

# Better Business with Malvern Bank: Shorty's Story – The Icon Behind Shorty's Caboy Hattery

June 24, 2021 by Hillary Dobbs

[“Shorty” Koger](#) grew up in a chunk of Oklahoma so small they didn't even have fences, cattle just roamed freely about the countryside. It might seem an unlikely origin for someone who ended up becoming an icon in the equestrian and cowboy worlds, but maybe it is less surprising when you get to know Shorty and get a feel for who she is. I had the good fortune to have a conversation with her and learn her story, which is a lively and picturesque American tale, as well as an inspiring chronicle of a self-made businesswoman, with insights and lessons we could all learn from.

Shorty took to horses early—she rodeoed and ran barrels, and as a young woman, even went on to ride a few bulls. She got creative to pay the bills. “You couldn't buy Coor's in Texas, so I'd load up 6-8 cases of Coor's and some Wrangler jeans to the rodeo to see if I could pedal them off,” she explained. “I did it out of my camper and my truck. It helped me pay for my expenses and my entry fees, then got me gas to get back home.”

Like all great businesspeople, she had a catalytic moment that set her off on a new path. After her beloved father's passing, Shorty's brother sent two of his hats out to be professionally cleaned. They came back ruined. Her brother suggested that Shorty get into the hat cleaning business and do it herself— and do it better, given how much she loved the hats. “A light went off in my head,” she said.





Shorty Koger

Initially, she was using a tea kettle on a stove at rodeos to shape hats, but it wasn't easy, and the business was cutthroat. "No one wants to help you learn anything because they don't want any competition." Eventually, she lucked into a mentor figure through a man who shared the unlikely name of "Shorty," who was getting into politics and needed campaign money, so he was selling his steamer, the centerpiece of his hat cleaning business. Unfortunately, he already had a buyer lined up, but Shorty (our Shorty) stuck around in case the buyer didn't show up, and he didn't. "At five minutes after ten, I wrote the check," she recalled.

The politically inclined "Shorty" helped in other ways too. Hat making requires a lot of sewing, but Shorty K "flunked Home Ec" because she was "so left-handed." Political Shorty was right-handed, but luckily, his mother was a lefty. She gave priceless instruction in the finer points of needlework, and many other business lessons as well.

Now, "31 years later, thanks to my mother, daddy, The Lord, and my family," she's at the top of her game at [Shorty's Caboy Hattery](#). Her hats are icons in the industry and are status symbols sought out by anyone with a Western saddle (or English!). One of the secrets to her success is God-given talent. "It's a gift honestly, because I can look at someone and know

what color, shape, what will look good on ‘em. I do have that eye that The Lord’s given me, which is wonderful.”

Looking back, one of the biggest moves that stands out in her illustrious career was the move to her current shop location. As a girl in Oklahoma, she’d go into town to buy groceries and see legends like Tex Ritter, Randolph Scott, and Ben Johnson hanging around in Fairfax, OK. She wanted to be just like them someday, including looking like them. Her dream was to have a hat shop in The Stockyards, but she didn’t make the move until she had mastered her craft. Shorty didn’t want the real cowboys like Tex, Randolph, and Ben to think she didn’t know what she was doing, so she waited until she did.

Her timing was good, and the cowboys have approved of her and then some. This year, she is being inducted into The Cowgirl Hall of Fame, and Shorty’s Hattery is newest corporate partner and official custom hat of AQHA.



True to form, she built her business like a cowboy would.

The cornerstones of her success are hard work, determination, craftsmanship, and relentlessness. “I’m never gonna retire. I’m gonna die in my booth one day selling my hats. That’d be a good way to go.”

Most cowboys want to go out with their boots on, but Shorty probably intends to go out with her hat on too. I can’t blame her because the hats she makes are truly extraordinary. From the buck stitching to the leather work, everything is done by hand. She takes the time on detail that other craftsmen ignore. “They just take an electric sander and run it over. I don’t do it that way.” And it makes a difference (I can vouch for this personally. I am lucky enough to have one of her masterpieces).

As I finished up my call with her, I reflected on her many accomplishments. Self-made businesswoman (she literally started with zero dollars), innovator, artist, hall of famer, and I have a feeling the list won’t stop there—she isn’t hanging up her hat anytime soon.