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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Barber Looks Back Over Half Century

By NEIL A. MATHESON

BARBERING has undergone great changes in the last half century. I talked to Ollie S. Harper, a man who knows for he started barbering with Riggs and Berrigan in 1921 and retired a year or so ago from his own shop, perhaps 50 yards, or less, away on Queen Street.

Some individual shops were bigger in those days – there were six chairs in Riggs and Berrigan's shop for example.

But there were fewer shops. There was Tyce Reardon's shop under the Hughes Drug Store building, Ernie Riggs was in the John T. MacKenzie building on Queen. Albert Wilson was on Kent Street, in the area where Cudmore's Dry Cleaners are now. It was close to the North American Hotel which older residents will recall.

Bert Cantwell had a shop on Kent, close to Queen. There was another barber in the shop and shoe-shine parlor run by Fred Lambros on the corner of Kent and Great George, as it was known then.

Milton Bell had a shop on Great George Street – later founder of what we know now as Milton's Old Spain, Mr. Bell had learned his barbering at the Bert Cantwell shop, Mr. Harper tells me. Mr. Bell's shop was next to the Stanley, Shaw and Peardon building, now occupied by Lord's Drug Store.

Jack Riggs had a shop where the Capital Theatre is now. Down Grafton Street a bit, a Mr. Worth had a shop. George Hooper had a barber shop close to where the Fashion Shoppe is now on University Avenue.

Charlie and Art Worth were located in the area where Old Spain is now. Jack Cameron was down the street a bit, next to where the A Herne and Company garage was then.

Work Hours Were Long

BARBER SHOPS opened at eight in the morning and closed at eight at night, every day but Saturday. On Saturday they didn't close until 11:30, "and you would be lucky to get out of the shop at midnight," Ollie recalled.

The drunks started coming about 11 o'clock, they always left it to the last and the barber shop was the favorite place to go at that hour. You would have to shave them, even though it was past closing time, once they had entered the shop.

They presented various problems, most of them difficult.

One night Ollie had cut a drunk's hair, but he could not awaken the man who had gone sound asleep in the chair. "I tried everything, but it was no use", Ollie told me.

Minard's Woke Him Up Fast

FINALLY ANOTHER man said "I'll get the SOB awake." Somehow he had a bottle of Minard's liniment. The stuff is terribly strong when you shake the bottle violently then

suddenly uncork it. The chap did just that and shoved the bottle under the drink's nose, just as he was drawing an inward breath.

The drunk was out of the chair and into the middle of the floor in what appeared to be one leap. He was out through the door and up the street in the next moment and "just disappeared". That was "one haircut the shop never got paid for, we never saw him again," Ollie told me.

Shaving was one of the main barber services when Ollie started in 1921, and long afterwards. Most businessmen came in for shaves. You would start shaves when you opened and it would usually be 10 o'clock before you were through. A shave cost 15 cents then, a hair cut was 35. Contrast that with today when a shave is one dollar and a haircut is \$1.75 – the prices Ollie quoted.

Those Charges Piled Up

THERE WERE other charges, though, and thereby hangs a tale.

Ollie tells it like this:

"A man from the North Side came in one day. He was a rum runner and he had been taking some of his own medicine. The man was fairly drunk. He asked for a shave, then for a haircut, then a shampoo, then a facial, he took everything the shop had to offer – of course the barber kept asking him if he wanted the additional things, and the man kept saying 'yes'."

When the man finally climbed out of the chair, he asked "How much is that?"

I think the total bill came to about \$2.50, Ollie told me, and the man looked the barber straight in the eye and asked:

"Where do you expect to go when you die?"

Some of the extra charges would be 15 cents for a hair tonic, 35 cents for a shampoo, 35 cents for a facial massage. There would probably be a head rub and other things which Ollie did not include in his shortened price list.

Few shaves are given now. Bill Morrell who now owns the Queen Street shop Ollie sold to him, on his own retirement, told me they don't encourage shaves. It's not worth it. You lose money on shaves, he said.

No Electric Clippers Then

I ASKED OLLIE about it and he explains it like this:

A shave costs \$1.00 and few men can afford to pay \$6.00 a week for shaves – a shave each of the six week days. In addition, Mr. Harper told me, a barber gets \$1.75 for a haircut, and you can cut a man's hair as fast as you can shave him. Indeed a man known as a "tough shave" takes longer to shave than it does to cut a man's hair.

There were no electric clippers when Ollie started his career. There were hand-operated clippers, before the electric ones became available, but "about two out of every five customers would not let you use them. You had to do it with the scissors and comb."

Long Hair On Men Not New

THEY TALK about those fellows with the long hair, but that's not new, Ollie observed.

"The long hair is the same as it was years ago. Before my time as a barber, there was long hair, and there were whiskers. All you have to do is go back and look at pictures of some of the Cricket playing teams that used to play cricket out in Victoria Park. They were only young men but they looked much older. They had this great big beard on, and they had long hair", Mr. Harper recalls. It wasn't so long as it is now, but it was long hair, he added.

There's nothing new about long hair and long whiskers, he said. "All you have to do is go back and look at some of the old pictures.

"We thought many of these men were old men, but take a walk through some of the cemeteries and see the headstones to some of these people we thought were old, and you find they died at 40 or 45 years of age, or some probably 35," he said.

How Old Is 'Old'

THE EXPLANATION I believe is that we who termed those people very old were very young ourselves at the time, and they did appear old to us.

Look at an old sport picture of yourself, for example, if you have one around. You'll look like a child almost, when you view the picture now. I know that has happened to me.

Those people "were old" because "we were kids", Ollie observes, and I agree with him.

I know I would have been highly insulted if someone had told me my face and bearing was not mature, when I went to University, for example. As a football player, and hammer thrower, for example, I felt very much the man.

But I have to take that back now, when I look at some of the old sports team pictures in my possession.

It makes so much difference how old, or how young, you were when you looked at older people and thought they were really old men.

Cutting Women's Hair

THAT BROUGHT our talk to a discussion of women getting their hair cut. When I was a boy I was told a woman's hair was her "crowning glory". But times change.

Mr. Harper recalled "when the women started to get their hair cut".

Riggs and Berrigan and Tyce Reardon's shop were the two main shops in town where they got their hair cut. They went to the barber shop, there were no hair dressers then.

There may have been more but Mrs. MacDonald is the first woman hair stylist I can recall in Charlottetown, he said. She was in Tyce Reardon's shop. The shop was partitioned. The women customers would get their haircut by the barber, then go into the other part for the hair stylist part.

