

# WESTERN COSTUME CO.

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The exact origin of Western Costume Company is hazy, and the truth has become obscured by a century of myth. Articles claim that it was founded anywhere from 1912 to 1915. And there is an old, but apocryphal, story about William S. Hart being involved. Sorting fact from lore is difficult, but what is certain is that the company was started by L. L. Burns and his wife, Mabel Edna Burns. The earliest known record of Western Costume is an advertisement from January 1914 that boasts "Indian, Cowboy, Spanish, Mission, Miner, Trapper Costumes and Properties For Stage and Photoplay."

L. L. Burns hailed from Flagstaff, Arizona, which was the intersection of several Native American tribes, including the Hopi and Diné. In 1904 he moved to Los Angeles where he worked for the Benham Trading Company, a prominent vendor of Native wares. By the early 1910s, Burns had taken over the Benham Company and was involved in a number of other ventures, most of them relating to the nascent Los Angeles film industry. One of these side ventures was a production studio and film laboratory that he operated with producer and director Harry Revier. The pair supplied everything from a stage, office space, a film laboratory, and anything else a production needed, including props, sets, and costumes. The small space that Burns and Revier occupied was not much more than a stage and a barn, but when Cecil B. DeMille came to Los Angeles in 1913 to shoot *The Squaw Man* (1914), he leased the space from them and subsequently bought out their lease to the barn. This barn became the home of DeMille's production company, the Jessie L. Lasky Feature Play Company, which was soon renamed Paramount Pictures. The barn itself still stands and is now the home of the Hollywood Heritage Museum.

When DeMille bought out Burns's and Revier's lease, the men's partnership ended, but Burns continued making a name for himself in the nascent Los Angeles film industry. Due to the natural scenery of the area, Westerns comprised much of the filmmaking in Southern California during this time. With his stock of Native American goods and knowledge of Native culture, Burns's became a vital resource for filmmakers. Directors hoping to authentically costume actors and dress scenes turned to Burns. He even traveled to the Pueblos of New Mexico to recruit Native Americans to go to Hollywood to act as extras in films. One story recounts that William Fox purchased pieces from Burns for a film, then tried to return them after production wrapped. Burns realized the potential of rentals and, recognizing his unique qualifications to fill this niche of the industry, started a new business. Western Costume Co.—named for the Western films it costumed—was born.

The film industry grew quickly, and so did the company. Burns began to expand his supply of primarily Native American costumes by stocking a wider variety. He employed seamstresses, including his wife Mabel, to produce garments that would be rented to clients and then returned to Western's costume supply. This "make-to-rent" system gave clients exactly the costume they wanted while also allowing Western to grow their rental stock—a rental model that is occasionally used by productions to this day. Burns took great pride in providing authentic pieces, and he began to build a research library. It was

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the first library of its kind in the film industry, and was the go-to source in the early 1920s when films began to put a higher premium on accuracy. By 1918 the company had outgrown its small downtown office at 7th and Figueroa, and the following year Western Costume relocated to a seven-story building at 908 South Broadway. This larger space allowed Burns to further expand the costume stock, research library, and accommodate prop, wig, and furniture departments, and around 1920 Burns bought out Western's major competitors: the Fischer Costuming Company and Lee Powers' prop business.

By its first decade in business, Western employed over 150 people and was responsible for ninety-nine percent of the costuming in the LA film industry. As the largest facility of its kind, they also costumed nearly all of the local theater productions at venues like the Mayan Theater. The business was thriving, and the company was grossing two million dollars per year. Western Costume dressed Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Buster Keaton, Rudolph Valentino, and many of the other major stars of the era. Burns had a network of agents throughout the world that sent back garments, fabric, books, weapons, and other useful artifacts. In 1924 Western continued its expansion by moving to a twelve-story building across the street at 935 South Broadway. This newly built structure featured over 200,000 square feet of floor space, and housed a freight elevator that could take customers' cars up to a rooftop parking lot. Western now featured a metal shop, dye vats, and a laundry facility. On the top floor, actors could have glamour shots taken in their choice of costumes from the building at Wescosco photo studio. One of the studio photographers, William Mortensen, became one of the most famous and most controversial photographers of the 20th century.

Western's time at 935 South Broadway was to be short-lived. By the mid-1920s, Hollywood was the established center of filmmaking in Los Angeles. To be closer to the studios, Burns established a Hollywood branch of Western Costume where he kept a portion of each department and his administrative offices. In 1926 a group of Western employees defected and formed their own costume house. The expense of the move and the emergence of a formidable rival caused Burns to briefly lose control of the company in 1928. The Great Depression was the final blow, and he was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1931. Jack Warner hired Burns to head the Wardrobe Department at Warner Bros., a position he held until his death in 1944.

In January 1932, brothers, Dan, Joe, and Ike Greenberg, bought Western Costume out of bankruptcy. The Greenbergs streamlined the business by liquidating the furniture department and many of the larger props and set dressings. They moved the company to a single building at 5335 Melrose Avenue, a prime location adjacent to Paramount Studios. This would be Western's home for the next 58 years. While the Greenbergs saved the company from obsolescence, the brothers were salvage operators and wanted out of the entertainment business in short order. In 1934 they sold Western to brothers Joe and Abe Schnitzer, who were veterans of the film industry. Joseph Schnitzer had actually been the first president of RKO, and Abe had been a manager.

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In the mid 1930s, Western once again began to thrive. It contained over half a million costumes, 13,000 guns, a huge collection of military medals, suits of armor, and countless jewelry pieces. It also housed the largest research library in Hollywood, a fabric store, on-site laundry, a shipping department, dye works, multiple custom-made workrooms, an embroidery shop, a woodworking shop, a foundry, a paint shop, a leather shop, and various other manufacturing shops. Their sword room became known as the "Holy Smoke" room because of the response it elicited when visitors first entered. They claimed to have a shoe last and measurements for every major actor in the industry. A new order was placed roughly every thirty seconds, and they had a private connection directly to the Central Casting office so they could begin readying the costumes as soon as a call came in for background actors.

In the 1940s, Western employed around 250 people, making them the largest employer in the film industry apart from MGM. When European immigrants flocked to Los Angeles in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, they brought with them their crafts. As a result, Western employed some of the best artisans from across the world in their custom workrooms. The three research librarians at Western spoke at least six languages between them. Costume house employees began organizing within the labor movement in the late 1930s. Western Costume was organized by 1942, and in 1944 they merged with Motion Picture Costumers Local 705 of the IATSE. Western Costume has been a Local 705 signatory costume house ever since, and have periodically been the largest union employer in the industry.

Despite consistent demand, the company still faced troubling uncertainty in the 1940s. In 1942 Joe Schnitzer had to take a medical leave from the business. Furthermore, unionization meant higher payroll costs, and the company struggled financially. Unsure of the future, Schnitzer approached the studios. Fearing the end of an indispensable resource, six major studios—Warner Bros., RKO, 20th Century-Fox, Columbia, Universal, and Republic—united to purchase Western Costume in January 1943. Joe Schnitzer passed away the following year, and Abe Schnitzer stayed on as president.

Western's fortunes began to ebb again in 1950, when the postwar boom ended. Graydon B. Howe became general manager, and soon hired a friend, John Golden, to help pull the business out of its financial hardships. The pair began a major overhaul of the company's romantic, but archaic, methods. Western supplied costumes for films such as *An American in Paris* (1951), *Guys and Dolls* (1955), and *The King and I* (1956). Within a year of Golden's arrival, Howe had a heart attack; in 1958 his ill health forced him to retire. Golden was named president, a position he held until he retired in 1989.

Golden's tenure as president saw major changes in production, including the end of the studio system. In the 1960s Western costumed major films like *West Side Story* (1961), *Cleopatra* (1963), *Mary Poppins* (1964), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969). While many film studios struggled during

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this decade of transition, Western was buoyed by television productions, often costuming as many as 80 at a time, including many of the most popular series of the era, such as *The Munsters* (1964–1966), *Batman* (1966–1968), and *Star Trek* (1966–1969). There were as many as 300 people on payroll to handle all the orders, and demand was so high that employees regularly worked six and seven days a week.

During the 1970s, films shifted toward gritty realism. Glamorous, expensive, period pieces were a thing of the past. Their extensive uniform stock kept Western relevant during this time, making them indispensable, even for contemporary productions. They also outfitted the many variety shows that were popular during this time, like *The Julie Andrews Show*. Several of the studios sold off their costume departments, and as they did, Western bought them up, storing overflow in annexes around Hollywood. Fortunately, while many studios sold off their production libraries or raised the price of access, Western maintained theirs—albeit with a staff of one as opposed to five, as in the past—as a low-cost resource for designers and costumers. Made-to-order departments also faced issues of understaffing because of an increasing scarcity of talented artisans. Golden looked to Europe and South America to find qualified technicians like seamstresses, tailors, and milliners. After the wigmaker retired, the position went unfilled; the leather shop closed for years because there was no one qualified to fill the position.

Prior to the 1980s, costumes were repurposed and reused on production after production. Costumes from *The King and I* (1956), for instance, were rented out to high school productions of the show. However, the MGM Studio auction in 1970 had revealed a burgeoning collectors market. Costumes proved to have value beyond their rental cost because movie fans were willing to pay to own a piece of film history. In the early 1980s, film-loving employees and customers began flagging the more culturally significant pieces they found among Western's racks. These costumes, worn by actors such as Charlie Chaplin and Marilyn Monroe, were moved from the rental stock to a special room where they could be preserved. This collection grew into *The Star Collection*, an archive that now features more than 5,000 artifacts. Pieces in the archive are not available to rent, but are periodically loaned for exhibition.

By the 1980s the costuming industry had changed dramatically. Most period films were made in Europe, and Western's business had slowed substantially. Film budgets got smaller and production timelines were shorter. Costume designers rarely had the time or budgets to do extensive research or custom costume builds. Western employed fewer than 100 people by the end of the decade. During this decade, they turned out wardrobe for productions like *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Dune* (1984), *Clue* (1985), *The North and South* (1985–1986), *Top Gun* (1986), and *Steel Magnolias* (1989).

While Western's business was dwindling, its neighbor, Paramount, was interested in expanding its studio, and wanted the land that Western occupied. In 1988, Paramount purchased the company with the intent to keep the property but sell the business. Once again bidding for a buyer, Western's future was

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uncertain. In 1989, the AHS Trinity Group stepped in to buy the business. Made up of businessman Paul Abramowitz, Creative Artists Agency co-founder Bill Haber, and novelist Sidney Sheldon, the AHS Trinity Group was given a year to relocate. John Golden, who had helmed the business for three decades, retired, and Abramowitz became the new president of Western Costume. At the recommendation of costume designer Ann Roth, Abramowitz hired veteran costumer Eddie Marks as his vice president, and the pair soon found a 125,000 square-foot former printing plant in North Hollywood. The space at 11041 Vanowen Street could house Western's 7.5 linear miles of costumes, enormous collection of props, and the research library. Finding the new home of Western Costume was only the first step of the monumental task of moving the company. In April of 1990, all 3.5 million costumes and props, plus the more than 10,000 books from the library, made their way to a new home in the San Fernando Valley. Both locations remained open for business as usual during the day; at night, truckloads of costumes were packed and transported across town. Two years later, after successfully orchestrating the relocation to North Hollywood, Marks replaced Abramowitz as president of Western Costume. Then, in 1995, Bill Haber bought out the other members of the Trinity Group to become the sole owner of the company. Marks took steps to modernize the business. He hired Frank Allegro to overhaul the uniform department, and invested over \$1.5 million dollars into improvements, including the purchase of up-to-date uniforms from every branch of the US military and many major law enforcement departments. Bill Burchette took over theatrical rentals, which accounted for roughly thirty percent of the business, and was charged with pursuing a broader network of professional and academic theaters as clients. Western's overall staff dropped from around 100 in 1988 to just over 50 in 1993. For most of the company's existence, Western Costume employees pulled all the costumes from stock for clients; beginning in the early 90s, designers and costumers could comb the racks themselves for the pieces they needed. Over the course of the decade, Western collaborated on films like Jurassic Park, The Shawshank Redemption, and Apollo 13, and worked on popular television shows like Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman. They also made stage costumes for superstars Madonna and Janet Jackson. Marks recognized the importance of continually refreshing the rental inventory. As costumes are rented and re-rented, they begin to show their age. In addition, much of the existing stock comprised garments that were made directly for films, rather than actual vintage clothing. Marks recognized that tastes had changed, and that many designers preferred authentic period clothes. During his 30 years at the helm, he purchased eight private collections of vintage clothing, including the collections of Helen Larson, Patty Norris, and Dorothy Weaver; Weaver's collection alone comprised 40,000 pieces. To make room for these new acquisitions, Western briefly operated an outlet store, selling older stock items directly to the public. In 1993, they sold a large portion of their archive, the "Star Collection," in three successive auctions with Butterfield and Butterfield. As the new millennium loomed, the computer-savvy Marks brought the historic company into the technology age, replacing certain antiquated, analog methods. Western boasted a laser color copier in its library and offered a service digitizing client's costume break-

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downs. The company also became the beta customer for Rental Tracker Pro, a software that digitally tracks rentals. Previously, every item had to be written up by hand before it was rented. Starting in 1998, as items were rented, they were given a barcode and put into a database, making rentals easier to track and quicker to process. RTPro is now an entertainment industry standard. Western Costume remains a vital resource for costume designers in the 21st century, providing costumes as varied as uniforms for Zero Dark Thirty and minidresses for Mad Men. This era of prestige television has left no shortage of beautifully costumed productions, and designers continually come to Western for research, rentals, and custom work. Western was involved with costumes for The West Wing, Boardwalk Empire, Orange is the New Black, Agents of Shield, The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, and 1923, among many others. In 2009, Western acquired the Dykeman-Young Collection, which necessitated six 53-foot containers to transport the costumes from Jamestown, New York, to their new home in North Hollywood. Several years later, Marks purchased Rick's Costumes American and a beautiful collection of menswear from the 1930s to 1960s from Amalgamated Costumes. Western Costume celebrated its centennial in 2012 with a pageant of historic clothing and film costumes, hosted by the Costume Council at LACMA. That same year, the Costume Designers Guild presented Western with a special Service Award for a century of contributions to the industry. The past decade in the entertainment industry was defined by the rise of new media and streaming services. Apple, Netflix, and Amazon became major players in production, and Western names all of them as clients. The costume departments for Stranger Things (Netflix), Palm Royale (Apple TV+), and Man in the High Castle (Amazon), among others, all worked with Western Costume. When business halted due to the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, Marks used the opportunity to relocate Western's expansive uniform department to a larger space in an adjacent building. In the space the uniforms had previously occupied, he added cages and more fitting rooms to accommodate the growing clientele, and expanded the Supply Store to make room for more products costumers depend on. Marks passed away in September 2023 and was succeeded by Vice President Gilbert Moussally. Like his predecessor, Moussally grew up in the costume business. He worked at American Costume Corp. and as a Vice President at Motion Picture Costume Co. before taking over Western Costume's uniform department in 2018. He shares a dedication to keeping Western's rental departments stocked with fresh pieces and has focused on bolstering stock in periods that are underrepresented. Western is the last "one-stop shop" costume house left in Hollywood. It still boasts the best costume research library in the world and houses a fabric store with a great selection of vintage and modern fabrics and trims. It features four made-to-order workrooms: a men's tailor shop, women's clothing shop, hat shop, and shoe and leather shop. Rentals include four major departments: the uniform department, men's, women's, and The Collection (which features designer garments and premiere pieces). Office space and fitting rooms are available to rent for prep and wrap, and Western has an on-site shipping department to help costume departments get their costumes where they need to go.

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