

The Zayres-Towers Connection

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After a slow, careful period of initial growth through the end of the 1950's, Zayre Corp., as it was now known, began to expand rapidly. Only six Zayre stores were in operation in 1959, the approximate year that Zayre's volume reached that of the Bell Shops/Nugents stores. By 1962, there were 27 Zayres open, with ten to twenty new ones added annually for many years afterward. That same year, Zayre Corp. became a public company. Headquarters remained in Natick, Massachusetts, moving later in the decade to nearby Framingham.



Zayre set its sights on a much larger market area than that of some Northeastern contemporaries, including Bradlees (owned by Stop & Shop, who would expand outside the Northeast much later on) and Two Guys (owned by Vornado, who would add some West Coast stores in the late 60's). Starting in 1960, the company embarked on a program to open stores in major markets all across the eastern half of the U.S., with a presence in nearly every state east of the Mississippi by the middle of the decade.



Wisely, they tended to open the stores in clusters, so as to maximize brand presence and advertising efficiency. By the end of 1966, Zayre had 92 stores total (not counting the specialty stores) with major concentrations in greater Chicago (9 stores), Miami (10 stores) and their home turf of Boston (13 stores). Medium-sized Zayre markets at the time included Washington DC (5 stores), Pittsburgh (4 stores) Atlanta, Cleveland and Columbus (3 stores each), Jacksonville, Tampa and Providence, R.I. (2 stores each).

Some of this growth came through acquisition. When **Toronto-based Towers Marts**, a chain with discount store locations from Ontario to Florida went bankrupt in 1963, Zayre picked up four of their Washington DC area locations – Silver Spring and Wheaton, Maryland and Falls Church and Alexandria, Virginia. Consumers Mart of America (CMA), a no-frills superstore chain with a smattering of locations around the country, was another early discounting casualty, and Zayre announced in March 1965 it would be taking over three Chicago locations (Ashland Ave., Oak Lawn and Palatine) and a couple of units in Florida. In December 1966, Zayre bought out Duluth, Minnesota-based Northern Enterprises, Inc., owner of four Shoppers City stores located in Duluth, St. Paul and Minneapolis. Interestingly (unlike previous acquisitions), Zayre retained the Shoppers City name for these stores.



In Zayre's early years, their product mix leaned heavily towards soft lines (mainly clothing) due to the Feldbergs wealth of experience in fashion, gained through years of operating the Bell Shops/Nugents stores. As the sixties progressed, Zayre's product offering resembled that of a more typical discount store, with toys, sporting goods, photographic, records, books, health and beauty products and much more added to the mix. A number of these departments were leased out to concessionaires during Zayre's first decade, including linens, greeting cards, candy and health and beauty items among others, totaling nearly a



third of Zayre's store revenues. In the mid-60's, Zayre bought out a good number of these firms, leaving only a handful of departments (accounting for only 12-13% of sales) as leased operations. Zayre was far from the only discounter to actively buy out their lessees at that time – Kmart, Vornado and several others did the same.

In describing Zayre's stores, a 1966 Barron's article put it succinctly – "The typical Zayre discount store is about 70,000 square feet and air-conditioned. All outlets are on well-traveled roads with ample parking space. While the stores are pleasant and neat, no attempt is made to create a high-fashion image". The company itself put a slightly more upscale spin on things in their advertising, which in my opinion was a cut above average discount house ads, even if the stores weren't necessarily so. For many years, the tagline "Fabulous Department Stores" appeared alongside the chain's name in their ads. Fabulous confidence at the very least!

The photos above are circa 1963. The locations are unknown save for the last two photos – the TV/Hi-Fi department is from the Monroeville, Pennsylvania store and the night exterior (depicting a free concert on the front sidewalk) is the Beverly, Massachusetts location.

