

Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Attention: News Editor

Owen Cleaners Celebrates 100th Anniversary

Paducah, KY – January 10, 2020 – Owen Cleaners, Inc., a Paducah based family business, celebrated its 100th anniversary during an informal reception for employees, customers and friends on Friday, January 10, 2020 at 9 am. The reception was held at the company’s main plant at 1021 Kentucky Avenue.

Woodrow Wilson was President when Horace and Tully Owen first opened the doors to Owen Brothers Quality Cleaners in January 1920. The brothers had started in Fulton, KY before moving to Paducah. Carolyn Perry, a granddaughter of Horace Owen and current owner along with her husband, David Perry, asked a local archivist, Leigh Ann Paxton, to find information on the grand opening. Ms. Paxton was able to locate the original advertisement for the grand opening in the January 11, 1920 edition of the Paducah News Democrat.

The two brothers ran the business together for the first few years until Mr. Horace Owen eventually bought out his brother to become sole proprietor. In the early years the company specialized not only in drycleaning and laundry services, but also fur cleaning and alterations as well as fabric dying. Many other diversifications occurred over the decades including coin-operated laundromats drapery and rug cleaning and even photo finishing.

In 1950, Mr. Owen was joined by his son-in-law, Gene Katterjohn, Jr. The two formed a partnership that greatly expanded the business and lasted until Mr. Owen’s death in 1977. Gene Katterjohn and his wife Carolyn, who was Mr. Owen’s daughter, then ran the business until the early 1990s. It was in January 1992 that history repeated itself when Carolyn Perry, the daughter of Gene and Carolyn Katterjohn, and David Perry, their son-in-law, purchased the business to become the third generation to own and operate the family business. Like Gene Katterjohn, who had a pharmacy degree from Purdue University and had worked for Abbott Laboratories before joining Mr. Owen, David and Carolyn Perry both left corporate careers in Dallas, TX to move to Paducah and continue the family tradition in drycleaning.

Now 28 years later, both David and Carolyn, agreed that the decision to move back to Paducah was a good one. David Perry said, “Leaving the corporate world for a

small business could be perceived by some as a risk. But it had always been my dream to own and run my own business. I soon found that running a small business and sustaining it over many years can be just as challenging as any corporate career.” Carolyn Perry added, “I enjoyed returning to my hometown where I could rekindle childhood friendships while raising our two children, Emily and Matthew. It was also such a wonderful benefit for them to grow up living in the same city with their grandparents, Gene and Mary Louise Katterjohn.”

Mr. Perry also commented on the challenges for any business to sustain itself for a century. “The only way to survive is to constantly adapt and evolve,” he said. “While some may think that drycleaning is a static business, it actually must constantly adapt to changes in fabrics, fashions, demographics, lifestyles and even technology.” “I think the secret to our success has been that all three generations have been very good at adapting and innovating as the times change.”

Owen Cleaners has often been recognized as an industry leader and innovator. In the 1930s, Mr. Owen first signed up with the Sanitone drycleaning process which originated in Cincinnati. Today Owen Cleaners ranks as the oldest, continuous licensee of Sanitone in the world. This distinction is not only indicative of the longevity of Owen Cleaners, but also to the growth of Sanitone as a premier drycleaning process internationally.

In the 1950s, Horace Owen and Gene Katterjohn expanded into the coin-operated laundromat business and become one of the first to feature front-loading washing machines that were imported from a company in Sweden, which is now part of Electrolux. The Owen Laun-Alls also featured spacious, in-laid terrazzo floors, hair drying stations and covered drive-ups. The partners hosted many visitors from around the country who wanted to see these innovative, new laundromats firsthand.

Later in the 1990s, Owen Cleaners became the first drycleaner in the United States to combine photo processing with drycleaning services. David said, “I first learned of this idea from a drycleaning company from Australia. We had become friends with the owners via an annual international drycleaning conference. After much research we purchased a photo lab and started developing film and printing photos.” He continued, “The idea was that a busy mother could drop off rolls of film from a child’s birthday party while also dropping off the laundry. We would have both the laundry and the prints ready for pick up the next day.” Owen Cleaners was featured in a national drycleaning magazine for this innovation.

In 2002, Owen Cleaners was recognized as the Business of the Year by the Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce, principally for the company’s 20-year partnership with Cal Sisto and WPSD-TV for the Cal’s Coats for Kids program. David said, “Thanks to Cal Sisto and his efforts, we collected and cleaned over 90,000 coats during that 20-year period. Every autumn many of our employees also volunteered their time to help sort and clean the coats, which were then given to local charities for distribution to deserving kids and their families.”

Carolyn Perry also recalls several other interesting aspects of the company's history. "I can recall as a young girl when Owen Cleaners was asked to do cleaning for the movie, *How the West Was Won*. According to my father, we were even asked to tailor some of the dresses for Debbie Reynolds." "We later did cleaning for the movie *The River Rat* starring Tommy Lee Jones and a hanger from Owen Cleaners was even featured in the movie." In the late 1980s we supported *In Country*, with Bruce Willis and then later *U. S. Marshals*, again starring Tommy Lee Jones."

Both David and Carolyn mentioned that another secret to the company's success has been the dedication and support of many excellent employees over the years. David said, "Mr. Owen had many employees who worked with him for decades and Gene had several employees with 40 years of service." Even since 1992, Carolyn and I have enjoyed working with many employees on our team with over 20 years of service." He added, "The fact that so many of our employees get to know and serve our customers over many years only enhances the sense of loyalty that customers have to Owen Cleaners."

Owen Cleaners plans to recognize and thank its many customers with special promotions and programs throughout the year. Carolyn said, "We plan to make 2020 a very special year as we thank all of our customers for their longstanding support." David added, "As the year progresses, we will begin to turn our focus from the past to the future."

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