

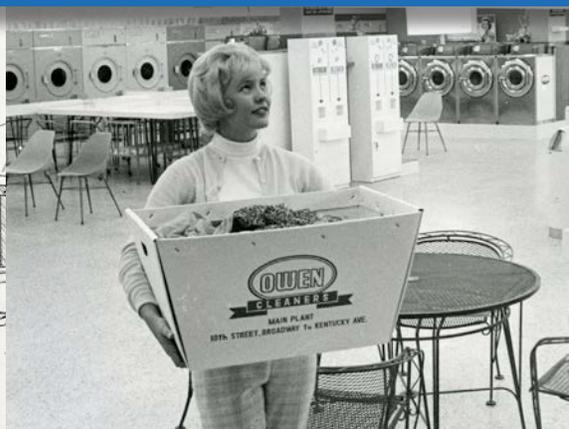


The Successful Chemistry of a Family Business

Owen Cleaners celebrates 100 years of operation

by DARLENE MAZZONE

Top: Gene Katerjohn, Carolyn Katterjohn Perry and Dave Perry • Bottom Left: Horace Owen



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he year was 1920. Woodrow Wilson was president, women's suffrage was ratified, Babe Ruth was king . . . and Owen Brothers Dry Cleaning opened in Paducah. That was a century ago.

A partnership formed 100 years ago between Horace and Tully Owen after World War I has been reimagined several times over as part of a lasting commitment to quality and integrity. Today, owners David and Carolyn Perry look back on a legacy that now spans a century and are awestruck by the company's longevity and unparalleled success.

A few years after the Owen Brothers opened, Horace bought out his brother and became the sole proprietor of the Paducah establishment. During the 1930s he grew the company by introducing home delivery and the innovative new Sanitone dry cleaning system.

In 1950, Horace was joined in the business by his son-in-law, Gene Katterjohn. Gene had served in both World War II and the Korean War, and was a pharmacist by training. After marrying Mr. Owen's daughter, Carolyn, Gene was approached about joining the family business. He had no experience in dry cleaning, but says

his knowledge of chemistry "helped a lot." Together the two partners built a new dry cleaning plant, added locations, and opened new, coin-operated laundromats. Upon Mr. Owen's retirement in the late 1960s, Gene took over sole management and ownership of the business.

Years later history repeated itself when David Perry and Carolyn Katterjohn Perry, Gene's son-in-law and daughter, purchased Owen Cleaners. The two had met in graduate school and were pursuing careers in Dallas. After the arrival

of their first child, Emily, they began to think about alternatives to the corporate lifestyle. It was then that they received an unexpected phone call. "Gene told us he was definitely going to sell the business and asked if we were interested," says Dave.

Within a few months they had worked out an agreement, and in early 1992 Dave and Carolyn Perry became the third

generation to own and operate Owen Cleaners.

In the three decades since, Owen Cleaners has continued to grow and evolve as a company, while at the same time staying true to many of the core strategies first introduced by Mr. Owen and Mr. Katterjohn. "I often think how indebted we are to both of these pioneering entrepreneurs," says Dave. "Their decision to become a Sanitone dry cleaner in the 1930s was an example of their significant impact on the company." Sanitone is an international leader in advanced, environmentally friendly dry cleaning technologies,



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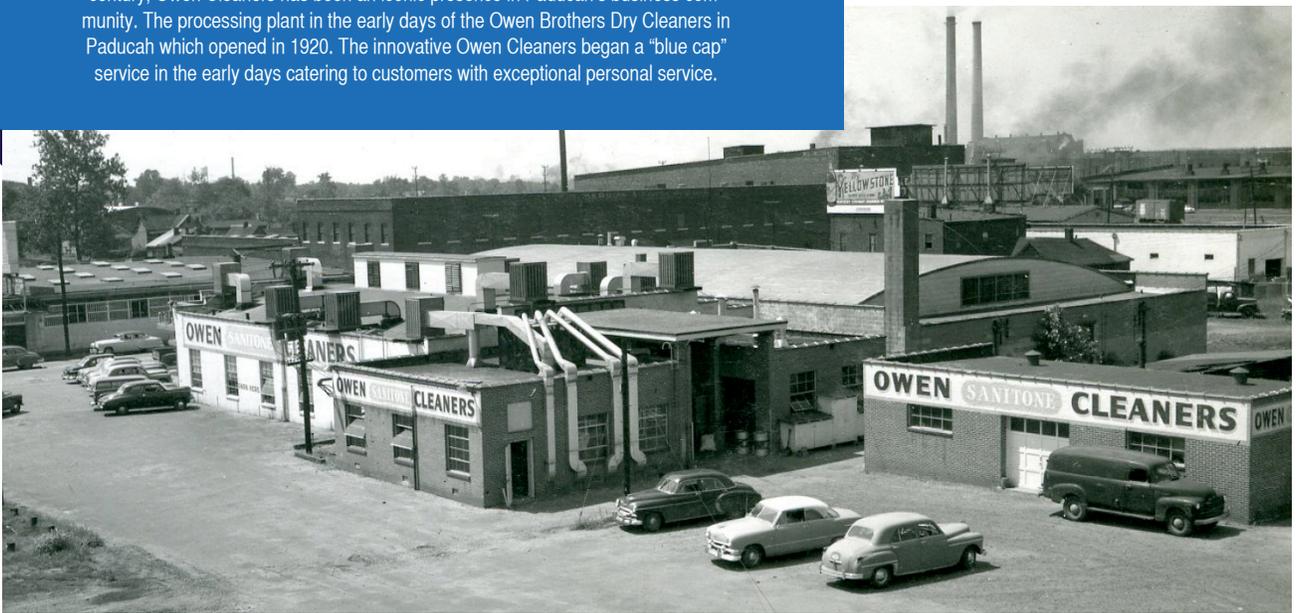
- CAROLYN PERRY

and only licensed affiliates that meet stringent criteria can use Sanitone products. "Owen Cleaners holds the unique distinction of being the oldest licensee of Sanitone in the world."

"My father was truly an innovator," adds Carolyn. "Staying ahead of the competition certainly helped the business grow, but the formula for success also required keeping some things the same. It was always the goal to provide excellent customer service and offer an outstanding product."



CLOCKWISE TOP LEFT: Gene Katterjohn and at one of the early locations of Owen Dry Cleaning. Check out the poster promotions! Gene Katterjohn was an industry leader in the implementation of ever-evolving dry cleaning technologies. For a century, Owen Cleaners has been an iconic presence in Paducah's business community. The processing plant in the early days of the Owen Brothers Dry Cleaners in Paducah which opened in 1920. The innovative Owen Cleaners began a "blue cap" service in the early days catering to customers with exceptional personal service.



OWEN CLEANERS

That philosophy was consistently recognized as an industry standard by the Varsity International Conference of Dry Cleaners. For more than 25 years, Owen Cleaners was invited to participate in the annual meeting, which was composed of only 20 leading companies from around the world. Gene Katterjohn served as Varsity Conference chairman in 1976 and Dave repeated the honor in 2001.

The prolonged history of this centennial concern has resulted in its share of fashion and fabric revolutions. For example the arrival of washable polyester in the 70s had a major impact on dry cleaners around the nation. The diminution of wool garments and the addition of spandex to synthetic fabrics posed new challenges to cleaning technologies. "At one point we were doing lots of dresses and pleated skirts," adds Carolyn. "With the advent of the 2000s we saw a significant increase in pants and blouses. It sometimes seems like we're a different company with each passing decade."

And lest you get the notion that dry cleaning is, well, dry, let's set that record straight. "We have experienced so many unique opportunities," explains Dave. Owen Cleaners came close to cleaning President Bill Clinton's shirts as he traveled through town during his presidential campaign. "At the last minute, plans changed but we were ready if we were needed," Dave remembers. The company did provide cleaning services for members of the secret service. "We've worked with several movies who were filming here," Carolyn adds. "The early owners worked with *How the West Was Won*. Then we did cleaning for the actors who were here for *River Rat*, *US Marshalls*, and *In Country*."

Owen Cleaners has always offered their services free of charge to clean American flags. That notoriety put Dave on the cover of the magazine of the National Federation of Independent Business after 9/11. Later a WWII museum in New Orleans heard of the company's reputation and sent historic flags for the team to handle with care.

But Owen Cleaners means much more to Paducah than home delivered garments, convenient drive-thrus, and trusted methodologies. David and



Carolyn Perry have invested themselves in magnanimous work that has taken place outside the world of dry cleaning. Both have been ardent supporters of scores of local projects, and they have devoted their unique expertise to a myriad of civic concerns.

"Paducah is a great town," Dave comments. "And I had always wanted to own my own business. Surprisingly the two came together in 1992."

And together, these partners in life and in work now celebrate the centennial anniversary of a company whose roots run deep in the place they call home. **P**