Legend Posing As History

The theory that two lone boot makers (Hyer and Justin) outfitted a generation of cowboys defies logic. (Top) Hyer Brothers boot and shoe shop in late nineteenth-century Olathe (Charles Hyer second from the right). (Bottom) Sketch of Joe Justin's early boot-making shop in Spanish Fort, Texas.
Hyer, Justin, and the Origin of the Cowboy Boot

by Barbara Brackman

Boots were hard to buy in the days when the West was young. Stores and mail order firms were non-existent then. Only two sources were open to the range-dwellers. Old Man Justin had a little shack on the Texas prairies, Hyer had a very small one-man shop in a Kansas country town. And these two small stores were the beginning of the Western boot business.

Ramon De Ortega, July 1936

De Ortega's story of the origins of the American cowboy boot industry was extreme even when standards for western history were lax. His theory of two lone cowboy boot makers west of the Mississippi is more than romanticism riding roughshod over historical methodology. The idea that two men outfitted a generation of cowboys defies logic. Evidence of western boot makers abounds in the decades from 1868 to 1886 that were the heyday of the Texas-to-Kansas cattle trails. The 1870 census counted 869 businesses that manufactured and repaired boots and shoes in the cattle-raising states and territories west of the Iowa-Louisiana line. By June 1880, before either the Hyer or Justin shops were founded, census takers recorded 1,274 western shoe and boot makers.

Statistical abstracts from the censuses do not differentiate between those who made cowboy boots and those who made cavalry boots, lace-up boots, stogy boots (work boots), granger boots (farmer's boots), and other footwear for men, women, and children. However, advertisements, photographs, life stories, and town histories clarify that some of the 121 cobbler's Kansas in the 1870s specialized in custom-made boots for working cowboys and ranchers. In 1870 the Abilene Chronicle carried advertisements for two shops. Thomas C. McInerney stated he had been making boots there since 1868. His new competitors, W.J. Johnson and J.D. Lafferty, vowed, "Our prices will be as low as any other market in this part of the state. We will also manufacture boots and shoes to order for our customers and will warrant our work." Census records include three other boot makers in Abilene's boom years as a cowtown.

Barbara Brackman, a resident of Lawrence, Kansas, is a free-lance writer and museum curator. She is co-curator of the exhibit "How Kansas Gave Texas the Boot," currently at the Kansas Museum of History. She also is co-editor and co-author of Kansas Quilts & Quilters published by the University Press of Kansas (1993).

Research that made this article possible was partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

After the cattle trail moved west to Ellsworth, Kansas, cowboys could buy boots from Andrew Schmidt or John Mueller. When the trail headed to Dodge City, Mueller followed, setting up his business on Front Street. In 1874 John Cubine accommodated cowboys when he opened a boot shop in Chetopa in southeastern Kansas, and two years later he moved to Coffeyville.  

De Ortega’s summary of boot origins would not warrant criticism fifty years later had boot history advanced beyond his simplistic tale. Popular writing and academic western history continue to describe the development of the cowboy boot without reference to historic methodology. Terry G. Jordan in his 1993 analysis of cattle traditions, North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers, offers an innovative interpretation of the origins, diffusion, and differentiation of western cattle culture. Yet in a paragraph about the origins of the cowboy boot he credits Justin as creator, repeating the myth that today passes for history:

In the late 1870s, cobbler H.J. Justin of Spanish Fort, on the Red River in north Texas, responded to the complaints of trail-driving cowboys by modifying the British-derived riding shoe ... the Anglo-Texan boot subsequently spread through most of the West.

Two recent popular histories cite similar stories about boot origins. A 1993 Warner Brothers television documentary, The Wild West, credited Justin as creator. Tyler Beard in his 1992 Cowboy Boot Book interviewed boot maker Jay Griffith about boot making and boot history. Beard notes:

Although there is some debate on the subject of who made the first boots, Jay claims, "In 1875, C.H. Hyer and Sons opened a boot shop in Olathe, Kansas, and designed the first cowboy boot. H.J. Justin started up in 1879 in Spanish Fort, Texas. But from these two men descended hundreds of one-man boot shops that spread the cowboy boot across the west."  

In the midst of the recent enthusiasm for writing a new history of the American West, it is surprising that the prevailing view of boot history focuses on two men. A study of their company histories, however, readily reveals the sources for these origin myths. Neither the Hyer Boot Company nor the Justin Boot Company actually claimed the invention of the boot, but company advertising has required careful reading for the truth.

Over the decades their advertising and corporate images focused on superlatives. Understandably, each advertised the best boot. Each also claimed to be the biggest and the oldest cowboy boot factory, and each defined a place in history as the inventor of the mail-order boot. Both subtracted about five years


Before Huer or Justin began making boots, others were providing custom-made footwear for cowboys. Thomas C. McInerney's shop (top) started in Abilene in 1868, and John Cubine's business (bottom) opened in Chetopa in 1874. Two years later Cubine moved his establishment to Coffeyville, where this ca. 1880 photo was taken.
from their founding dates to establish a more impressive history. Journalists, in turn, have compounded minor exaggeration into whopping hyperbole.

As early as the mid-1920s, soon after the death of Charles H. Hyer, the company began to weave romanticized origins into their public relations and advertising, such as this typical version from the 1950 catalog:

Hyer, The Oldest Cowboy Boot Factory in the World. Hyer's Beginning actually dates back MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS. William H. Hyer, a highly skilled craftsman, began making boots by hand in 1840, back in New York state. He later carried on his chosen field in Kankakee, Ill. Meanwhile his son, C.H. . . . dreamed of going west and setting up a boot factory of his own. . . .

A dramatic incident marked the actual start of the new Hyer boot factory. A lone, dust-covered cowboy rode in town, tossed his bridle rein over the hitching post and tramped into the little frame Hyer shop. "Can you make me a first-class pair of boots?" he asked. "I reckon I can make you as fine a pair of boots as good leather and hand work can produce," promptly replied the surprised and happy shoemaker, and a few days later the rider and his friends were admiring the first pair of Hyer hand-made cowboy boots. From that day, cowboys beat a path to the door of the little shop where a young man with needle and thread and wearing a leather apron and sitting on a stool was to be found painstakingly fashioning a pair of cowboy boots by hand.

Hyer's story of the "lone cowboy" changed little from the 1920s through the 1960s. The tale told in interviews, press releases, and catalog copy implies that a working cowboy inspired Hyer to make his first pair of cowboy boots. The shoemaker's craftsmanship and promptness impressed the cowboy who told his friends out west. Word-of-mouth advertising made Hyer's reputation as a good and reliable boot maker. By the mid-1960s, however, the implications changed. A United Press International article celebrating the footwear of new President Lyndon Johnson added a twist:

The late C.H. Hyer first opened the doors of his shop in 1875 and invented the cowboy boot as it is known today at the request of a customer. Prior to that time the cowboys wore plain work shoes or work boots, but at the request of a Westerner who drifted in one day Hyer built a high-heeled, sharp-toed boot that caught on like wildfire.8

No longer did the story of the lone cowboy suggest that Hyer made a good pair of boots; indeed he had invented them. A 1967 variation published in Kansas! magazine involved two cowboys who told Hyer what they wanted:

"A high heel to keep the foot from sliding through the stirrups so you can't get caught and dragged. Form fitting, tough yet soft for control of the horse, high enough to protect the legs. Boots like the old Spanish style." . . . The modern cowboy boot had been born. Prior to this, the only boots that were available were machine made in the East, with low heels, poor quality.9

The Justin Company also has used a story of the founder's craftsmanship and dedication as the basis of their image. A rather conservative view is this biographical sketch of Herman Joseph (Joe) Justin, written for the Texas Centennial in 1936:

It was in 1887 that Mr. Justin established a small shop for the manufacture of cowboy boots in Nocona. . . . Mr. Justin located first at Spanish Fort where he opened a small repair shop. As soon as he had acquired capital sufficient for the purchase of a small supply of fine leather, Mr. Justin made a pair of boots. He sold these immediately and with the proceeds purchased more leather. From this small beginning grew one of the largest enterprises of its kind in all the world and the fame of Justin boots in many foreign countries.10

The Justin story also took a more dramatic turn. In 1958 a story in Western Horseman magazine indi-

---

cated that the company was nearly a decade older and it was Justin who had designed the boot.

The year was 1878. And H.J. Justin arrived in Spanish Fort with a quarter in his pocket and enough leather to make one pair of cowboy boots. He was, undeniably, an exponent of the philosophy that “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” and on his second day in town set about starting his business—he already had his first order. . . . The cowboy who dropped by Justin’s shop had a clear idea of what he wanted in the way of a boot but what he got was a considerable improvement over the footwear of the Conquistadores and, more recently, of the grays and the blues of the Civil War brigades.”

After Hyer closed in 1978, competition between the companies cooled and Hyer’s legend faded. In the past decade Justin’s image, coordinated by the New York public relations firm Ruder-Finn, has kept

the Texas company in the spotlight, where it remains the focus of much of the mythology about how cowboy boots came to be.

The obvious fact is that neither Hyer nor Justin "invented" the cowboy boot. Because both opened their shops rather late in the era of the cattle trails, one school of popular historians has identified earlier boot makers who might be considered the originators. John Cubine who gained a reputation for the "Coffeeville boot" has received some credit. In Texas Boots, Sharon DeLano and David Rieff describe his shop in the late 1860s "where the first cowboy boots were being made." Had Cubine arrived in southeastern Kansas before the documented date of 1874, he still cannot be credited as the designer of the boot. 12

The look of the nineteenth-century cowboy boot is well described in photographs, in firsthand accounts, and in drawings from catalogs, advertisements, and magazines. Its three most important components were the high heel, the below-the-knee cut, and the side seams on the legs. Less important but part of the boot's identity were pull straps, decorative stitching on the legs, and a toe shape that varied from round to square. Many of the characteristics that identify today's boot—the variation in leg heights from peewee boots on up, the decorative inlay, colorful, complex leg stitching, and the pointed toes—were introduced in the 1910s when the entertainment industry demanded fancier boots and industrialization made such decorations viable. In contrast, the nineteenth-century boot was a rather plain affair. Colors ranged from black to brown with moroccan red trim. The varieties of inlay and decorative stitching were minimal; most boots had neither. No single man originated this high-heeled, side-seamed, below-the-knee boot. Rather it is a combination of parts long popular in Europe. Its basic appearance and structure owe much to English fashions for the Wellington boot and the Hessian boot. Wellingtons, named for England's Duke of Wellington, were a below-the-knee boot that became popular around 1810 when men began wearing trousers rather than tight breeches. The Wellington, worn under the pant leg, typically had beaded (piped) sideseams, one-inch stacked, straight heels, square toes, and tape pull-on straps. Stitching might decorate the leg and the top edge, which was cut straight across or curved slightly higher in front. A v-cut behind the knee was optional. By 1847 when J. Sparkes Hall, boot maker to Queen Victoria, wrote The Book of the Feet, boots were a fashion necessity. "At Present, the boot is almost as domestic a thing as the slipper... The Wellington is unquestionably the most gentlemanly thing of its kind." 13

British fashion was fickle: in 1868 an English magazine noted, "The Wellington has been almost entirely abandoned in England in consequence of the short ankle boot, but it is generally used by some classes of persons in the United States, although in an odd fashion, with the trousers stuffed loosely in at the top." Among the Americans wearing their Wellingtons in odd fashion were the cowboys riding from Texas to Kansas and returning to show off their custom-made, knee-length boots, their pants tucked into their bootleggs. 14

Cowboys also wore a boot with a v-cut under the knee, a look that was introduced to England about 1785 by German dandies, imitating the military footwear of Hessian soldiers. Hessian boots, also called Austrian boots, were named for the city state of Hesse. They were distinguished by the v-dip and a tassel that hung from the center of the cut. Hessians were popular before Wellingtons and out of style in England by the 1840s. British shoe historian June Swann has noted that the fashion survived longer in the United States. "A photograph circa 1879 of Billy the Kid shows him in medium high-heeled Hessians with front dip but no tassel, the straps hanging outside." 15

Most American observers of nineteenth-century cowboy garb took boot tops for granted. The high,


14. Quoted from an 1866 copy of Leather Trader Circular and Review, in June Swann, Shoes (London: B.T. Batsford, 1882), 44.

15. Ibid., 43.
underslung heel was the characteristic that attracted everyone's attention including that of a Topeka journalist writing in 1889: the cowboys' heels "throw the French heel of a lady's boot entirely in the shade."  

Recent popular writers tend to attribute the heel to Spain. Rosemary Kent in The Genuine Texas Handbook stated that the basic boot "is a direct descendant of the Spanish riding boot the conquistadores brought to Mexico." The Spanish view is too narrow; pictures and descriptions of riding boots over several centuries indicate that Spain was only one of many European countries where horsemen favored a high, underslung heel. A look at the Spanish horseman reveals little evidence that America's Spanish culture influenced the look of the cowboy boot. Spanish-influenced American horsemen often were pictured and described as wearing flat-heeled boots, shoes, or mocassins. With their footwear, Californios, vaqueros, and other descendents of Spain throughout the Americas sometimes wore soft leggings (las botas) over their pants. The absence of pictures or descriptions of sturdy-legged riding boots is explained by an analysis of their riding style, which called for a combination stirrup and leg protection (los tapaderos) that hung from their saddles. A horseman using tapaderos required neither a high heel to keep his foot in the stirrup nor a stiff boot to protect his leg from the brush on the trail.  

The cowboy who rode east of the Rocky Mountains from Texas to Montana favored a different riding style, using an oxbow stirrup in which he placed his weight on the ball or in the instep of the foot, a style requiring a substantial heel to keep the foot stable. He wore his leg protection (sturdy boot legs and chaps) on his body rather than on his saddle as vaqueros did.

The functional relationship between riding style and footwear is important to the development of the cowboy boot. The cobbler built knee-length, flexible but tough, high-heeled boots for men who rode with oxbow stirrups. The boots were not a matter of invention but a skillful combination of the European boot-making vocabulary of the time. It is no coincidence that many of the boot makers discussed in this article had recent ties to Britain and German-speaking states. It seems likely that the heel's antecedents, like that of the boot top, were in northern Europe.  


LEGEND POSEING AS HISTORY
Despite the obvious parallels to European riding boots, latecomers Charles Hyer and Joe Justin retain center stage in boot history. To understand their roles, one must view the companies’ origins, growth, and industrialization through the scripts of their advertising, much of which has focused on the past. They were not unique in defining company image through origins. As the post-Civil War United States changed rapidly into an urbanized, industrialized, and increasingly immigrant society, nostalgia began to glorify the rural, independent, handworker who typified American values. Much early twentieth-century advertising reflected a glorious past when a firm’s pedigree implied more than stability and experience, and Ben Franklin, Martha Washington, and Dolley Madison sold everything from insurance to bread.

Nostalgia for the Wild West required little distance. In 1886, just as the cattle trails were moving west of Kansas, the Barber County Index longed for the good old days of a few years earlier: “What a sight it would be to have all the old-timers . . . meet here, rigged up with their slickers, leggings, broad-brimmed hats, colored shirts, high-heeled boots and other paraphernalia of the cow-boy.” During the early decades of the twentieth century, images of Native Americans and cowboys emphasized tradition, a balance to conflicting themes of industrialization, new technology, and productivity.

Hyer and Justin focused on their origins as small, one-man shops as a response to the national nostalgia and as evidence of how far each had come. Both companies increased the emphasis on their past as they industrialized, abandoning hand-made methods for factory production. As the factories grew larger, they also grew more historic. Hyer’s advertising copy and catalogs used an accurate origin of 1880 until after the deaths of the founders. A 1934 article dates the encounter with the lone cowboy to sixty years earlier (1874). A 1948 Topeka Daily Capital article moves the date back to 1873, and a 1956 article cites 1871.

“Mr. Justin has been making boots since 1880,” announced The Cattlemen in 1915, the beginning of a long advertising association. Other Texas and Oklahoma boot makers occasionally ran competing ads that mentioned experience. In 1921 the Lucchese Company claimed thirty-seven years of experience (1884) in the same issue that Justin advertised thirty-nine (1882). One month later Justin advertised forty years of experience.

By the 1950s Justin and Hyer seem to have stabilized official dates in company advertising, although journalists continued to waver. Hyer, acknowledged as the older of the two firms, celebrated a diamond anniversary of seventy-five years in 1950. Justin, officially four years younger, marked a centennial in 1979 with a special boot, the Signature Edition, which featured a map of Texas inlaid with a gold star and diamond pinpointing the town of Spanish Fort where founder Joe Justin set up shop. “With assets of a hammer, an awl, and 25 cents, the young artisan began making custom-crafted boots for cowboys in 1879.”

Both companies celebrated their anniversaries prematurely. The first Hyer boot shop in the West actually appeared in November 1880, and Justin probably opened his first shop in Spanish Fort in the middle of that decade. On many levels Charles Hyer and Joe Justin lived parallel lives. Each was a midwesterner, born to German immigrants. As young men in the 1870s, each followed the lure of the West and began making cowboy boots at the end of the era of the Texas-to-Kansas trails. Each was assisted in developing his business by a brother who later was forgotten as the one-man shop came to dominate company image. Each fathered three sons who learned the trade as children, took over in the 1910s, and competently managed the company through mid-twentieth-century changes.

Charles Henry Hyer was born of German parents in New York in May 1852, shortly before the family

19. “Cowboy Reunion,” Barber County Index (Medicine Lodge), May 21, 1886.
moved to Kankakee, Illinois. William Hyer was a shoemaker, and his sons Charles and Ed learned the family trade. In the mid-1870s Charles came to Leavenworth, Kansas, to work for the railroad. He soon found a job as foreman of the shoe shop at the Olathe School for the Deaf where he worked for six years training the students in boot and shoemaking. 23

Believing the town of Olathe could support another shoe shop, Charles asked Ed to join him. The firm’s first advertisement appeared in the Olathe Mirror on November 25, 1880, announcing “Ed W. Hyer Boot and Shoe Maker.” In that year or the next Charles quit his job at the school and went to work for the Hyer Brothers’ shop. He married Minnie Alstead of Chebanse, Illinois, with whom he had two daughters and three sons. 24

Olathe was close enough to the stockyards in Kansas City and to the trails and rails that cowboy boots became an important part of the shop trade. By 1889 the Hyer brothers had five men working for them. Ed returned to Kankakee to marry Mary Strehlow, whose father was employed there at the Hyer family shoe business. They moved to Chillicothe, Missouri, where he managed a grocery store. After Ed left, the Olathe firm began using the name C.H. Hyer. Ed and his wife returned to Olathe about 1900, and thereafter he was pictured in a place of honor in catalogs as superintendent. 25

In 1898 the Olathe Mirror posed twenty-two employees of the firm that a headline writer called the biggest shoe shop in the world, the first of such published hyperbole. (Some Massachusetts shoe factories turned out Hyer’s annual production in one week.) As the company prospered and his sons and brother took over management responsibilities, Charles H. Hyer devoted time to politics, becoming a city councilman and a one-term Kansas legislator. By 1913 the firm was known as C.H. Hyer and Sons, Manufacturers of Olathe Cow Boy Boots and Shoes. 26

23. Charles Hyer probably arrived after the 1875 Kansas State Census was recorded since no Hyers are mentioned in the census index. His obituary notes he arrived in Olathe when he was twenty-two years old (1876). Information on Hyer’s life and the company’s history is drawn from several sources, especially Dean Hyer, “Hyer’s Colorful History,” The Hyer Dealer 2, 3, 4 (November 1954–October 1955). Charles H. Hyer contributed his memories to a history of the Olathe School for the Deaf on its fiftieth anniversary, see Charles H. Hyer, “Outline History of the School,” The Kansas Star, Golden Jubilee Number, 1861–1911 (Olathe), December 15, 1911. Hyer’s obituary, Olathe Mirror, June 16, 1921.

24. Hyers’ local advertisements began in the Olathe Mirror on November 25, 1880, and lasted through mid-1882. They did not advertise locally after that; this evidence suggests that mail-order business was their mainstay. Helen King to Anne C. Jones, April 3, 1990, Johnson County Museums. In Hyer’s obituary Mrs. Hyer’s maiden name is spelled Alstead, see Olathe Mirror, June 16, 1921.

25. Undated obituaries of Mrs. Edward Hyer (died May 1927) and Ed W. Hyer (died December 3, 1928), Johnson County Library, Merriam, Kans.

26. “The Biggest Shoe Shop in the World,” Olathe Mirror, August 24, 1898, clarifies that Hyer probably was the biggest cowboy boot manufacturer of its time. According to “The Home of Cowboy Boots,” Kansas City Star, February 11, 1911, Hyer’s 1910 production was ten thousand pairs of

A look at Spanish horsemen reveals little evidence that this culture influenced the look of the cowboy boot. Using tapaderos, the combined stirrup and leg protection covering the rider’s foot, horsemen needed neither a high heel to keep the foot in the stirrup nor a stiff boot to protect the legs from brush.

LEGEND POSING AS HISTORY
After Charles Hyer died on June 13, 1921, the "Hyer boys" kept the company prosperous through boom decades and bad. The family sold the company in 1968, and in 1977 the firm went bankrupt. It was purchased the following year by Ben Miller, Inc. of El Paso, Texas. Miller's line of boots, called the Larry Mahan Boot Collection, uses the Hyer name now for a small line of women's boots. When Miller closed the Olathe factory, Hyer's former employees bought machinery, patterns, and records. The Olathe Boot Company, founded by Ron Orscheln, who had been Hyer's general manager, continues Hyer's factory traditions. During the 1980s the Hammont Boot Company founded by Hyer shop foreman Fred Hammon continued the custom boot line in Gardner, Kansas. After Fred's death, his wife, Carolyn, maintained the company until 1991.

Hereman Joseph (Joe) Justin was born in 1859 in Lafayette, Indiana, the second son of Nicholas and Catherine Justin, Prussians who had lived in England and New York before settling in Indiana. Censuses record Nick Justin as a tailor, but family and factory histories say he was a cigar maker, and that son Joe wanted nothing to do with the family trade. Joe Justin left for Texas when he was either eighteen or twenty years old. Determining exactly what year he arrived in Texas or when he set up his boot-making shop has been difficult because obituaries, biographies, interviews, and company history give a range of dates from 1878 to 1887. The 1880 census indicates that the three oldest Justin boys, John, Herman (Joe), and Albert, were no longer living at home in Indiana, but the Texas census soundex for 1880 lists no H.J. Justin. The most likely story is that he arrived in Texas in the early to mid-1880s as was reported in his obituary.

Justin's first two years in Texas were spent in Gainesville in Cooke County, seven miles south of the Red River. In her autobiography, his daughter Enid recalls that he worked for two sisters who had inherited the Norton Shoe Shop there. He then moved thirty miles west to the town of Spanish Fort, where the Red River intersects a branch of the Chisholm Trail. Spanish Fort had just changed its name from Burlington. Boosters were confident its location promised continued prosperity, and Justin picked this spot for his first repair and shoemaking business. With four hotels and more saloons, the cowtown had a wild reputation as a headquarters for stockmen. Louanna (Annie) Allen, who moved there as a child, remembered Boot Hill, raids by outlaws who crossed the river from Indian Territory, and the boom town's collapse. Spanish Fort was, she told a reporter, "a live wire town, but mostly on paper. When one man went broke, they all seemed to go down almost at once, and the town was virtually gone." Spanish Fort was a victim of the railroads that bypassed the town, causing the cattle trail and river to diminish in importance as transportation links.

In January 1887, the year Spanish Fort went broke, Annie Allen married the new boot maker. Like most of the town's other residents, the Justin's moved twenty miles south to the new town of Nocona built near the rail lines. Their move occurred in 1887, 1888, or 1889, according to various biographical sketches. In Nocona Joe's younger brother Willie also worked in the Justin shop until his death from tuberculosis.

By 1907 Nocona was a town of 1,836 people with eight schoolteachers and one industry, the Justin Boot Company, which employed a dozen or so men in a new building. It had grown from an artisan's shop, in which each man completed a pair of boots using hand tools, to a shoe factory with specialized tasks and machinery. Another important change involved a wider customer base with a national advertising campaign to reach cattlemen in other states.

boots and shoes. In 1910 the George E. Keith Company of Massachusetts produced twenty thousand pairs daily in its nine factories according to Fred A. Gannon, A Short History of American Shoemaking (Salem, Mass.: Newcomb and Gause, 1912), 59.


As the business grew, the Justin family grew to three boys and three girls. The children learned the trade; daughter Enid, who started her own boot factory after her father’s death, recalled that she was sacking catalogs to be mailed when she was twelve and later learned top stitching and inlay work. When sons John, Earl, and Avis (Sam) became partners in 1908, the company name was changed to H.J. Justin and Sons.

In 1915 Joe Justin began to suffer from a “creeping paralysis.” Travel to doctors around the country brought no cure, and in 1916 he retired. The following year Justin apparently suffered a stroke caused, the family believed, by worry about his sons and the draft. For a year he lay bedridden, paralyzed, and mute. He died at age fifty-nine on July 14, 1918. In 1926 Justin’s sons moved the company to Fort Worth. Enid took over the Nocona building and established
Nocona Boots, a company that merged with the Justin Boot Company in the 1980s, Justin thrives, producing 3.5 million pair of boots annually in their three major lines, Justin, Nocona, and Tony Lama.31

In the decades after the turn of the century, Hyer and Justin competed as the largest manufacturers of cowboy boots. In addition to their standardized, machine-made, assembly-line boots sold through stores and catalogs around the world, they each maintained a mail-order custom line. Cowboys all over the West could send their sizes by measuring their own feet and requesting the color, heel, toe, and style of boot. The companies may have acquired reputations by word of mouth, but they maintained them with national advertising campaigns that reached working cowboys. Both, for example, advertised regularly in the Wyoming Stockman-Farmer, targeting a significant group of customers. Their effectiveness can be measured by the recollection of movie cowboy Tim McCoy. When he went west in 1909 to become a horse wrangler, he immediately acquired the cowboy "outfit" in Lander, Wyoming. "The all-important boots were by custom, either Hyer or Justin."32

Such prominence linked the two companies with a secondary legend. Both are credited with building the first boots of any kind on left and right lasts. However, much evidence supports differentiated shoes and boots prior to the days of the cowboy boot maker. In 1801, William Young advertised rights and lefts in the Philadelphia Aurora and General Advertiser. The first English text on boot and shoemaking in 1813 advised: "I would wish to draw your attention to an observation or two on straight and crooked lasts. Right and left lasts are made as near as possible to the form of the feet, and the shoes made on them will fit better than those that are made on straight lasts." During the Civil War, the standard ankle boot issued to Union enlisted men, the Jefferson bootee, was a lace-up shoe made in factories on right and left lasts.33

Analysis of the tale of the right/left invention reveals it as a myth with some persistence in English and American culture. In 1847 shoe historian J. Sparkes Hall complained, "Many persons have an idea that right and left shoes are a comparatively modern invention." He attempted to establish an accurate history, but his failure is evident in today's versions of the Hyer/Justin stories.34

Another legend associated with Hyer and Justin is that each invented the self-measuring system, allowing the company to expand beyond the face-to-face link between boot maker and customer. Justin's story was embroidered with the most detail as described in an article about the company centennial:

Justin... and his wife Annie created the first self-measuring kit. This device, which came with tape measure and foot chart, allowed customers across the nation to order Justin boots by mail. Justin got the idea from a suggestion by a Montana rancher, O.C. Cato.35

Hyer had a similar story. "A fancy pair of boots of the cowboy type made for an Olathe man found their way to Colorado and an inquiry as to how an intending customer could take his own measure led to the invention of a self-measuring blank." Hyer's method of obtaining a custom fit was outlined in the 1900 catalog instructing customers to trace their feet and measure with a tape line the ball, low instep, high instep, heel, small ankle, leg, and the height of the boot or shoe—directions that varied little until 1927. Justin, wrote Don Dedera in Arizona Highways, "hit upon a kit which made it possible for any remote bunkhouse cowhand to measure his feet and legs at six places, and mail in an order in a pre-addressed envelope." The subtle differences between Hyer's instructions and Justin's kit with its envelope and some say an enclosed tape measure are the stuff that carried their advertising rivalry. Company focus on such details emphasized self-reliance, independence, and innovation—characteristics familiar in the mythological West.36

32. Tim McCoy and Ronald McCoy, Tim McCoy Remembers the West (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 30.
34. Hall, The Book of the Feet, 106.
35. "Justin Celebrates Anniversary," 73.
A look at the context of the shoemaking industry of the times reveals that western boot making was an adaptation of established eastern systems. Changes in shoe measurement were in the air after the Civil War. Carol Willis Moffett in a federal publication *Shoe Sizing and Fitting* (1941) noted that the prolonged war with its need to resupply soldiers forced the shoe industry to adopt standard sizes for factory-made boots. The peace-time application of the mail-order shoe developed immediately after the war; its important components were a brand name on the shoe, a national advertising campaign, and a standardized system of sizing. No longer did the customer need to be measured by the shoemaker. For twenty years each company maintained a different (sometimes secret) sizing system. To impose order upon chaos, retailers formed a national organization in 1886, issuing a set of uniform measurements to be published and mailed to all boot and shoe manufacturers in the United States.\(^{37}\)

Hyer and Justin cannot really be credited with being the first to apply self-measurement to the farflung cowboy boot trade. The technique was practiced by other firms in the 1880s. Henry Erdman, an El Paso, Texas, boot maker advertised in 1883: “Rules for self-measurement sent on application.” In an 1899 job application to Hyer, Charles Rokahr attested to his skills in “fitting people by the scales of self-measurement as I am perfectly at home and successful in that part of the business as I have had an actual experience of sixteen years [since 1883].”\(^{38}\)

Neither the Hyer Boot Company nor the Justin Boot Company invented the left/right shoe, the self-measuring system, or the cowboy boot. Charles Hyer, Joe Justin, and their children, however, deserve a good deal of credit for their business skills, which enabled them to adapt to changes that ruined most of their competitors. The founders overcame what probably was the most significant obstacle to success at the beginning of the twentieth century: finding skilled shoemakers who had been through apprenticeships. Charles Rokahr’s offer to work for Hyer in 1899 was caused by his inability to find enough craftsmen to maintain his own shop. A decade later Hyer voiced the same complaint: “We cannot get the men... The old fashioned shoe maker is disappearing.” Claude Cubine, managing his late father’s Coffeyville shop, told a reporter in 1911, “It would be a big and profitable business if I could get the boot-makers... As it is we are making a bare living, where we might be taking in a small fortune. I am thinking seriously of closing up the shop and pre-empting land in Montana.”\(^{39}\)

Cubine and Rokahr persisted for two more decades relying on skilled artisans to maintain small shops until the Great Depression. Hyer and Justin did more than persist. They prospered by adapting factory methods of shoemaking to the custom cowboy boot trade. Each worker was responsible for one step, a system that required less on-the-job training and resulted in more efficient production. The companies’ genius was the adaptation of factory methods and factory profits to maintain their custom lines. They have earned their positions in western folklore history, not by being the first but by being the most adaptable.\(^{40}\)

---