

those times because they refused to do the long haircuts,” he says. “Ourselves, we just tried to do whatever the customer wanted. Anyone’s welcome, and it’s first come, first serve. Any day that we’re open, we’re open to anyone that wants to come in.”

There is no arrogance or liberal preening about Owens’ tone; you can tell that, for him, any form of discrimination simply runs counter to good common sense. “You treat others how you’d like to be treated and you get along pretty well in this world, for the most part,” he says.

## Half-Assed Psychology

Owens is just a really nice guy, and his nice is the opposite of used car salesman nice: He is genuinely kind and agreeable instead of obsequious and ingratiating. Though not opposed to starting up a conversation, more often he’s a listener, interjecting a word or two to spur the monologue. Owens claims there’s nothing all that tough about his job, though he says that along with knowing how to cut hair, “you’ve got to be a half-assed psychologist, too.”

Not to mention ready for emergencies, such as when the electricity suddenly went out during the Columbus Day storm of 1962. At that moment Owens had a gentleman from Cottage Grove in the chair. “I told him I could do one

of two things,” he recalls, which involved either having the guy return when the power was back, or letting the barber finish now with a pair of manual squeeze clippers from the 1890s. I ask Owens how he did with the old clippers. “I tried,” he says with a grin.

Another time, there was an elderly customer who’d just had surgery and, despite his wife’s protest, insisted on getting a haircut. “While he was in the chair he passed out,” Owens recalls. He dialed 911 right away, and as Owens waited for the EMTs he administered cold towels and made sure the guy kept breathing. The man lived.

But nothing beats the stories about Fred, the one-eyed dry cleaner. Owens used to stay open Saturdays when he owned the shop by the post office, and every couple of weeks Fred was in the habit of getting liquored up early and then dropping by for a trim and a shave.

Well, this one time, Fred stumbles in particularly drunk, and when it came his turn he plopped down in the barber chair. Owens finished up with his hair and then, removing Fred’s glasses, lathered up the dry cleaner’s face for a pass with the straight razor. When he was through, he told Fred to sit back while he put his glasses back on.

Standing behind the chair and in full view of the rest of the customers, Owens took Fred’s glasses and applied a thick coat of shaving cream to the lens for Fred’s one good

eye. He slipped them on. “Okay, Fred,” he said. “There you go.” The man sat up in the chair, froze a moment, and then started shouting: “I’m blind! Good Lord, I’m blind!”

Everyone in the shop busted out laughing. Finally Owens removed Fred’s glasses and wiped them clean. “God damn it, Larry,” Fred said, shaking his head, “you got me good.”

Some years later, Owens recollects, Fred — who wasn’t lacking in physical girth — went to make a call in the phone booth that used to stand near the steps of the post office. Right in the middle of the call, Fred dropped dead, and his body got wedged into the tiny space. “He was a good sized guy,” Owens says, “and they had a heck of a time trying to get him out of that phone booth.” If memory serves, he said, they eventually had to disassemble the booth in order to get Fred out.

Needless to say, that telephone booth is now only a figment of the past. In fact, you’d be hard pressed these days to find a telephone booth anywhere — they’ve gone the way soda fountains, voting booths and highway cafes, relegated to the dustbin of our collective cultural history. We are not necessarily better off for such losses, which put the squeeze on what was once called social space — the places we gather in person to talk, catch up, hear the latest gossip.

And get our hair cut. ■

