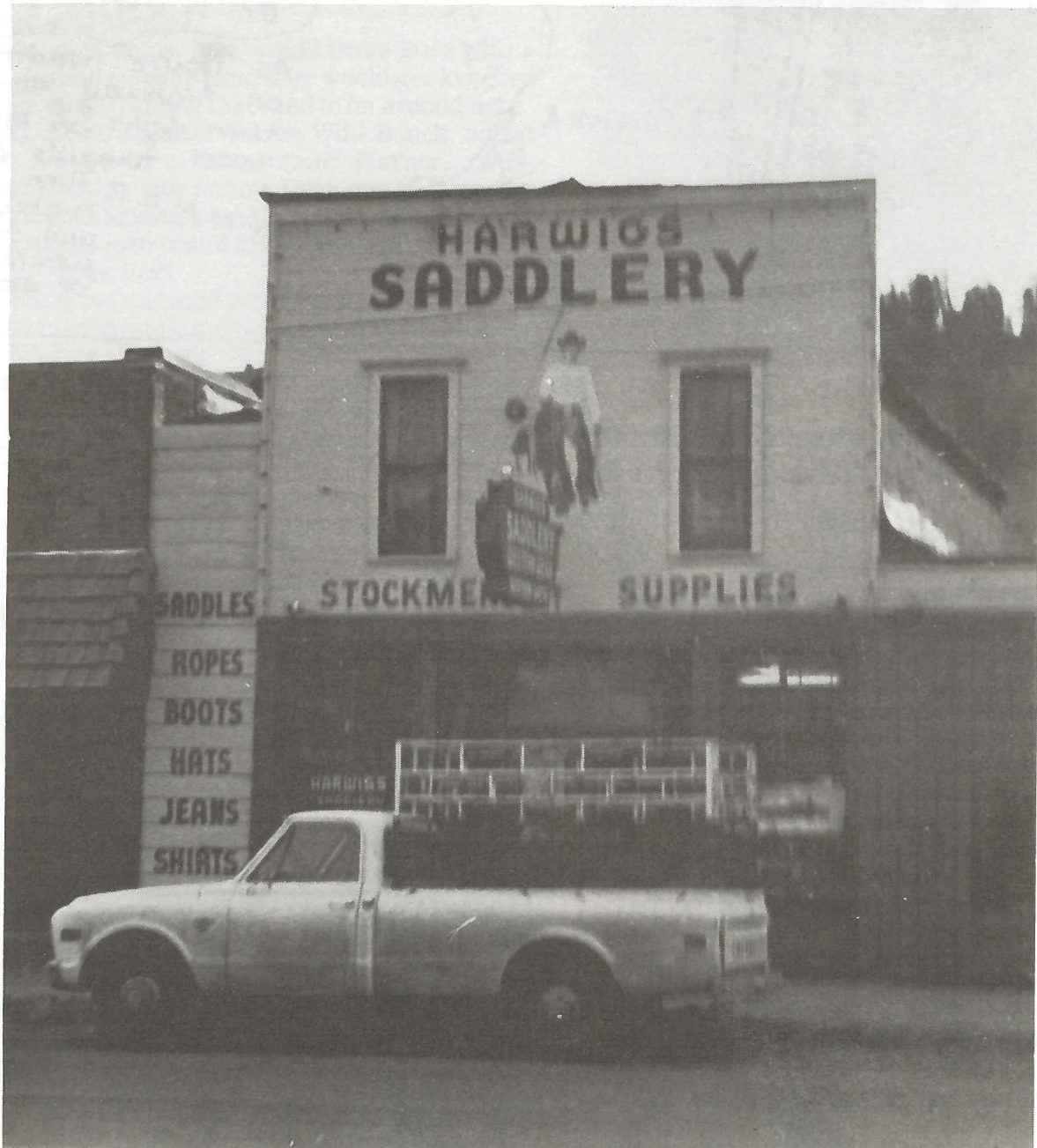


# HARWIGS: WE'VE NEVER BEEN SKUNKED

BY: KIRK WILLIAMS



"A change you can't believe - We used to sell horse collar pads for fifty-nine cents, now they are seven or eight dollars, if you can find them," says Mrs. Atwood Harwig, owner and proprietor of Harwigs for the past forty one years, since 1936.

Harwigs as a building has an eighty year history, but as a Harwig owned and operated business it goes back sixty one years. The building has probably been here since about 1890.

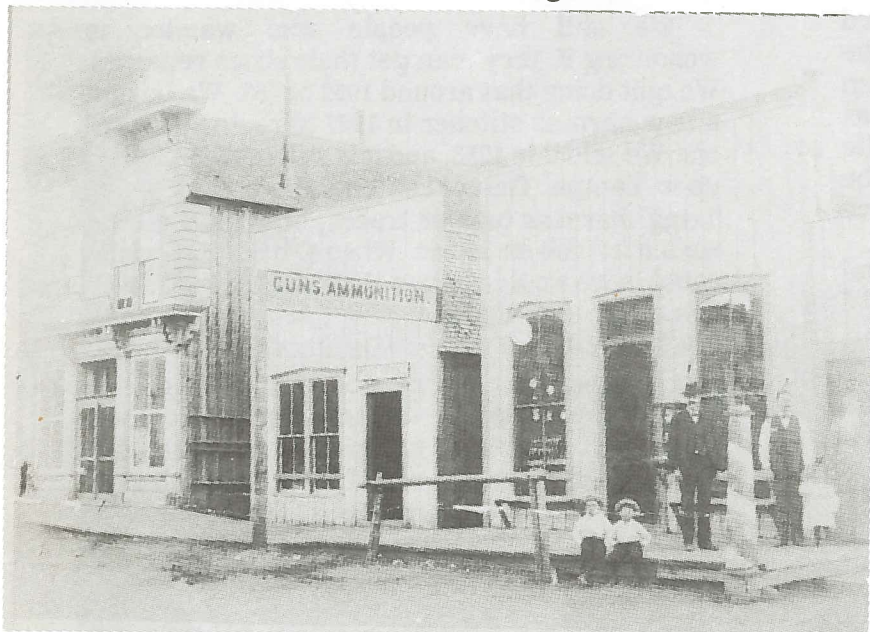
"Here's a picture that was in the Pilot in 1899 and the building is there then. It is still the



original wood. At the time when we came in, we wanted to do the front over in western style and use slabs to make it rustic looking, but the town wouldn't let us put anything on an old building that wasn't fireproof. We had all the old paint sanded off, stained it with linseed oil and got back the natural wood finish. I don't know how many layers of paint we removed.

The Harwigs were interested in remodeling the front of the building. "We wanted to keep the bottom part the same with something different on the top portion. A young Spanish American boy happened to be in town, and he was a real artist. He wanted to repaint our front, and we wanted to get a cowboy up there. He did it free handed, and it was a dandy. Every year or so we would have to have it touched up. Finally we had to have him completely redone in sheet metal. A few years ago we had the cowboy repainted." over, it was a copy of the first one, and I think we must have had it painted again about 1950.

"Charles Harwig, my husband's father, bought the store in 1916. It was a going business then, Armstrong and Kemmer, a saddle and harness company. Mr. Harwig called it the Steamboat Harness Shop. He slicked it up and was very proud of it because he lined it all with celotex and put in a new floor. Charles Harwig, Atwood's father, was a harness maker, and my husband learned the business from him. There have been a lot of changes, but we never imagined that it would ever turn out so good.



**HARWIGS IN 1899 (SHOWN ON LEFT)**

"The Harwigs came from Connecticut. They lived in Denver for some years, then moved to Steamboat when Atwood was born in 1912. They lived in the big old house his grandparents homesteaded next to the Hot Springs. It burned down in later years.



**MRS. HARWIG ON A TYPICAL DAY**

"I was born in Colorado Springs, and I'm the same age as the old grade school, but it didn't last as long as I did. I didn't come here till 1936, and that was after I met Atwood in college in Boulder. How did I get into the business? I married it.

"There was a pool hall next door when I came here in 1936, a bank on the corner, a second hand store, a meat market, a liquor store, an empty store and a gas station there. We lived here in the back. This used to be the shop, as you can see in the picture. This back part opened up and this was the shop. It had a big pot belly stove in it, here right in the center. That was the heat for the whole store. The building was up on stilts. Times were tough back then. It was just up on stilts and all open underneath, so we banked the snow up, if it was deep enough to help keep the breeze from blowing under there. Outside it was what they call board and bat, just wide boards, you can still see part of it, the strips over the seams. There it had never been painted, kinda warped, what they call barn wood now. You can see it still. They used a pink building paper to keep the breeze out and make it a little warmer. Boy, it was cold the first year my husband and I were in here. We didn't think we could keep from freezing. We put gunny sacks on the floor and wore overshoes because the old pot belly stove got warm and was just dandy for a while, then it cooled off. You're roasting here and cold there. Of course, the floor was a cold as the dickens, but we insulated it a little bit, and after the first two years, we built our apartment in the back and moved the shop up to the front part.

"We still have the old paper rack and the cash register from back then. The only other thing we have is that set of shelves. Charles really slicked it up. The first winter we were here we just nearly froze to death. It warmed up some in the afternoon when the sun came around back and since we lived in the back, that really helped.





## CHARLES HARWIG IN STORE AFTER IT HAS FIRST BEEN BOUGHT

“During Depression times it was pretty hard to find a job. That’s all there was to it! The times were so hard and we had just gotten started then. There was one day all we sold was a ten cent pair of shoestrings. We had very little inventory. It just wasn’t too much ’cause the winters were always pretty quiet. At least we’ve never been skunked!

“Since it was depression times and no one had steady jobs or money, and since Atwood and I had been engaged for four years, we decided to take over the store and pay Mrs. Harwig so much a month and keep it going ourselves. At the time she had it priced for \$1500. We didn’t have any future plans besides to keep it going at that time and build it up, of course. We had very little stock and did mostly repair work on harnesses, saddles, shoes and boots.

“We did just about as much repair work as retail sales. We weren’t into clothes then, just saddles, harnesses and boots. The most common job to do on a saddle was to replace the sheep skin lining. Some saddles needed a lot of work and some only small repairs. We repaired harness and saddles and about anything in leather that needed to be fixed.

“We still have people who wander in wondering if they can get their shoes repaired. We quit doing that around 1952 or ’53. We bought a new harness stitcher in 1937 to replace the old one. We sold it in 1953, and it is still in the country, up in Yampa. That old stitcher did a good job on fixing harness tugs or traces, but it did not do such a hot job on shoes. When a customer would come in we would change the machine over from doing harness tugs to shoes because we didn’t want to lose one of our customers.

“The hardest thing about repairing the harness tugs was the thickness of the leather which had broken. To repair the break the leather needed to be layered heavily on each side of the break and sewn on the stitcher. It was a lot of work. We did just about everything but make the whole saddle and I think I could still repair them.

“Saddles and clothes have changed a lot through the years. There are lots more styles now. Then you could carry the same things year after year. All styles do change and western wear have become the style. The whole clothing business has changed. There was only one style jean. They were all alike. Now you have many many different styles. They are high style.





### MRS. HARWIG AND KIRK WILLIAMS, THE AUTHOR

"There are a lot of new fabrics now, all these we didn't have then, just the one hundred per cent cotton or wool. Now we have all these synthetics and permanent presses, no wrinkles, no shrinkage and all that.

"I think Levis were the first jeans, but I believe we sold the first Wrangler's that were in the area when they first came on the market. It must have been back in 1940. That was when we were first getting into clothing, jeans and work shirts.

"We bought and ordered from many different companies to get a variety of merchandise, so we would not have the same thing other stores in town were carrying.

"Saturday was the biggest shopping day before World War II. All of the ranchers came into town to shop on Saturday night. We stayed open till nine, then we always stayed around and visited till ten or eleven. But during the war if you didn't get to town after the Safeway truck got in on Wednesday, by Saturday there was no selection of food, so you had to take what was left. Also later all the government offices began closing Saturday at noon which cut down on traffic, and people just quit coming to town on Saturdays and would come during the week or any day that was convenient. So it was no longer the big day of the week.

Also, all the government offices closed on Saturday at noon which also cut down on traffic. People would just wait and come and get everything done at once.



### MRS. HARWIG SHOWING MR. RALSON LEATHER PRODUCTS





**CHARLES HARWIG IN STORE AFTER REMODELING**

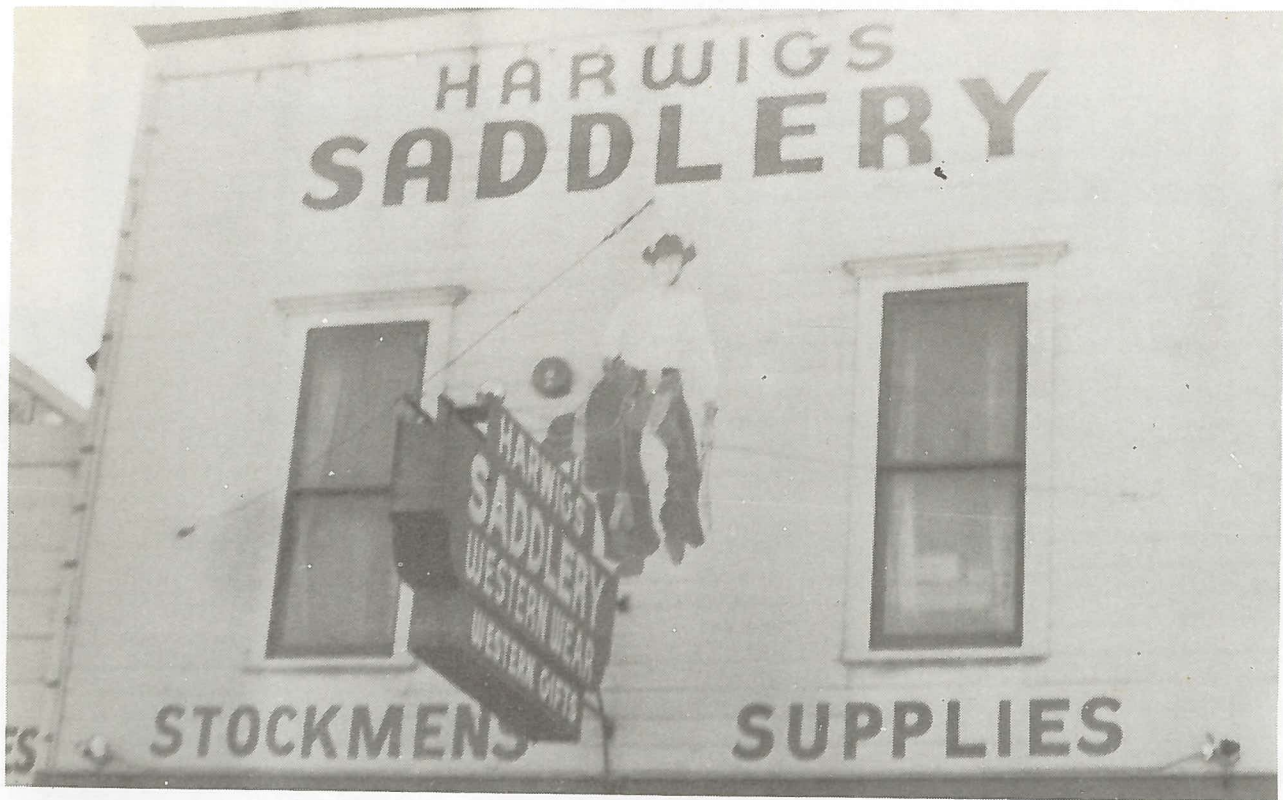
“There were two big events that everyone came to town for, the Swedish Picnic, which was ski carnival and the Fourth of July Rodeo. Those two kept us from being just a wide spot in the road.

“Another happening occurring near Harwigs was a fire. Four old wooden buildings all next to each other caught fire. The fire whistle blew about ten or eleven o'clock, and the building two doors down was on fire. Everyone got together here and moved the whole stock and personal belongings out on the snow banks. We didn't have too much stock, nothing to compare with now, of course. But we moved everything out in the back and front. We all felt that if any of us started, we'd all go, because this old dry building and the prevailing winds are always in this area. We thought they would just blow up the whole bunch. You know, it was about thirty below zero that night in the middle of the winter. The hoses froze up, of course. Our little volunteer fire department has always done a good job and we were very grateful to them. We sat here in the kitchen and drank coffee and waited to see if we were going to burn. Lucky there was a fire wall of bricks between the burning building and the one next door. The firemen stopped the fire



**KATHRENE HARWIG WATCHING THE STORE**





### THE DANDY COWBOY ON THE FRONT OF HARWIGS

there. When the fire was out everyone helped pack us back in again. Sam Orr from the forest service brought over a crew and helped us. What a mixed up mess, but we were open for business that morning. As far as we know there was only one pair of boots missing. Someone stole them, and someone else said they saw them pack them off, but they would never tell us who it was. I have always been curious about who it was that stole that pair of boots.

"This has always been ranch and cattle country. We are all people, you know. Our customers were always both from the country and town.

"Western wear has set the style. It's going all over the country. We have had many changes through the years, like the horse collars. We don't have much demand for horse collars anymore, other than for the cutter racers. We used to sell boots for fifteen dollars, and now a similar boot sells for sixty dollars. I think the first Wrangler jeans were three ninety-eight, and now work shirts are twelve dollars and jeans are from thirteen dollars up.



### "IT'S AN OLDIE BUT GOODIE!"

"Our worst day kept us from being skunked because of shoelaces, and our best day was the sidewalk sale last year, so after all these years, Harwigs is still a growing and successful business."