

Flourish

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The buzz of Englewood since 1909

Sam Hill's Barber Shop taking its cut for a century

By **PETER JONES**

When businessman Mike Oller gets his turn in the chair for a trim, it doesn't take long for the customer and his barber to cut loose.

"What did you think of the Broncos game last night?" barber Rick Lozano asks.

"You know, we haven't had a defense all year," Oller rejoins with a sigh.

"That was pitiful," Lozano agrees, as he cuts back the hair around Oller's ears.

The blame for the plummeting can be placed squarely on defense coordinator Jack Del Rio, says the conventional wisdom in Sam Hill's Barber Shop.

For more than a century, this South Broadway hangout has been a sort of town hall for sports, sex, business, politics and everything in between.

The unofficial "experts" are any man – and we do mean man – who happens to wander into the oldest continuously operating business in the city of Englewood.

"Hang out in a barbershop. I hear anything and everything here," said Lozano, the fourth and latest owner in Sam Hill's 104-year history.

The shop's who's who of barber-chair experts has included the city's mayors, area business leaders and local media figures, ranging from The Fox's Michael Floorwax to Denver television's Blinky the Clown.

"I had a customer who was 99 years old, who just passed away. He'd been coming in here since the '40s," Lozano said.

The customers you won't find waxing nostalgic are women.

Sam Hill's has not cut a woman's hair in decades – not since former owner Dick Konecne suffered a particularly fastidious female customer, grabbed the nearest razor blade and scraped the word "women" from the shop window.

"If a woman sat down in my chair, count on a half hour to an hour at least. I can usually do a man's hair in 15 to 20 minutes," said 49-year-old Lozano. "I don't feel comfortable cutting a woman's hair. I haven't done it for 25 years."

Like Floyd's iconic barbershop on *The Andy Griffith Show*, Sam Hill's is as much a social hall as a haircutting establishment. Anyone who recalls the chaos that ensued in Mayberry when Floyd hired a pretty manicurist will get the idea.

This boy's club may raise the hair of political correctness, but that is part of its charm, according to some longtime customers at a shop where little has changed since Franklin Roosevelt was in the White House. [Note: The tubs from Sam's days as a bathhouse were removed at least a decade before that.]

"I like the old setting," Oller said. "Places like this are as rare as hen's teeth."

Seventy-year-old Alan Pasqua has been getting his cuts at Sam's – under three of its four owners – since the late 1950s when \$1.50 could get a teenager his first flattop.

"It's still the best place to get your haircut," he said. "Those Super Cuts and Super Great Clips and those places – they don't know how to cut hair."

Business gels

To the best of anyone's knowledge, this unassuming business at 3456 S. Broadway first turned on its pole in 1909 as the OK Barber Shop and Bath House. As rumor has it, someone named John Burgess set up shop to clean the filthy residents of bar-filled Englewood, a trolley ride south of then-dry Denver.

Sam Hill bought the place in the mid-1930s and changed the name, which is still painted on the front glass, two ownerships later.

"He was a nice guy, really easygoing," Pasqua

said of Hill.

At one point, Hill served on the Englewood City Council.

"He was pretty heavily into what was happening in the city, so this was probably a pretty good meeting place back in those days," Lozano said. "If these walls could talk, what would they say?"

The real question is could you repeat what they said in mixed company?

The off-color history is just one of the reasons that Sam Hill's is a kind of male sanctuary that barely exists in the 21st century.

"There's guys in here who like to grab a *Playboy*. This is where a guy can come in and be a guy," Lozano said. "If you're going to drop an F-bomb or something like that, you feel comfortable."

Back in the day, Hill was so dedicated to comforts that he created one of the first coin-operated vibration machines and installed it on the back of his barber chairs. Hill was known to cut hair while the chairs vibrated, never scratching a customer.

Hill owned the shop until the late 1950s when Konecne, one of Hill's staff barbers, bought the business. After some debate, Konecne kept Hill's name on the window, and Lozano, formerly one of Konecne's barbers, made the same decision when he took over eight years ago.



Rick Lozano cuts the hair of Mike Oller at Sam Hill's Barber Shop, the oldest continuously operating business in Englewood.

Photo by Peter Jones



Sam Hill's Barber Shop marks its 10th year under that name in the mid-1940s. The business began as the OK Barber Shop and Bath House. Photo courtesy of Englewood Historical Preservation Society



Colorado Gov. John Love, left, greets owner Dick Konecne outside Sam Hill's Barber Shop in the mid-1960s. The business has been in operation since 1909, though its owners can be counted on one hand.

Photo courtesy of Sam Hill's Barber Shop

"Why change something that's been around here forever?" said Lozano, who has cut hair at Sam Hill's for nearly a quarter of its history.

No cutting and running

The name is not all that has not changed at what is likely the oldest barbershop in Arapahoe County. A walk through Sam Hill's Barber Shop is a virtual history of the 20th century as told through the prism of the male haircut.

"You're not going to get more traditional than this. This is old school," Lozano said.

Outside, the barber pole – buried in four inches of concrete – dates to the 1920s.

Open the door and see a working cash register from the '30s, a lathering machine and hair vacuum from the '50s, and a still-working antique hair dryer from the '30s.

Most interesting to some has been the large metallic ashtrays that still stand in the now-non-smoking establishment.

"Kids will ask parents, what is that?" Lozano said.

Even the price of a haircut has not changed much at Sam Hill's. The cost jumped a buck to \$15 eight years ago and Lozano expects to raise it another buck next year, due mostly to rising property taxes.

As for the cuts them-

selves, they have not been altered much at Sam Hill's – though Lozano has tried his hand at a mohawk occasionally.

"I'm pretty traditional," he said. "I'm not one of those foo-foo style guys."

Lozano attributes the business's longevity to the short list of independent owners who have always owned both the shop and the building.

"There's no landlord to raise the rent and do whatever landlords do," he said.

Sam Hill's is currently a one-man operation with its owner serving as store manager, barber and conversation arbiter, but that was not always the case. Young Lozano started out on Chair No. 4 during Konecne's tenure.

"He had to let one guy go because he came in drunk. That moved me up to the third chair," Lozano said with a laugh. "The guy in the second chair had family problems, so he had to escape to Canada, so I moved up to the second chair. The next one is out the door, so I'm getting close to retirement."

Even so, Lozano is confident that the barbershop's legacy will continue long after his own hairline has receded, literally and figuratively.

"Barbers are hard to find," he said, "but eventually somebody will come along. Somebody's got to continue the tradition."

