which the team's recommendations would be acted upon. Instead, he was sent to Southern California for a three-year stint as vice president of the company's western region—a \$2 billion business stretching from Alaska to Hawaii to the border of Mexico. Finally, after a total of 16 titles, the tap on the shoulder came. After board approval in April, he assumed the reins of chairman and CEO in September 1983.

He since has guided JCPenney through the shoals of store repositioning and an enormous corporate relocation out of the Penney Building on Sixth Avenue in New York City to temporary housing in several buildings in Dallas.

The repositioning has focused on discontinuing hard goods, remodeling stores using such top names in retail store design as the Walker/Group, and introducing more fashion merchandise. Customers now can find designer names like Halston, Lee Wright and Mary McFadden in Penney stores, and private label lines such as Plain Pockets jeans, Stafford, St. John's Bay and Fernand Aubry cosmetics. The mass merchandiser of functional, sensible clothes has been reincarnated during Howell's tenure into a fashion and value-oriented national department store.

Profits have been record, and retail analysts point to Howell's ability to control costs and his skillful promotion of the company. Taking a page



With the expertise of a veteran grandfather, William R. Howell holds 2-year-old cancer patient Brittany Rieger while her parents get settled aboard the JCPenney corporate plane. JCPenney participates in the Corporate Angel Network Inc., a non-profit organization which arranges transportation to and from cancer research centers on corporate aircraft whenever space is available.

from upscale retailers, Penney mounted its first international promotion in 1984, "Salute to Italy." Howell pulled off a coup the following year by orchestrating the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to the Penney store in Springfield, Virginia, launching a "Best of Britain" promotion and garnering national media coverage. Penney's most recent large-scale event, "Expedition: India," involved some \$110 million in merchandise and drew visits from an assortment of maharajahs and ministers of state.

While the Penney stores are the heart of the business, the empire encompasses a \$2.6 billion catalog division, 400 Thrift Drug stores, two insurance companies and a bank. To keep it all going, Howell is up at 5:30 a.m., in the office by 7 a.m. In a typical week, Howell might jet in the company Gulfstream II to one of Penney's six mammoth regional catalog distribution centers. He might meet with store managers and merchants anywhere from Atlanta to Chicago, Boston to Seattle. He undoubtedly will be guest speaker at a luncheon and perhaps join the governor of Texas at a press

conference for Lone Star Lifestyle, a corporate public relations program benefiting various community-involvement groups within the state.

Howell recently attended a store opening in Claremore, although as a matter of policy, the senior officers do not fly out to "take the bows" or "share the limelight." But this occasion was an exception and symbolic of the thread of continuity in Howell's life. His father had attended the original Claremore store opening in 1927 and was present at this one, along with Howell's mother, sister and brother-in-law, who is also a Penney store manager.

In spite of a schedule which requires him to travel 100 days a year, Howell finds time to support those values to which he is committed. One of these is education, which accounts for his willingness to chair OU's Centennial Celebration.

"Time for Greatness' is the theme," he reports, "and obviously, it's the 100th year of the University. The idea is not just to have a celebration but to prepare and assure the future for the next generation. The Centennial Cam-

paign goal is \$100 million to be used to endow and provide academic excellence beyond the present century. The University was actually an institution before the state was a state. We start the celebration in the fall of '89 and will carry it through until December of 1990, which is the actual anniversary."

Howell credits OU with preparing him for his career. "I went to the University for one reason, and that was to get an education. I went there with the idea that I was going to get as much as possible out of the University from an educational point of view, so I attended classes, I studied hard, and I tried to achieve academic excellence personally.

"I learned the discipline for the first time of managing oneself, because I'd never been away from home until I left Claremore to go to Norman. It was a time of trial and error and learning, and those are probably characteristic of life. It was also a time for building self-confidence, because once you've learned to apply yourself and achieve goals, you gain confidence to set the next set of goals. You have to work hard and be patient with yourself and those around you."

Then, slipping into football terminology, he says, "Somewhere along the line you also fall short and stumble, but you pick yourself up, reorganize and run after your goals again."

Howell believes that there is a direct link between a better educated society and healthier businesses. At a recent luncheon for supporters of the United Negro College Fund, Howell told the audience, "The educational need of our society is the news of the day. We (JCPenney) recently reexamined our customers' needs, our needs and our communities' needs. This resulted in our recommendation for a greater commitment to education in 1989."

While his education at OU may have prepared Howell for his business career, it is his own personality which has shaped his management style. That style has been described as creative and dynamic, and he prides himself on being approachable.

His open door policy is genuine, although he admits it is a claim he cannot always make good on because of his tight schedule. "I can't be available

if I'm not here. Never have learned to be in two places at one time."

He has been called the "quintessential company man—typical of many from Heartland America who have attained success but wear the mantle of authority easily." Unassuming and laid back, this corporate officer with a million dollar income wears a \$180 JCPenney suit and eats in the company cafeteria.

"He's just like Mr. Penney was," says his mother, Opal Howell. "Mr. Penney never did let wealth make any difference in his life either."

A consummate team player, Howell is always quick to credit others, attributing his success to "the help and assistance of a lot of people, people who were very patient and encouraging, at times very demanding, people who set high standards personally but who always found a way to set a little higher standard for those about them, so that the next generation could be better than the last."

The Penney corporate culture is marked by participative management, which Howell considers its key competitive advantage. "This does not mean consensus management," he explains. "It does mean getting those people involved who have the most to give to a particular subject."

This corporate culture, with its respect for the individual and team spirit, seems to breed loyalty and longevity. "A lot of times when the going gets tough," says Howell, "people start pointing fingers. At JCPenney, when the going gets tough — and we've had our tough times — we close ranks and pull together."

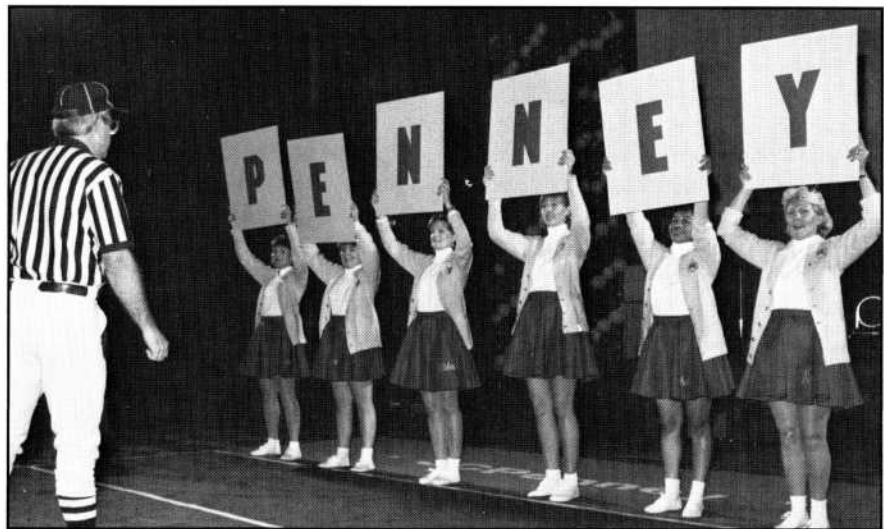
One of the tough decisions Howell had to make was the corporate move to Dallas. Howell believes the move is rejuvenating and reinvigorating the company, and that the best is yet to come. The company has just announced that HKS, a Dallas-based architectural firm, will design the new permanent headquarters in Plano, scheduled to be occupied by 1992. Howell describes these offices as a community of buildings, probably interconnected, with no physical barriers to communication and interaction. Instead of elevators, there will be staircases, encouraging people to get together face to face and to keep fit by running up and down stairs. Asked

whether this concept places Penney in the avant garde of a trend to anti-skyscraper living, Howell retorts, "Not in the forefront of a trend but in step with a reality."

The Howells are building a home on the grounds of Stonebriar, a community development just a stone's throw from the new headquarters. They are lucky to have both daughters close by. Ann Bromley and her Penney management trainee husband live in Plano with their three-year-old son. Daughter Terri Fine, a 1983 OU accounting

much time nowadays for these pursuits. He doesn't watch baseball, but he does watch the World Series. He doesn't watch basketball, but he does watch the NBA playoffs. He does watch football.

Queried as to whether the Sooner-Longhorn game evoked mixed emotions for this Oklahoma-born Texas transplant, Howell responds with a quick, "No, not at all." Then, smiling wryly, he adds, "Don't have any mixed emotions. I've told the world, including Texans, that I'm a great champion



Referee Howell leads the cheers for JCPenney's participation in the United Way.

graduate, is married and lives in the Dallas area.

W. R., as he frequently introduces himself, enjoys his involvement in community activities, but these are company-related involvements — United Way, Dallas Chamber of Commerce, Dallas Citizens Council and the North Texas Commission. He also serves on the boards of some of America's most prestigious companies — Exxon, Warner-Lambert, NYNEX, Bankers Trust—and for him these are reciprocal relationships where he takes as much from the table as he brings to it. He is also a member of the Business Roundtable, Business Council, Beta Gamma Sigma Directors Table, Delta Sigma Pi (professional business fraternity), American Management Association and National Retail Merchants Association.

For recreation, Howell likes reading (in particular publications critical to the business), woodworking and golf, although he admits he doesn't have

of the state of Texas and its people — except its football team on the first weekend in October. Then my loyalty is pure."

The chairman of JCPenney refuses to identify his proudest accomplishments, saying that he could do that only at the end of his career, reflecting back over a chapter of his life. Howell is not due to retire until 1996, when he is 60. He corrects the interviewer. "Penney people don't retire; they graduate. They tend to be productive in their new lives and do a lot of things they did not have time or opportunity to do before."

What is Howell's best advice to fledgling business careerists? "Be patient. Understand yourself. Respect yourself." He is reminded of athletes willing to suffer the agony of defeat for the thrill of victory. "The exultation of life itself. Finally, be yourself. Trust that whoever you are, you can achieve all the joys, satisfactions and wins you want." 