

100-year-old Dick's Menswear in Fresno's Chinatown to close

By Bethany
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A landmark in Chinatown, Dick's Menswear is closing in Chinatown, after a hundred years. Video by John Walker
THE FRESNO BEE

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A slice of Fresno history is coming to an end: Dick's Menswear in Chinatown will close May 15 after 100 years.



The seller of [Pendleton](#) shirts, Stetson hats and suspenders — both casual and dressy — at 1526 Kern St. is more than just a store. It's been a hangout for gentlemen of a certain age for decades, including occasional visits from Fresno's most famous son, author William Saroyan. But the man most people associate with Dick's is Dick Avakian, who ran the store his father founded for 58 years before his death in 2009.



Ofelia Hemme, 56, took over Dick's 11 years ago. She also runs Ofelia's & Sons Barbershop and the newly opened Mexican restaurant Ofelia's Cocina across the street. She's a Chinatown fixture herself, a Mexican immigrant who came to the U.S. at age 14 — “no mama, no papa” — and worked her way to being a business owner.

Avakian was a regular customer at Hemme's barbershop. He was somewhere around age 90 and still running Dick's when they got to talking about the store's future during a haircut. He had already turned down several offers from other people to take over the store.

He said to Hemme, “Why don't you take over?”

“I know nothing about clothing,” she said.

“He says, ‘I'll teach you.’ ”

He did and she's been running Dick's ever since. The store is a throwback to a time when everybody came downtown to shop, when Gottschalks had a big store on the Fulton Mall and Aki Hardware was open next door to Dick's.

Peggy and Jim Riley, both in their 70s, stopped by Dick's on Monday. They live in the River Park area now, but they remember coming to Dick's as children.

“In our childhood our parents would come on Sundays because it was the only thing open,” Peggy Riley said. “We're sad. It's a part of history.”

They left Monday with two discounted hats for Jim Riley — a felt Pendleton and a straw Stetson. (“He came from nothing, so this is a treat,” Peggy said.)

She and others remember Avakian, and the others who came in to shoot the breeze: police captains, fire chiefs, the man behind Lamoure's Cleaners and former Congressman Tony Coelho.

They bought clothes and hats and shoes, and today the best seller is the \$125 Stacy Adams dress boot called

Madison. Its tag says the design hasn't changed since 1875.

"They call it the 'old man shoe,'" Hemme said.

Dick's is closing May 15 — or maybe sometime later that weekend — not because sales are dropping, but because Hemme said her 16-hour days six days a week are just too much. She's been feeling that way for a while now, but cringed at the thought of shutting down a business so close to being a century old.

"Three years ago I said, 'I can't take it. I can't take it,'" she said. But "I had to make it to 100."

A picture of Avakian hangs front and center in the store. Hemme talks to him sometimes. And sometimes it feels like he's talking to her. In the mornings, she unlocks the door with thoughts of shutting down the business.

"Outside I say, 'I'm leaving,'" she said. "I come inside, I'm like, 'No.'" "

Some things haven't changed in the 100 years since Dick's opened. The store is still a hangout. Two chairs just inside the front door host all kinds of visitors. Hemme's husband, Earl, occupied one of them on a recent morning, popping up to help out a man with his bags.

"Let me help this young man here," he said about a customer who was 91.

On their way out the door, Ofelia Hemme called out: "You enjoy your zapatos."

But other things have changed. Chinatown and downtown aren't the go-to places for shopping anymore. Just a stone's throw away from Dick's, trucks are moving dirt at what will become California's high-speed rail line. Hemme opened her Mexican restaurant earlier this year.

And when her employee at Dick's left a few months ago and the business hit the 100-year mark, she decided to close it. Running three businesses is just too much, she said. She tried to sell Dick's, but no one had enough money to buy out her merchandise, she said.

She'll continue to take special orders for hats and shoes from the barbershop.

But it's the restaurant she started early this year that she wants to focus on. Ofelia's Cocina is a little place behind Central Fish that serves authentic Mexican food and a few American dishes.

Breakfast burritos are served all day, "just like Denny's," Hemme said. The sweet mole sauce and the chile relleno are her mother's recipes and menudo and posole are served on weekends.

It's open for breakfast and lunch starting at 7 a.m. weekdays (closed Tuesdays) and at 8 a.m. on weekends so Hemme can sleep in an hour.

She's got plenty of experience in the kitchen. She started working when she was 14, fibbing about her age. It was the same year she left her parents in Mexico to visit her 30-something brother.

"I came over when I was 14 and I liked it and I stayed," she said. "My dream was to own a house."

She's worked at just about every restaurant in the neighborhood, including the former San Carlos Cafe and Chihuahua Tortillas. The tortilla factory sold to-go food, but Hemme made corn and flour tortillas on the factory side.

She eventually bought her first house and became a citizen. Now, she's got four kids, nine grandchildren and owns four houses — renting several of them out — and the three businesses.

Over the years people have tried to lure the store and her away. One new Hanford shopping center offered her a \$40,000 discount on rent. But the store has stayed put.

And so is Hemme.

“I just feel like I have to stay here,” she said. “I’m crazy for Chinatown.”

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