

The West Coast Shoe Company Story *continued from page 8*

percentage of our production like it used to,” says Roberta Shoemaker. “But it is still an important part of us, because it goes all the way back to our roots and our history. So many people come here to our showroom and say, ‘My grandfather used to wear your boots in the woods.’ So there’s generations of that history. It’s not just a boot that we made and there’s nothing more to it. There’s family history to it. So they’ll always be important to us.”

Other well known Wesco work boots are still in regular production. The Jobmaster, Packer, and the classic Romeo are versatile work boots and shoes designed for everyday use both outdoors and indoors. The Volt Foe, Highliner, and Firestormer are specialty boots for electrical workers, climbers, and firefighters. Law enforcement agencies around the West purchase the Motorcycle Patrol model for their officers.

Their boots are made for both men and women says Bruce Shoemaker, a great grandson of John Henry. “People think of our work products as a guy’s boot, but so many women are taking nontraditional jobs now and they deserve to have the same quality tools to wear as anybody else.” Bruce Shoemaker joined the family business a few years ago to help prepare for the 100th anniversary celebration after running his own market research company.

As mentioned earlier, Wesco doesn’t just make work boots. Motorcycle and horse enthusiasts love their Boss, Morrison, and Harness model boots. The JH Classics, Hendrik, and the Robert William are oxford dress shoes for men with the same toughness and integrity of their boots; the JH Classics is named after company founder John Henry. A line of signature boots that includes the Frazee, Phoenix, Black Widow, and Athena add some savvy feminine style to Wesco’s collection.

Wesco boots and shoes have a worldwide following and have become particularly popular in places like Japan, China, Hong Kong, and in parts of Europe. “When I started here

we were heavy into work boots but we were starting to do other things,” says Chris Warren, who used to work on the factory floor but is now the Sales Manager. “The transition to other styles and models needed to happen. We use a lot of designs that are derived from our old catalogs. I don’t think we needed to reinvent the wheel for Wesco, but we needed to do something to evolve to a bigger marketplace and bigger clientele.”

A tour of the factory allows a visitor to see the entire production process. From the rolls of different grades of leather, each hand inspected and measured for appropriate thickness, to the numerous stations where craftspeople cut, sew, and attach the various leather pieces, to the bottom soles being nailed on by hand, to the stock storeroom where the final product sits, it’s a labor intensive and skilled operation.

One of the most unique aspects of Wesco’s product lines is the opportunity to customize a purchase; custom orders make up about 55% of all sales, says Sales Manager Warren. Customers trace and measure their feet and legs individually so the bootmakers can hand cut the leather to the exact size and build the boot from the sole up for an exact and

comfortable fit. Customers can choose which style of toe they want for their boots, and dress shoes have several options for toe caps. Customers can make many personal choices in their design – the color and type of leather and liners; the color and style of thread stitching; the style of straps, buckles, rings, hooks and eyelets; the style of laces, and even the type of sole. Extra midsoles can be added, as can heel lifts, safety toes and linings, and extra straps. You can even have them add on a pocket for a phone,



Above: Craftspeople at the Wesco factory in Scappoose build boots and shoes, cutting leather by hand and hand nailing the soles.

Left: Wesco makes more than just work boots for loggers, climbers, and electrical workers; horse and motorcycle enthusiasts are also loyal customers.

remained family owned is a bit of an anomaly these days. But the West Coast Shoe Company and the Shoemaker family seem to have hit on the right recipe.

“The thing about Wesco Shoes is that they’ve been great community partners throughout the years, but they’re kind of quiet and in the background,” says County Commissioner Heimuller. “Until this year during their 100th anniversary celebration, I would guess that over fifty percent of the people who live in Scappoose had never heard of Wesco Shoes.”

“In logging communities like Vernonia they were well known because their product lasts forever and were a high quality safety boot,” adds Heimuller. “And they’ve done a great job marketing a high-end product to the world. But they’ve done all that without having lost their true DNA, which is building a damn good shoe in Scappoose, Oregon.”



New pairs of boots and shoes waiting for the next step in the shoemaking process.

knife, or credit card.

Of course, all those custom options do come with a price, and their boots and shoes are not inexpensive to start with. Wesco likes to think of their boots as an investment, one you will wear and use for many years, maybe even decades. “We sell to that five to ten percent of people that realize the difference and buy quality things because they last a long time and they get their money’s worth from it,” says Bruce Shoemaker. And of course those work boots that get used and abused day in and day out can always be rebuilt. “We have guys come in that have been wearing the same pair of boots for 10 and 20 years, they just keep sending them back and having them rebuilt. They keep them oiled and don’t let them dry out. The leather will last a long time if you maintain it.”

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