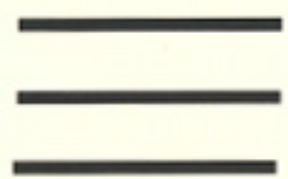
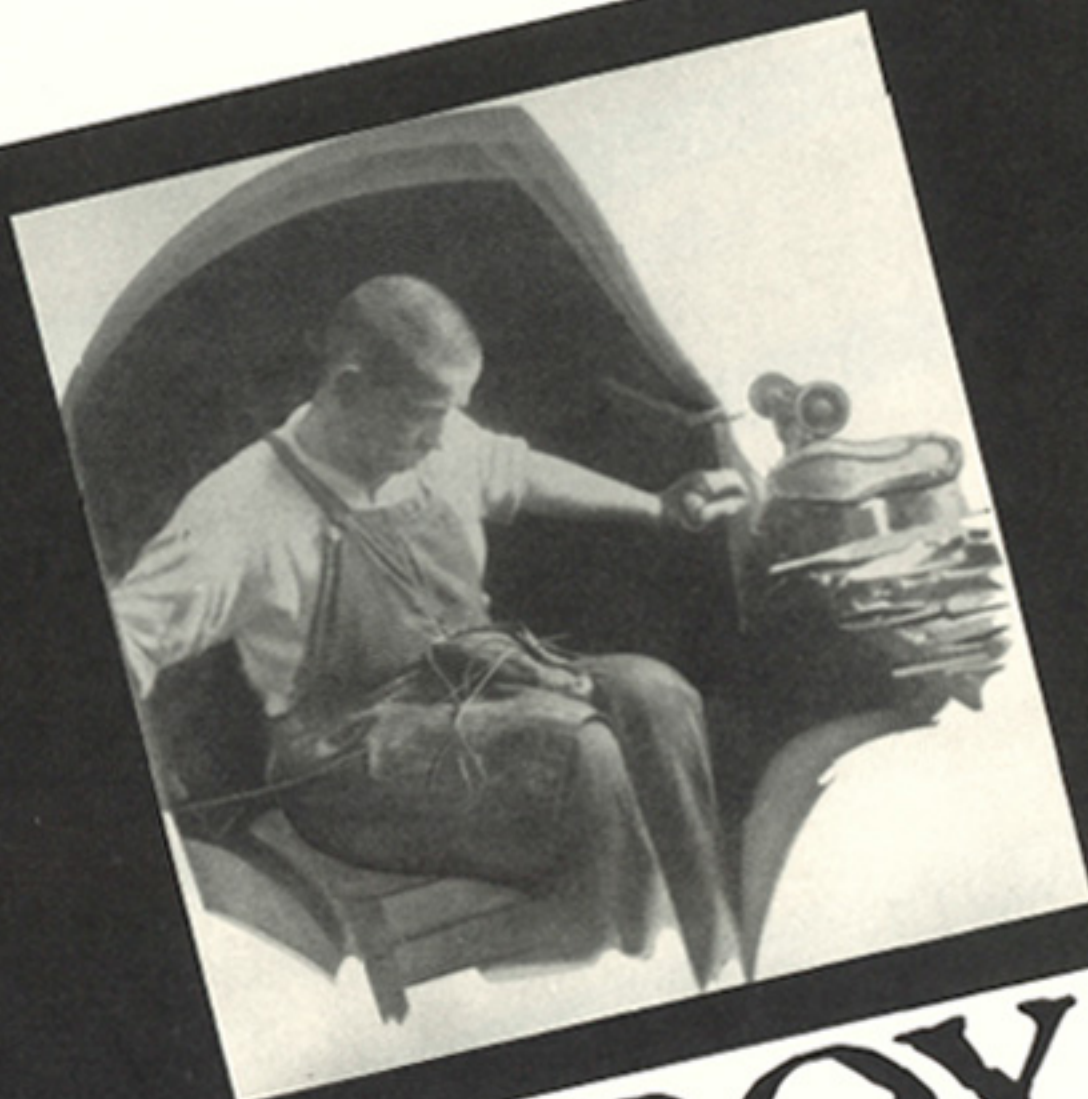




The Kansas Story



COWBOY BOOTS



"Started
to
Newton
at
8 1/2
o clock pm
from there
to
Dodge City
got pair
boots
\$6.50."

Henry A.
Raymond.
1872

COWBOY BOOTS

The Kansas Story

By Barbara Brackman, Jennie A. Chinn, and James F. Hoy

Kansas
State
Historical
Society

Topeka,
Kansas

1994

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NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
ARTS





"To handle
a herd of
all steer
cattle on
the trail
requires
the very
best
cowboy
skill, and
a herd
boss who
can speak
the bovine
language."

John C. Jacobs
Reminiscence,
1920s

KANSAS AND THE CATTLE TRADE: An Introduction

By Jennie A. Chinn

Jennie A. Chinn



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Kansas and the Cattle Trade: An Introduction

By Jennie A. Chinn

The myth of the American cowboy has its roots in the Texas-to-Kansas cattle drives. From the first cattle shipped from Abilene in 1867 through the mid-1880s, several million longhorns were driven from Texas to railheads in Kansas to be delivered to stockyards in the East. The men who drove the cattle north became a symbol of the American West and cowboy life became romantically portrayed in art, literature, and popular culture.

Beef was a much sought after commodity in the northeastern states after the Civil War. While war had devastated the cattle industry in the East, millions of longhorns could be found on the Texas prairies. During the Civil War cattle drives from Texas to the East were disrupted by the Union blockade of the South. Cattle were allowed to run wild, and their numbers increased to approximately five million head by 1866. Confederate soldiers returning home to Texas after the war found a declining economy with little opportunity to make a good living. It became profitable for veterans to round up cattle, and even more profitable to drive the herds

east where they brought forty to fifty dollars a head as opposed to four dollars a head at home. Beef also was desired in the West at army outposts, Indian reservations, and mining towns.

Driving cattle long distances was not new, but the drives to Kansas (and a few markets in Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, and Indian Territory or present-day Oklahoma) between 1867 and 1885 were on a scale unimagined before the war. The cattle drives usually followed Indian trading or pioneer trails that offered an abundance of grass and water. The Chisholm Trail was perhaps the most famous route. It was promoted by cattleman Joseph McCoy and went from San Antonio, Texas, to Abilene, Kansas. Named for Jesse Chisholm who marked the original trail, the path became a major transportation route for cattle delivered for shipment to the Kansas Pacific Railway.

Abilene was only one of many cattle towns that gained prominence during this period. Ellsworth, Brookville, Wichita, Caldwell, Newton, and Dodge City all became legendary. A number of factors combined to make these Kansas locations "cowtowns." The

state was open for settlement in 1854, but conditions during the Civil War prevented the area from becoming densely populated. Before the end of the war only the eastern third of the state had been heavily settled by immigrants. At the war's conclusion, however, new settlers headed west. During this period railroad companies also were actively developing lines across the state.

A lack of Texas railroads and the difficulty of water travel made cattle drives an attractive option, the wide-open spaces in Indian Territory and the western two-thirds of Kansas combined with the railroads that had reached western Kansas, made the long drives a reality. The distances traveled on the drives averaged 750 miles, and most drives lasted thirty to forty days. Some cattle owners organized their own drives, whereas some cattle were purchased by agents who resold the animals for profit in Kansas. Most cattle, however, were driven north on a contractual basis for an established fee. Usually cowhands or cowboys were in their early twenties and made between twenty-four and forty dollars per month. The trail bosses often made more, but they also were held responsible for lost cattle.



W.T. (Bill) Jackman made nine trips over the trail between 1870 and 1890. In the 1920s he recorded his reminiscences which describe the men and equipment needed on the long drives:

The number of men necessary in handling a herd of 3,000 head of cattle was the boss, eight men with the cattle, a cook, and one man with the horses called the "remunda man", making eleven in the outfit. About 60 horses were furnished to each herd, or six to each man, excepting the cook. The best horse of each mount was selected for his night horse and was used for no other purpose. This horse was supposed to be perfectly gentle, easily handled, clean footed, of good sight and to have all qualities of a first class cow horse. His other five horses were used each one-half day.... A first class new wagon was furnished each outfit and the same was generally drawn by four mules or two yoke of oxen, mules being preferable. Thirty days' provisions or more could be handled in addition to the bedding, slickers, clothing, etc. belonging to the men.

Jackman also recalled the clothing and equipment the men wore for protection from all kinds of weather and emergencies:

The trail men all dressed about the same manner, their costume consisting of a substantial suit of clothing, fine Stetson hat, the best shop made boots with high heels, spurs of the best make, red bandanna handkerchief for the neck, a good pair of leather leggins, and quirt and a good fish brand slicker. All used splendid saddles and bridle, the bridle bit generally shop or homemade.

Life on the trail was both difficult and tedious. Abbie Bright came to Kansas from Indiana in 1871, and at the age of twenty-three she claimed 160 acres of land near present-day Clear-water along the Chisholm Trail. In her diary she wrote:

June 4 (1871) Sunday....Had some heavy rains last week. The Ninnescah River was high. A heard [sic] of cattle crossed down at the trail, and 15 to 25 drowned. Every week from 7 to 10 thousand of Texas cattle are driven north over the trail. If the cattle stampede, and dont want to



cross, the hearders yel, and fire off their pistols. We hear these some times, and it sounds as I suppose a battle sounds. It is the cattle that keep the trail worn so smooth.

The problems caused by stampedes on the trail were remembered by Mrs. A. Burke who accompanied her husband up the Chisholm Trail in 1871:

Both the Clark and our herds were stampeded one day....It was a horrible yet fascinating sight. Frantic cowboys did all in their power to stop the wild flight, but nothing could check it. By working almost constantly the men gathered the cattle in about a week's time. They were all thrown into one big herd, and the roar of hoof-beats of two thousand milling cattle was almost deafening. The herd was divided into two, then worked back and forth until every cow was in her rightful bunch. After an experience of this kind the men would be almost exhausted.

Kansans eventually legislated cattle trails out of the state. Before the Civil War long-horn cattle, although immune, were known



to carry Texas or Splenic fever. This disease was caused by cattle ticks in southwest Texas. When Kansas cattle came in contact with the tick many of them died. Although the source of the disease was not known at the time, settlers recognized that Texas herds were destroying their cattle. Abbie Bright wrote in her diary on September 3, 1871:

Thousands and thousands of Texas cattle have been driven north over the Trail this summer. Some heards [sic] were allowed to graze this side of the river, before crossing. The Texas cattle generate I think that is the word, in their long journey, a substance in their feet an[d] toes that poisons the grass. This does not hurt them, but if native cattle eat the grass where they have been, it causes them to have Texas fever, and they die.

In 1859 the territorial legislature passed a law prohibiting infected cattle from entering the territory. In 1867 the law was amended to restrict all Texas cattle to the land west of the sixth principal meridian, near McPherson. This quarantine line became known as the "dead" line.

As settlers moved west claiming land across Kansas, they fenced their crops and homes legalizing their year-round rights to land that trail riders needed for only a short time. As more settlers claimed land in Kansas, the "dead" line gradually was moved to the southwestern border of the state. The cattle trails and the homesteader could not coexist. As the number of farmers increased in Kansas so did the number of fences, which became barriers to the cattle drives. H.P. Cook summarized the problems in a WPA narrative recorded in the 1930s. As he crossed the Kansas line on an 1874 trail ride he recalled:

We ran into a bunch of settlers. The cowboys always called them "nesters." Now, they didn't like for these trail herds to cross their lands at all, and there they were gathered in groups, armed with shotguns and clubs, to force us to narrow the trail down as much as possible and kept the cattle moving. They were afraid they would lose some of their grass. You know, later on the Kansas legislature passed a law to keep cattle from south of a certain line from being driven at all into their state. They claimed it was to pre-

vent the spread of the so-called Texas fever.

In an interview in the Emporia Gazette on November 8, 1934, Mrs. James Lynch, who came to Kansas in 1869 and lived in Burlingame, remembers the conflict between settlers and trail drivers:

When the herd appeared at the top of the hill west of town, cowboys rushed through the streets telling the people to get inside. Storekeepers locked their doors and business was suspended until the wild herd had passed through.

Alice Humbarger Baker also recounted problems:

Our first dwelling (in Dickinson County) was a log cabin on the river immediately by what became known as the Humbarger Ford. Very early in the cattle trade, herds were driven from Wichita across that ford. My mother told of the great herds passing, scraping their horns on the logs of the house, as they crowded towards the water.



An 1884 blizzard turned cattle kings into paupers and ended the boom years for the trail-riding cattle industry. But the ultimate end of the era was caused by the railroads that had started it all. Lines extended into towns from Texas to Montana providing rail transportation where the cattle were raised. For a time cattlemen continued driving cattle because they questioned the railroad's dependability and suspected inflated shipping rates. However, in 1886, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad extended its tracks west to Albuquerque. The days of Kansas cowtowns were over.

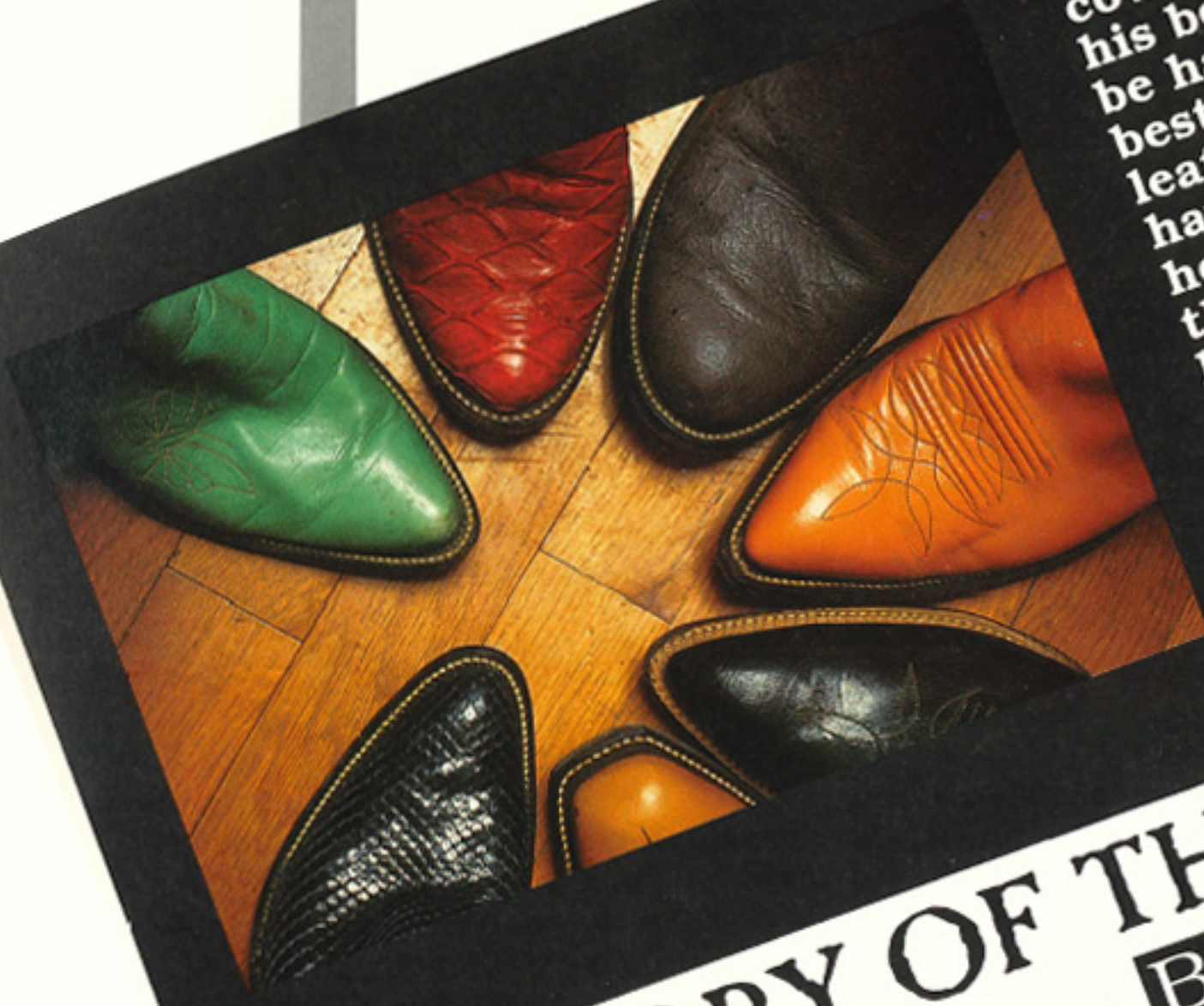
Nat Love (Deadwood Dick), who was born a slave and spent his youth as a cowboy riding the trails to Dodge City, described the end of his trail riding in his 1907 autobiography:

With the march of progress came the railroad and no longer were we called up to follow the long horned steers, or mus-

tangs on the trail, while the immense cattle ranges, stretching away in the distance as far as the eye could see, now began to be dotted with cities and towns and the cattle industry, which once held a monopoly in the west, now had to give way to the industry of the farm and the mill. To us wild cowboys of the range, used to the boundless plains, the new order of things did not appeal, and many of us became disgusted and quit the wild life for the pursuits of the more civilized brother. I was among the number and in 1890 I bid farewell to the life which I had followed for over twenty years.

Although the era of the long cattle drives was a relatively brief period in Kansas history, it was significant. The state profited from the cattle trade both economically and culturally. Some scholars believe that the ranching industry in Kansas developed in part out of the cattle trade. Since the late 1800s,

Kansas has been one of the top beef-producing states. In this century more land in Kansas has been devoted to ranching than to any other single use. Today one of the world's largest beef packing plants prospers outside of Garden City. The plant, owned by IBP, Inc., handles five thousand head each day. From the post-Civil War cattle drives to the ranching industry as an important part of the state's agriculture, to the beef packing industry, Kansas has played a significant role in the history of the American cattle industry.



"Next to his hat the cowboy is proud of his boots. They must be hand-made, of the best and softest leather and they must have long legs, and heels that will throw the French heel of a lady's boot entirely in the shade."

Topeka
Capital Daily Commonwealth
April 19, 1889

A HISTORY OF THE COWBOY BOOT

By Barbara Brackman

Barbara Brackman

A History of the Cowboy Boot

by **Barbara Brackman**

The cowboy boot, like so much in American culture, is derived from combinations of immigrant and native traditions. The high-heeled, below-the-knee boot that we know today with its stitched and inlaid decorations owes much to English, German, and Native American traditions in footwear and ornamentation.

American methods of handling cattle are derived from two major traditions, those of the Anglo American cowboy and the Spanish American vaquero or buckaroo. The two cultures overlapped when post-Civil War expansionism filled the Great Plains and Northwest with cattle. Eastern cattle customs passed through Texas and traveled north with the cattle drives of the 1860s, meeting California traditions moving north along the western slope of the Rockies.

In Kansas we are primarily concerned with cowboy traditions that spread north from Texas to Montana and Wyoming, rather than

the vaquero traditions that moved along the west side of the Rockies from Mexico and California to Oregon, Nevada, and Washington.

The history of cowboy boots in the Central Plains can be divided into four historical periods. These periods involve changes in the look of boots as well as changes in cowboys' lives, where cattle were raised, how the cobbler and cowboy teamed up, and how the boots were manufactured and sold. The first period (1865-1885) covers the years of the Texas-to-Kansas cattle trails when boot makers were traditional artisans who set up shop along the trail and sold directly to the men who passed by. The second period (1885-1920) is the era of the northern herds when boot makers and cowboys were geographically separated by thousands of miles, a distance that was bridged by the mail-order boot business.

The third era (1920-1970) is that of the factory-made boot that was influenced more by the entertainment industry than by the cattle industry. The last period (1970-

present) is represented by the renewed interest in handcrafted objects including custom-made boots.

Boot Makers Along the Trail and the Origins of the Cowboy Boot (1865-1885)

What did the nineteenth-century boot look like? Photos of cowboys in studio poses or at work show a high boot, usually cut just below the knee, with seams along the sides. The top is generally cut straight across, but many have a V-cut below the knee while others are cut higher in the front to cover the knee. Most have a high heel and a flat rather than box toe. Many boots have exposed pull straps some the exaggerated leather straps called mule ears, others smaller leather or tape straps.

The two-inch heel seems to be the most distinctive aspect of the nineteenth-century cowboy boot, the feature that distinguishes it from the "Plow Boot" or the "Farmer's Pride," which also were offered in the Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs of the period. The heel is also the item most often mentioned in first-person accounts.



The heel's purpose seems to be two-fold. Perhaps most important it fit into the saddle's stirrup. Cowboys used a narrow oxbow stirrup, and the higher heel held the foot in place. Boot and stirrup worked as a functional pair. The second use of the high undershot heel was enabling the cowboy to stand and grip the ground as he worked with untamed horses and headstrong cattle.

Many historic photos show boots with no leg stitching that when worn tend to have wrinkled legs that sag around the ankle. A few boots reveal minimal decorative stitching on the legs, which makes the boot stiffer and more likely to stay up. And a few written accounts discuss ornamentation. The most elaborate descriptions are of the Dodge City Cowboy Band's boots recorded by the Topeka Daily Commonwealth, September 10, 1882:

Each has a white Mexican sombrero, wide-brimmed and tasseled and ribboned with gold and silver lace and cord; fancy flannel shirts, leather leggings...and spurs that look like their old calling were circular saws; boots in red and yellow fronts, with the crescent and lone star inlaid in still brighter colors.

The Cowboy Band members, as entertainers, undoubtedly had fancier boots than the average working cowboy in the 1880s, but other accounts mention stars and a moon shape as decorations. Stars, however, were not the only decorations on cowboy boots. Fred Sutton's memoirs of the 1870s and 1880s include this description:

[In] a photo of myself taken when I was a young cowboy on the Crooked-S ranch, I wore the usual four-gallon hat with eaves a foot wide, hairy chaps, high-heeled boots with a dancing girl and a royal flush embroidered on the patent leathertops of each.

Where did this distinctive boot come from? Folklore attributes the development of the cowboy boot to Kansas during the period of the long trail drives when cobblers set up shops along the trails and sold their boots directly to the cowboys. But like most folkart, boots evolved from a variety of traditions, and their origins are difficult to trace.

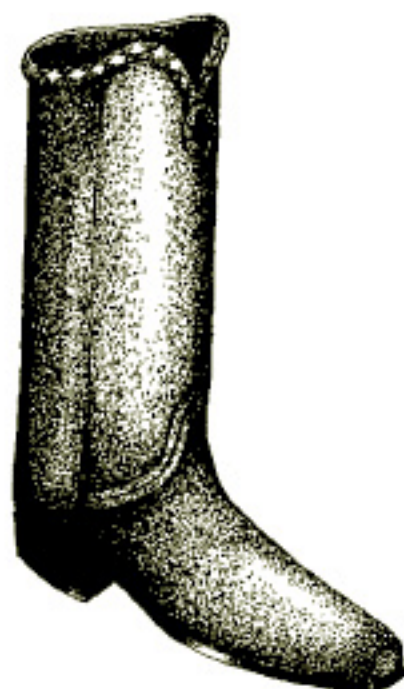
English cattle traditions were imported to the colonies from New England to the South

where farmhands who moved livestock short distances were known as drovers, cattle hunters, or cowpen keepers. In colonial New York as relationships between landholders and tenants deteriorated in the mid-eighteenth century, raiders who stole cattle from the manorial herds were labeled "cowboys." The name took on political significance during the Revolutionary War as cattle theft increased and the name came to mean "bandit." In the early nineteenth century eastern cowboy traditions traveled down the Ohio River and into Texas where ranching subsequently began in the 1830s. During the Texas revolution, groups of guerrilla fighters took pride in the name cowboy. During the 1860s as herds of Texas cattle were driven to Kansas, Montana, and Wyoming, the word cowboy took on new meanings.

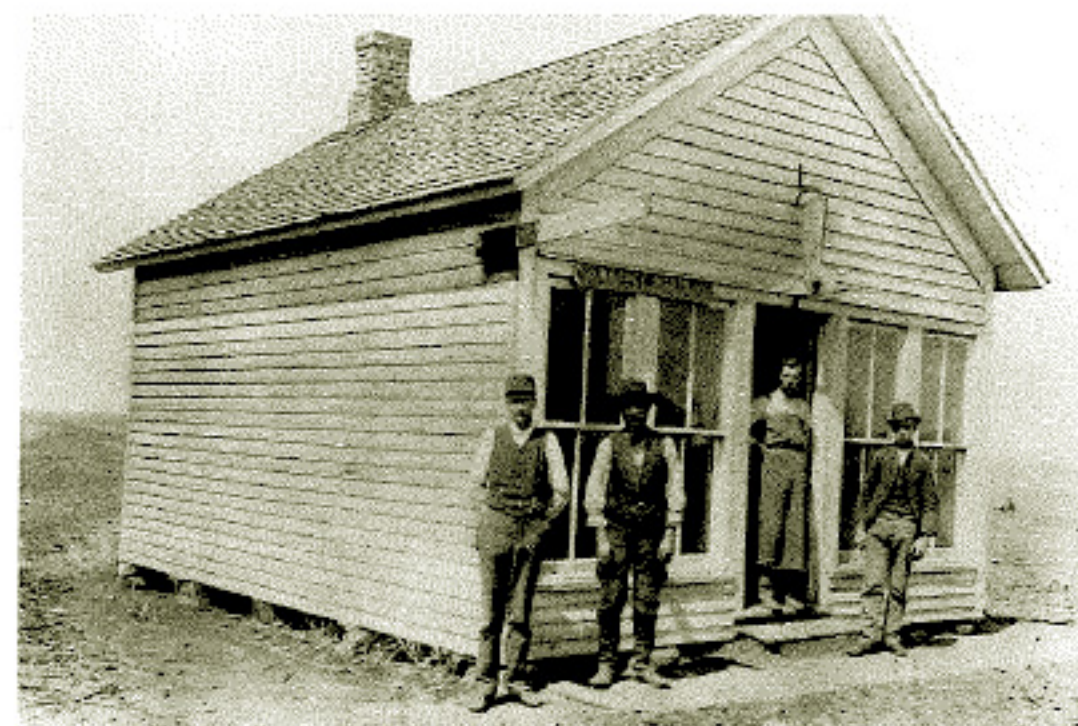
The look of the cowboy boot also owes much to English culture. The boots that the trail-riding cowboys wore were derived from two popular English boots, the Wellington and the Hessian. Wellington boots, named for England's Duke of Wellington, were a below-the-knee boot that became popular when men took to wearing trousers rather than



wellington boot



hessian boot



tight britches. The Wellington, worn under the pant leg, typically had side seams, one-inch stacked, straight heels, square toes, and tape pull-on straps. Stitching decorated the legs and the top edges, which were cut straight across or curved slightly higher in front.

Wellington boots originated about 1817, enjoyed a mid-century popularity in England, and fell out of fashion in the 1860s. An 1868 British magazine, *The Leather Traders' Circular and Review*, 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.

Those classes of Americans, wearing their Wellingtons in fashion odd to British eyes, included cowboys who were showing off their custom-made, knee-length boots by tucking their pants into the bootleg.

In addition to boots with Wellington-cut tops cowboys wore a boot with a V-cut under the knee. This distinctive look was introduced in 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. As Hessian soldiers had fought in the American Revolutionary War, the style may have come to America before it traveled to England. Hessian boots were distinguished mainly by the V-dip and a large tassel that hung from the center of the cut, a style that lingers in the short boots worn today by drum majorettes.

Hessians were popular before Wellingtons and were out of style in England by the 1840s. British shoe historian



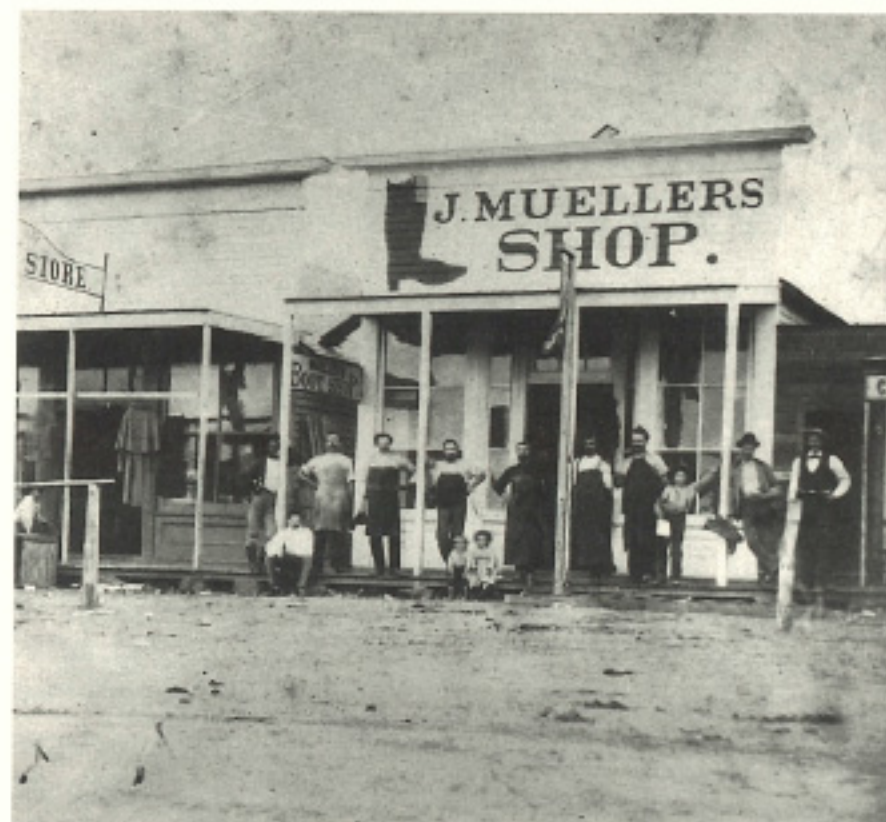
June Swann has noted that the Hessian fashion survived longer in the United States: "A photograph circa 1879 of Billy the Kid shows him in medium high-heeled Hessians with front dip but no tassel, the straps hanging outside."

The fashionableness of the Hessian boot illustrates the importance of German shoemaking to European style. The cowboy boot makers in Kansas in the nineteenth century also reflect much German heritage. The Hyer brothers were first-generation Americans, their parents being born in Hanover and Mecklenberg, Germany. Lesser-known boot makers such as Andrew Schmidt and John Mueller of Ellsworth were German immigrants. The German connection may have been important because European shoemakers followed an apprenticeship program where young men learned cobbling skills. Before coming to Olathe, Kansas, Charles and Edward Hyer learned shoemaking in Illinois from their father, William, who had been a shoemaker since his immigration from Germany in the mid-1800s. As the Hyers' Olathe company grew



at the end of the century, they hired European-born artisans. A list of fifty-one employees from 1917 indicates that half were born in northern Europe in Sweden, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Germany. British boot makers also were influential. Thomas McInerney of Abilene immigrated from Ireland, and names like Cubine and Bright indicate British heritage. Certainly the look of the boots speaks of a steady input of European design and skills.

American observers considered the cowboy boot remarkable, particularly because of its high heel. The high heel, the characteristic most often described in eye-witness accounts of nineteenth-century boots, is not easy to trace to specific sources. Today's folklore attributes the heel to "the old Spanish style" passed from the conquistadors through the Mexican charro tradition. This 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. High-heeled boots were only a minor tradition with the Spanish and Spanish-influenced Americans who often were pictured in flat-heeled boots, shoes, or moccasins. On their legs the cattlemen,



called Californios or vaqueros, wore soft leggings or silver-studded pants. Their riding style called for tapaderos, a combination stirrup and leg protection, 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 bushes, brush, and trees on the trail.

The functional relationship between riding style and footwear is important to the development of the cowboy boot. Cobblers 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.

The Mail-Order Boot Business (1885-1920)

The second period in boot history is the era of the northern herds when boot makers and cowboys were geographically separated by thousands of miles, a distance that was bridged by the mail-order boot business. As the open ranges of the Southern Plains were closed, the center of the cattle industry moved north. Cattle were raised near their fodder and were driven short distances to local railroad trunk lines. The cowboy still had a job but it was within the confines of a large ranch often on the Northern Plains of Wyoming and Montana. Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Miles City, Montana became the big cattle shipping centers for the northern herds.

Some boot makers probably followed the cowboys north, but by 1890 changes in American business rendered the itinerant artisan as old fashioned as the wild cowboy. One significant change was the mail-order supplier, a marketing idea that centralized consumer goods. Catalogs from Montgomery Ward & Co. appeared in the 1870s, and Sears, Roebuck and Co. expanded their mail-order business with their 1896 catalog. That same year, mail order became far easier when Congress authorized Rural Free Delivery, bringing the mail directly to the farmer, rancher, and cowboy. In those boom years of mail order, every crossroads had a post office. In 1901 the U.S. Post Office authorized almost seventy-seven thousand local post offices (a number that dropped by nearly 50 percent within twenty years). In 1911 the post office offered parcel post with COD, further simplifying the transactions between customer and supplier.

The Justin Boot Company of Texas has long claimed to have originated the mail-order boot, often advertising the story of how H.J. Justin received a letter from a Montana

rancher named Cato. According to a 1866 version of the tale his letter said:

The cowboys up here have a hankering for your boots but Texas is too far away. Do you suppose you can devise a measuring chart? If you can you'll get a lot of business from here by mail.

The invention usually is said to have happened soon after Justin married Annie Allen in 1886 as she is often credited with inventing the mail-order measuring chart. As with most of the first, best, and biggest stories, the story of this particular invention has little basis in fact. At least two El Paso, Texas, boot makers used a self-measurement system before Annie Allen's marriage. In 1883 Henry Erdman of El Paso was advertising his fine boots and shoes with "Rules for self measurement sent on application." In 1899 Texan Charles Rokahr wrote Charles Hyer in Olathe of his skills in building boots to fit mailed measurements that dated to 1883:

If you remember I spoke to you in regard to fitting men's feet by scales for self-

measurement. That part of the business I have accomplished to perfection. And which is very necessary for success in this part of the business. I have tested it in every particular and failure in that line is almost impossible for me....I have had actual experience of over sixteen years in that particular work.

In the 1880s Justin was only one of many boot shops making the transition from face-to-face contact with their customers to a mail-order business with a larger, nationwide clientele. Charles Rokahr knew he had a skill that Olathe boot maker Charles Hyer could use. Hyer never hired Rokahr, who continued to run his own business in El Paso, possibly because Hyer already had employees with Rokahr's skill. The first Hyer catalog, dated 1900, included instructions for measuring one's own feet, and an earlier newspaper article (1898) described the Olathe company as the largest shoe shop in the world with patrons drawn from many remote parts of the world:

The really wonderful creations gotten out by these expert workmen are for the

cowboys of all the great cattle regions of the west from Oregon and Montana down through New Mexico, Arizona, California, Texas...old Mexico...and the Klondyke [sic] country....Mr. Hyer's correspondence is something appalling and some idea of it may be gained by the fact that for years his postage stamps have cost him eighteen hundred dollars a year.

Hyer and Justin became the leaders in mail-order cowboy boots, easily competing against other boot-making artisans less successful at making the transition. By the early twentieth century they were each other's major competition, leaving smaller shops and general suppliers like Sears and Wards behind. In 1909 future movie star Tim McCoy set out for Wyoming to become a cowboy. Among his first purchase was a pair of mail-order boots, noting that only Hyer's or Justin's would do.

Boot makers in Wyoming, Washington, Montana, and Oregon did not have Hyer's or Justin's success, probably because of competition from the mail-order giants. Wyoming boot makers from the 1870s through

the 1920s can be tracked in newspaper advertisements and city directories, but most lasted only a few years. One exception is Gus Blucher who brought his shop to northern cow country, opening G.C. Blucher's in Wyoming in the fall of 1915. He competed in Cheyenne against five boot makers, selling to walk-in traffic as his competitors did, but he directed his advertising to the mail-order trade. Blucher reportedly had worked for Justin in Nocona, Texas, for years and may have opened his own shop there before moving to Wyoming. He learned Justin's mail-order boot-making business well, and he advertised next to Justin and Hyer in the Wyoming Stockman Farmer and other trade papers. In April 1919 Blucher announced:

On Account of failing health, I have sold out my old equipment and have retired from the boot business. Until further notice I will be in no way connected with any boot making firms in the country.

The ad was signed, "G.C. Blucher, Cheyenne, Wyoming's Cowboy Boot maker, Olathe, Kansas."

Like other boot makers, Blucher did not last long in Wyoming, but he continued his business in Kansas, apparently recovered from ill health. The G.C. Blucher Boot Company in Olathe claimed to make "real boots for real cowboys" and continued to sell a Cheyenne boot made in Kansas to Wyoming cowboys. Shortly after the move Blucher acquired young partners, William Flournoy and Ray Powers, who also had lived in Nocona, Texas, and may have had experience with Justin. Flournoy and Powers told reporters over the years that Blucher moved his business to Olathe because he had trouble finding skilled boot makers and materials in Wyoming. Proximity to the Hyer factory with its pool of skilled workers may have motivated the move.

The Factory Boot and the Fancy Boot (1920-1970)

Throughout the history of boot making the business has lacked a large supply of skilled artisans. In 1899 Texas boot maker Charles Rokahr wrote to Charles H. Hyer lamenting a move to set up shop in Illinois:



I wish that I had never left El Paso, Texas, as I have come to realize what a great mistake I have made. I have been unfortunate all the way. My freight was delayed until a few days ago. I just started to work this morning. I also find the same trouble existing here as in El Paso and with you regarding workmen.

In 1911 Hyer voiced the same complaint:

We cannot get the men. Of the sixty shoemakers upstairs there are only ten of them American born. American boys are not learning trades nowadays, especially the shoe maker's trade....The old fashioned shoe maker is disappearing. It is one of the crafts that does not attract apprentices, notwithstanding the increasing demand for handmade footwear and good wages.

In 1913 Coffeyville boot maker Claude Cubine contemplated closing his father's forty-year-old business:

It would be a big and profitable business if I could get the boot makers. The boots



bring \$12 to \$16 but they require much time, care and material in the making. 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.

Hyer solved his labor problem by abandoning the traditional system in which one man built a pair of boots from start to finish. He turned to a system in which employees with fewer skills constructed boots in parts. Cubine, on the other hand, was either unable or unwilling to adapt to new factory concepts, and his shop went out of business after his death. The one-man system became an economical anachronism. Not only did boot construction change during the twentieth century, but the look changed to primarily ornamentation. Fancy boots grew out of the world of cowboy entertainers.

Rodeos are an early form of cowboy entertainment, often associated with Fourth of July celebrations and agricultural fairs. In 1882 Colonel George Miller, founder of the 101 Ranch, held a rodeo or roundup in Winfield, Kansas, for their fall agricultural

fair. Buffalo Bill Cody organized his first rodeo in North Platte, Nebraska, for the July Fourth celebration that same year. Buffalo Bill was an innovator who took the concept of the rodeo, which served as local entertainment for working cowboys and their neighbors, and developed the International Wild West Shows. Extravagant rodeos and Wild West shows became prime entertainment in the decades before and after 1900.

As working cowboys became entertainers, they exaggerated their work-a-day tasks with wild horses and cattle into rodeo drama. They also exaggerated their working costume. For example, African American cowboy Bill Pickett wore an extremely exaggerated bull-dogging heel, as it is now known, so his heels could dig into the dirt while he faced a bull.

Rodeo and Wild West show stars developed the need for fancy, eye-catching decorations that could be seen from the stands. In doing so they contributed to the demand for boot ornamentation that has become standard. Ornamentation underwent significant changes from 1910 through the 1920s.



Native American beadwork was influential as cowboy entertainers came into direct contact with American Indian performers in the Wild West shows. As Native Americans became familiar with the European-derived horse culture, they began wearing parts of western outfits such as the hat and chaps. Many cowboys and American Indians combined costumes from both cultures, wearing cloth shirts and pants with beaded vests, wrist wrappings, and leggings over beaded moccasins or plain boots. The flashy beadwork was obvious to audiences at a distance. As Wild West shows evolved into other popular entertainments, performers and their boot makers adapted Native American legging designs to leather boots.

Although Native Americans obtained horses from European immigrants, they developed their own riding traditions. Most nineteenth-century American Indians rode barefoot or in thin shoes rather than in heavy boots. Native American traditions contributed little to the form of the nineteenth-century cowboy boot, but their mark definitely is seen in the twentieth-century boot, primarily in its ornamentation.



By 1920 the cowboy boot had changed significantly from the plain black or brown leather boot whose main distinction was the high, undershot heel. The 1920 Hyer catalog featured the new fancy cowboy boots, on the cover a cowboy and a cowgirl excitedly read a Hyer catalog while dressed in highly decorative boots. Their boots were a little shorter than knee length, had the V-cut front derived from the Hessian boot, and had a high, exaggerated undershot heel. Most significantly, the boots were decorated with inlay hearts and diamonds, and colored stitching highlighted the scroll pattern.

During the next thirty years inlay designs on cowboy boots became increasingly intricate. The top stitching patterns on the legs also increased in complexity and importance as several rows of colored silk thread replaced the dark single or double lines found on turn-of-the-century boots. The designs, whether inlay or topstitched, followed certain general rules. They ran up the sides of the boots from around the ankle and stopped below the boot top. Most had a separate band of inlay or stitching edging the top. Some had inlay around the toe area or on heel scabs.

The leg designs usually had four design areas, which looked symmetrical when viewed from the side, front, or back (this is a carry-over from earlier decorative topstitching). The symmetries were generally two-way mirror images. Abstract designs seemed derived from scrolls and flames; the realistic designs came from floral images, with leaves, tulips, and rosettes being the most common patterns. The rosettes were generally a five-petaled floral. Flowers often were used on the leg with a simple curve emphasizing the natural shape of the leg. Symbols such as stars, hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades also were popular and customers could order their brands or initials for the center of the boot front. The Hyer catalog showed simple boots and fancy inlaid boots, which they described as "Hyer's Dandy (Especially for Show Work)" or the "Fancy Show Boot." The stitching designs, which also were adapted for applique, included scroll designs (these remain important today) and newer vine patterns that closely resemble the vines in American Indian beadwork.



Tom Mix has been credited with introducing the boot's "fancy" new look in the early 1920s. Mix is one of the earliest movie stars to wear such boots; stills from a 1921 movie depict him in almost knee-high boots inlaid with a row of white tulips up the side, an image that remained the characteristic Tom Mix boot throughout his life. He certainly popularized the decorative boot with contrasting inlay, and probably he was the most visible entertainer wearing them prior to 1920. Rodeo cowboys had been requesting inlaid boots from the mail-order companies in the second decade of the twentieth century and it seems likely that Mix and other movie stars only popularized this boot style.

Hyer began making a factory inlay boot after 1910 when employee Earl Hawkins cut a band of diamond-shaped inlay using a punch made of gas pipe. As Hyer moved into factory production, it quickly developed numerous dies for machine-cut inlay, but the company history notes that the "big boom in fancy inlaid boots actually occurred in the 1920s."

These new inlay designs had little to do with the stitching patterns or inlaid Lone Stars

and moons of earlier boots. The obvious source for most of the floral designs seems to be the beadwork of Plains Native Americans. The motifs, especially the five-petaled rosettes, reflect the floral imagery in this beadwork, which is derived from European embroidery patterns introduced to American Indians by French missionaries. The symmetries (two-mirror images) and naturalistic form of boot designs echo the figurative beadwork made from 1850 through the early twentieth century by certain Native American nations.

The placement of the inlay designs is similar to the pattern in many forms of Native American leggings where beads decorate the side of the leg and form a band below the knee. Some leggings also include beaded design around the toe. Both leggings and boots have geometric and floral designs. Details like a row of diamonds below the knee or along the side of the leg are carried into twentieth-century boot design.

The widespread popularity of western wear throughout the mid-twentieth century continued to influence boot design. From the 1930s through the 1940s western wear

was highly influenced by the Hollywood cowboy. Working cowboys, like Coffeyville, Kansas, native Reb Russell, became film stars. Many movie westerns were short on plot but long on action. Collectively, these films introduced a romantic view of the cowboy and his gear to the American public.

Country and western music, once called hillbilly music, was first associated only with the southeastern United States. However, the singing cowboys of the 1930s and 1940s popularize this form of music. The World War II era witnessed an explosion of interest in country and western music as people from all regions of the country found themselves sharing barracks, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Local and national country shows appeared live and on radio. In the 1950s stars like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Dale Evans crossed over into television, becoming well-known personalities. Families throughout America adopted the Hollywood western look. As cowboy boots entered the realm of popular culture, styles were based less on function and more on fashion. Regional differences gave way to standardized patterns. However, at the height of western wear popularity, the tradition of making cowboy boots for working cowhands and ranchers continued. Today both fashion and function influence the design of boots whether they are worn by working cowboys or individuals who adopt the western look for style.





A Renewed Interest in Handcrafted Boots (1970-Present)

Some cowboy boot makers carry on the tradition of custom boot making. Rather than a dying art, custom boot making is enjoying a renewal. Ranchers maintain a market for a well-made boot, and an appetite persists for the western look in popular culture. Trends from cowboy collectibles to country and western music create a consistent demand for boots. The market in the early 1990s is being met by new boot lines from established and new footwear factories. At the higher end of the market, entertainers can afford elaborate handmade boots and many working people are willing to invest in custom boots.

Despite the active markets, most custom boot makers have difficulty making the craft profitable. Like any handwork, boot making cannot compete economically with factory work. Custom boot makers charge from two hundred dollars, while factories can sell machine-made boots as low as forty dollars. Factories prosper by making a small profit on many boots. Justin, the largest boot

factory, produces 3.5 million pairs annually; a small factory like Blucher produces fifty pairs in a good month. Mechanized factories produce good-looking boots with decorative stitching created by computerized sewing machines that can sew six rows at once. A handmade boot requires the human topstitcher to guide the boot leg through the sewing machine six times for the same look. Although the hand-guided topstitching is prized, its cost makes custom boots expensive.

Most custom shops include a basic charge for decoration such as topstitching with an additional charge for extras. Boot maker Carolyn Hammon explains:

People are ordering a lot of calf boots, the shorter top boots with the bands with colorful stitching on them. A lot of them are wanting what Hyers made back in the forties or fifties. In the forties, that's when they wore a lot of the little short topped boots with a lot of stitching—anything you can crowd on it....Three rows goes with the boot order and then its ten, twelve dollars a row extra....The stitching runs



the price up on 'em. We try to keep the costs down on our rodeo boot [they have no top stitching] so the bronc riders can afford to buy them.

Factories also keep prices low by cutting corners with materials, substituting paper and plastics for leather and metal. Boot maker Archie Leach points out this trend:



I just got through working on a pair of [factory boots]. They have a paper insole. When I took the bottoms off those things you could just see blue sky right through the hole....Of course I was kidding you know and I said, "You buy anything but these cheap [factory boots] and I ain't going to fix them." "Oh," he said, "I got them on sale for \$30." It's cheap boots....They're all going to paper.

In addition to competing with the factory-made boot, the custom boot maker must be a business manager as well as an artisan. Many repair boots, shoes, and saddles on the side for a steady income. The demands of the various businesses under one roof can relegate boot making to a low priority. Boot maker Jim Holenbeck says:

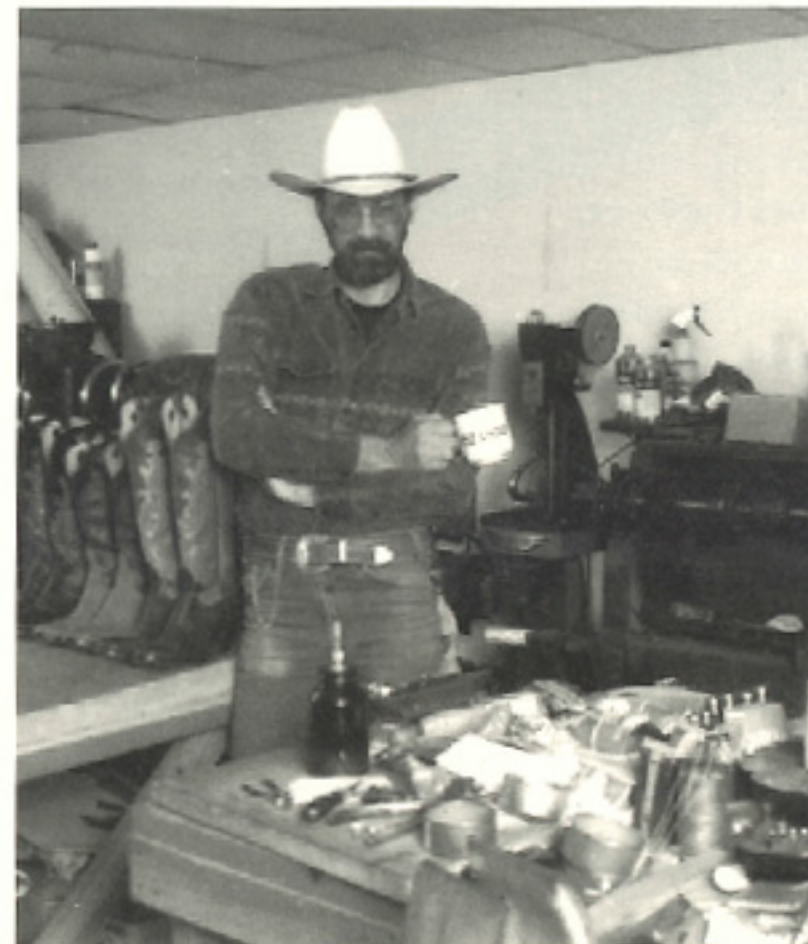
At first I tried to shun the repair work....Carl McDowell always gave me the advice that I shouldn't get started in saddlery and repair if I was going to make it in boots. But at times I felt it was a necessary element just to keep everything going and not have to look for outside work....I'm a victim of geography

here. I'm out here in the Flint Hills; there's all these horses and saddles out here and no one to fix them....I love my craft....I miss the boot making and still enjoy doing it....Last winter I got down to no saddles to repair. I thought, "I'm gonna set the world on fire with the custom work this winter." It wasn't two days later, twenty-two saddles came in the door.

Boot maker Dave Treptow agrees, recalling, "the shoe repair pays the bills for my bad habit of making saddles and boots."

Production problems in boot making are inherent to any small shop in which the demand for the product exceeds the artisan's ability to produce. Boot makers might hire assistants

but most complain of the difficulty in finding skilled workers. Boot making requires a long apprenticeship, something the shops cannot afford to fund. Traditionally boot makers learned through formal apprenticeship programs. Some of the older artisans learned through family businesses. According to Archie Leach:



I've been doing it all my life off and on....[I learned] mostly by tearing them up and putting them back together. And then I worked for other people. I worked in Oklahoma City and Tulsa and different places in the 1930s. Just tell you what. It's a matter of doing a thing over and over and you get used to it.

Boot makers are quick to acknowledge the romantic reasons they persist with careers that are not financially profitable.

Most prefer to earn a lesser living doing work they love rather than hold a more conventional job. Boot maker George Steinberger explains:

I've always wanted to do this....I think the history of boot making needs to be kept alive because there's so much history in it....There's a western romance....it's just romance that you cannot explain.

It may be romance and a sense of history that lures people into boot making, but pride in their work is often the reason they continue. P.J. Mays, former manager at Blucher Boots, quotes cowboy actor and customer Ben Johnson who said, "It ain't bragging if it's true. We're not bragging, it's true....I think we have a lot to be proud of."





"I'll get me a new slicker
'An some Coffeyville boots,
Buy a quart of good red licker
'An quit this crazy old galoot."

"The Dad-Blamed Boss"
Folksong

KANSAS AND COWBOY BOOTS: Folklore, Fact, and Fancy

By James F. Hoy

James F. Hoy

KANSAS AND COWBOY BOOTS: FOLKLORE, FACT, AND FANCY

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Mounted herders, and their footwear, have existed since the dawn of recorded history. But it was the Texas-to-Kansas trail drives of the late 1860s that gave birth to the modern cowboy. Naturally enough, the earliest cowboy boot makers are also associated with these two states, as suppliers for the cattle trade set up shop in the towns where the drives ended, or where the herds were shaped up for the trek north. The 1870 and 1880 censuses indicate that Kansas boot makers were more numerous than their Texas counterparts, and they appear to have been more influential in the development of the cowboy boot, particularly in the early years. Determining just when and where the first pair of cowboy boots was made, however, is an unanswerable question, not only because of the scarcity of historical records, but also because it is difficult to determine what was considered a cowboy boot in the 1870s.

The cowboy boot has obviously undergone numerous transformations and incarnations



since T.C. McInerney opened his shop at the end of the trail in Abilene in 1868 and began to cater to the cowboy trade. The early-day drovers wore everything from laced work shoes to military boots, which had a high stovepipe top, a low flat heel, and a broad round toe. Like other boot makers who operated in Kansas during the first decade of the cattle drives, McInerney apparently built a drover's boot from a military model.

Kansas boot makers have long been credited with firsts, bests, and biggest in the folklore of the West. Kansas folklore tells us that one of the first boot styles associated primarily with the cowboy was the Coffeyville boot, which seems to have been developed sometime in the late 1860s to mid-1870s. The Coffeyville boot had such a reputation that it was mentioned by name in a cowboy folksong, "The Dad-Blamed Boss," collected in the 1920s. The boot may have been available as early as 1869, the year the city was founded, or by 1876 when boot maker J.W. Cubine moved to town. Cubine's boot seems to have represented a transition between the military style and the cowboy boot. Its high top was straight across the

back and rounded in front, and it had a high heel and a broad round toe. Sometimes a red leather star was sewn onto the top front in a successful effort to attract the Texas cowboy. Cubine's Coffeyville shop produced some of the country's best boots from 1876 until it closed in 1931. The Coffeyville boot was contemporaneous with Charles Hyer's boots being built in Olathe.

Conflicting legends credit both Hyer and Cubine with an innovation in boot making that seems rather obvious: making a right-footed boot on a last shaped to the right foot, and a left-footed one on a similar last for the left foot. The belief is that before the days of the cattle drives each boot in a pair was identical to the other and was shaped to the right or left foot by wear alone. This legend appears to have remarkable persistence. In 1847 British shoe historian J. Sparkes Hall vainly attempted to clear up the confusion concerning "the idea that right and left shoes are a comparatively modern invention." Nearly 150 years later the story still circulates. It is true that for centuries most shoes and boots were not shaped to the contours of the left and right foot. However, in 1818 a

process to manufacture wooden lasts by machine was invented, and factories turned out left and right lasts routinely. Even though the truth may well lie somewhere else, folklore confers the honor of this innovation to one of these two Kansas boot makers.

Tradition also credits Charles H. Hyer with inventing the first distinctive cowboy boot in the mid-1870s. Hyer was born to German parents in New York before the family moved to Illinois where Charles' father was a practicing shoemaker. A job with the railroad brought Charles to Leavenworth. After quitting his job, he found work as foreman of the shoe shop at the Kansas School for the Deaf in Olathe.

According to a story passed down through newspapers, the Hyer family, and company promotional materials, the cowboy boot was developed when a Colorado or Texas cowboy, on his way home from the Kansas City stockyards, stopped by Hyer's Olathe shop sometime in 1875 or 1876. He wanted a pair of new boots, but built differently from his Civil War-style footwear. He preferred a

pointed toe that would slide more easily into a stirrup, a high, slanted heel that would hold a stirrup on a pitching horse, and a high top that was scalloped in front and back rather than a smooth stovepipe style. As other cowboys saw and admired Hyer's handiwork, orders started coming into the shop. Before long not only was Hyer operating a boot-making factory that employed scores of workers, but other boot makers were being influenced by his innovations, which included a mail-order system in which the customer included his own foot measurements.

How valid is this traditional account? There is no reason to doubt that the basic outline is factually correct, according to Dean Hyer. But even though he likes the idea of his grandfather having invented the cowboy boot, Dean Hyer also believes that by the mid-1870s the cowboy boot was an idea whose time had come, and other boot makers throughout cattle country were independently creating similar innovations. Texas boot maker Henry Leopold, for instance, has said that his father, Frederick William Leopold, was employed in Coffeyville to make



slant-heeled boots for cowboys perhaps as early as 1869. German-born John Mueller opened a boot shop in Ellsworth in 1872, then moved it west to Dodge City two years later following the cattle trade. A Mr. Aley had a boot shop in Coffeyville as early as 1875. We also know that H.J. Justin moved to Spanish Fort, Texas, in the 1880s (1879 according to Texas tradition) to set up shop and catch the cowboy trade at the starting point of the cattle drives. Undoubtedly there was much polygenesis in the development of drovers' footwear.

However, wherever and whenever the first cowboy boots were made, Kansas boot makers played an important role in their overall development. The Coffeyville boot was important enough to be recorded in song, while the Hyer Company soon became one of the leading boot manufacturers in the country. Moreover, Blucher boots, considered by many working cowhands to be the best cowboy boots ever made, were produced for many years in an Olathe shop across the street from Hyer. G.C. Blucher was a Missouri boot maker and shoemaker who was hired to run the shop floor for the Justin



Company in Texas. After several decades in Texas, Blucher moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1915 and opened his own shop. The winters there proved too severe, both for himself and for some of the workers who had accompanied him from Texas, and in 1918 he moved to Olathe. Among the innovations folklore attributes to him are the undershot heel and the streamlined toe, which combines the appearance of a round and a square box toe. When Gus Blucher died around 1930, an associate named Fournoy bought the business and continued operations until his death in the mid-1960s. At that point John Payne became the owner, and in 1969 he moved everything to Fairfax, Oklahoma. The company has since changed hands several times, but it is currently producing high quality boots in traditional Blucher designs. The Hyer company, on the other hand, is no longer in existence, having closed in 1977. The rights to the name are held by the Ben Miller boot company of El Paso, Texas.

Much of the Hyer equipment, however, and many of its designs, have remained in Olathe. During the late 1970s Ron Orscheln

bought many of the lasts, dies, and machines and started a new company, Olathe Boot Company. The first boots came out of the company in mid-1978; fifteen years later, fifty employees are producing 180 pairs of good quality factory boots a day. About 80 percent of this number are custom ordered, although not custom made. That is, the customer will select features such as style, leather, and stitching but the boots are made in standard sizes, not individually lasted to the customer's measurements. Sales are nationwide, with some international outlets in Canada and England. In addition to cowboy boots, Olathe Boot Company also caters to some smaller niche markets such as English-style polo boots and jodhpur boots.

In their heyday, when Hyer was the country's leading cowboy boot manufacturer and Blucher did the best custom work, both companies had a long list of celebrity clients. The daddy of all western heroes, Buffalo Bill Cody, was a Hyer customer. Movie stars such as William S. Hart, Harry Carey, Ruth Roland, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Gene Autry, Joel McCrea, Will Rogers, and Clark

Gable all wore Hyer boots as did presidents Coolidge, Eisenhower, and Teddy Roosevelt. So also did showmen Tex Austin, Zach Miller, Pawnee Bill, rodeo cowboys Yakima Canutt and Booger Red, and author Will James. Tom Mix wore both Hyers and Bluchers, while John Wayne, Monte Montana, and Ben Johnson were Blucher customers, along with outlaw Emmett Dalton, and more recently, country singer Reba McEntire.

Considering that the cowboy boot was derived from a military model, it is not surprising that some boot companies made boots for both markets. Company representatives known as fitters, some from as far away as England, would travel from military post to military post measuring feet and taking orders from cavalry officers for custom boots. Two of the major suppliers were based in Kansas: Hyer and Teitzel-Jones. Military boots were Teitzel-Jones' main business. J.C. Teitzel was originally headquartered in 1884 at Junction City, adjacent to Fort Riley, which had one of the largest, and the last, horse cavalry units in the country. In 1916 he and his partner C.C. Dehner moved the



company to Wichita so they could concentrate on making boots instead of repairing them, and be close to a steady supply of labor. At that time Schuyler Jones bought into the company, then took over sole ownership in 1930. When the horse cavalry was phased out during World War II, so was the steady market for English riding boots. Thus Teitzel-Jones began making cowboy boots, a venture that lasted only until 1950.

In the meantime a former Teitzel-Jones employee, Carl McDowell, had opened his boot shop in Wichita. McDowell got his start in 1933 just out of high school as a general handyman for Teitzel-Jones; when he left in 1946 he was foreman of the bottoming room, where the vamps are attached to the soles. In the interim he had experienced every aspect of boot making. Sensing the coming drop in demand for military boots, McDowell left the company in 1946. He set his sights on supplying boots for the ranchers and working cowboys of the Gypsum Hills and Flint Hills in Kansas and the Osage Hills in Oklahoma, many of whom were more or less steady customers at the Wichita Livestock Exchange, across the street from his shop.

Thus his boots, although well crafted and fine in detail, were never as fancy as some of those from the better-known Texas shops. Nor did he try to expand his business into a mass production factory. At its peak the McDowell Boot Company never had more than three employees, made only a few hundred pairs of boots a year, and never sought customers from beyond a two-hundred-mile radius of Wichita. Rather than get rich, McDowell was content to earn a living making fine boots, with the help of his wife, Martha, who stitched tops and handled orders.

A number of husband-wife teams are found among Kansas boot makers including Bobby and Jolene Baker of Garden City. Both are graduates of the boot- and saddle-making curriculum of Oklahoma State Technical University at Okmulgee, and both are former rodeo competitors. Once they started a family, however, they decided that a boot shop might be more financially secure than rodeoing. In 1977, about the time they were finishing at Okmulgee, they bought the entire shop contents of an octogenarian cobbler in Cimarron and moved everything to

Garden City. In addition to making boots (Jolene does some cutting and marking, but Bobby is the chief boot maker), they also repair saddles, boots, and shoes and sell tack. By opening their shop immediately after graduation, the Bakers did not have a chance to hone their skills by apprenticeship. Instead they have learned by trial and error. They have, however, served as master craftsmen for other apprentices, including a young North Dakotan who returned to his home state to set up a boot-making business. One of Bobby Baker's innovations is a nonwooden last that can be molded to give the customer an exact fit.

The late Fred Hammon and his wife, Carolyn, comprised another husband-wife team of boot makers. Fred was Hyer's floor manager when the company sold in 1978. Like Carl McDowell, Hammon had begun work just out of high school in 1953 as a general handyman. During his years with Hyer he learned the entire two-hundred-plus-step process of boot making. When the new owners moved the company to El Paso, the Hammons bought some of the equipment and set up shop in Gardner, a few miles southwest of



Olathe, in the spring of 1981. With two employees, one to last bottoms and the other to stitch tops, Fred and Carolyn began turning out about thirty pairs of boots a week. Fred's major contribution was measuring feet, building lasts, and performing finish work. Carolyn would skive (trim) the leather, mark patterns, sew in beading and counters everything that the laster and stitcher did not do. Unfortunately Fred died in the fall of 1986, and Carolyn sold the business five years later. Olathe saddle maker George Steinberger bought the company, and Carolyn taught him to make boots. Thus through the Hammons, the Hyer tradition continues. Carolyn has also passed on her boot-making knowledge to James Holmes, Bill Gomer, and her children Gregg and Christine.

Jim Holenbeck learned to make boots from a trade school and from the more traditional apprenticeship method. Jim worked for several Utah saddle makers in the mid-

1970s, then in 1979 he took a job with legendary Texas boot maker Charlie Dunn. His workbench was directly behind Dunn's, so Holenbeck could observe the master at work. Dunn insisted on quality. The smallest error in stitching had to be corrected, even if the mistake would have been hidden in the final product. And Dunn was meticulous in measuring feet, a lesson Holenbeck learned well: if you get the measurements wrong, the boots do not fit; you have to make a new pair, or the customer finds another boot maker. By having served as Dunn's apprentice Holenbeck is maintaining a dual tradition: his ancestor, Bill Blasing was a boot maker during the 1890s in the same area of the Flint Hills (between Manhattan and Alma) where Jim works, and Charles Dunn himself was apprenticed to a boot maker in 1898 at age eight. As do the Bakers, Jim Holenbeck finds that the lucrative repair business can inhibit making new boots and saddles.



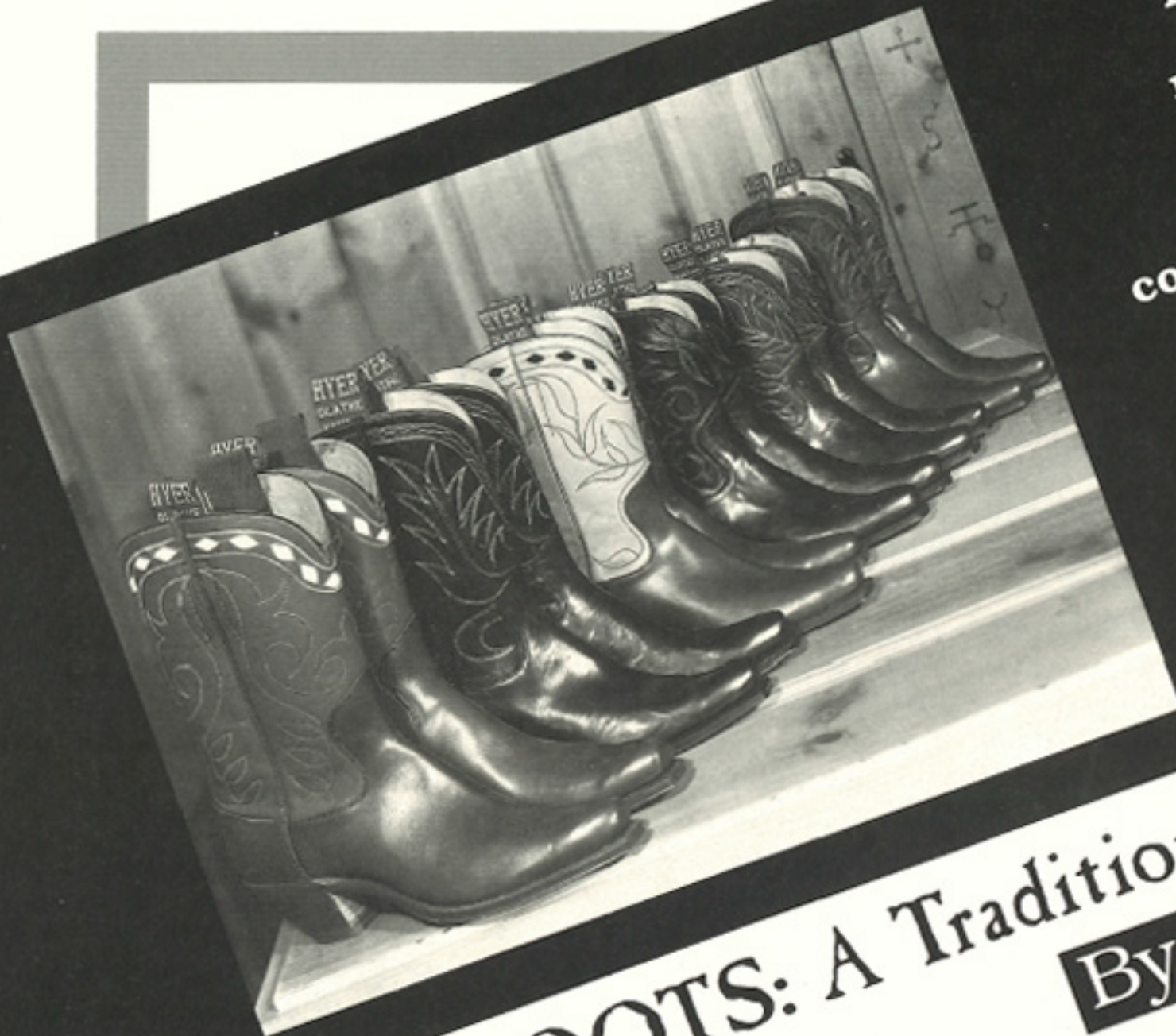
In addition to professional boot makers who began through technical school programs, such as Dave Treptow of Lawrence, Darrel Krug of Russell, and Brian Chambers of Salina,

several Kansans have made a few pairs of boots as sidelines. The late Murray Edwards, for example, was a working cowboy from Atwood who could make boots and saddles as well as spin a rope and play the fiddle. Marvin Ferguson of Preston, who retired to Kansas from the military in 1965, is a saddler who also has made boots. Archie Leach of Sedan is another Kansas boot maker who took up the trade in retirement. He learned boot and shoe repair from his father in the 1920s, and he had bought a number of lasts and other equipment in the



1930s when he ran a small repair service. When he took a job with the Caney Valley Electric Cooperative, he closed his shop and sold the lasts. Then in 1982 Leach retired and bought the lasts back from the man who had purchased them nearly a half century earlier. Rather than take up golf, Leach installed boot-making equipment in his garage. He began turning out several pairs of boots a month, partly because he enjoyed working with leather and partly because it was a link to his heritage.

Today Kansas has cowboy boot manufacturers for the mass market and a number of individual artisans who custom make boots one pair at a time. These boot makers are keeping alive a tradition of craftsmanship that goes back, through Blucher and Cubine, to what some like to think of as the very origin of the cowboy boot in Charles Hyer's boot shop in 1875. As we approach a new century, one hopes that this tradition will continue as part of the Kansas cultural heritage.



"In boot
making,
the last
comes first."

Popular
saying

CUSTOM-MADE BOOTS: A Traditional Process Continues

By James F. Hoy

James F. Hoy



CUSTOM-MADE BOOTS: A TRADITIONAL PROCESS CONTINUES

By James F. Hoy

To the old-time cowboy no item of apparel was more highly regarded than a pair of handcrafted, shop-made boots. The high tops with fancy stitching, the tall undershot heel, and the pointed toe marked the wearer as a horseman. From the days of the cattle drives until the present, handmade boots have been constructed in a traditional manner with meticulous care.

Custom-made boots have two major advantages over those that are mass produced: fit and style. The boot wearer not only gets a boot that will conform exactly to his or her foot, but he or she also chooses every feature including such basics as leather color, stitching design and height of the tops, heel height and design (from a two-inch narrow undershot to a flat roper or dogger heel), and toe style (from needle-narrow to broad-round). Fancy details, from which to choose include leather inlays, number of rows of stitching on the tops, style of top (stovepipe, deep scallop, or shallow scallop), tongue in back (where the counter joins the tops),

mule-ear or finger-hole boot pulls. Sometimes customers will provide a stitching pattern for the tops, although usually they will select one of the boot maker's standard designs.

Individual boot makers sometimes will vary in the sequence of steps they follow and in the precise methods they use in making a pair of boots. The following outline gives a general idea of how a pair of cowboy boots is constructed from start to finish.

Ordinarily the first item of business is for the customer to choose a style, specifying whether they are for work, "scuff" (casual wear), or dress. Bullhide often is used for a work boot, French wax calf for a scuff boot, and kangaroo (or some exotic leather such as ostrich or alligator) for a dress boot. The customer generally will examine the hides available, selecting an appropriate leather in a likable color. The buyer then will select a color and leather for the tops and give full instructions for other details including height, heel and toe styles, rows of stitching, and inlays.

Unless the buyer is a repeat customer whose measurements are on file in the shop, the boot maker next will measure the customer's feet. Generally the artisan will trace an outline of each foot on a sheet of paper, then use a tape to take various measurements on the foot: around the diagonal from the back of the heel to where the ankle flexes on the top, around the ball just back of the toes (where the foot is widest), around the instep (about midway between the ball and the heel), around the waist of the foot, just behind the ball. He or she also measures the calf of the leg to the boot's height. The tops must be large enough for the foot to slip into, but not so big as to wrinkle and sag. Also, if the cowboy wears his pants legs inside his boots, the tops will need to be a bit larger.

Because each person's bone structure is different, the boot maker must use his or her judgment in taking appropriate measurements. According to Carl McDowell, it is not unusual for someone to have a heel that fits comfortably into a size 7C, for instance, while the toe needs a 9D. A well-fitting boot, says McDowell, will be snug but comfortable



with no play in the heel: when you pull it on there will be a tug and a slight "pop" as your heel slips into place. Because custom boot makers generally guarantee their products' fit it is extremely important that they take accurate measurements. Although the customer might be attracted to a particular design, it is the boots' fit, along with their durability, that determines if he or she becomes a repeat customer. Once the measuring is completed, the boot maker builds a last to conform to the customer's foot. Most boot makers have a supply of standard-sized wooden lasts they can build up with leather so that a last will precisely match the customer's foot. Some are able to keep a different last for each customer, but many use and adapt the same standard lasts for different customers, keeping separate ones only for very unusual feet or for steady customers who regularly order a new pair of boots.

Once the last conforms to the customer's foot, incorporating as well the chosen toe style, the boot maker makes a pattern for the tops' (uppers) stitch design. If it is a standard design, a pattern die will be available. If not,

the design will be traced on paper and transferred to leather. Jim Holenbeck always makes the last before working on the uppers so he can use it as a visual aid.

Once the last and the uppers' design are completed, the boot maker cuts out the tops and the bottoms from the leather. The foot part of the bottoms is called the vamp, and the heel portion is called the counter. At this time the lining and other reinforcement pieces are cut out.

The next step is to wet and crimp the vamp and vamp liner. After soaking (in plain water or in a commercial solution, depending on the chemical and mineral content of the available water), the vamp leather is stretched over a crimping board and tacked down. A crimped board is a flat, narrow board that is shaped in the rough outline of a boot. The vamp stays on the crimping board until it has dried, which takes from a few hours for silicone-treated leather to a day or two for untreated leather. This process takes the stretch out of the leather so that the boot will not become loose when worn.

While the vamp is being crimped, the boot maker will begin work on the uppers, which are usually made in two pieces, front and back. The first step in fitting together the outer leather and inner lining is to skive (cut, shave, and taper) the various pieces—tops, liners, counters, and reinforcement leathers. If inlays are to be part of the design, the inlay leather also is cut out and skived at this time. The piping (beading along the top) then is cut and put into place.

Rubber cement is used to hold the pieces together until they are stitched, which is the next step. The fronts and backs of the uppers are still separate at this point. Stitching the decorative pattern into the uppers is a relatively easy process if the design is simple and only a single stitch is applied. But if the design is complex and requires several rows of stitching, the process is long and complicated. The late Fred Hammon once observed that the work involved in stitching the uppers is determined by the number of "points" the places where the sewing machine operator has to stop and turn the upper before making more stitches.



A complex fern or cactus leaf design with eight rows of stitching, for instance, requires literally hundreds of points. The finished product easily reveals the sewer's skill level. Today many large boot companies use computers to create multiple rows of perfect stitching. Such mechanized techniques lack the feel, or the sense of true artistic perfection that one finds in a handmade boot.

After the uppers are stitched, the vamps are removed from the crimping board and trimmed so they can be sewn to the uppers. Usually the outside vamp is sewn to the inside counter liner with a single row of stitching, and the inside vamp liner is sewn to the outside counter. The excess leather is trimmed from the vamp. At this point the front uppers are sewn to the vamp, the back uppers to the counter, the side beading is sewn to the backs, and the front and back sewn together, all of it inside out. After trimming the excess leather from the inside where the beading is attached, the boots are turned right side out and the pull straps attached. Pull straps are made of leather or cloth. Some are mule ears large leather pieces that hang down the outsides of the boots.

Once the foot and uppers have been put together, the boot is ready for lasting. The insole is wetted so that it will conform to the last. The boot maker then cuts a groove for the welt, which is used to attach the vamp to the sole. After the bottoms have been soaked and the uppers evenly wetted, the boot is slipped over the last and worked onto it. Special care is given to the instep and the heel, making sure that everything is straight and correctly smoothed. The boot is then tacked to the last where it stays until it has dried.

When the insole is dry, the toe box is installed. Toe boxes determine the shape of the toe: broad flat round, narrow round, broad or narrow sharp square, or what Blucher calls a streamlined design that combines the look of a square toe with the durability of the round toe. Commercially-produced toe boxes of plastic or other synthetics are widely used in manufactured boots, but many custom boot makers still create the boxing with leather.

When the toe has been boxed, the vamp is pulled over the toe and the welting cut,

inserted, cemented, and sewn into place with hand thread. The liner is then attached to the insole, the welt to the vamp, and the boot begins to look like a boot. The shank, a reinforcement that fits between the sole and the arch on the bottom of the boot and gives it firmness, is installed with filler and a shank cover.

Next the sole is mellowed (wetted) and fastened into place with stitching and wooden pegs into the shank. A heel base is attached and the heel is stacked, or built, by adding layers of leather until the proper height is reached. It is then ground into the proper shape. Finally, the last is pulled out, the pegs broken off, and the boot is ready for finishing. The finishing process includes trimming the edges of the sole, smoothing the shank, grinding down the heel, and dyeing the edges of the sole and heel. A heel pad is put into the boot, and the leather is conditioned with silicone or moisturizer. The edges of the heel and sole are burnished, and the boots buffed to a shine.

At this point the boot maker double checks the measurements. To make sure the boot

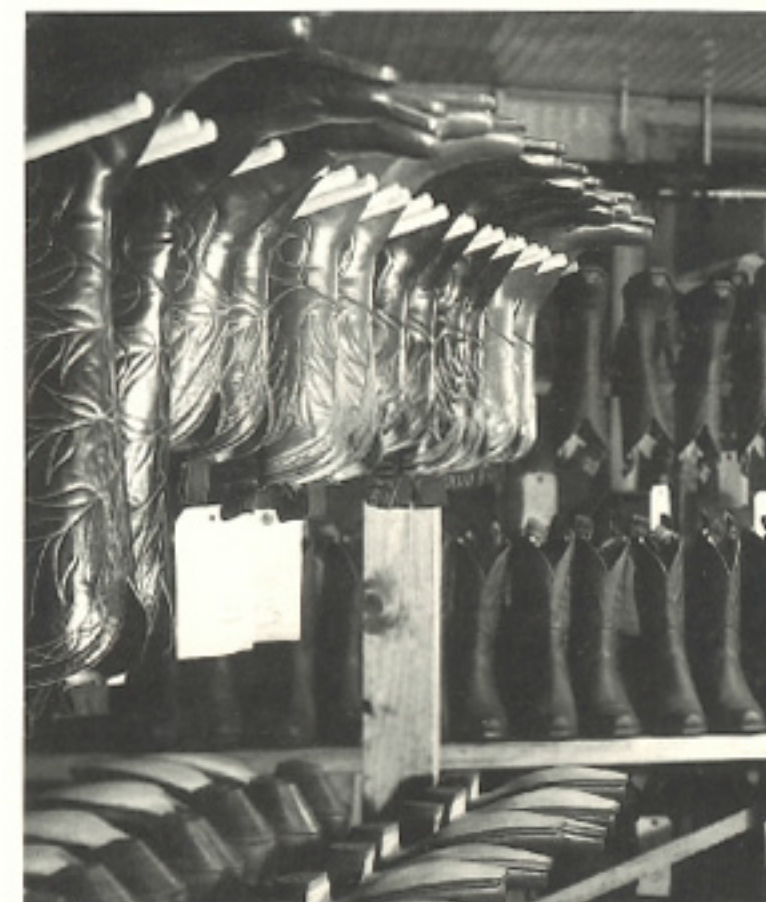


will fit, the instep and tops may be "treed," stretched out with a wooden device inserted into the leg or foot and spread out with screws or wedges. Some boot makers will achieve the same effect by cramming the boots with old newspapers. Once the boots have been treed, they are ready to be mailed, or for the customer to pick up.

From start to finish it may take from fifteen to forty hours of actual work time to make a pair of boots. The whole process, however, is usually spread out over a week or two. A boot maker working alone often will have four or five boots in progress at any one time. Carl McDowell, for instance, would make lasts, crimp tops, make uppers, and pull boots over lasts on Mondays through Thursdays, then attach bottoms on Fridays and Saturdays. With about two helpers in a shop, a couple dozen boots may be in progress at any one time.

Rarely can a customer order a pair of boots and expect to receive them within a month.

Custom boot makers may run anywhere from six months to more than a year behind on orders. But ask any cowhand and he will tell you it is worth the wait for a pair of boots that will wear well, look good, and really fit.





"I wanted
to make
a good boot
and have a
good, reliable
boot shop."

Carl McDowell
1992

THE COWBOY BOOT TRADITION: A Community Aesthetic

By Jennie A. Chinn

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Folk art is defined as those expressive behaviors that are traditional, learned through person-to-person interaction, and based within a community aesthetic. Traditional behavior is passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. In some cases the learning takes place in an informal setting. However, in such occupational art forms as boot making, the traditions may be passed on through a formal apprenticeship.

Folk art is traditional in that it is part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, the behavior must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead, local variants are found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the

communities to which we all maintain membership. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance creating a traditional culture.

A community is not simply a group of people who have contact with each other. Individuals who make up a community share certain concerns and interests, and they maintain a system of values that are shaped and reshaped through time. These values hold the community together and are reflected in its folklore and folk art.

A group's folk culture represents that part of culture selected and supported by people within the community. It is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn are accepted by the community. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

Part of a community's folk culture is reflected in its members' dress. Certainly the cowboy boot is an excellent example of this. The boot, as part of the cowboy outfit, is a strong symbol for a particular occupational group. During the period of the Texas-to-



Kansas trail drives, a time that codified the romantic view of the American West, cowboys were generally adolescent outlaws who had a reputation for drinking and shooting.

Teddy Blue, a trail drive cowboy, wrote his memories in 1939. He recalls the cowboy outfit as an identification badge for adolescents proud to be cowboys:

Before I went home I stopped in North Platte, where they paid us off, and bought some new clothes....I had a new white Stetson hat that I paid ten dollars for and new pants that cost twelve dollars, and a good shirt and fancy boots. They had colored tops, red and blue, with a half moon and star on them. Lord, I was proud of those clothes. They were the kind of clothes top hands wore, and I thought I was dressed right for the first time in my life. I believe one reason I went home was just so I could show them off. But when I got there and my sister saw me she said: "Take your pants out of your boots and put your coat on. You look like an outlaw." I told her to go to hell. And I never did like her after that. Those were the first store clothes I had ever



bought myself. Before that my mother made my clothes or they were bought for me, just like you'd do for a kid. My sister was a fool anyhow.

Nineteenth-century cowboys had a group costume, or "outfit." Observations and memoirs consistently cite the distinguishing characteristics of the cowboy's dress. Some observers seemed in awe of it. In May 1886 a reporter in Medicine Lodge wrote about a cowboy reunion:

What a sight it would be to have all the old-timers in this county, and the hundreds of others in adjoining counties meet here, rigged up with their slickers, leggings, broad brimmed hats, colored shirts, high heeled boots and other paraphernalia of the cowboy.

One of the most distinguishing characteristic of the cowboy boot is the heel. Historically the heel was a mark of vanity as it identified the cowboy as a member of a specific group. In the 1907-1908 Hyer boot catalog the customer is offered three possible heels. A cowboy heel (1 1/2 to 2 1/2 inches high), a commonsense heel (1 1/8 to 1 3/8 inches

high), and a low flat heel (3/4 to 1 inch high). An eighth of an inch may seem like a subtle difference, but it was a distinguishing feature in defining this occupational group.

As the cowboy's costume evolved it was documented by the press for consumption by the middle class who by 1910 were copying the dress and the ways of the cowboy everywhere from dude ranches and rodeos as entertainment to movies. Cowboy dress, like gang fashion, zoot suits, and punk clothing, went from an outlaw class to the middle class.

When a form of dress is adopted by those outside the group, the tradition may continue to have meaning within the original community. When this happens, as in the case of cowboy boots, the "insiders" often are uncomfortable with the "outsiders'" use of their tradition. Veteran boot maker Carl McDowell explains:

There wasn't anyone wearing boots but the cowman. You see anyone with a pair of boots on, you could bet your dollar he was a cattleman....One of these boys out around Wilmore told me one time, said

Carl, "it used to be kind of an honor to wear a pair of boots. You go downtown and we cattlemen, we loved what we was doing, and we kind of felt honored, kind of distinguished from other people we had on cowboy boots." He says, "Hell, now you see a pair of boots, you don't know whether he's a used car salesman or a drugstore man." They got to calling them drugstore boots after guys got to wearing them.

How one wears traditional clothing can identify not only the community from which the individual comes but the local variant of the tradition practiced in their community. Boot maker Dave Treptow remembers his move from Oklahoma to Kansas. "In Oklahoma they wear their pants inside the boots," explains Treptow, "I came here and people were looking at me strange. I figured it out after a while."

Since boot making continues within a community tradition, the art form is guided by a community aesthetic, which means that the art of boot making is a collaborative process between the boot maker and the customer. Sometimes collaboration is obvious when a