

Next I ask him who's the most famous person he's ever had in the barber chair. "Probably you," he says with a sly smile.

"When I first came to Eugene I was the young kid on the block," Owens says. "Now I'm one of the old codgers." His first shop, opened in 1960, was on Willamette between 6th and 7th avenues. In 1972, he relocated to a place across from the old Eugene Post Office downtown. He's been at the current shop since 1995.

Hair Style

During all the years he's been wielding the clippers, Owens says he's seen hairstyles come "full circle," from crew cuts to longer hair and back to regular cuts. "Flat tops are back," he says. Owens quit doing shaves about 10 years ago, though he still has his straight razor, and the strop he used to sharpen it continues to hang from his barber chair, a relic of the days before HIV.

One of the things keeping Owens in business through all the economic ups-and-downs and changing fashion trends is a generous, *laissez-fair* attitude toward his customer base. During the '60s, for instance, when hippies turned *au naturel* into a way of life, Owens didn't shy away from letting the longhairs take a seat.

"There were a lot of barbers that went out of business in

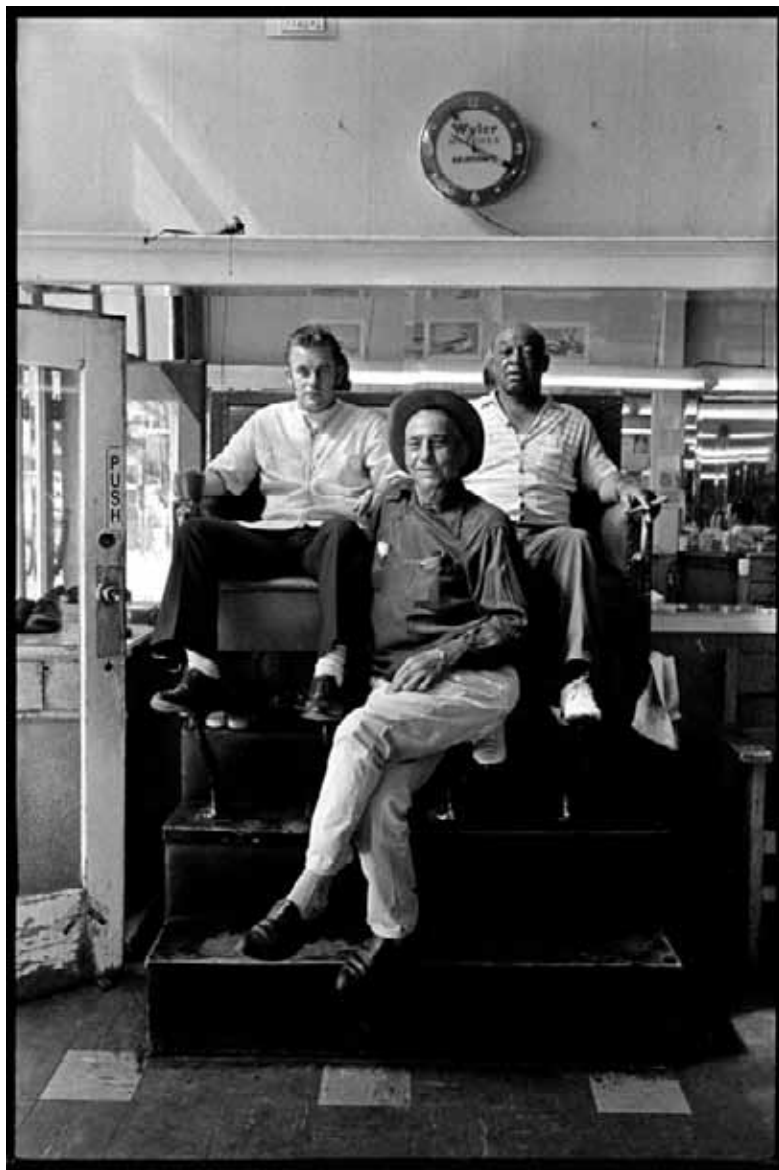


Above: (Clockwise from top left) Larry Owens, Leo Washington and "Garlic" George Stevens at Owens' first barbershop on Willamette, which he held from 1960-1972

Photo by John Bauguess

Below: Larry Owens gives Rich Schwartz a trim

Photo by Todd Cooper



calls out as he strolled through the door. Owens smiles and asks him how he'd been.

"Oh, I'm getting old," Blais says, giving me a wink. As he takes his seat in the barber's chair, Blais tells me he's lived his entire life, all 95 years of it, right here in Eugene. "And my damn hair keeps growing," he says, laughing.

As Owens goes to work on Blais' hair, the two men keep up a constant patter, a back and forth full of humor and gentle ribbing. "I'm one of his agitators," Blais says to me while Owens, busy with the clippers, grins. "I rile him up."

They start telling stories about bad hair days of years past, such as the time Blais and his father took turns trimming each other's hair with these new electric clipper that his dad had just bought. When Blais returned home with his new haircut, his wife, horrified, asked her husband what happened. "Well, I guess something didn't work out too good," he recalls, chuckling.

That story reminds Owens of the "trim comb," a new-fangled device that came out in the '70s, which was basically a comb with shears built right into the teeth. "That razor blade cut anything that stuck out," Blais says. "It worked great if you didn't use it."

Owens smiles. "Those trim combs was the best invention that barbers ever had," he says, recalling the dozens of customers who came into the shop needing their botched haircuts fixed. This then leads Owens and Blais into a recollection of a barber they knew back in the day and the near-heroic amount of coffee he used to consume. Blais begins to crack up.

"You could hear it sloshing around in his stomach when he moved," he says, his eyes watering. He guesses it was all that coffee that eventually did him in.

"It wasn't the coffee that killed him," Owens says. "It was the stuff they sold in the tavern."

Hair Stories

Since the time of Aristotle, the village barbershop has been central to the social and political life of society. This is where the real news gets relayed: insider gossip about who's been drinking too much lately, where the mayor ate last Tuesday, hot fishing spots, cold snaps, construction projects, the cost of gas, marriage, divorce and taxes, the

red lipstick on the collar, the quarterback's sprained pinkie finger. The barbershop is where folks congregate to wag their tongues while they get their ears lowered. Offer opinions. Make predictions. Tell tales.

"You get some pretty wild stories, all right," Owens says. "Most of 'em I don't want to repeat." He says the most popular topics of conversation are the weather, current events, hunting and fishing (he's an avid sportsman), and sports — especially all things Ducks. During football season, the prospects and fortunes of the UO squad provide a running commentary, and every customer bidding farewell gives a "Go Ducks" that is returned by all.

"You hear all different viewpoints on all different subjects," Owens says, though he himself avoids the world's two greatest goads to argument. "I had what I felt was a very wise teacher," Owens says of an instructor he encountered during his years of apprenticeship. "There are two topics, if you're smart, you won't get involved in — politics and religion," he explains of a personal rule he's followed for more than a half century of hair cutting. "Those two subjects I stayed away from, and I still do." When it comes to customers and politics, "I listen, they talk."

Owens speaks with the slow, deliberate cadence and drawling hard vowels of a lifelong Oregonian, though until the age of seven he lived in the small town of Heavener, Oklahoma ("spelled like the place, but with an 'e' and an 'r,'" he tells me). Now he considers himself an O.I.O., or "Oregon Improved Okie." Owens grew up in Riddle, where he graduated high school on Thursday, May 28, 1959; the following Monday he was enrolled at Moler Barber College in Portland. He received his apprentice license 10 days before his eighteenth birthday, and he's been a working barber ever since.

Think of it: Larry Owens has been cutting hair in Eugene for more than 50 years. That's enough follicular DNA to repopulate a mid-sized city. How many pillows could you fill with the collected clippings Owens has swept from the floor? Could all those strands, knotted end to end, circle the globe? How many times?

"I have no idea," Owens replies when I ask him to guess the number of haircuts he's given at this point. If you figure, conservatively, that he serves an average of five customers a day, multiplied by 52 five-day workweeks over 50 years, you've got 650,000 haircuts.