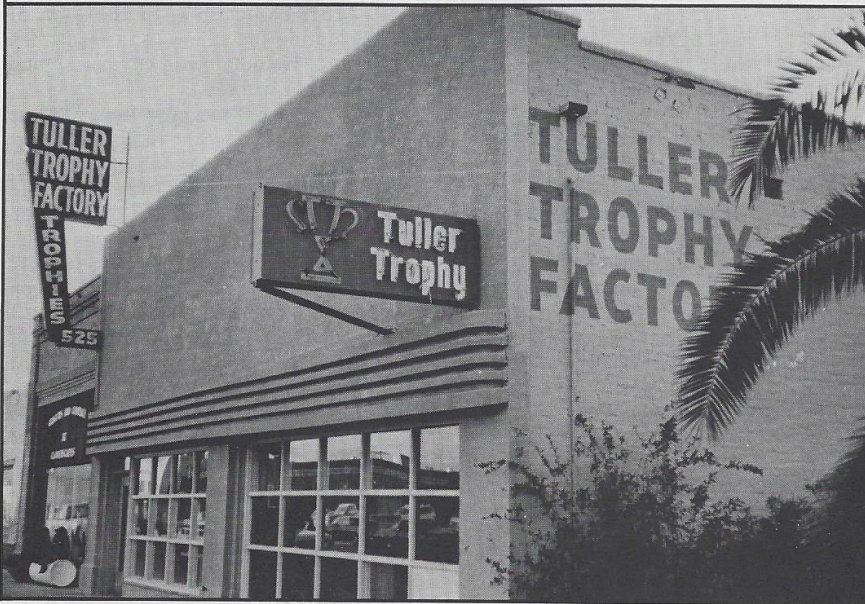


## A Creative Man



## in a Creative Business

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As a teenager, he was a self-taught actor. Then he became a Hollywood television producer. Later he became a jeweler. In that role he painted the sidewalk in front of his small shop gold in order to make it more noticeable. When he toured the White House and informed maintenance officials that the nameplate on John F. Kennedy's portrait was in need of repair, he acquired the White House as a regular engraving customer. When he received his first big plaque order in 1956, he drove overnight from Tucson, Arizona, to Los Angeles to pick up the merchandise he needed to fill the order. Now after 28 years, this customer still buys awards from him.

Just who is this former actor/showman/producer/jeweler/trophy dealer/engraver and all purpose "idea man" who has such a flair for the unusual and a reputation for creative initiative? He is none other than Mort Tuller (fig. 1), founder of the very successful Tuller Trophy Factory in Tucson, Arizona, which manufactures and sells custom designed trophies as well as plaques and ribbons. But Mort's broad imagination and flair for the dramatic were revealed long before he brought them to the attention of the award industry!

For example, in 1937 at the age of 16, Mort auditioned for a part in the

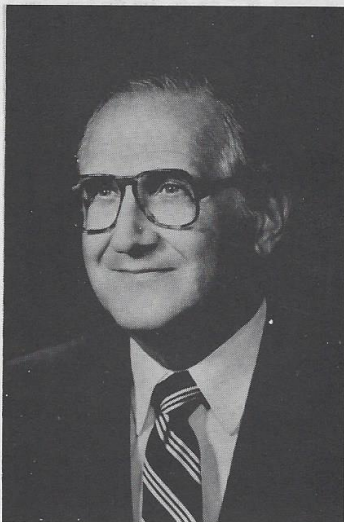


FIGURE 1

"Dead End" stage production, which ran at the Cass Theatre in Detroit. Although he had had no prior acting experience or training, he was hired to play the role of "Dippy," one of the "Dead End Kids." (The "Dead End Kids" later became the "East Side Kids," and still later, the "Bowery Boys," of Hollywood movie fame).

Because he enjoys being on the more creative end of things, Mort did not pursue an acting career. He turned instead to producing. "I worked with a TV station in Chicago before going to Hollywood to start my own production company," he explains. "After producing several shows, I developed an idea for a television series. I tried to sell the idea in 1949 and for the next two years, but found that the timing was wrong for this type of series during those early years of TV. Finally, I turned in the rights to the show and left Hollywood."

But Mort was not at all discouraged by this experience. "I knew that there was more to life than show business," he explains. "So in 1951, my wife Sylvia and I came to Tucson, Arizona, where I went to work with my father-in-law in his jewelry business."

Four years later, Mort opened his own jewelry store in Tucson. "I had learned quite a bit about the business while working for my father-in-law, but it is difficult for me to work for someone else. I suppose that is because I have so many of my own ideas! I like to be able to create — in fact, it is something that I feel I have to do."

He probably never felt more strongly about this than when he discovered that the rights to his TV series had been bought and developed into a very similar series, which became one of TV's all-time classics: *Dragnet*. While Mort himself did not have a hand in the actual production of his idea, the fact that someone else had been able to do it successfully was just as important.

Meanwhile, the jewelry store that Mort had purchased in 1955 was posing a real challenge to his imagination. This was an 8' x 60' shop which was referred to earlier.

"One of the problems I had in this store was parking space for my

customers," Mort recalled. "The store was in a downtown location, and about six months after I bought the building, the city prohibited parking on the street."

Looking back on the consequences of this, Mort says that he has to laugh about it now. "When you don't have an area for your customers to park, there are two things that can happen. First, your customers can park illegally in front of your store. This tends to speed up your sales! But secondly, your customers can simply pass by, unaware that the store even exists. This tends to cause bankruptcy!" he chuckles.

"But I knew that I had to find a way to make my shop stand out. It was so narrow that if someone blinked their eyes while walking by, they would miss it entirely. The parking situation just made things worse." So after searching for a way to make his store stand out more, Mort came up with the idea of painting the sidewalk in front of it gold. He obtained a city permit and went to work.

The next morning, however, he was shocked by the results. As Mort explained, "I watched from the window of the store as people approached the gold part of the sidewalk. It was a very bright gold, being fresh paint. They would walk up to the edge of it, stop, and then walk into the street to go around it! I was dismayed to say the least. But after about two weeks, the paint began to oxidize, which toned down the color somewhat. The next thing I knew, people were coming from all over town just to see the sidewalk. Groups of tourists would have their pictures taken while standing on it! I came to be known as 'the man with the gold sidewalk.' It was literally the talk of the town."

Shortly thereafter, Mort began to receive requests for trophy engraving. "I had a small engraving machine which I used in the jewelry business," he recalls. "There was a trophy shop in the area, but it sold mostly bowling equipment. Therefore, many of these trophies were brought to me for engraving."

When these customers began requesting trophies as well as engraving, Mort agreed to order



what they needed, but hesitated to stock these items.

"Trophies were not related to jewelry, and at that time I never really thought of them as being a money making item. The difference was that with jewelry, a customer would spend a substantial amount of money on one purchase. He would also take some time in making a choice. With trophies, on the other hand, one sale would amount to about \$10 and could be completed within a few minutes," Mort says.

But with his first large award request, which came about one year after opening his store, Mort decided to change the entire direction of his business, and he wasted no time in doing this. "The jewelry business had actually been declining, so when a man came in and asked for 90 mint julep cups and 90 plaques for a newly formed organization, I told him that I could get them. It was then that I knew I was out of the jewelry business.

"So I closed the shop at 5:00 p.m. and drove straight to Los Angeles, which is about 525 miles away. I arrived there the following morning and went to Kaag Manufacturing to order the cups and plaques. While there, I asked the people at Kaag about the award business — how to make a living at it, etc. Kaag had just introduced the concept of selling component parts, so while I was there, I decided to buy some of these parts.

"When I returned to Tucson, I called my customer to inform him that I'd been able to order his awards. This first sale came to over \$1,000, and that money was my salvation, since by then I owed about that much. My first customer in the award business has since become my oldest steady customer.

"Meanwhile, my trophy parts had arrived. I didn't know the first thing about assembling a trophy, so my wife and I both learned by experimenting. This was much like building with Tinker Toys — we put everything on the floor and tried different ways of putting them together," he recalls.

Mort's outlook on his new business was perhaps the most important part of its success. Once he'd made

the decision to enter the award industry, he knew that he would never regret it. "The award industry is precisely what I wanted and I felt very comfortable with it," he commented. "It was sort of like standing at poolside, feeling how cold the water was with my big toe, and then jumping in. As soon as I was in, it felt just fine.

"These products actually make people happy. A trophy or plaque recipient will never knowingly discard one of these items. They may put them on a wall or shelf, or they may put them in a drawer and never look at them again, but they will always keep them."

When he looks back to the year 1955, when he first started selling trophies and plaques, Mort remembers his biggest problem as being one of space in his 8' wide store. "If we had two people behind our counter and a display on the wall, a third person would not be able to walk by!" he laughs. "So in 1958 we found a new store to rent — one that gave us 1,000 square feet of space."

As the Tullers' business grew, they began to stock a larger inventory. They also began to purchase machinery for trophy manufacturing. "Being here in Tucson, we are a little bit out of the mainstream of the major markets, especially in those days. When we first started handling awards, we were literally unable to handle "emergency" orders, such as the customers who forget to order their awards until the last minute. Expanding our capabilities helped to protect ourselves and our customers. For example, if we receive an order for 58 trophies at 4:00 p.m. today,

and they are needed for presentation tomorrow evening, we would be able to fill the order."

Tuller Trophy Factory has indeed expanded its capabilities. Its inventory, equipment and warehouse now occupies 12,500 square feet. 50% of its business is trophies, 40% is plaques, and 10% is ribbons. When medallions are needed for trophies and plaques, Tuller Trophy can make these in-house also. There is no wholesale work done at Tuller Trophy Factory — everything that is manufactured and sold is for retail customers.

In 1965, Tuller Trophy Factory moved to its present location, which is made up of two separate buildings. The main building, or factory, houses a showroom, the wood shop, ribbon department, photo department, and paint department. It also houses the main engraving department, which includes two New Hermes pantographs and a Dahlgren computerized engraver. A Varityper Compset typesetter, Xpres machine, and two Automark typewriters are also kept here. The remaining space is used as the general warehouse.

A second retail store is located on the east side of town about seven miles from the factory. A showroom is located here, part of which is shown in figure 2. This store is equipped with an Automark typewriter and three New Hermes pantographs. Some of the engraving and all of the assembly is done at this location.

What is particularly important about Tuller Trophy is the fact that 95% of the trophies it sells are custom designed. According to Mort, "When



FIGURE 2





FIGURE 3

a customer needs a trophy, he can simply describe the event and the sport involved. We will then design that trophy ourselves. Since Sylvia is an artist, she does the best design work. But everyone else becomes involved in some way with trophy design."

The Tuller Trophy Factory is proud to say that they had a regular customer who ordered trophies twice each month for five years. This customer never received the same trophy twice!

"Many of our customers do not even bother to look in the catalogs," Mort remarks. "They just come in and tell us what they need. This method works well because it enables us to be creative almost all of the time."

The Tuller Trophy Factory has an extensive array of equipment that allows them to produce many award components — especially wood parts — from scratch. Included in the list is not only a complete wood shop but a paint shop. In this respect, they are



FIGURE 4

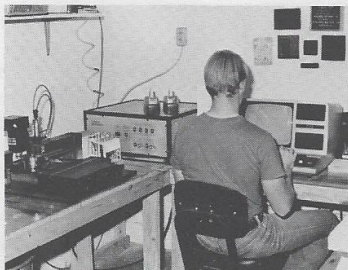


FIGURE 5

different from other trophy businesses in that they make some items that other retailers usually order from a manufacturer. As Mort explains it, "By doing this, we do not have to turn customers away if they need something that is out of the ordinary. For example, if a customer needs a number of plaques shaped like the Liberty Bell, I can not only make these plaques, but I can have them ready within one day."

Order processing often begins in the wood shop, where plaques and trophy bases are made. This shop is perhaps the most well stocked area of the business. A small part of it can be seen in figure 3, where Ramon Mendivil, shop supervisor, uses a band saw to cut walnut.

Tuller Trophy buys its walnut from a mill and uses a thickness planer (fig. 4) to smooth out the roughness. The walnut is then cut to the proper size and put through a shaper to achieve the desired edge. Next it is sanded and sent to the paint room for a coat of sealer. When the sealer is dry, the wood is hand sanded and coated with lacquer. It is then ready for plate attachment and engraving, as shown in figure 5 where the

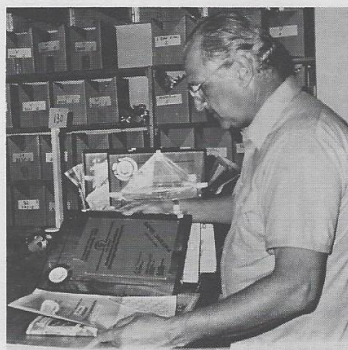


FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8

System One engraver is being used. The final product is checked against the original artwork, as shown by Mort Tuller in figure 6.

For trophies, aluminum extrusions are kept in stock which are cut to the desired length with a chop saw (fig. 7). Any castings or figures that are needed are made out-of-house. These items and the cloisonné emblems that are used for medallions are the only work that the Tullers have done out-of-house.

Sylvia Tuller (fig. 8), handles most of the design and photography work. In figure 9, she is using the Varityper

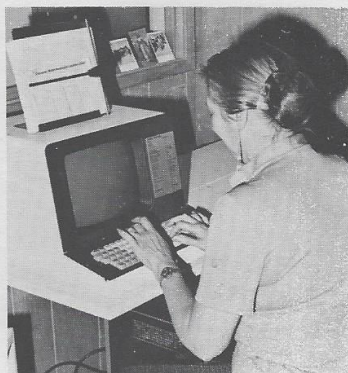


FIGURE 9





FIGURE 10

Compset to prepare typeset artwork for an order.

In the ribbon department (fig. 10), Sharlene Smith, ribbon department supervisor, is shown hot stamping ribbons. In figure 11, Cheryl Harrison uses the eyelet machine to hole-punch ribbons.

Tuller Trophy's assembly room, where orders are prepared for pickup, is pictured in figures 12 and 13. In addition to storing parts under worktables where they can easily be

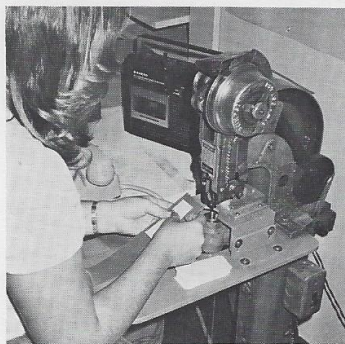


FIGURE 11

reached, Mort maintains two other supply inventories. One of these is located on a balcony which was recently added to the factory. The other inventory supply is in the warehouse (fig. 14), also located in the factory building.

The orders that Tuller Trophy receives come from a varied clientele. As Mort explains it, "Many of our award customers are schools, colleges, sports organizations, corporations and even Indian

reservations. For industrial customers, we engrave instrument panels.

"In addition, we manufacture and engrave a number of nameplates for the White House," he continued. "This came about when Sylvia and I visited the White House in 1979. We were looking at the portraits of past presidents when I noticed that the nameplate for John F. Kennedy's portrait, which was lacquered brass, was partially black. This was simply due to the wearing of the lacquer.

"So I made a point of telling the maintenance personnel about this, but I had to laugh when they apologized and assured me that the problem would be taken care of! I explained to them that the reason I had mentioned this was because I could make a better plate — one that would be maintenance free.

"They then asked if I could show them some samples, which I just happened to have. They liked the samples, so I called my shop and had our employees make a nameplate for John F. Kennedy. This nameplate was photosensitized anodized aluminum, made using a process known as *Fotoseal* in metal.

"This process involves exposing the photographically-coated plate to ultraviolet light, then placing it in a processor where it is developed and sealed. The plate is then treated with chemicals and heated, which closes

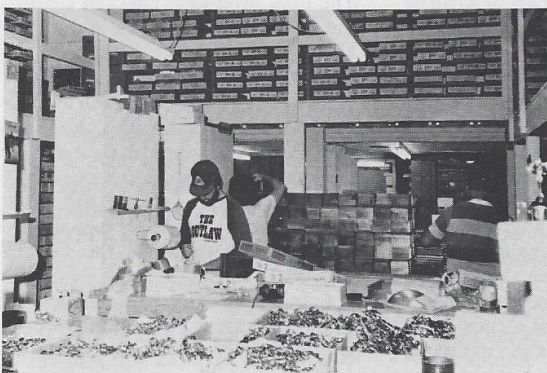


FIGURE 12

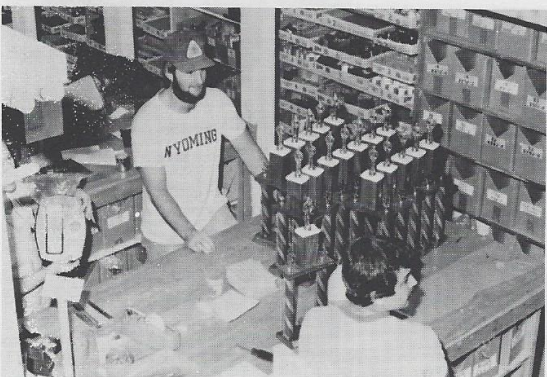


FIGURE 13

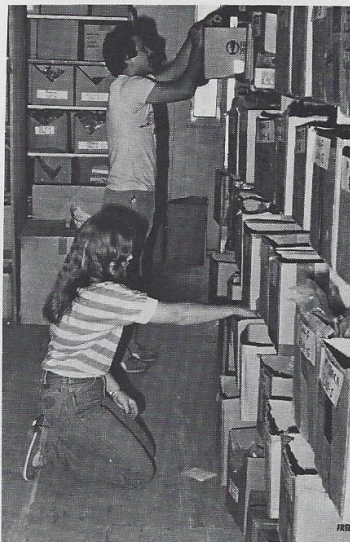


FIGURE 14



the "pores" on the plate and permanently seals the image.

"I received this nameplate by Federal Express while still in Washington," Mort explains. "I immediately gave it to the White House personnel, who were not only impressed with the plate, but appreciated the promptness with which it was delivered. When I arrived back in Tucson, I received an order from them."

The work that Tuller Trophy Factory does for the Metropolitan Museum of Art was acquired in much the same way. "When Sylvia and I went to this museum a few years ago, we noticed that some of the exhibit labels were made of paper. In many cases, this paper was torn and damaged. I thought it was a shame to have these great paintings labeled with torn pieces of paper, so I spoke to the museum personnel about this. What followed is very similar to what occurred in the White House. Since then, we have done work for museums in London, England, and for a museum in Athens, Greece."

As one can see, Mort's initiative has not only helped him to acquire new customers, but these customers have provided some very effective word-of-mouth advertising for Tuller Trophy Factory. In fact, Mort believes that this type of advertising works best.

"We have tried just about every type of advertising available," he says. "We've experimented with television, radio and newspapers, all of which were ineffective. We now advertise by running a display ad in the *Yellow Pages*, and by placing our company label on the back or bottom of all merchandise.

"Since trophies are not an item that people buy on an everyday basis, we feel this is adequate. If someone needs to buy awards, they will usually look in the *Yellow Pages* for a company that will supply them.

"The reason we put our name, address and phone number on all of our merchandise is because we know it will be seen. For example, in the car business, customers like to kick tires. In the award business, and I mean this seriously, customers like to look at the bottom of trophies! I don't

know why this is true, but it is. Time after time I have watched my customers when they look at a trophy and they always look at the bottom.

"Now I have to assume that the trophy recipient is going to do the same, so that's where my name goes. This has generated business from all over the country," Mort continued.

By now you may have recognized Mort Tuller's name and recalled that he was the first president of the Trophy Dealers and Manufacturers Association (TDMA). This resulted from his involvement with The Trophy Dealers of America (TDA) and the merger between this association and the American Award and Manufacturers Association (AAMA).

"For many years, I had been attending the sporting goods shows, for the purpose of talking with the awards people. In 1974, when I received an announcement for TDA's trophy show, Sylvia and I attended. We were excited about it because this was the first show to be held especially for the awards and recognition industry.

"What we found was a group of very dedicated, industry-oriented people," Mort recalls. "I joined TDA while at the show and offered to help out in any way I could."

In the next six years, Mort Tuller held several positions within TDA. First he became chairman of the awards committee, and then a member of its board. Following this, he became third vice president, and then second vice president.

When TDA merged with AAMA in 1980 and became TDMA, he chaired the merger meeting and became president of the new association. Mort says that he enjoyed both of his one-year terms as president because it enabled him to help the association. Actually under Mort's leadership, TDMA for the first time became a major, national force within the industry. During those two years, membership almost doubled, from 297 to 558 members.

"TDMA is a very active organization — it has been very good to me and I was happy to be able to do something in return. The entire awards industry has been good to me. In fact, I know that I will always

be involved with it."

In September of 1983, Mort was honored by TDMA with the "Crittenden Award." This award recognized his "outstanding service to TDMA and to the trophy/award industry."

In addition to his industry-related activities, Mort belongs to several clubs, such as the Masons and Shrine clubs. He was president of the Tucson Press Club and an exalted ruler of the Elks Lodge. "I've always enjoyed working with groups or clubs. There are so many opportunities to broaden your horizons, keep up with what is important to you, and help out at the same time."

For Tuller Trophy Factory, Mort is striving to become even more diversified with award creations. "We would like to design even more awards for the large corporations and the major events," he remarks.

"In the future, I think that graphics will be used more extensively in the award industry, and I plan to enlarge my own graphics department to try and keep up with this trend."

Mort Tuller has no plans for retirement — ever. "With the business going full steam ahead, and me being as happy as I am, there's really nothing for me to retire to. There is nothing that I dislike about my work, so I would say that I am in it for good!" he exclaims.

Those who have actually met Mort Tuller will never forget him. His genuinely contagious enthusiasm, wit and imagination, not to mention the "ten-gallon" hat he can be seen wearing at the TDMA shows, all add up to a very colorful character indeed. But perhaps the most memorable feature of this man is his sense of humor, which is sometimes subtle, sometimes almost as dry as the Arizona desert, but always clever and never offensive.

When we reflect back upon Mort Tuller's multiple careers, his achievements and ideas, it is easy to see how they have benefitted both the company that he and Sylvia have founded, and the industry that he has been a member of for the past 28 years. ■