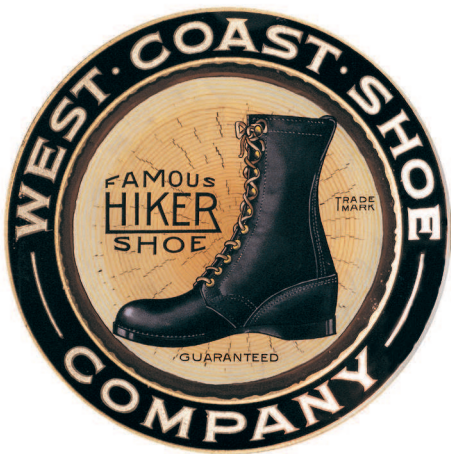


The West Coast Shoe Company Story *continued from front page*

clothing needs, advertising clothing brands like Pendleton and C.C. Filson, along with Golzan, Packard, and Skookum shoes and boots in their windows.

The stock market crash of October 1929 changed everything.

With the economy failing and the Great Depression soon to follow, demand for logs quickly ground to a halt, and with it the demand for Wesco's boots. John Henry lost everything, including his business, his home, and his savings. The only things left were his shoemaking tools, his family, and a piece of property on the Sandy River. But John Henry wasn't a quitter, so he swapped that vacation property for 11 acres of land overlooking Scappoose and built a home for his family, with a boot factory in the basement. The family worked together - on a good day they could turn out eight pairs of logging boots which John Henry carried out to the local logging camps to sell. The economy recovered slowly but surely, as did the demand for the Shoemaker's work boots. The family, including two adult daughters and their husbands, and a grown son, built a factory next to the family home; in 1937 it was a two-story, 2,400 square foot operation.



The original Wesco logo.

The demand for Wesco's work boots exploded during the wartime years of the 1940s, especially their "engineer" boots that were the preferred choice of boatbuilders and shipworkers on the West Coast. The logging business was also again booming, and so was the West Coast Shoe Company.

Following the war the company introduced a new service, one they still offer today, complete boot rebuilding, taking a well worn pair of trusty Wesco boots and replacing the heels, soles, laces, tongues and then reattaching the boot upper. For about one-third of the cost for a new pair of boots the original



The West Coast Shoe Company started in Portland in 1918. This was one of their storefront locations at Morrison Street and 1st Avenue.

pair can be brought back to life.

Today Wesco's manufacturing plant and showroom take up three levels and 19,000 square feet, along with a separate office building, all built on the original factory location tucked up in the hills behind Scappoose. The original family home still stands overlooking the business, surrounded by other homes, some originally owned by members of the Shoemaker family and some still owned by them. Five of John Henry's six children lived in homes around the factory, and many of his grandchildren still live there. A small sign on the lane is the only indication that a world famous factory is hidden in what looks like a quiet neighborhood.

Five family members currently work for the company. "I started working here during summer and winter breaks during college," says Roberta Shoemaker. "When I graduated from college I went to work here in the office and I stayed and worked my way up to



Wesco gives new life to their customers' worn out boots by rebuilding them from the sole up.

where I am now. It was very common when I was young for me and my cousins to run in and out of the factory and see our grandfather and mothers and fathers all working here."

Wesco has quietly built its reputation on their dependable and quality products. Columbia County Commissioner Henry Heimuller and his family are also longtime county residents. "My family's relationship with the Shoemaker

ers goes back to my grandfather who was in the sand and gravel industry - Wesco boots was all anybody wore back then and we still wear them," says Heimuller. "I was just in and got measured for a new pair of shoes myself."

Heimuller tells the story of his father, who was helped by the Shoemaker family when he was a child. "My dad contracted polio just a short time after he was born. He spent about a year in Doernbecher Hospital. When he was discharged at 18 months old the doctors told my grandmother and grandfather that he would never walk. They took him home, but my grandmother was a bit tenacious so she went and talked with the Shoemakers. Mr. Shoemaker custom made my dad a pair of shoes that he contorted in a way to fit my dad's feet and then my grandmother worked with my dad to learn to walk. She would take him back to the shoe factory where Mr. Shoemaker would work on his feet. My grandmother said that sometimes Mr. Shoemaker would make him some new shoes, sometimes as often as every two weeks, or tear apart a pair of shoes he had made and readjust the soles and the shoe. By the time my dad was three years old they had him walking. The story is that the Shoemakers made my dad's shoes for him all through his childhood and never charged the family for a single pair of shoes."

Today Wesco employs 33 people, many of them high quality craftsmen and craftswomen, who have worked for the company for many years, some even decades.

The product line has grown over the years, but still includes several models of their famous work boots. Their Timber logging boots feature patented riveted calks and remains the sturdy and dependable boot that Wesco originally built their name on. "Today logging boots don't represent the large

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