

Trading suits for a collar

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By LAURIE SLOTHOWER

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — In a way, Peter Schipper has always been a man of the cloth.

The lanky Santa Cruz haberdasher worked at his father's Schipper-Dillon clothing store when he was attending Santa Cruz High School. He's worked there ever since, becoming its president in 1978.

But the market has changed. Small, independent stores face stiff competition from chain-store outlets. Discount houses and teen clothing stores abound. Faced with what he calls "the writing on the wall," Schipper is closing the business and hopes to go to seminary school next fall to become a minister.

The store at 1224 Pacific Ave. will shut its doors in January, Schipper said Saturday. The owners of Palace Stationery two doors down plan to redecorate and move in sometime in February, according to Palace Manager Mabel Smith.

Next fall, Schipper wants to attend the Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary in Colorado, trading in his Arrow shirts for ministerial robes. He and his wife, Jeri Beth, will live there for three years while Schipper works on his master of divinity degree.

And after that?



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Peter Schipper will close doors of Schipper-Dillon.

"I might end up back here. Who knows?" said Schipper, 50. "This is something I've wanted to do for years."

Schipper-Dillon was one of the oldest family-run businesses on the Pacific Garden Mall. A number of factors have spurred Schipper to close it.

First, while the store was not losing money, it wasn't making as much as it had in previous years. "Operating expenses were up while profits were down," he said.

Across the country, independently owned retail stores are closing,

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Man of the cloth

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Schipper said. "The old guard, like us, are dying, and it's not just in Santa Cruz."

Last year, Schipper joined a buying group of consisting of 27 independently owned stores. Six have since gone out of business.

The hot retail stores are chains like Benetton, Aca Joe, The Gap, and The Express Ltd. — specialty stores "that are big, have a lot of energy, and a lot of money behind them."

One newsmagazine called stores such as these — which sell mix and match outfits geared to teens — "cookie-cutter outlets," their merchandise as indistinguishable from store to store as Big Macs.

Local preferences for casual clothing also worked against the store. Schipper-Dillon carried clothing for older, more conservative men, and Santa Cruz just isn't a suit-and-tie kind of town.

"People here like to dress laid-back. We tried to keep up with the times but we weren't on the cutting edge," he said.

Schipper noted that, nationally, sales of suits have increased over the past three years, but not in Santa Cruz.

In addition, customers who were his father's contemporaries have retired. They don't need tweed blazers and ties anymore. "My father retired and moved to Placerville. He's worn a suit once in three years."

These days, he added, nobody buys anything unless it's on sale.

The soft-spoken, nattily dressed businessman did not blame street people for his decision to quit the

business.

Transients have been hanging around the Mall for 10 years, he said, and yet in 1981, Schipper-Dillon had its best year ever.

"You hear people say they don't come downtown anymore, but you never know how much that translates to dollars and cents," Schipper said.

Schipper's father, Ted, and his uncle, Ernest Dillon, advertised their business as a "Modern Store...for Style-Minded Men" when it opened in 1948.

Radio station KSCO broadcast the opening-day festivities, which included a talent show and five-piece orchestra. The mayor and the president of the Chamber of Commerce were on hand to welcome the venture.

The building was destroyed in the 1955 flood and reopened four months later with an expanded line of merchandise.

In the 1950s there were seven stores downtown selling men's clothing — "and we all made a nice living at it," Schipper said.

Schipper, who earned his first pay-

check at his father's store stacking pants, took over as general manager in 1975, when Dillon retired. When his father retired in 1981, Schipper became a second-generation owner.

A religious conversion he experienced 10 years ago led him to think about becoming a minister.

"I had a drinking problem and was very unsatisfied with my life," Schipper said. "I knew I needed something to balance the negativity in my life."

"My wife and I decided to go to church. And you know, when you're ready to hear the truth, you understand it for what it is."

The Schippers became Christians and attend Twin Lakes Baptist Church.

In the past five years Schipper said he's felt called to study the Bible and help people. Seminary school beckoned, but "back then, I was 45. The thought of it scared me to death."

"Now, it's gotten to the point when I can't not do it."

Crowds line up for store's last sale

By RICHARD EMANUEL
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SANTA CRUZ — Thursday was a bittersweet day for Peter Schipper.

Business at his Schipper-Dillon clothing store was "incredible," he says. But the reason for it was his going-out-of-business sale.

After 39 years, the family-run Santa Cruz business is closing its doors. The sale, which began Thursday, will continue until all the merchandise is gone.

Scores of people lined up outside the Pacific Avenue store Thursday morning and a uniformed, private security guard sat at the door.

"We had to feed them in a few at a time until 11 o'clock," Schipper said. "I didn't know there were this many people in Santa Cruz."

Business has slackened in the last year or two,

and Schipper says he's ready for a change of vocation. Next fall, he plans to enroll in a Baptist seminary in Denver, Colo.

"People say they're sorry to see the store go, and we're sorry to see it go, too," Schipper says. "But the reaction has been very encouraging to me personally."

Friends greeted each other across the racks of suitcoats, and longtime customers exchanged words with Schipper. The tall, smiling Schipper, 50, looked relaxed as a middle-aged man raised a suitcoat on a hanger and said, "Couldn't get out of here, Peter!"

Many of the shoppers said they'd been coming to the store 10, 20, 30 or more years. Schipper's father, Ted, and his uncle, Ernest Dillon, founded the business 39 years ago.

A woman squeezed Schipper's arm. "This is a sad sight," she said, edging behind him, heading for a display.