

On the Barber  
Robert S. Griffin  
[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

The barber was born in rural Georgia in 1890. He had little formal schooling. As a teenager, he sold his share of the small peanut farm passed down to him by his father to his two older sisters and set out to make his way in the world. He went to barber school--he never said where it was--and worked as a barber on a troop ship crisscrossing the Atlantic during World War I. Then it was barbershops in Nebraska and Illinois, and perhaps other places, and then, around 1920, to Saint Paul, Minnesota, where he never left. Nebraska could have been before the war. After the barber died, which was four years after his wife died, one of his sisters revealed that he had been married when he was in Nebraska. His second family was very surprised to learn that. As far as anyone knows, there were no children from this first marriage.

After working in a multi-barber shop in South Saint Paul, a working class suburb of Saint Paul, the barber worked alone, first at the Saint Francis Hotel in Saint Paul, and then in his own shops in downtown Saint Paul and in the eastern part of that city.

In contrast to the barbers that had come before, the barber's generation were serious tradesmen—at least in Minnesota they were. They were licensed. They had an active union that set prices and regulated its members. They emphasized dignity, courtesy, sobriety, efficiency, and hygiene. No cigar smoke and ashes on the floor. No bawdy talk. Proper decorum. The barber's shears, razors, comb—always an Ace brand comb—and clippers—always an Oster brand—were kept properly sterilized.

The large front window of the barber's shop with its conservative lettering announcing the name of the shop was sparkling clean, as was the ceiling-to-floor mirror on the wall opposite the row of stiff-backed chrome chairs with their vinyl-covered seats and backs for customers waiting their turn to be served. Checkered linoleum floors, spotless; the cut hair swept up at every opportunity. On the ceiling, light bulbs hidden by porcelain fixtures; no dust, ever. Small tables on either side of the row of waiting chairs with the

day's newspaper and popular magazines—"The Saturday Evening Post," "Life," and "Look." No off-color magazines; not even hunting and fishing magazines. On the wall, a calendar advertising a bank with a pastoral scene; nondescript, benign, hardly noticeable. No pin-up calendars as in previous times. Attached to the outside of the shop, about three feet high, a slowing-turning, glass-encased barber pole that gave the impression of white, red, and blue stripes spiraling upward. The barber bought his own pole for the last two shops, the ones he owned.

Center stage, as it were, the barber chair (or, in some shops, two or three chairs, with the owner or senior barber taking the one nearest the door)--large, impressive, a throne of sorts. High quality chrome; a large, sturdy circular base flaring at the bottom; top grade leather-covered and cushioned seats and back- and arm-rests; hydraulically adjustable to accommodate a customer's height. The barber bought his own chair for the shops he owned.

When there was no one waiting when the barber finished a customer, he would lock the barber chair into place and sit in one of the waiting chairs glancing through the day's sports results in the newspaper. When a new customer—always men--entered the shop and hung his suit coat and hat (in those years men wore fedora hats, suede or felt with wide brims all around snapped forward in front) and, in the colder months, his outer coat on the tall chrome rack, the barber would rise and would come to attention by the barber chair, standing tall to his full 5'7"—though never in a hurried or abrupt way; the barber was always controlled, serene in a way. The barber was immaculately groomed: his thinning hair, with a sheen from a noticeable amount of hair tonic, precisely parted slightly to the left of center; sparkling clean rimless conservative eyeglasses; dress shoes highly polished; a spotless white smock, or, in later years, a clean, freshly pressed and starched white shirt and a conservative tie with a double Windsor knot; sharply pressed dress pants of dark blue or black. When it was sunny through the window, a green plastic eyeshade.

The barber gestured respectfully to the customer to take a seat on the barber chair—on the seat of honor, really. Once the customer seated himself, the barber would noiselessly pump the chair to the

appropriate height and adjust the neck- and foot-rests. Like a matador with his cape, he would swirl an immaculate white, sometimes striped, sheet-like cloth in a wide swing so that it fell gently around the customer's torso, arms, and upper legs and back and pinned it at the nape of the neck. So that hair would not get on the customer's neck, a three-inch-wide white gauze neck-strip, also secured at the nape. The barber would then wash his hands at the sink near the mirror and dry them. Only then would he turn the customer to face the mirror and ask quietly: "So—what'll it be?" Or, for the regulars: "The usual?"

The barber was polite, reserved, modest, and somewhat removed, although without being standoffish. During his time there was a semi-official text of the barbering trade entitled *The Art and Science of Barbering*. It seems unlikely that the barber read it, he was not a reader, but nevertheless it appears he took its precepts to heart. Among them: be a good listener; don't be opinionated; and don't give advice.

A fair number of the barber's customers came for a shave along with their haircut. For that, the barber would take a fresh white terry-cloth towel from a neatly folded stack on a small table next to the sink and run it under hot water until it was just the right temperature—hot but not too hot. The barber returned to the chair and tipped it back so that the customer was almost prone. The barber wrapped the customer's entire face in the towel for several minutes to soften the beard—just the nose exposed to allow for breathing. For the customer, engulfed in the warmth and blackness, with nothing to do but lay back and let go, it was a welcome respite from the world. For the shave, the barber used a straight razor and lather brush and mug. He took pride in being able to shave equally well with both his right and left hands. After the shave, soothing lotion. When the customer left, the barber sharpened the razor with a three-inch-wide leather strap—called a strop—that hung from a hook next to the sink.

The barber's customers were virtually all adults, but there were a few boys (never girls). The barber had the smaller boys sit on a 1X8-inch painted board that rested on the barber chair arm-rests to prop them up high enough to work on. The barber's son recalls that

the children just about always were around two or three or four years old—he remembers very few who were eight or ten or twelve. And invariably, it seems in retrospect, these little tykes didn't like what was going on a bit, and squirmed and cried in escalating intensity throughout their haircuts. Their parent--most often the father, every once in a great while the mother--would stand beside the chair trying to reassure and calm the red-faced, distressed little flailer while the barber worked his clippers, comb, and shears the best he could given the moving target. Thinking back on it, the barber's son wonders why the very young ages, and why getting a haircut was such an aversive experience for these little souls. Perhaps the noisy clippers were scary. In any case, no matter how loud and frenzied the crying and spasmodic the contractions, the barber never departed from his calm, pleasant, vaguely removed persona. Nothing ever, apparently anyway, with children or adults, rattled the barber in the least.

The barber never worked less than ten hours a day, from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. or fewer than six days a week, Monday through Saturday. He combated foot fatigue by wearing comfortable shoes and standing with his feet shoulder width apart and distributing his weight evenly from heel to toe. Especially as he grew older, his shoulders throbbed at the end of the day from holding his arms up from early morning to evening, but he would ask his wife to spread on some smelly balm he bought at the drug store, and back in the shop first thing in the morning he would be. His last year, the cancer that had spread forced him to use a high stool to cut hair and shave because he could no longer stand for more than a few minutes at a time.

At the end of each day, after he cleaned up the shop and got it ready for the next day, the barber took the streetcar, and later the bus, home to his wife and son, arriving a little after 7:00 p.m. He ate dinner with his wife around 7:30—his son had eaten earlier—and he was in bed by 10:00. Once or twice a year he would bring his barber tools home in a black satchel, and then after dinner go to a funeral home to give one of his customers their last haircut and shave.

The barber practiced his trade for almost sixty years. For almost sixty years, the barber did the very best he could. He completed each task; he never hurried a customer along. His son, who knew of him the last twenty years of his life, cannot recall him missing a single day of work. The barber's one vacation those last twenty years was a long weekend train trip to Chicago and Milwaukee to see major league baseball games. Unfortunately, the Milwaukee game rained out.

The barber could never afford a car, or a house; all his life he rented. The son remembers the barber paying the rent first to "Mr. Kammer" and then to "Mr. Jensen." The barber's income was whatever was left in the cash register at the end of the day, and sometimes it was very little. The barber never had enough money to open up a savings account, and he never had a checking account. When he died, at 74, still cutting hair, propped up high on the stool, his only possessions beyond his barber pole and chair and his barbering tools were some clothes, a few pieces of old furniture, and the money in his pocket—a few dollar bills and some change.

The son cannot recall a time when his father complained about his lot in life, or a time when he extolled any aspect of his existence, professional or personal. The barber seemed to go through life without comment; or at least external comment, one can never be sure what he thought inwardly about his life. However the barber may have seen life when he was young and just leaving the Georgia farm to confront the world, it appears that for him existence had come down to doing the thing right in front of him the best he could, and then the next thing, and then the next and the next and the next, until, in 1964, next things ran out and eternity began.