

Albert Carey, A Veteran Shoe Shiner With Style

By Russell Clark
Post Staff Writer

When Albert Carey was five-years-old in the early 1930s, he went to work on Trade Street in downtown Charlotte carrying his pine shoe-shine box. Inside the rectangular box was homemade soap, rags, and brushes that were used to clean and polish shoes.

Brushing, buffing, washing, and dyeing are still ways that shoe-shiners express their talents, but now the price has jumped from a nickel to \$3 and their job has been modernized. "Back in those days, we had to shine shoes and watch for the police at the same time," reminisced Carey. "They would chase us off the streets because we distracted customers from barber shops and other downtown businesses that had shoe-shiners," revealed Carey who now leases a booth in the downtown Marriott Hotel.

The native Charlottean is considered by many as the "King" of shoe shiners. "About three months ago, I was in a shoe-shine contest here. My competition came from New York and he was very professional, but when it was over, the four judges picked me as the champion."

Carey, a World War II Army veteran, pointed out that after he returned home from the service he tried his luck in another field. "I wanted to try something new when I got back home and since the benefits I received from the Army allowed for my education, I took up cosmetology. I studied the trade at the Wood & Morgan Beauty School that used to be on McDowell Street. The six-month course was helpful, but I realized that there was more money in shoe shining for me," explained the 1960 Second Ward High graduate.

Shining shoes is a way of life for Carey, but most people would probably think he's an executive by his neat, business appearance.

"My appearance has always been important to me," he says, wearing a pair of stylish dark brown knits with matching shirt and tie. "I guess that's one of the reasons I've been successful. On the other hand, I ask questions to my customers so that I can learn from them. It's very educational, plus I usually get a tip."

Times have changed since he first began and so had his business. "To accommodate customers, I do brief cases, leather coats, and just about anything made of leather to supplement my income. Sometimes I make \$120-\$130 per day if there is a special event happening here," he laughed, adjusting his glasses on his groomed face.

After more than 50 years in the business, he has seen and met some important people. "Just a couple of weeks ago I met RUN-DMC when they were in town. One of the guys heard about my reputation and he asked me to do a good job on his suede adidas tennis shoes. He was friendly and he paid \$18 and two tickets to their show."

Over the years, Carey recalls only one bad experience while working on shoes. "This guy came in wearing a \$20 pair of man-made leather shoes that he bought across the street. He wanted me to wash and clean them, I told him the material would not hold the water. He insisted on having them washed and as a result, his feet got soaked," Carey remembered.

The veteran shoe-shiner's day at the booth starts around 7:30 a.m. and lasts until 5 o'clock. Working the night shift is a female college student. "I think it's a good job for students who are willing to work hard because you can take home money every day. Since the booth costs \$15 a day to lease, it only takes about four to five customers to cover your daily rent expense," he noted. "I also give her advice. My secret to shining shoes is brushing."



A true professional, Albert Carey shows a few trade secrets in the art of shining shoes.

You've got to brush the polish into the leather to give it that 'high-gloss' look.

"He's here everyday," commented Marriott Hotel General Manager, Al Edney. "The job he does for

his customer is a main factor. Once they try him, they usually come back."

"A shoe looks sad before I shine it, but when I finish, it smiles," Carey reflected.

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