Background on Roberts Jewelry

Roberts Jewelry was founded in Harlingen, Texas, in June 1922 by Roy Bertrum (R.B.) Roberts. It was located in the historic [1915] S. Lozano & Sons building at 123 W. Jackson from 1922 to 1961. R.B. Roberts promoted himself as “Optometrist and Watchmaker.” Watch and clock repair were the mainstay of the business. In those days, the store did not stock jewelry, but if a customer came in and wanted a ring or necklace, there were pamphlets on hand from which items could be ordered. Records from 1925 show that R.B. Roberts was active in the Harlingen Kiwanis Club, the first Kiwanis Club organized in the Rio Grande Valley.

After World War II, R.B.’s son, Bert Lund Roberts, got involved in the business, after working for a short time at Reynolds Jewelry in Mercedes. According to Bert’s stepson, Brett Nelson, R.B. handed him the bulk of the store’s “inheritance,” watches left by customers to be repaired, and said, “Here, if you can figure out how to fix these, then you’ve got a job.” Bert did, and the business later became his.

During Bert’s tenure, Roberts Jewelry grew and expanded. Bert realized they could make more money if they had jewelry in stock. He began to carry the Krementz line of good-quality, costume jewelry and Bulova watches and clocks. Bert also parlayed his wartime experience with timing and navigational equipment into a long-standing relationship with Southern Pacific and Union Pacific, both of which had division offices in Harlingen. For many years, the rail lines contracted with Roberts Jewelry to inspect and synchronize the clocks, pocket watches, and wristwatches used by their workers.

In addition to his role as a respected clock and watch repairman, Bert L. Roberts was very involved in civic affairs. He was one of a group that established the International Association of Lion’s Clubs, was very active in the Harlingen Elks Lodge, and in the Harlingen Businessman’s Association, a division of the Harlingen Chamber of Commerce. He also was active in the Downtown Merchants Association. On September 1, 1961, Bert moved Roberts Jewelry to 119 S. Second Street.

The year 1978 marked another milestone for Roberts Jewelry. On April 1 of that year, the store moved to its present location at 216 E. Jackson. Bert also began thinking of retirement and advertised the store for sale in the national trade publication, Modern Jeweler. “Jewelry Store with all services, established in 1922,” the ad read, “Continuous growth, clean inventory, gross $150,000.” Keeping all his options open, he also urged his stepson, Brett, to get trained in jewelry repair, so that he could take over the business. Whether Bert got any offers on the business is unknown, but Brett successfully completed his studies and received a certificate in Jewelry Repair from Paris [Texas] Junior College in October 1978. He began taking over the family business soon after. Transfer of the business from Bert to Brett was completed on January 25, 1989.

Roberts Jewelry has a long history of donating products and services to the community, including support of events and activities benefiting the Muscular Dystrophy Association, American Heart Association, United Way, Harlingen Boys & Girls Clubs, Harlingen Humane
Society, Gladys Porter Zoo, Gulf Coast Conservation Association, Algodon Club, Harlingen
Elks Lodge, and Rio Grande Valley Museum. The business has contributed to numerous
fundraising efforts undertaken by school groups and students and to scholarship funds organized
by the Catholic Daughters of America, Beta Sigma Phi, Harlingen Rotary Club, and Harlingen
Sunburst Rotary Club, among others. Roberts Jewelry has also been a strong participant in the
Harlingen Downtown Improvement District, which has been an active Texas Main Street
Program since 1989. Their participation and leadership has been key to many successful
cooperative promotions of the downtown historic district.

Roberts Jewelry has a strong reputation for quality products and services and is highly respected
by lawyers, bankers, and insurance agents that handle appraisals and settle estates. In 1991,
Brett completed seven years of correspondence courses with the Gemological Institute of
America, and received a diploma distinguishing him as a Graduate Gemologist. Even now, in
2007, Brett is one of very few certified gemologists in South Texas, an accomplishment that
distinguishes Roberts from other jewelry stores. For generations, families have trusted Roberts
with repair of fine watches and jewelry.

At one time, there were about ten jewelry stores in downtown Harlingen. Only two family-
owned jewelry stores, Roberts (established in 1922) and Alexandre’s (established in 1958) have
survived. Cindy Nelson, Brett’s wife, recalls that when others were abandoning downtown and
moving their businesses to the Mall, Bert Roberts urged them not to do so. While almost all of
the stores that moved to the Mall have since closed, Roberts Jewelry, which remained
downtown, committed to serving the public in one central location, still survives and thrives, 85
years since its founding just two blocks away.