

In Oklahoma City in 1930, the stockyards area of the Oklahoma capital was a unique place. It was an area that the industrial revolution had almost passed by. Cowboys still rode horses down the street, it was not uncommon to see horse-drawn wagons, and principal inhabitants were cowmen and others who made their living from the various aspects of livestock. The area even had its own name — "Packing Town" — so

They Do It All For Cowboys

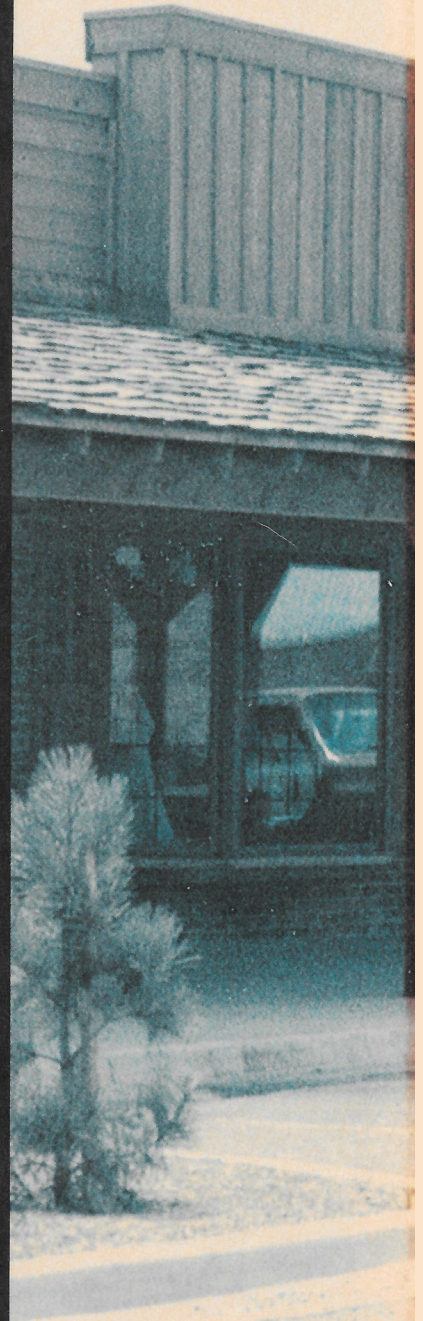
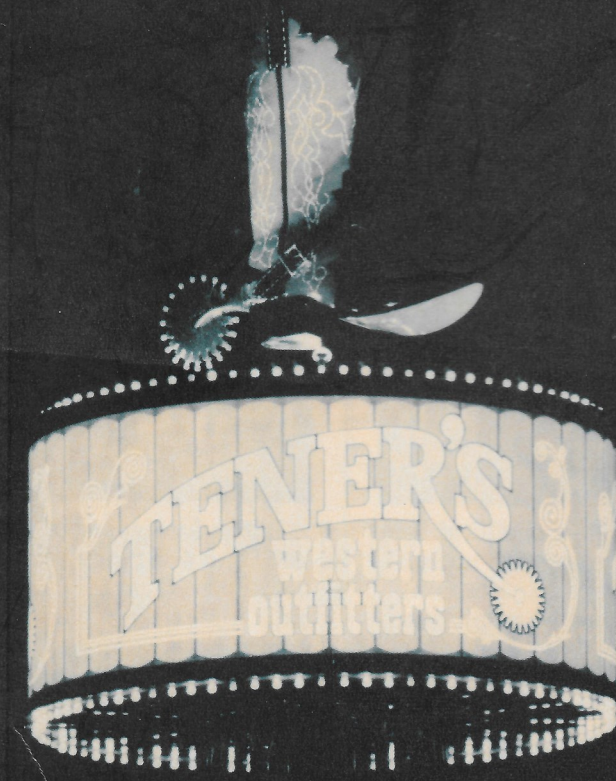
by Jim Jennings

called because of the many packing plants that flourished there.

That was the situation when Ray Tener opened his dry goods store in the area, down on Exchange Avenue, and his customers were those who lived and worked in Packing Town.

"It was that way for the next 48 years," said Jack Gordy, Tener's son-in-law and current president of the company. "For as long as we stayed in the stockyards area, the men who worked down there, and their families, were our primary customers."

When Tener opened his



store, it was strictly a dry goods or "men's furnishings" store, but a short time later he added a cleaning business. This, however, didn't work out, as Tener explained. "We kept the cleaning business for six or seven years, maybe more, but as time went on, I could see that we weren't doing too well. I had four or five people who devoted most of their time to that end of the business, and I finally discovered that it was taking 70 percent of the help to do 20 percent of the business."

So Tener went out of the cleaning business. He did, however, keep the old press, and used it in his store to steam and crease hats.

Tener says he sold

what they called men's furnishings in his early-day store on Exchange, and continued to do so when he moved around the corner to Agnew Street a short time later. But that store of the 1930s was the forerunner of the western store of today, simply on the basis of his customers — the packing house employees, and the farmers and ranchers.

"There was no such thing as a 'western store' back then," Tener said, "but our stock was pretty well what you would call western today. We carried boots and Levi's and hats, along with our other merchandise."

Tener said that back in the '30s almost no one worked in cowboy boots, but instead wore oxfords, lace shoes or an oil-

treated, thick-leather boot that was good to wear while wading through the manure in the stockyards. "Everyone thought it was too hot to wear boots," he said. "Back then there was no air conditioning in any of the offices, the stores or the cars. I attribute year-round boot sales to air conditioning. In the summer time, we just didn't sell many boots."

"We did stock boots, though," he continued, "almost from the beginning. The first ones were made by a company called Starnes, and they probably sold for \$15 a pair. They were good boots, not fancy, just good solid boots. Then maybe a year or two later we started handling some Justins."

These were shelf boots,

ready-made, but one of the top lines during those years was probably made by a company called Hyer, which was strictly a made-to-measure organization.

"Yes, everyone had to order their Hyer boots directly from the factory," Tener said. "They had a salesman who traveled all over the country, making the high spots, and he took orders for their boots. He would come to the stockyards two or three times a year."

"Well, right after the war was over, Hyer decided they wanted to stock some boots in our store, have 'em already made up, and I jumped at the chance. We were the first store in the country to stock Hyer boots."

As mentioned before, Tener stocked Levi's in his store, but surprisingly, that wasn't the best-selling pant.

"We had a few Levi's," he said, "but they didn't



The black and white photo on the opposite page is of the store when it was located on Agnew Street near the stockyards. It is definitely different from today's store with its western motif.

sell anything like khaki pants. Khaki pants sold for \$2.35, and Levi's for \$1.95, and we would sell 10 times more khaki pants than we would Levi's.

"And in the summer we sold those stockyard boys seersucker pants," he continued. "They were good and they were cheap — sold for \$1.65 a pair. Used to, at the beginning of summer, I would go down to the yards and spend hours taking orders for seersucker pants. The reason for that was that I didn't have much money to invest in them, and if you could get them sold before you bought them, you were way ahead of the game. Some of those boys would buy as many as four pair."

Tener retired from running the store in 1971, when the business was incorporated, and his son-in-law Gordy took over. However, at 78 years of age, he still comes to the store every day. Tener said, "Jack's been good to me. He allows me to work two, three or four hours a day, and he pays me a lot more than I'm worth. And I have a good doctor — who I'm going to keep — who says to not work more than three hours a day, and to select the least busy time to do it. That's what I'm doing."

Jack Gordy first started working at Tener's Western Wear, which is what it was called at that time, in 1964, as a junior in high school. He was dating Tener's daughter, and started out at the store by sweeping the floor.

Gordy said, "That first year I swept the floors, stocked and waited on a few people, and I just fell in love with what I was doing. I think every kid who's growing up dreams of being a cowboy. I was

born in the city, but when I went to work out there it was kind of like a dream come true. I was almost a cowboy."

Gordy continued to work for Tener during the summers and on weekends, and finally was taken on fulltime in 1968. He married Katie Tener in 1969, and when the store was incorporated in 1971, Jack and Katie bought the majority of the stock.

"At that time we were still out on Agnew," Gordy said, "and our clientele had never really changed from back in the 30's. We did most of our advertising in the farm and rodeo magazines, and in the stockyards paper, and the base of our customers was the genuine cowboy, the ranch hand, the packing-plant employee and the truck driver."

During the next few years, Gordy was to do a lot of thinking about the store and its future in the stockyards. He said, "I decided we were in a situation down there to

where we really needed to move. We were as big as we could physically get, and we had merchandise overflowing. We were having a lot of trouble getting the customers we wanted in the store because of its location. It's a lot better place down there now than it was, but we couldn't get women customers to come to our store much at all because of where it was, and for the same reason we couldn't stay open late at night. Also, there wasn't much horse business down there, and we were not drawing much from the other parts of the city.

"Now, we were a very good store in the stockyards," he continued, "and we made some money, but it was really just a living. We didn't own our building — the guy who was making all the money was our landlord. He actually made more profit than we did.

The slogan on the barrel has become the byword at Tener's.

Gordy continued, "I spent two years studying the market and market changes, and trying to decide what we were going to do. I studied industry trends, not only in western wear, but also in the horse and cattle business, and I knew that, according to all I had read, the era of the big stockyards was over. Country sales had started gaining in popularity, and people were shipping their cattle direct to the feedyard from their ranch



Jack Gordy and Ray Tener look over one of the hundreds of pairs of boots on shelves in the store.

or farm, and bypassing the stockyards.

"Also, those who did ship their cattle to town were consigning them to some trucker, whereas before it had been kind of a ritual that the whole family would come. That told me that maybe we needed to be in a place where more people congregated."

So Gordy began to look, and while driving around through the city, he found himself being drawn more and more to the area where Reno Street intersected with Meridian.

He said, "Those corners, at that time, had six major motels, and they had more agricultural business than the stock-

yards had. There were horse shows and meetings, cattle shows and meetings, farm implement meetings — everything. It all ended up on those corners because of the availability of rooms, and the area's proximity to the fairgrounds.

"We finally found some land we liked," he said, "but the price was just unbelievable. It was like \$3 a square foot, and I thought \$1,000 an acre was high. We did one heck of a selling job to the bank to convince them to loan us the money, and I think they went out on a limb. But we had a very proven track record, and they decided to loan us enough money to buy one acre."

Gordy located the new store on Reno, just west of Meridian. The year was 1978. They built an 11,000-square-foot store, but the following year he purchased an adjoining acre and added 8,500 more square feet of building. Then the next year he added another 8,800 square feet. He said, "We have been out here two years and expanded twice. We now have 28,000 square feet on two acres."

The store has changed considerably since those days in the stockyards, although Gordy stresses that it is still the same store. It is now called Tener's Western Outfitters, and sales include jewelry and tack, as well as clothing, hats and boots.

Gordy said, "When we first sat down and thought about it, we figured we might lose three out of 10 of our old customers, but I don't think we lost one out of 10. I know we lost some, and there are some who are mad at us, saying we are not the same store. But you can't make everyone happy, and we are trying to be the same kind of store. We're bigger than we were, and sometimes you can't give quite the service that you could when we had five employees and I watched every sale to make sure every customer was treated correctly. But we strive for that, and we're working on it."

Tener's is a cosponsor of the AQHA World Championship Quarter Horse Show. They joined the show in 1979, giving a \$2,000 shopping spree that first year, and last year became a cosponsor, along with U.S. Tobacco's products Copenhagen and Skoal. Each company donates \$500 per class to the show, and this year

there are 62 scheduled classes. Tener's has also continued the presentation of the shopping spree, but has increased it to \$3,000.

They are active in other areas, too. They are involved with some other breeds of livestock, both horses and cattle; they are paying the entry fees for all the cowboys and cowgirls at this year's National Finals Rodeo, and they are a sponsor of the Miss Rodeo America Pageant. Gordy said, "All of that takes a lot of money, but it's pretty well paying our dues in the areas where we need to pay them. We're trying to give back to the horse industry some of what they have given to us."

These promotional efforts follow the slogan Gordy adopted about five years ago: "At Tener's, We Do It All For Cowboys." "That really coins what we're trying to do," he said. "That really says everything about us."

Tener's Western Outfitters, in one form or another, is now in its 51st year, and neither Gordy nor Ray Tener sees any end in sight. As a matter of fact, Gordy says he plans on going on television when he's 80, saying, "At Tener's we do it all for cowboys." He was in love with the store that first summer back in 1964, and his feelings haven't changed. He said, "Ever since that first time I walked in the store, I really knew what direction I wanted my life to take. I feel very happy Mr. Tener let me have the opportunity to be what I am, and do what I'm doing, and hopefully, maybe I can make the thing stand up and be here long enough to where my kids and grandkids might be able to enjoy the same type of thing I've had." □



In an attempt to "do it all for cowboys," Gordy has developed a very extensive stock of hats and tack.