

Outlook-26 APR

# Barber shop tradition

## *Brandon Lowe knows the history of local business*

BY KELLY MOYER-WADE  
staff writer

**F**or Brandon Lowe being a barber is more than just a job, it's a lifestyle.

"I love the sense of pride you get from doing this. You're part of such an old profession," Lowe says.

One of the oldest in the West, actually.

Lowe, 25, knows all about the history of barbering.

He points to the red, white and blue striped pole outside his downtown Gresham barbershop, Bon Ton Barbershop, and says barbers were the first surgeons.

"They pulled teeth, and I've heard they even did some blood-letting," Lowe says. "That's where the pole comes from. The red stands for blood, the blue for veins and the white is for bandages."

The history of the profession, mixed with family pride — his grandfather was also a barber — enticed Lowe to the world of barbering.

His goal was to open his own shop by the time he turned 25 and he met that goal this year when he bought one of downtown Gresham's oldest businesses.

The Bon Ton has been around since the early 1930s. Orville Wright bought the shop from its founder, Shorty Anderson, in 1937 and owned it until 1960, when Orville's son, Bob Wright, took over ownership. Bob sold to the previous owner, George Gurtner, about five years ago and Gurtner sold the Bon Ton to

### IF YOU GO

**What:** Bon Ton Barbershop

**Where:** 37 E. Powell Blvd., Gresham

**Owner:** Brandon Lowe

**Services:** Cuts for \$10, Shave for \$10 or a combination for \$18.

**For more information:**  
Call 503-665-2840

Lowe in August.

Lowe painted the stark white walls a cheerful, cherry red and hung a few black and white historical photos to add his personality to the place.

With its vintage barber chairs, gleaming straight razors and scrubbed sinks, the Bon Ton is straight out of America's past.

"Men come in and we talk about politics," Lowe says. "People used to get their news at the barbershops. Barbers knew everything because they'd pick up little pieces from all their customers."

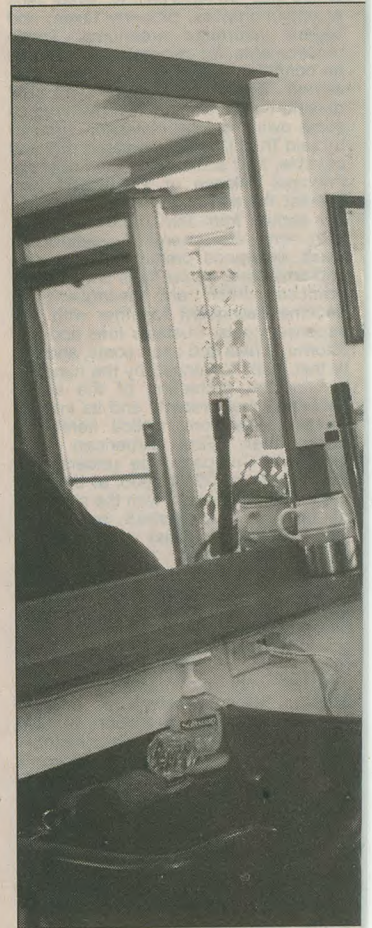
Being a barber means Lowe is licensed to use a straight razor for an old-fashioned shave. He cuts hair for men and children and has a couple female customers who want no-fuss haircuts.

In barber school, Lowe trained with a former Marine, and says he loves doing military cuts.

He invites young and old customers to come in for a \$10 haircut, a \$10 shave or an \$18 combination of the two.

In keeping with his pared-down style, Lowe offers a few quality hair products, such as Paul Mitchell and American Crew, but he keeps his prices very low.

"I've worked in chain shops, where there's so much pressure



**Brandon Lowe, owner of the Bon Ton Barbershop**  
Lowe bought the historic business

to sell the products, and I never liked that," Lowe says.

A very large bottle of Paul Mitchell shampoo, which might cost you more than \$25 in any other hair shop, costs just \$10 at the Bon Ton.

The prices, the vintage feel of the shop and Lowe's love of his profession may remind visitors of a time long past — when



# continues at Bon Ton



STAFF PHOTO BY CAROLE ARCHER

Bon Ton Barbershop in downtown Gresham, holds a straight razor in his shop Friday, April 21. The shop is open for business in August, and is licensed to use the razor for traditional shaves.

going out for a haircut was like going to visit an old friend.

It's appropriate that the Bon Ton is nestled in a strip of old-fashioned businesses off Powell Boulevard, near Gresham's historic Main Avenue.

"Being in this part of Gresham is great," Lowe says. "It has a nice, small town feel, which I like, and the business owners in

downtown are really friendly."

For some of Lowe's customers, going to the Bon Ton is a tradition.

"I have some customers who have been coming here since Orville Wright owned the place," Lowe says.



# Gresham barber keeps on cutting

8-25-75

When it comes to age, the Bon Ton is a cut above the other barber shops in town.

Established in 1935, it is the oldest barber shop in Gresham, according to its owner and resident barber, Bob Wright. Orville B. Wright, his father, purchased the shop in 1937, and it has been in the family ever since.

Wright, whose first enterprise was shining shoes in the original shop located on Main Street, never thought he'd follow in his father's footsteps.

"I gave a 15 cent shine in those days, and haircuts were 35 cents," Wright reflected.

"My father advised me to make up my own mind about a career," said Wright. After working at a number of jobs including a 13-mile postal route in Gresham and a Portland radio station, he decided to take up barbering.

Wright has no regrets about that decision. He finds barbering to be challenging and always interesting.

"It's really neat," he said. "I'm kind of a creative nut, myself. Every head of hair is different."

A barber can almost give a person a different personality by how the hair is shaped, Wright said. Head shape, hair condition, ears and personal preference are just a few of the factors to be taken into consideration if a satisfactory haircut is to be the final product.

Women's lib hasn't bothered Wright at all.

"Young women going into the barber business is great," he said. It's a good profession for them, he said. Some are extremely artistic. Wright said women barbers can give men an added perspective because they know better what hairstyles appeal to the opposite sex.

Wright has seen drastic changes in Gresham, framed by the Bon Ton's front window. "Gresham is here to stay,"

he said. At first he was afraid of growth after living in the town most of his life, but now has accepted change as better.

Proper planning has been a great asset to the city," he said. "We should be real proud of Gresham and the improvements that have been made in the core area."

Wright will be a first-time father in October. Four years ago, his mother, Austa B.

Wright, introduced him to the girl who lived in the apartment upstairs. Their common denominator was hairstyling as Linda is a beautician.

Wright and his family intend to stay in Gresham. In fact, they just bought a house on Towle Road. It stands near a tree where Wright used to rest and share his sandwich with a friendly dog after they completed the mail route.

## Gresham's Oldest Barber

1937



Alfred Berglund  
& Orville B. Wright

1975



Bob Wright George H. McAllister

George  
McAllister  
has been  
going to  
the Bon-  
Ton for  
38 years.

# BON-TON BARBER SHOP

45 N.E. 2nd.

Phone 665-2840



BON-TON Barber Shop - Men and Boys. Shave 25 cents. Hair cuts 35 cents. Shoe Shine 15 cents. This in 1933 when Shorty Anderson opened the BON-TON on Main Street, Gresham. Health conditions caused him to sell to Orville Wright in 1937.

The BON-TON was located in the old theater spot, next to Murphy's Tavern. The floor sloped as theater floors do. Through the shop and in back of it, Dorothy Stockton had a beauty shop. The barber shop had three chairs, a big <sup>wood</sup> pot-bellied stove that needed constant filling in the winter. It had hot water and plenty of towels, and a shoe shine stand where Bob Wright worked after school and Saturdays. Al Berglund was hired <sup>as</sup> to work the second <sup>Barber</sup> chair.

The BON-TON stayed in this location until 1948 at which time they moved to a building on Second on <sup>Walter</sup> Walten Hick's property. A week later, Mr. Wright had a stroke and was unable to work again. Al Berglund managed the shop for Mr. Wright.

In 1960 Bob Wright apprenticed to Mr. Berglund as was the law at that time.



Mr. Berglund died unexpectedly. Bob took the State Boards and became full-fledged barber. In 1986 the Hick's property was sold and the BON-T moved to its present location at 37 E. Powell. It is now business as usual Tuesday through Saturdays. Hair cuts \$8.00, Kids \$7.50.

The BON-TON has seen shaves become almost non-existent. Hair styles have gone from flat tops through duck tails, to hair hanging down to the hynie. Even a few ladies have ventured in. The BON-TON has made a good living for its owner for more than 60 years. It is an honorable business and we welcome Bob Wright who represents the BON-TON - Pioneer Business of the Year!



X A

As my father's pick-up truck rattled to a stop, my eyes came to rest on a worn building, painted that shade of red which is usually associated with old barns. I dropped myself onto the asphalt and scurried along on my short legs in order to keep up with my father's long strides. As he creaked open the door, I looked up and stared in fascination at the barber sign, painted with an unending pattern of red, white, and blue.

"Get in here, Gregory John!"

I hurried into the dark, cavernous shop. The smell of hairspray and shaving cream filled my nostrils. The salutation of the barber reached my ears, "Hi, Greg." Embarrassed, I stared at the ebony tile floor and mumbled a reply. I shuffled over and hopped up on a dusty chair beside my father, as conversations of the Blazers, taxes, and hardware floated by me unnoticed. I began searching the aged shop for some means of entertaining my youthful mind. My eyes roamed from the post cards tacked randomly to the wall by the door (the one with the topless Hawaiian woman on it was always particularly interesting to me) to the dusty window sill displaying a scattering of old rusty razors and scissors.

As I look back on my early childhood trips to the Bon Ton barber shop my most vivid memories, however, are of Bob, the barber. He was a skinny man who always seemed, to me at least, much older than he really was. I recently visited with Bob and he looked as though he had stepped directly out of my memories. His closely groomed hair, balanced delicately between his two, over-sized ears. His small nose surrounded by his glasses frames and thin mustache. And of course, Bob had a burgundy bow-tie on; Bob always had a bow-tie around his neck--as if he felt his fragile neck would snap if it wasn't constrained by a bow-tie.

Skip  
I sat, intending to talk to Bob about the history of the old Bon Ton building, but instead, stories of ~~an~~ old barber named Mr. Hall, who had once played semi-pro



baseball with the Portland Beavers popped up. "But, he wasn't that good," Bob made sure to <sup>emphasize</sup> ~~emphasis~~ as he jumped to a story about how the mirror in his father's old shop had a crack in it caused by Karie Nashon, a woman's advocate back in Kansas.

But eventually Bon Ton history became the focus of Bob's well practiced storytelling. Originally the Bon Ton was located at 111 North Main Street, next to where the ~~present~~ tavern is presently found. Started by Bob's father, Orville Wright (not of Kitty Hawk fame) in 1939, the location of the Bon Ton remained stationary until 1948 when it was moved to a new building on Second Street, scrunched between W.R. Hicks and Amaton Furniture. However, the elder Wright took ill and it was Bob's turn to take up the barber trade.

This was the Bon Ton that became a fixture in Gresham history. Unfortunately, I was a member of the last generation that had the grand experience of a "real" haircut in that wonderful old building. In 1986 the old Bon Ton was destroyed for an expanded parking lot, and Bob and the Bon Ton soon found itself a new niche in the newly remodeled Rexall Drug shopping mall.

I decided that a trip to the "new" Bon Ton was in order. <sup>As I entered,</sup> The bustling traffic noise of Powell Boulevard was replaced by the simple melody of a Carpenter's song playing on the radio. As I sat down <sup>next</sup> ~~next~~ to a man flipping through a National Geographic, I noticed that time seemed to have had little affect on the happenings of the Bon Ton. It had the same atmosphere as the Bon Ton of my childhood; as if an attempt had been made to clone the old one. There were signs of "progress" however; a T.V. in the corner, a radio, and there was even a "No Smoking Area" sign on the wall, which I found particularly humorous since the shop was no larger than my room at home.

The longer I stayed, the more I learned that the passage of time was of little concern to the people in the shop. The men waiting seemed contented--almost willing--to wait as long as necessary to get their haircut. The small town conversations



continued as if I was the only one who had aged since those early haircuts of years past. The Blazers and taxes were the topic of conversation as Bob and the other men helped an aged man named Gus out of the large, steel throne and into his wheel chair. The men treated this as a duty, rather than a burden. This small town motto of everyone helping one another was further accentuated as two customers argued over who was next. It wasn't "I'm next," rather they both insisted the other go first. As I sat in that old leather chair watching Bob scrounge through numerous bottles of pink, green, and white hair tonic, I realized that when I passed through the door I had entered another realm; <sup>one</sup> ~~One~~ that was years behind the modern world, but, quite possibly, more enjoyable.

As I got up to leave, a humorous conversation began between Bob and the man in the chair. Bob had said something about not wanting to take too much off because, "You can't put it back on once it's gone." The man replied, "Oh, it always ends up coming back...just not as much as before."

That statement pretty much summed up my feelings for the Bon Ton and my memories. Once they're gone, they're gone forever. To me the Bon Ton is one place I wish time would leave alone, but that's not realistic. So I'll just enjoy Bob and the Bon Ton while I can.

I just thoroughly  
enjoyed your paper,  
Greg. The voice, the  
images, the reality  
of it all works  
so well!



# Looking for Gresham's ears? Visit barber Bob



ROGER JENSEN/The Oregonian

Barber Robert L. Wright and his customer, Sidney Sinclair of Gresham, build rapport during a hair-cutting session at the Bon-Ton. The Gresham Historical Society named the barbershop "Pioneer Business of the Year."

*It's a tradition at the Bon-Ton, grab a chair, get a trim and shoot the breeze*

By **EUGENE RASHAD**  
*of The Oregonian staff*

**G**RESHAM — Longtime barber Robert L. Wright provides a way to understand how life in a community changes over time. Many people have shared reminiscences of Gresham's past as they sat in Wright's 50-year-old padded, red-leather barber chair. Most of his customers are local — but he has cut hair for a few folks from as far away as Astoria.

"To many of my customers, barbers are like counselors," he said. "It's that same level of trust."

Wright, 65, is the owner of the Bon-Ton Barbershop, 37 E. Powell Blvd. He has cut hair and listened to customers for almost 40 years.

The Gresham Historical Society recently named Wright's barbershop "Pioneer Business of the Year" for providing over 60 years of quality service to the community.

"I knew the old man, (Orville Wright) as well as Bobby," said Vern Cook, president of the society. "We called him Bobby because he was a few years younger than we were."

Cook said the continuity of maintaining the barbershop from one generation to another was a factor in the Bon-Ton's designation as a pioneer business.

"In the old days, a barbershop was a place where there

Please turn to  
**BARBER, Page 7**

*Oregonian (Metro East) Thursday, May 12, 1994 don't use*



# Barber: 1920's cash register still rings away

## ■ Continued from Page 1

was a lot of communication," said Cook, a lawyer, former legislator and longtime politician. "It was a place where people met each other and talked. And of course, barbers had a lot of time to listen. Some of them even ran for public office."

Wright's role can be compared to a village oral historian. He takes pride in knowing the importance of stories and folklore and passing it on to others.

His open face and thin ears have served as a sounding board for those who have come to know him because of his ability to listen and his desire to help.

"He's congenial, always smiling," said Boyd Northrup, 58, who drove from Rhododendron to Gresham for a hair cut.

Wright charges \$10 for a cut and he still rings it up on the 1920 Ohmer cash register that came with the shop when his father purchased the business back in 1937.

A haircut cost 35 cents in those days. Back then, the shop was located on Main Street, next to Murphy's Tavern.

Wright is an interesting man. He's a veteran of the World War II and after the war, he aspired to be a radio announcer.

"I wanted to get into commercial radio," he said.

He succeeded at that goal, working at KVAS 1230 on the AM dial doing news, sports and music. The G.I. Bill had paid for his schooling at Northwest Broadcast School in 1950.

Heagy, 64, who runs a jewelry store next door to the barbershop.

Wright has one of the town's best institutional memories, said another Gresham businessman.

"If you want to know when was a street put in, a hospital built, you ask Bob," said Ken Arends, an insurance agent two doors down from the barbershop.

## Water heater incident

Arends recalled a dramatic event in the barber's life.

"He came over one time when his hot-water tank blew and said 'Gosh, my hot water tank is leaking.'"

"Did you turn the water off,

Bob?" Arends said. "...Well, no. You can do that, eh?"

"That would be a good idea to turn the water off," Arends said he told his friend.

"I wonder how I'm going to get hot water?" was the barber's response, Arends recalls.

"You'll probably have to buy a new tank, Bob," Arends said.

"I suppose they'd charge" said the barber.

"Yeah, Bob," Arends told him.

"He's got a subtle sense of humor," Arends said. "He'll probably live to see a 100. Just like his mother."

But mishaps such as a failing water heater rarely interrupt the routine at the Bon-Ton. At the conclusion of most haircuts, Wright follows this system:

He places his right hand on the barber chair and turns it enough to put the finishing touches on the client's head. He brushes particles of hair from the man's ears and shoulders.

Wright plans to continue serving as a repository for local history. He's one who remembers. Cutting hair and listening is the defining moment for the barber people call Bob.

"As long as I can enjoy people, I'll continue to cut hair," he vows.



### Family arrives in 1937

Wright's father was a barber when the family moved from California to Gresham in 1937. Bob Wright attended Gresham schools during the 1940s and worked a summer job in the Gresham Berry Growers processing plant. But it wasn't until years after his father died in 1952 that Wright looked seriously at becoming a barber.

"Dad never talked to me about cutting hair," he said.

Wright enrolled in Moler Barber College on the G.I. Bill. He served as an apprentice with Al Berglund. After taking the state examination, Wright received his barber's license.

The barbershop was located on Second Street when Berglund was the barber. He had managed it after Orville Wright suffered a stroke. In 1986, Bob Wright took over the operation and moved to the present location on East Powell Boulevard.

As far as the business goes, Wright has seen barbers fall by the wayside.

"It's a very competitive business," he said. Part of the competition came from salons that operated after hours.

And when the State Barber Board merged with the Board of Cosmetologists and Hairdressers, the face of the business changed forever, he said.

"They said the move was necessary to save money by creating one craft," Wright said.

As late as the early 1960s, he said, short hair was in, long hair out.

"The popular cut back then for men was hair combed across with a light shadow and sideburn on the sides," he said.

Today, styles run the gamut — flat tops to duck tails to tassles hanging clear down to mid-back.

In the Bon-Ton, six chairs line the west wall of the shop for customers waiting for a haircut. The barber chair is just off center of the shop. A large plant — a gift from a customer — graces one corner.

A shoulder-level mirror on the wall reflects the many faces that have come to the shop over the years.

"He's a funny little guy who works his butt off," said Miles C.



## cal organic gardener

If customers of the Bon Ton barber shop in downtown Gresham were to stay in the shop after their haircuts, they would probably find barber Bob Wright saving their hair in a container in the back room.

Wright is saving the hair for Linda Carpenter, who is

planning to use the hair as fertilizer in the garden of her family's home in Gresham.

Miss Carpenter said she got the idea from Organic Gardening magazine, which said hair was "about 10 times as potent as manure" when used as fertilizer.

"Besides," said Linda, "it is easier to handle."

Apparently the idea of using hair as fertilizer isn't an entirely new one. Mrs. Bertha Smith, 78, of The Village at 180th and Powell, said her father told her never to burn hair, but to bury it.

"Hair is pure protein and is good for the soil," said Mrs. Smith.

Miss Carpenter hasn't had a chance to reap the benefits of her new method of fertilization as of yet. She mixed the hair in with a compost pile and the hammer mill she uses on the compost is presently broken.

June 1972

## Barber saves hair for lo





**THE HAIR** that Gresham barber Bob Wright cuts from Gil Lehr's head will go to fertilizing the garden of Linda Carpenter, Gresham.



**RECYCLING HAIR?** Bob Wright, owner of the Bon Ton barber shop in Gresham shows the hair that he is saving for Linda Carpenter which will be used for fertilizer.

(Outlook photo)



**LINDA CARPENTER** found an article in Organic Gardening which said that hair was an excellent fertilizer. She plans to use hair in the garden of her family's home in Gresham.