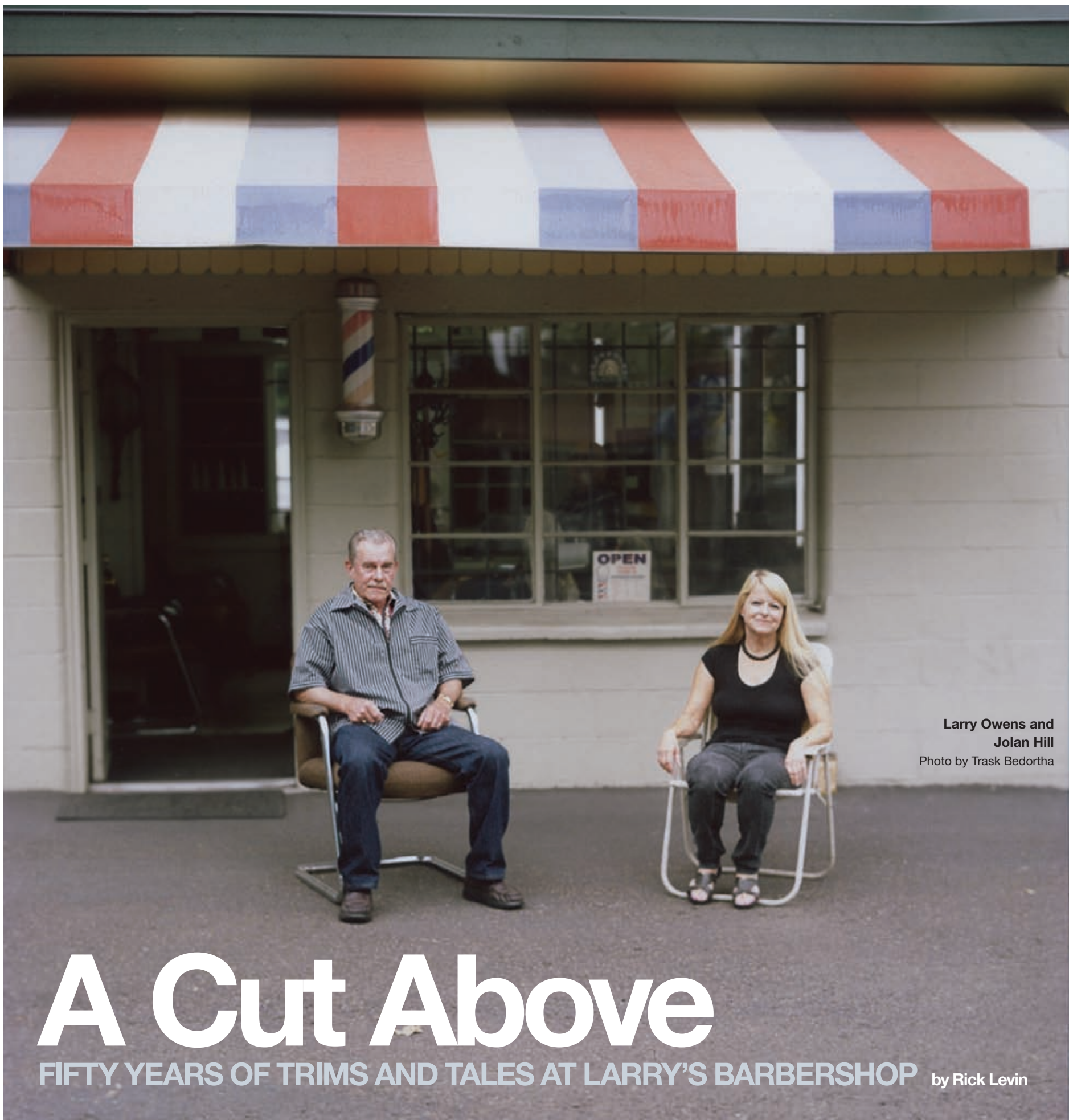




Larry Owens and
Jolan Hill
Photo by Trask Bedortha

A Cut Above

FIFTY YEARS OF TRIMS AND TALES AT LARRY'S BARBERSHOP by Rick Levin

Walking through the open door of Larry's Barber Shop is like stepping into the vortex of a time machine that only moves in one direction. Antique doo-dads, vintage signs and old photos line the walls and shelves: tools of the trade long out of use, such as hand-powered squeeze clippers dating to the late 1800s, a restored Bristow's clock, and an actual *ka-ching* wooden cash register that looks like a prop from a Preston Sturges movie. The two barber chairs are things of beauty — hand-cranked, swiveling, hinged contraptions of vinyl and steel that look better put together than most cars these days.

The building is little more than a bunker. Sitting recessed at the back of the lot on 13th Avenue between Olive and Willamette, it's small, squat and undistinguished as a block of government cheese. The walls are stacked brick, painted a blanch olive drab, and the big plate windows are barred on the inside. A desert of asphalt surrounds it. The place once housed the offices of a used car lot.

Viewed from the street, the only things hinting at what's inside are a pole on the sidewalk, standing some 15 feet high and decorated top to bottom with those symbolic swirls of red, white and blue — though, needless to say, the days of bloodlettings and leeches and molar extractions are long gone — and a sandwich board propped on the grassy easement that reads: "Men * Womens Hair Cuts \$11," and under that, "Seniors \$10."

Larry is Larry Owens, and though he's hardly an antique himself, you might properly call him vintage, an old-fashioned barber from the days before hair was mastered and cuts went super. His shop is a piece of living history, a functional museum and a testament to hard work and craft.

In 1959, Owens became the youngest licensed barber in the state of Oregon. He was 17. Now 70, Owens has been cutting hair that whole time, mostly in Eugene. He says that at this point in his career, "I've probably cut some of 'em's hair close to 50 years. I cut their hair when they were young, and then their sons' hair, and then their grandsons' hair."

Owens has a memory like a steel trap. He doesn't just recall dates from decades ago; he remembers exact days. Most of his customers, if not damn near every one, are greeted by first name.

The men who get their hair cut at Larry's are typically of a generation for whom the barbershop was a regular stop, part of a weekly or bi-weekly routine that was as much social as it was hygienic. Back in the day, a haircut was not a personal statement of style; it was maintenance. You knew your barber, and he knew you and your hair because he'd cut it just a few weeks ago. You didn't tell him you wanted it "short on the sides, natural in back, with sideburns, and leave a bit on top and in the bangs." You simply asked him to "clean it up." Or you didn't mention your hair at all. You sat down and your barber turned on the clippers and went at it.

Early last week, for instance, when Everett Blais walked into Owens' shop for a trim, you might have thought the two men were brothers-in-law. "Hello, Easy Money," Blais