

# City slickers mosey around in cowboy duds

By D. Eric Kircher

The "Urban Cowboy" look — where even people who never have been near a horse or cow wear Western-styled clothing — may have peaked on the coasts, but managers of Western specialty stores in Lincoln are planning on at least one more year of large sales before any decline.

"It's holding its own," said Con Schleiger, manager and buyer for Lincoln Army & Western Wear. "I don't think it's going to last over a couple of years."

Linda Wohlfarth, a manager and buyer for Fort Western & Supply, said she expects the current boom to last this year and the next before it levels off. The Wohlfarths are expanding their store to handle the increased business. Wohlfarth said her family has doubled the floor area since the specialty store opened several years ago.

"Certain people will change with fads," said Mark France, manager of Indian Village Western Shop, "but some will recognize the value and continue to buy western clothes."

Wohlfarth said Fort Western customers include "real cowboys, urban cowboys" and horse show riders.

At least 60 percent of Lincoln Army & Western Wear's customers are farmers and ranchers, Schleiger said, but the rest are executives, professors, clerks, and college students. Even foreign students have started to go western, he said.

## Everyone buying boots

"It's caught on all over," Schleiger said. "Everyone is buying boots."

All the kids from 16 on up to 70 or 75 are wearing them."

France said businessmen, the nine-to-fivers, state employees and students, as well as working cowboys are buying western clothing and accessories.

"Along with the western fashion, people are going back to the good clean fun," France said. "The square dance department is just going bananas. The square dance department is our calling card." The store stocks the fancy wear required for these social occasions, including frilly dresses and petticoats.

But the dancing usually attributed with starting the national trend toward western was done by John Travolta in the movie *Urban Cowboy*.

"Fashion has turned western since *Urban Cowboy*," The Gateway Western manager Kay Williamson said. The store gave away sneak-preview tickets when *Urban Cowboy* came to Lincoln and placed some store merchandise

in the theater window. She said people came to the store after seeing the movie.

## Travolta boot

"That is the boot that John Travolta wore," Williamson said, pointing to a golden tan boot with dark toe tips and uppers. She said the store sells many pairs of that style.

Cowboy boots cost between \$30 and \$300 (or even higher by special order), but most pairs cost about \$100. The well-heeled urban cowboy can be well-shod by paying \$275 for a pair of genuine ostrich leather boots with a pattern of raised bumps marking where the quills protruded when the ostrich wore the leather.

Prospective purchasers should hurry to buy their exotic leather boots though, because the supply of exotic leathers is finite, while demand, if it isn't infinite, at least is heavy. Williamson said she received a letter from Tony Lama, a famous Texan boot manufacturer, advising the store to not even order ostrich leather boots for a year and a half.

For those not willing to settle for cowhide, boot makers are sewing up boots from iguana lizard skin, elephant ear leather, eel skin, sharkskin, ostrich leg skin, python skins, elk and bull hide.

Wohlfarth said she has some customers who have boots covered with every different leather. They will buy boots sewn from exotic leathers as soon as the boots arrive at the store.

## Out of state orders

Along with Sandhills ranchers who fly into Lincoln twice a year to shop for clothing, Lincoln stores get calls from Texans and New Yorkers who can't find a good selection of Western-wear in their states' stores.

Besides being unable to fill orders of exotic merchandise, orders for more common staples don't arrive as quickly as they did in the past.

"No one expected it to get this big," Schleiger said. "There's a pick up (in business) from certain people, but the thing is, we can't get enough merchandise. We just got hats that have been on order for nearly a year." Orders the store had received in three weeks now take 15 weeks to arrive.

"Felts are very hard to come by," France said. The felt hats are made from wool felt or wool felt with varying amounts of beaver fur. Hats manufacturers are allotting their shipments of hats to each store. France said he had sold his allotment and Williamson said her store had a low supply of felts.

Felt hats cost from \$10 for a cheap wool felt to about \$100 for a high percentage beaver fur felt hat.

## Straw hats

"Straw hats are really starting to sell now," France said. Straws are cooler in warm weather than felt hats, although the managers said both materials sold well year round. Straws cost from \$10 to \$30.

Wohlfarth said hats, boots and shirts were bit sellers, but "the biggest thing, the most important thing is the hat."

She said people will wear cowboy hats with tennis shoes and other non-Western dress.

"I would say that the hat business is good but the hat accessory business is great," Wohlfarth said.

Customers are buying hat pins, hat racks and hat bands to customize and personalize their hat. Only urban cowboys buy the trim, she said. A "real cowboy" wouldn't be caught in the saddle with a pheasant feather band around his hat.

"Cowboys like clean hats," she said.

Williamson said customers buy the hat bands — with prices ranging from \$2 to \$50 — because they can't afford a new hat, or because they can't find the preferred style in stock, but still want a different look.

## Very expensive look

"It's very seldom that we sell a whole outfit," Schleiger said, because a hat, boots, shirt, slacks and jacket would cost at least \$225, more than most people can afford to spend in one day.

"They have no idea of the cost of the merchandise," he said.

They like to get the whole works in one night if they can afford it, Wohlfarth said. "Usually they are headed to the bar."

The managers admitted western wear is expensive, but they said the longer-life and fit make the clothing a better buy than other lower quality ready-to-wear clothing.

They praised the fit and durability of the hand-made leather cowboy boots and tapered western-cut shirts.

"I think the 'comfortable' is going to win out over everything," Williamson said.

"Western wear is acceptable now, where it wasn't before," Wohlfarth said. She added that a while back Lincoln Southeast High students would call her "Wendy Western" when she wore cowboy boots to school.

"Western wear is the one place you can be unique," she said. "They'll either say 'that's really neat' or they won't say anything at all."

