



# William Henry Belk: Merchant of the South

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## **William Henry Belk: Merchant of the South** LeGette Blythe

This is the story of a southern farm boy, reared in the dark days of Reconstruction, who became a pioneer of modern merchandising in the South and built a small country store into a huge mercantile group of over 350 establishments that now do a business of more than a hundred million dollars a year. William Henry Belk was a child of less than three when his father was killed, a victim of Sherman's raiders in the last months of the Civil War; at the age of fourteen he got his first job in a store in Monroe, North Carolina; and at the age of twenty-six he had started his own business, a business which was to spread from North Carolina to every state in the South. He witnessed, as he played a part in, the whole creation of the New South that has been built on the ashes of the Civil War.

At a time when the South was in the grip of dire poverty and a vicious credit system, Mr. Belk and his brother, Dr. John Belk, pioneered in such innovations as an all-cash business, clearly marked retail prices with no haggling at the counter, and the unquestioned refunding of the purchase price when the customer was not satisfied. They were also uniquely successful in creating a system in which the individual stores retained complete freedom, with managers who were part owners, while enjoying the benefits of mass purchasing. Much of this book is the story of how the Belk brothers trained young men -- many of them southern farm boys like the Belks -- to be merchants, set them up in stores under their direction, and helped them to spread the Belk way of doing business through the South. The result is that the Belk group of stores today is not a chain system, but rather a family of stores in which each store retains its individuality while the group as a whole works together for their common benefit.

*William Henry Belk* gives an unusual slant to the history of the South since the Civil War. It is a lively picture of the hard times of the seventies, the panic of 1893, southern life at the turn of the century, and the boom days of the twenties as they were seen by the clerk behind the counter or the buyer trying to get wares the public wanted. But most of all this book is the story of a man whose success was built on a religious faith that was as firm as it was simple, an unflinching zest for "trading and trafficking," and an unshakable belief through good times and bad, in the future of his country.

Originally published in 1958.

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