

# THE PLACE TO GET A FEDORA—OR A SHAVE

BY FREDRIC HAMBER

*Step into Cable Car Clothiers on Sutter Street and instantly feel transported into an environment that evokes the sensory richness of **Ali Baba's** cave. Irish country hats, Panamas and fedoras vie for attention with neckties, ascots, Mackinaw vests and chunky bottles of cologne. Classical music, bluegrass and jazz play on rotation over the sound system. A display case holds a selection of subtle two-toned striped Swiss cotton pajamas which look like the right thing for a gentleman to wear when his room service tray arrives in his suite at Le Bristol Paris. In the front corner windows, **Nicky the Barber** plies his trade. The year could be 2017—or 1946, when **Charlie Pivnick** founded the shop.*



*“We work a year out looking at different styles and picking out the fabrics,” says Cable Car shopowner Jonathan Levin, who procures hats from factories in Italy and England, and Stetson in the United States.*

“We try to choreograph everything from the music to the lighting,” says the late Pivnick’s grandson, **Jonathan Levin**, whose family has owned and operated the classic men’s haberdashery for six decades and counting. “Everything has a story behind it—from the **Churchill** portrait to the hat boxes. A lot of tourists come in and want to take pictures. Every section of the store I personally curate—everything needs to be clean and neat, but we want people to feel like they can touch things.”

Touching things—a silk scarf, a waxed country jacket, a wood-handled umbrella or a fabric swatch for a made-to-measure suit—is a large part of the appeal of the place. It’s a pleasure increasingly endangered in our digital era. The company, which began as a World War II surplus store before shifting into menswear, has occupied several downtown locations over the years, but a commitment to customer service and the quality of its offerings remains a constant.

“San Francisco is unique,” Levin says. “There are very few cities [in the U.S.] that appreciate

tradition. We’re the longest-tenured men’s clothing store west of the Rockies. The barbershop has been bringing a whole new generation of people in—we’ve modeled it after an old shaving parlor with gold on the windows.”

There’s an educational aspect to Levin’s job. He shares with customers the knowledge he learned from his grandfather, a WWII veteran who yearned to afford the fine clothing he spotted around town after returning home to San Francisco. Later, as the proprietor of Cable Car Clothiers, the well-dressed Pivnick got to curate and sell the garments he loved to wear.

He passed down his enthusiasm to Levin, who delights in turning a seam inside out to display fine workmanship, or brandishing a long shoe-horn made of rare English stag, or explaining the difference between a grade-8 Panama hat and a grade 20.

There are second- and even third-generation customers who have relied on Cable Car to help build their wardrobes over time. Investment adviser **Lionel Shaw** has been a fan for years and

stops in from his nearby office. “For the discerning Brit or American gentleman shopping for something with authentic sophistication and timeless fashion relevance, Cable Car Clothiers has the selection,” he says.

Selection indeed. Recently, Levin helped a gentleman hoping to buy a tipping cane for a friend who likes scotch. “We had exactly what he wanted—a beautiful hand-carved cane from England [containing a glass vial],” he enthuses.

The company’s civic roots are deep. For years Cable Car sponsored college scholarship awards for San Francisco high school students that were presented at an annual luncheon downtown. Just recently, before a trade mission to China, a representative from Mayor **Ed Lee’s** administration came into the shop to buy 15 cable-car-motif bow ties to bring along as goodwill gifts.

The staff, some of whom have been with the company up to 40 years, also handle more immediate shopping needs, such as for the guy who realizes he forgot to put on a belt before leaving home. “We had a customer who was catching a flight in 45 minutes,” Levin recalls. “He had spilled coffee on his trousers. We fit him and tailored them, and he was satisfied. He was looking for service. That’s not something you can do by just clicking your mouse.”

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