The Sun Valley Shopping Center of Harlingen is said to have been the first of its type constructed in the Valley, according to realtor Gloria Golden. In a period of two decades it rose to prominence only to be succeeded by the new and larger Valley Vista Mall on Harlingen's west side. Following is its history.

3/16/60  Plans are revealed for a shopping center on a 22 acre block on the southwest corner of 13th and Austin Streets. The area is owned by Wilder D. Davis and A (Agustus). B. Demic who will sell the property later to be named Sun Valley Mall. Wilder and his wife Georgia have farmed part of the area and their home is in its northeast corner. Also living with them is his father Wilder D. “Dave” Davis and his wife Nola. Davis' daughter June would go on to be an actress and promote and direct local theatrical productions. In late June 1961 Roy L. Martin and Associates reveal plans for the 25-30 store complex, now said to be on a 27 acre tract. In August the $4.5 million shopping center is approved with its planned 1,600 car parking. The Davis family will move their houses including a garage apartment to the corner of 13th and Carrol. In the southeast corner of the property, where later a 10-screen cinema will arise, is the home of Gus and Lottie Demic. Upon their marriage in 1922 it was given to them as a wedding gift by Gus’s father. Daughter Margery Demic Biggerstaff was born in the house in 1924. The 1962 address along 13th Street for the Demics is listed as 909. In 1966 Gus is listed in the telephone book as being retired. He was a partner in the Farmer's Gin Company. His address is now 809 13th Street.

1963  The first store to open at the new commercial site was Val-U-Mart at 901 13th Street, the north end. It was constructed as a standalone entity and would not be connected with the central pedestrian way that would be featured as the center expanded.

1968  Woolco, the subsidiary of Woolworth Company, opens a large store on the south end of Sun Valley Mall. It has 89,248 Sq. ft. It, along with J.C. Penney, will be one of the mall's anchor tenants among twelve retailers. Woolco is an attempt by the company to upscale its merchandise. When the company fails to keep abreast of its aggressive competition, its directors vote to dissolve the company rather than make huge expenditures and possibly go into bankruptcy. The Harlingen store and others across the country close at the end of the fiscal year, January 31, 1983.

9/28/68  Penney announces it will open a store with 56,680 sq. ft. on its first floor and with 20,560 sq. ft. for its own use as a half second floor. In addition it will have a free-stading auto center with 6,786 sq. ft.

The city's numbering system for the area bordered by the shopping center was not uniform, for some center stores have even numbers and some odd. Some enterprises across the street were confusingly listed in some telephone directories as being in the Sun Valley Shopping Center.
The center was slow to have tenants as the economy of Harlingen was only slowly rebuilding after the departure of the military air base in 1962. In 1970 Woolco anchored the center on its south side at 701. Other businesses there this year were The Man's Shop at 715 and Val-U-Mart at 901 on the north end. They were joined the following year by a medium-sized separate building at 909. This was the pharmacy operated by the Medico Discount Drug Centers. By 1972 a second anchor store, J. C. Penny Co., had moved in at 821. Beall's Department Store was at 809. Val-U-Mart had changed its name to Val-U-Mart Discount Center. Smaller businesses were Lairsen's Style Shop at 801 and Saybrook Fabrics 815. The Singer (sewing machine) Company was in 719.

By 1980 Shipley Donuts had opened a modest store adjacent to Woolco on its south side. Terry Faris, a small department store chain that had got its start in South Texas had been added at 711. A similar store with a variety of goods had also entered the center. This was T G & Y. Smaller entities there this year were Vee Store, Inc. at 815, and Village Casuals, Inc. at 817. Scurlock's Super Market had replaced Val-U-Mart in about 1977.

By 1981 The Emporium had opened adjacent to the Man's Shop at 715. At 901 was the Green Stamps Redemption Center. In 1982 at 701 Styco Shoes operated a store and Godfathers Pizza had set up shop in 913. Jerry's Zenith and Appliance was to move into 801 by 1984.

The Woolworth Company closed its Woolco stores by 1983 after making its announcement on 9/25/82 that it would close all of its 336 stores. By the next year Beall's Clearance Center was able to occupy its Woolco's former site. 1985 was when Agape TV Media moved into 715 and Pam's at 815. Caravana Fashions came into the mall the next year, but the pizza parlor was gone.

By August 1983 some major stores were making the move into the new and larger Valley Vista Mall. Now with the loss of Woolco, J. C. Penny and Beall's the Sun Valley Shopping Center lost much of its appeal and commenced leasing to minor retail firms with little stability. A Church's Chicken outlet was established as a stand-alone structure towards the north end of the parking lot along 13th Street.

In recent years it housed a senior daycare center and some government offices. A Big Lots and a Family Dollar Store on the north end did bring some renewed retail traffic by 2000. The 99 Cent Store on the south side of the complex and the Thrift Store on the north side were late additions in 2008. Both had sizeable floor space.

Cinemark's Harlingen Movies 10 at the Sun Valley Mall opened in September 1992. The multi-screen theater was established at the south end of the shopping center. After 1999 it would feature less popular or second run features. This would take place after Cinemark opened its modern multi-screen complex on 77/83 Frontage near the Valley Vista Mall.

Sun Valley Mall blogs
Norman Rozeff wrote a very interesting piece about the history of Sun Valley Mall.

Sun Valley Mall is currently owned by Spigel Properties, which I believe is based in San Antonio. Current tenant mix includes Family Dollar, Texas Thrift Store, Fallas Paredes, 99¢ Only Store, Movies 10 (Cinemark), and social/government service offices. Big Lots used to occupy a large space in the mall, but has very recently moved to Valle Vista Mall. The parking lot is worn and full of potholes, and the exterior of the mall has been painted some rather gaudy orange and yellow tones. The interior is dead - save a few gla$$ doors to enter offices. I'm hoping that in the next few years, the city of Harlingen - or a developer - purchases the property and converts it into something useful.

Awesome!

I have fond memories of Sun Valley Mall as a kid. I was actually pretty young, but it was a cool mall for a long time.

I remember Orange Julius, Godfather's Pizza, Bealls (of course) and all that horrible (wonderful!) 80s decor. I would've loved to see a redevelopment of Sun Valley somewhat similar to the mall on South Lamar in Austin. It used to remind me a lot of SV, now they have a Central Market, Borders and a bunch of boutique shops.

-Mike E. Perez
http://anewharlingen.wordpress.com