

A Cut Above The Rest

Almost five decades after opening its doors, this barbershop still offers camaraderie with every haircut.



Gary Schoester, Curt Moen and Jim Sparks have logged more than 130 years of haircuts together at East State Barber Stylists.

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What do you think of when you hear the word “barbershop?”

Maybe you think of the popular 1960s television sitcom, “The Andy Griffith Show,” in which a cozy barbershop was run by Floyd, a quirky, reserved, and at times, excitable fellow, whose business was an institution in the make-believe town of Mayberry, N.C. Locals gathered there, not only to get their hair cut, but to play checkers, discuss cur-

rent events or just “chew the fat.”

A barbershop in Rockford, Ill., East State Barber Stylists, has a similar feel. While no one plays checkers, and appointments run in 15-minute increments, many of the customers come in not only for a haircut, but also to reconnect with the barbers and longtime clients. In an age when the term “community” is defined in complicated ways, this place offers a simple, straightforward taste of it.

Rockford businessman Tom Furst (center customer) enjoys the friendship that comes with his haircut.



A collection of straight razors that the barbers have used through the years, hangs on the wall.



Customer Larry Gross (right) is a "regular" at the barbershop.

The shop is sandwiched between a tax service business and a chiropractic office, in a strip mall located along one of Rockford's busiest corridors. The snug storefront has been a mainstay in Rockford since 1960, when its first owner, Ray Benjamin, opened for business.

These days, the shop has three barbers – Curt Moen, Jim Sparks and Gary Schoester – who, together, have logged more than 130 years of haircuts. A fourth barber, Lee Hudgin, retired last year, after 48 years. These days, it's remarkable that – in any industry – four colleagues could thrive, let alone get along, for as long as these men have.

Tom Furst, a faithful customer for the past 30 years, knows a little something about workplace dynamics; he's president of Furst Search Group, a Rockford-based executive recruiting firm, and even he's surprised at the barbershop's longevity.

"It amazes me that these guys have managed to stay together for such a long time," he says. "With so many hair salons in the malls, with large corporations coming in and out, how does it work?"

Even the barbers themselves aren't quite sure. "I've known other barbershops where the guys didn't get along and it didn't work out," Sparks says. "It is a bit unusual for three or four people to get along. We don't get in each other's way. If something comes up, we usually talk it out and reach an agreement." They have no choice, adds Schoester: "You spend more waking hours with these guys than you do with your wife."

The Shop

The shop itself is a rather nondescript place. Walk inside and you'll see a row of eight chairs where customers wait their turn. Stacks of magazines and newspapers sit on shelves, along with a variety of hair products. Photographs depicting generic barbershops grace the walls. Nestled in one corner near the ceiling is a seldom-used television set. Soft background music occasionally plays overhead, but it's the conversation and infectious laughter that fills the place.

On the other side of the 500-square-foot room, four black barber chairs line up against sinks that are surrounded by family photos, combs, hairdryers and other tools of the trade. These are the barber's workstations. This is where, from left to right, Moen, Schoester and Sparks literally have rubbed shoulders for the past four decades. The barbers admit, however, that it's difficult to see Hudgin's empty chair each day.

Over the years, in this simple room, lives have unfolded right before the barbers' eyes. Proud parents capturing



their precious child's first haircut on film. Grown men bemoaning the struggles of their favorite baseball teams. Solemn CEOs grouching about today's stock market. Adoring grandfathers swapping photos of young grandchildren. Grieving men openly mourning the loss of devoted wives.

Many comparisons have been made between barbers and psychologists or bartenders. A barber not only must cut hair, but also must be willing to converse with customers. "I couldn't work someplace where I couldn't talk to people," Schoester says. "That wouldn't be any fun."

The Barbers

Moen, Schuster and Sparks all attended barber school. After serving in the military, Moen says he bounced around at a couple of jobs, before finding his calling behind the chair. The first of the three to join the business, when he was hired in 1964, Moen eventually purchased the shop and was the owner, until the others bought him out eight years ago. At age 72, he still finds the motivation to get up and come to work each day.

"People ask me all the time when I plan on retiring. When I get old and grumpy, I guess," he says, with a soft chuckle.

Sparks, 66, was next to join the business. He arrived in 1973, after working in other shops for a few years. He left the barber business a couple of times, to take more lucrative factory jobs, but quickly discovered that factory work wasn't for him. He finally returned to the barbershop for good.

Schoester, 60, stepped into the shop one day in 1974, looking for work. Schoester had been encouraged by his own barber to explore the trade. "I knew I didn't want to go to college," he says. Moen hired Schoester on the spot. In fact, he wanted Schoester to start the same day, but the young barber had other plans, namely, a tee time at a local golf course. He started the following week.

All three barbers are quiet, soft-spoken men. But each has a good rapport with his customers, who range in age from one to 100. Over the years, the three men have become close with many of them. "We know their families, their kids, and the names of their dogs," says Moen, who has volunteered with many of his customers for community events and organizations.

Schoester has played softball and golf with his clients. And many customers rallied around Sparks a year ago, when he was off work for two months following major surgery. "That was quite gratifying," he says of

the cards, gifts and visits from customers. “It restored my faith in people.”

Moen, Sparks and Schoester have seen a few changes in their business over the years. Flat top haircuts were the rage when they started out in the 1960s. Short hair gave way to shoulder length in the 1970s. While the trend has returned to a tighter cut, the barbers say that almost anything goes these days. Neck shaves went away quietly years ago, and the barbers say cell phones have really helped to increase business. Instead of calling when they return to their offices, customers can check in for available appointments as they drive by the shop. And while haircuts are no longer \$1.50, as they once were, they’re still a relative bargain at \$12.

The Customers

It’s the customers who dictate the conversation during the 15-minute haircut. They love to talk baseball or football, or about their most recent round of golf. Typically, the barbers won’t discuss politics or religion, unless the customer brings it up first. Current events, including the current economy, usually rule the day and “colorful” language is discouraged.

The barbers have many customers who are members of a three- or four-generation family – all of whom still get their hair cut at East State Barber Stylists. But the most fun, they say, is giving a young customer his first haircut.

“It can be a challenge,” Moen says. “It usually takes children two or three haircuts before they get used to the idea.”

Bob Phelan has been going to the East State shop for more than 30 years. That’s saying something, since Phelan, who works in consumer product sales, lives nearly 30 minutes away and commutes to work in Madison, Wis. Still, he carves out time to get his hair trimmed every three or four weeks. “I went somewhere else once to get my haircut,” Phelan says, sheepishly. “It was not a good experience.”

Phelan took his young sons, Chris and Jon, to the East State barbers to get their first haircuts. Now in their mid to late 20s, the boys have found other stylists to cut their hair, but their dad remains faithful to Schoester. “Gary knows what I need,” he says. “I spend 15 minutes in the chair, we throw a couple of insults at each other, and we’re done. It’s not just a haircut; it’s an experience.”

Lloyd Duerst used to let Moen practice on his hair when Moen was just a barber student, back in 1961.



Curt Moen gives Larry Hedberg a haircut and chats with him about current events. The barbers avoid talking about politics and religion, unless their customers bring it up first.

Duerst jokes that the haircuts used to take so long that he spent more money feeding the parking meter than he spent on the haircut. The two have remained friends for more than 50 years.

A passionate Packers fan, Duerst remembers another time when the barbers, ardent Bear fans, good-naturedly locked him out of the barbershop. “We always go round and round with each other,” Duerst says. The barbers have collected many humorous stories like this over the years.

While Rockford isn’t the small town of fictitious Mayberry, the camaraderie in this local barbershop is just as enviable as that found in Floyd’s Barber Shop – and it’s the real thing.

“There’s a warmth, a comfort level,” Tom Furst says, smiling. “It’s more than just a service they provide; it’s a friendship. You feel good when you get there, and you feel good when you leave.” ■