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Historic Champion Building Donated to Community Foundation

New Albuquerque (Downtown), the little town that grew up around Front Street (First Street) and the railroad tracks in the 1880s, was dotted with neighborhoods spread across the sand hills, with empty spaces in between. Each had its own character, sometimes as an ethnic enclave, and was usually served by its own grocery store and small businesses. Most such establishments are as gone as the Alvarado Hotel, but one stands intact, on the southeast corner of Seventh and Tijeras.

In 1904, Alessandro Matteucci and Pio Lommori built and opened Lommori and Matteucci Grocery and Meat Market. When Lommori left in 1907, Alessandro's brother, Amadeo, joined the firm, which was renamed Champion Grocery. Amadeo left in 1914, but Alessandro managed the store until he retired in 1938. Others continued to operate grocery stores in the building until the late 1950s.

Alessandro and his wife, Maria, lived in an elegant apartment above the store. By 1908, the store expanded eastward, with additional apartments upstairs. Although the Matteucci's moved to a house, the apartments continued as rentals until 2010.

Champion Grocery was very popular and did business in Spanish and English. Alessandro's daughter, Yolanda Matteucci, who married Paolo Marianetti of another transplanted family, said her father selected the site because it was so near Immaculate Conception Church at Sixth and Copper – and Italian women loved to shop and chat after mass. The business provided many jobs for friends and family in the close knit Italian-American community that helped settle early Albuquerque.

Luckily for ladies, Champion Grocery delivered – first in a horse-drawn wagon or on a bicycle, and later in a gasoline horse-powered truck. Because there were no refrigerators, housewives had to shop almost daily. They could call the market and expect fresh groceries to arrive in time to cook dinner. The store sold dry goods, produce, and meat. Wine was made and stored in the basement.

Paul and Patti Marianetti, descendants of the original owners, have generously given Champion Grocery to the Albuquerque Community Foundation, and it will become the organization's new headquarters. The cast stone building is on both the Albuquerque Historic Landmarks Survey and on the N.M. State Register of Cultural Properties because of its historical and cultural significance.

Champion Grocery is 106 years old. It symbolizes the courageous pioneer spirit of Italian immigrants to Albuquerque, who worked hard to establish themselves and become Americans while preserving their unique culture and traditions. It is a monument to our beginnings, and to the "Mom and Pop" operations that helped tiny new neighborhoods sustain themselves on a high and dusty desert. It is appropriate that it will now serve its second century as home to the Albuquerque Community Foundation.



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