

Tannery On Banks Of The River Aids 'New Clothing Integrity'

By GRANT HARDEN
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SANTA CRUZ — For more than a century the manufacture of leather has been an important industry in Santa Cruz County.

And perched along the banks of the San Lorenzo River in Santa Cruz is the Salz Tannery which has been turning out leather since it was founded by Jacob F. Kron in April, 1865.

The tannery has had its ups and downs over the past ten decades, or so, but business has never been as good as it is today.

The tannery, located at 1040 River St., turns out between 1,500 to 1,700 finished hides a day, supplying a nation and a world that has acquired an almost insatiable appetite for things leather.

Norman Lezin, president of the firm and son-in-law to Ansley K. Salz, whose San Francisco-based family firm purchased the tannery from Kron in 1918, credits most of the new interest in real leather to today's youth.

"It's been young people and their interest in ecology and a return to a more natural, closer to nature, as well as to a new integrity of things," said Lezin. "Interest in ecology has been building for the last ten years," Lezin notes.

The Salz Tannery for 1965 was grossed about \$1 million in 1964. This year the firm expects gross business between \$12 to \$13 million.

The tannery, which was first incorporated in 1866 was valued at \$100,000. In 1929, when Ansley Salz took over the management and operation

of the tannery, it was incorporated at \$280,000.

In the last two years, Lezin said, the volume of business has nearly doubled at the tannery.

The tannery sells three quarters of its hides to manufacturers of boots, belts and shoes.

Among its clients are Buxton Belts of Los Angeles, Nunn Buch Shoes of Milwaukee, International Shoes of St. Louis and Redwing Shoes of Redwing, Minn.

Salz leather goes into the manufacture of luggage, hand bags, shoes, boots, belts, attache cases and covers for baseballs.

Ed Gaines, the firm's sales manager and personnel director, said the firm purchases its hides from packing houses from San Jose to Fresno, including such coast counties firms as San Jose Meat, Walti-Schilling of Santa Cruz and Salinas Dressed Beef.

People who work at the tannery — some 270 today, versus 80 ten years ago — appear to like their work, hard as some phases of it may be.

But then, Lezin and Gaines operate what is termed "a loose shop," with informality a major ingredient.

The company, for instance, prides itself on being "a truly equal opportunity employer." It has black and Chicano employees in key positions, most of whom were trained on the job.

In the summer, it hires the children of company employees to work around the plant. And company picnics are the rule, not the exception.

In fact, it was a summer job for Lezin's son Jerry that put the company into the retail business.

Five years ago Lezin turned an old storeroom in the plant over to his son Jerry, suggesting he try to sell some of the waste trimmings of leather to the community's new breed of craft-minded youngsters. Jerry set up a shop which he called "The Dead Cow."

"I noticed Jerry was beginning to live high on the hog but I didn't pay much attention to it," Lezin said musingly, "until one day I discovered he had purchased one of those moderately expensive foreign cars.

"That's when I eased Jerry out, so to speak, and we began to deal in the retail market in a serious way."

The Dead Cow is expected to gross between \$250,000 to \$300,000 this year.

The plant, which looks pretty much as it did fifty years ago, operates three shifts a day.

Steer and cow hides are fragile things and must be processed the same day they are received from the meat packing plants. When they are first received they are soaked in a chemical solution and "flashed" — the hair removed.

Still wet, the hides are graded and stacked for splitting in a machine that

splits the hide in two. Hides are then dyed or called for by the orders, dried and then coated with a polydye and dried again.

"The demand for leather is a worldwide phenomenon," said Lezin.

"This is reflected in a shortage of hides. The cost of raw materials for hides has tripled in the last year."

Business and interest in leather has improved much the Dead Cow. The tannery's retail store, now an annual leather fair in May.

Last May's fair drew nearly 10,000 people and nearly 50,000 feet of sold.



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