

THESE GUYS

dress 'em
feed 'em
cure 'em

take care of 'em from head to toe



Photographs by Bill Owens

W. T. "Bill" Dill of the Hat Corporation of America

The 1970 West Coast Western Wear Manufacturers' Convention was held on the weekend of October 3rd and 4th at the Sacramento Inn, an arrangement of motel and parking lot which rides the back end of a well-to-do Sacramento shopping center. One hundred-forty companies filled 106 motel rooms, turned into display areas for the occasion, with every imaginable Western-style appurtenance, appliance and appointment for horse and man. "Out of the stuff we've got displayed here today," stated A. E. "Al" Camp, Regional Organizer of the convention, "a man and his horse could walk in here without anything and we could dress 'em, feed 'em, cure 'em, take care of 'em—from head to toe."

During the weekend approximately

a thousand buyers for Western stores, Western wear departments of large department stores, and even boutiques, paraded in and out of the motel rooms, fingering fabrics, stroking leathers, trying on hats, appraising, haggling, and finally ordering, in lots ranging from truckload-size to a mere one or two items. Few Western wear manufacturers have reached the stage where they balk at filling small orders.

Most of the items ordered that weekend look, oddly enough, substantially the same as their form-follows-function ancestors of a century before. Western wear of today is nothing but an evolution of the clothing the working cowboy felt the most comfortable and efficient in.

Every item in his wardrobe had its purpose: The neckerchief absorbed the

sweat on his neck and could be tied across the face in case of cold, dust, sandstorm or the urge to rob a train. Boots were shaped for leverage in a saddle, with pointed toes to find a stirrup fast and high heels to prevent the foot being forced through the stirrup in event of a fall, death by dragging being looked upon with disfavor. Shirts and pants were fitted to the body in the Spanish manner to keep them from fluttering and spooking cattle, getting caught in ropes, and in general hampering a *vaquero's* movement. Heavy belts guarded a horse-breaker's kidneys, and massive buckles were fairly good insurance against a saddle horn to the belly. The hat was the cowboy's best friend—next to his horse—being used for face shading, cow-swatting, fly fan-

[by Amie Hill]

ning, drinking, head-warming, and a number of other spontaneous needs.

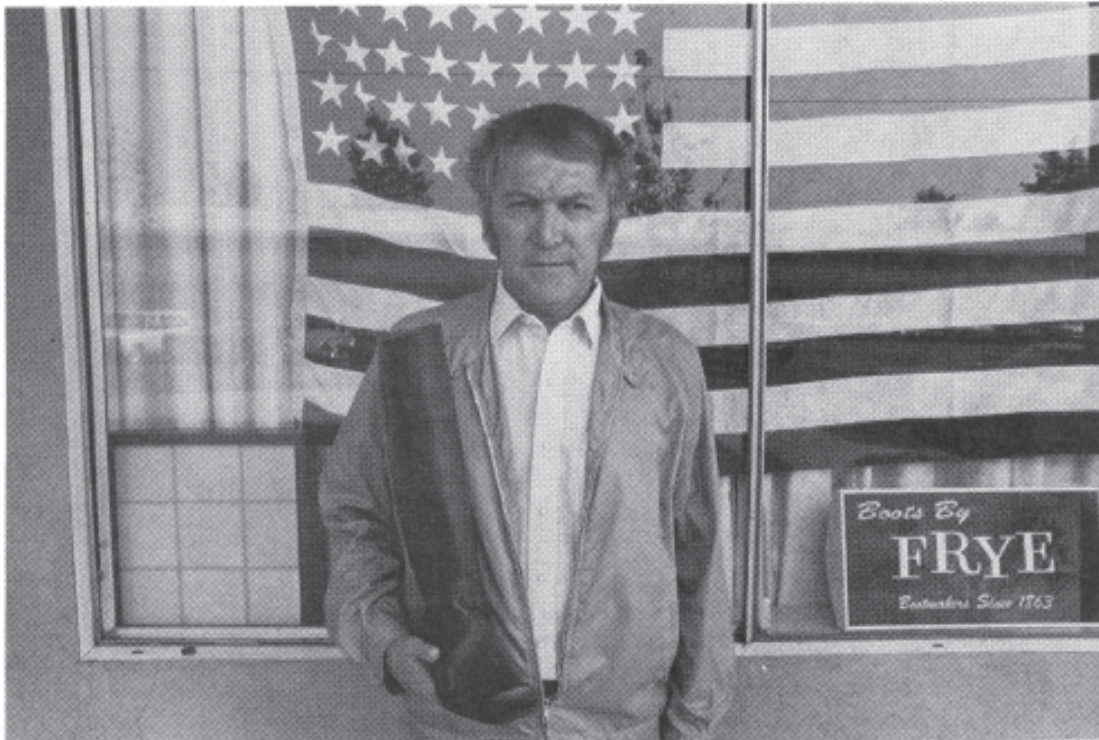
But in many ways the cowboy was deprived. For instance, he didn't have fashion designers to tell him that his peacock-Saturday-night trip should be a whole new different fashion "look," and so when he dressed up, his outfit was mere'y a duded-up version of his work clothes. The same wide-brimmed hat got a fancy turquoise and-snake-skin band, the neckerchief came out silk and sassy, the shirt embroidered with flowers. Chaps, the leg-coverings necessitated by an occasional ride

of tail, as well as the ability to carry saddles, bridles, bits, and buckles crusted with silver and weighing as much as a knight in full armor.

Western wear today falls somewhere in between the two extremes. Where possible, it's permanent-pressed and color coordinated, combing utility with good looks, and coming in both plain work clothes and dress-up styles. There have been a few further extensions, such as Western-style business suits and female versions of cowboy finery. Women's styles differ from men's only occasionally, usually appearing as

West. Many of these men had lived with Indian tribes and adopted Indian dress as the most suitable for their lifestyle. From the Indians' culture they introduced moccasins, beadwork and the now-ubiquitous fringe trimming, as well as motifs and patterns for decoration, all of which have been integrated into America a lot more successfully than the Indians.

Your average dealer in Western wear is extraordinarily sleek and happy nowadays. Generally he's a friendly slice of white Middle America with a cowboy hat on top, tooled boots



Don Kolb of the Frye Boot Company

through mesquite, were discarded for dancing, and the boots, still shaped for hard riding, were tooled within an inch of their utilitarian lives.

A good many cowboys apparently entered heavily into the dress-up school of thought, and this predilection for putting on the fancy eventually emerged, carried out to its furthest, as an entire new rodeo syndrome—the Parade Class, where every item of rugged work gear from hat to hondo, while basically unchanged in form, became idealized almost to the point of the ridiculous—silver-studded, tooled, embroidered, fringes dripping exaggeratedly longer and longer, brims wider, shirts silkier. The tough cow ponies of the other classes were replaced here with effete show horses, bred for arch of neck and thickness

scaled-down versions of shirts, ranch pants, hats, and boots, with the only major innovations being in the line of skirts and culottes and in the tailoring of the clothes as strictly to the female form as its male counterpart is to a man's. The exception to this is found in the growing field of square dance wear, where the traditional dress evolves not from the cowgirl or woman dressing like a man, but from the calico c'ad "womenfolk" image of the cowboy's old lady. Square dance dresses for women are flouncy and sassy, short, bright-colored, and stuffed with yards of fluffy petticoat.

The use of native American Indian styles and decoration was introduced into the cowboy culture by mountain men and trappers, who often served as guides for the exploration of the

on t'other end, and a suit made by anyone from Levi's to Brooks Brothers in between. His wife is plump and wears glasses and a matching embroidered shirt-and-ranch-pants combination above her cowboy boots. They can afford to be friendly—most of them are so over-ordered on their products that their next delivery schedule can't be met for five or six months. Even the small dealers are making it. "The little man will survive," says Al Camp, "The field is so specialized; you have to know so much in order to sell these lines. Our biggest problem (Camp represents several large lines of clothing and equipment) is finding enough qualified people and stores to represent us."

Western wear is one of the few clothing provinces left where a single



Sam Tucker of Socrates Sandals, Inc.

small company may manufacture entire outfits for men, women, and/or children instead of specializing in a single item of wear, and a well-run little mama-papa organization, because of the specialized knowledge needed, and acquaintance with local needs, will do as well, relatively, in the Western wear boom, as a large specialized distributor. Most dealers agree that distributing Western wear is a lot more fun than selling anything else, because, in the market's present friendly state, "there's a lot less pressure on the people you have to deal with, and a lot less pressure on you." Most of the people on the Western wear circuits know each other by sight and name. The field tends to be both highly cliquish and fiercely

competitive, and the spirit of Western wear conventions mirrors that of the rodeo circuit or any other Western-oriented series of gatherings where the same specialized people keep meeting up.

How long this friendly state of affairs might be expected to last is another question entirely. The very boom in Western styling in the area of fashion and "leisure wear" which has produced the happy economic condition is tempting some manufacturers not only to produce and market on enormous scales, but to lower quality in mass-production methods, and to attempt to pander to fashion tastes with "latest-style" alterations of the very styles which influenced those tastes originally.

The field seems to be about evenly divided between companies which have made some kind of unabashed play for the "youth" and "hip" markets, (Frye Boots new collection consists primarily of squared toes and harness straps, and Stanley Moss, who represents Minnesota's Minnetonka Moccasins, claims to have invented the leather fringed purse to go along with the growing moccasin market) and those who stick to the same solid line of Western products on the strength of their beliefs that if people want the real thing they'll come and get it. In between are those who are playing it cautious, like shirt manufacturers who are bringing out numbers with the stripes now so popular in "fashion" shirts, and missing a bet by toning down on the fancy embroidery and crud just growing popular with the funky set. Another cautious type is the regular clothing manufacturer who's come out with a Western or pseudo-Western line and wants to insinuate it into the Western wear market.

Al Camp has a multifaceted explanation for the enormous increase in sales. As he sees it, in the past five years there's been a boom in leisure time which has coincided with a relaxation of fashion dictums and the hippie-influenced back-to-earth or back-to-our-origins movement. He sees our only common American heritage as the cowboy-and-Indian culture, and infers both a return to tribalism and a return to the games played by customers as children.

He also points to the heavy Western influence on TV, especially in advertising, with Marlboro men, Mustangs, Pintos, etc, galloping across the vast wasteland, and in cowboy films and series. One TV show, called McCloud, has inspired requests from customers for the traditional Western dress jacket, long and tailored, with wide lapels, padded shoulders, flap pockets and side vents. 🐾

