

FUTURE OF THE MARKET: WESTERN MEMORABILIA

Rockmount still sets standard for cowboy couture

By Caroline Ashleigh

From the minute I slipped into my miniature cowgirl ensemble and sashayed onto the playground as a little tyke, I felt, instantly, like a larger-than-life character. Such an outfit has the power to transform you: It was a two-piece bright turquoise gabardine riding outfit, accented with gold leather and rhinestones. It came with a hat, split-fringed skirt, holster, play pistol, belt, bandera, boots, and spurs that went jingle, jangle, jingle. When I wore it, I exuded attitude and style. It seemed to create an aura that made all of the other little buckarettas and buckaroos feel like they were in the presence of the newly crowned Queen of Cowgirl Couture.

That's when I fell in love with fancy Western clothes. It's turned into a life-long love affair.

Fast forward to the summer of 2009 in Denver. An Antiques Roadshow event drew an unexpected surprise, one that stirred up the cowgirl in me. On a hot, sultry, summer evening in late July, I was invited to attend a private party by Steven E. Weil, president of Rockmount Ranch Wear Manufacturing Co. at his three-generation-owned family business, located in a red brick warehouse in the LoDo district of Denver for over 62 years.

It was there that I had the privilege of meeting Steven, the grandson of the legendary "Papa Jack" Weil, maker of iconic western wear worn around the world, who held the title of the oldest living CEO until his death in 2008, at 107 years of age.

Not unlike my own experience wearing Western wear as a little tyke, Steven began modeling Western wear as an infant in fashion shows. His love for vintage Western wear began in high school when he raided his grandfather's closet for shirts from the 1940s. And that's probably when he fell, cowboy-hat-over-heels, for Western wear, which turned into a lifelong love affair. Today, as president of the company, he is responsible for all design lines and operations, and could easily lay claim to the title as the current King of Cowboy Couture.

As Steven points out in his book titled, *Ask Papa Jack*, "We live and learn from stories in a way far more deeply than any other way short of actual experience." In an era when storytelling is becoming a vanishing art, I was mesmerized listening to Steven talk about his family business that started in the West, and how this original regional market would one day span the globe.

I was fascinated to learn that during the Great Depression in 1935, Papa Jack went into the business of Western wear, and the strategy worked, even in the worst of economic times. Rockmount prospered during the 1940s, as the rural West fared better than large urban areas.

Colleen Long of the Associated Press wrote in a syndicated news story appearing in the Los Angeles Times in 2001, "Rockmount Ranch Wear Ropes in Clients by Bucking Retail Trendiness." Rockmount today is still roping in clients and bucking trends in the second-worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Rockmount is the quintessential American success story. Papa Jack proudly stated in an interview with CNN in March 2001, at the age of 100, "We take pride in making it in this country. We would like very much to make it all in this country. It's a philosophy of self-preservation in this country, our way of life. If the people in this country earn their money here, and live here, there's a pretty good chance they will buy some of our products."

Steven adds, "Holding on to our roots at Rockmount became our salvation. Now we are virtually the last guys standing." They are not only the last guys standing, but they are continuing to prosper.

Steven reminisces, "Back in the early '80s, I was browsing through a Los Angeles vintage store on Melrose, and found a brown gabardine shirt that was so old at first I didn't recognize it as Rockmount. It dated from the 1940s and was marked \$75, which was twice the price of Rockmount shirts then. I told the retailer it was one of the first Western shirts my grandfather had made. Touched, he told me to take the shirt and send him a couple of new ones for it. Excited by the find, I didn't wait until returning home to tell my grandfather. In those pre-cell-phone days, I found a phone booth and called the office. 'WHAT?' Papa exclaimed, 'you traded two perfectly good new shirts for an old one we sold for \$3 forty years ago?'" Fast forward to February 2006. Rockmount shirts that were worn in the movie *Brokeback Mountain* sell for \$101,000 on eBay.

Even though I do not fit the celebrity status as some of Rockmount's clients — such as Elvis Presley, Robert Redford, David Bowie, Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton — after visiting Steven's shop in Denver, there was only one thing I could do. Before sidling up to the bar with my fellow appraisers on Antiques Roadshow in Denver, I got decked out in full Western regalia: my fringed black and silver studded cape, sterling silver snaffle-buckled belt, my rhinestone-encrusted spurred stilettoes, and my boldly colored Rockmount shirt with smile pockets, embroidered arrows, piping, enamel snaps, and tiered fringe. And just like that, I was transported back to the playground with all my little buckaroo buddies. I'm still in love with fancy cowboy clothes and spurs that go jingle, jangle, jingle.

As Steven Weil points out in his book, *Western Shirts – A Classic American Fashion*, there is no consistent standard for pricing vintage clothes. Factors such as demand, condition, rarity, as well as original packaging affect the price. "New/old" is a rarified category highly sought after by collectors. This is the "dead stock" that has escaped the ravages of time. Sometimes it is found in wholesale quantities — forgotten in storage — or it surfaces as a single piece that was put away new and never worn.

The modern-day master tailor who brought mass-media attention and razzle-dazzle to the Western-wear scene was





a Russian immigrant by the name of Nuta Kotlyarenko, better known as Nudie Cohn (1902-1984), a.k.a. “King of the Cowboy Couturiers,” “Dior of the Sagebrush,” and “The Original Rhinestone Cowboy.” Cohn influenced the Western-wear industry for nearly 40 years, whipping up costumes for Hank Williams, Hopalong Cassidy, Clayton Moore, Ronald Reagan, Liberace, Elton John, the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley, among others.

In 1957, he was commissioned to create the most expensive suit he had ever made: a 14k gold lame outfit bejeweled with 10,000 rhinestones. Over the years, Nudie is said to have sold Elvis \$100,000 worth of clothes, today worth \$400,000-\$500,000.

Another immigrant who created a market niche was Nathan Turk from Minsk, Poland. Beginning in the 1930s, movie studios began commissioning Turk to design costumes for Westerns. By the 1940s, Western musicians began frequenting Turk’s shop in Van Nuys, Calif. He created the blueprint for most of the successful country bands: a unique ensemble for group leaders to set them apart, with the advertising slogan, “With real western wear from the movies.”

The original cost of a Western garment is in direct proportion to the volume produced. Tailor-made shirts by Rodeo Ben and Nudie Cohn were quite expensive and out of the reach of the public when new. These early designs were “one-off” custom makes for celebrities like

Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. Later they went to limited production runs but remained much more expensive than production-made garments. By the same token, the more expensive the ready-to-wear garment, the lower the volume in which it was produced. It is not uncommon to find only a single surviving example of the best highly stylized designs.

Generally, today’s pricing seems to fall into four ranges:

\$300+: extremely fine, rare, ornate shirts.

\$100-\$300: highly ornate embroideries, pre-1960.

\$25-\$100: nicely detailed basic shirts in good vintage fabrics, pre-1970.

Less than \$25: generic, mass-produced commodity styles, including imports, since 1970s.

Note: Pricing changes along with trends, so these figures have a limited window of accuracy.

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