

The knowledge, skills and love required to repair leather shoes may be less common than they were 100 years ago, but giving footwear a new life in this way is making a comeback. Quality shoes are growing in popularity among consumers and the leather content of these products makes them as repairable as they are desirable.



LONG-LASTING



REPAIRABLE



GREEN JOBS

Old shoes resurrected

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, there were 120,000 shoe repair shops in North America; today the number is closer to 5,000. This reflects a drop from one shoe repair shop per 800 people to just one shop per 116,000. This is according to Jim McFarland, president of the Shoe Service Institute of America (SSIA), third-generation shoe repair shop owner in Florida and historian for the industry. He attributes the drop to shifts in population, culture and attitudes toward shoes. What's exciting him today, though, is that he is witnessing a reversal of that downward trend.

After a troubling couple of decades, the new generation of consumers seems to be abandoning short-life synthetic footwear. Instead, they're going for 'investment' shoes made with leather as well as other quality materials that — if cared for and repaired as needed — might last a lifetime, or even more. "The customers are coming back," Mr McFarland tells *World Leather*. Now the cobblers just need to be ready.

So where did the customers and cobblers go? In earlier days, Mr McFarland says, "you had many people immigrating who really knew this trade. They had big families; kids grew up in it and carried on the family business." As the decades passed, though, that changed. "Families had fewer kids, kids began going off to college to do different things. There were more people gowing out of the business than there were learning the business."

In the mid-1940s, he says, there were still some 63,000 shoe repair shops in North America. This was the start of the baby-boomer generation, who proved to be good customers. "When I was growing up, people were taking care of their shoes. They'd get them resoled and hand them down to their brothers and sisters."



A JM Weston artisan repairs a shoe.

CREDIT: JIM MCFARLAND



Once the 1980s and 1990s hit, cheaper, synthetic materials made shoe repair less appealing to consumers. “All of a sudden we were getting shoes that weren’t so repairable,” he says. He recalls a customer who brought in a pair of beautiful boots with leather uppers and polyurethane soles. “They must have sat in inventory too long because when she wore them for the first time the bottoms just fell apart,” he says. “The tops were like new and the bottoms crumbled. That’s what could happen with these man-made materials.”

In the 1990s, there were around 15,000 shoe repair shops in North America. Since then, Mr McFarland says, his customer base has been composed primarily of those baby-boomers still taking care of their shoes and by women of all ages who tend to replace tips on high heels. Until recently, that is.

The Shoe Shine Sunday generation

Mr McFarland says he is now seeing a new generation of consumers embracing quality footwear and, with it, the role of shoe care and shoe repair. “These 28- to 40-year-olds are all of a sudden buying quality shoes. Social media is educating the consumer, especially in men’s shoes, about which ones to buy and how to take care of them.” He chuckles and describes the “shoeshinesunday” hashtag he’s seen on social media: “They’re taking pictures of their newly shined shoes — ten, 15, 20 pairs of them all lined up — and posting the images online.”

As someone who has been in or around shoe repair since he was a child, Mr McFarland recognises this is a big deal. “We’re seeing the old days resurrected again,” he says. “I’ve seen this industry go down to where I thought, ‘Oh boy this isn’t looking good; there’s nothing but garbage out there.’ It’s turning around. Appreciation for quality is coming back.”

The appeal of vintage

Of course, shoe repair never went away, and there have always been customers who appreciate fine materials and quality craftsmanship. French footwear group JM Weston says it repairs close to 10,000 pairs of shoes every year at its Limoges factory. Five full-time artisans add new elastic panels on ankle boots, replace laces on loafers, install hand-screwed heels with inset steel corners, stretch leather and so on.

Goodyear welting allows shoes to be resoled multiple times. New vegetable-tanned leather soles come from the brand’s Bastin Tannery and the process, the company says, has nearly 100 steps, including stitching the welt, levelling the cork midsole, smoothing the sole’s edges and dyeing.

But, in what might be a response to the same type of customer boom Mr McFarland has described, JM Weston recently launched a new collection of repaired and reconditioned shoes called Weston Vintage. Customers have the opportunity to turn in JM Weston shoes they are no longer wearing in exchange for gift vouchers. Qualifying shoes are sent to Limoges where they are restored and put up for sale at a reduced price. When announcing the new collection, the company described the project as not only promoting a circular economy approach, but that it was passing “the timeless style of its iconic shoes” to a new generation.

Educate the consumer, promote the industry

When SSIA polled its membership on the best-made shoes in the world, criteria for voting included leather upper, leather sole and leather lining (as well as Goodyear welting).

“Everything breathes when it’s leather,” Mr McFarland says. “Leather uppers are easy to maintain and polish for many



years. A leather lining can protect the upper and is much softer. Leather outsoles always bring out the dressiest look." These components can help make a shoe last for decades if properly taken care of, he adds.

Imparting messages like this to consumers is half of SSIA's mission. Last year the organisation produced a series of short videos on its YouTube channel discussing topics such as buying nice shoes, practising good shoe care and knowing when to replace a sole. "We want to educate the consumer," he says. "We say, 'Don't be fooled by this material or that material.' We try to show which shoes to look for." There are plans for more videos this summer.

At the SSIA 2020 Convention, to be held this July in Chicago, the group will host the first North American Shine-Off. Film-maker Stacy Tenenbaum, who directed the 2017 documentary *Shiners*, will be one of the judges for the shoe-shining competition. "This is a way we can let the consumer know more about shoe care, especially in a city like Chicago with all the snow and salt," says Mr McFarland. "It's going to be fun. There are a lot of great shoe-shiners out there."

The other half of SSIA's mission is supporting the industry, largely through education at events like the annual convention. One of this year's speakers will be Gail Sundling, who runs the Delmar Bootery in Albany, New York and who, Mr McFarland says, was instrumental in him becoming a passionate participant in this world. When his family shoe repair store very suddenly became Mr McFarland's responsibility, he was unsure of whether he wanted to keep it. He had watched his grandfather and father struggle with the business their entire lives and assumed he would choose a different path. While still trying to decide what to do, he attended an SSIA show, intending only to check out the latest machinery. Then he found himself in one of Ms Sundling's seminars. "She made me realise I could run a business. She taught us how to keep our shops clean, how to be presentable, how to treat customers, how to make it work. I took everything about our store and changed it to what she laid out, and it started working."

Encouraged by this, he attended the next year's show and then the next. He entered contests and eventually won the Silver Cup, which recognises excellence in shoe repair craftsmanship. (As industry historian, he has also been spending the last couple of years trying to track down the original cup.)

Now, this reluctant attendee is president of SSIA and gets to decide that there will be no other seminars during Ms Sundling's this year. "We're closing everything else down for that time slot," he says. "She's going to have everyone's attention because what she has to say is so important." Mr McFarland's passion about SSIA and the industry is grounded in turning points like walking into Ms Sundling's classroom — and the memory of how the organisation rallied around him when a 2002 hurricane obliterated his business. "We lost everything," he said. "Our business was pretty much gone, our home was half destroyed." The next thing he knew, cobblers from all over North America were sending cash and cheques to help his family get back on their feet. Within a year he was able to make a living again. "The opportunity to be president has given me the chance to put my whole heart into my industry," he says. "I owe them my best."

Meeting consumer demand

As footwear trends, sustainability awareness, social media and efforts such as SSIA's collide to create a new generation of shoe repair customers, the industry finds itself struggling to



Jim McFarland with his 2002 Grand Silver Cup Award. Winning the award usually means repairing the shoes with nothing different than the way they came out of the box.

CREDIT: JIM MCFARLAND

keep up. "I go all over the country and visit shops every month," says Mr McFarland, "and the biggest question I hear is: 'Jim, do you know anybody looking for work?' There are so many shoes coming into these shops, and they can't find enough help."

He has colleagues who are running behind by weeks, sometimes by more than a month. Addressing this shortage is difficult because cobblers do not have the time to teach. "We're so busy," he says. "If somebody wants to come inside my store and learn, they'll have to spend a lot of time standing and watching. Partly because we don't want somebody picking up a nice pair of shoes to learn on, but also, when you watch you learn."

According to Mr McFarland, relatively few vocational schools or training programmes in North America are designed to prepare students for the shoe repair industry. There are exceptions — for example, in Washington, DC, John Matthews is doing extraordinary work for his community and for the industry with initiatives called the Peter Bug Shoe and Leather Repair Academy — but options are scarce.

This is why Mr McFarland is excited about the imminent opening of a new school under the direction of Hungarian bespoke shoemaker Marcell Mrsan. The Center for Craft and Design - Footwear Making School (which has already been likened by industry commentators to the Stefano Bemer school in Florence, Italy) will be based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The programme begins in September.

Mr Mrsan is a certified Master Shoemaker, and Mr McFarland recently spent a few days with him. Mr Mrsan is "remarkable" at using pencil and paper to "bring a shoe to life", Mr McFarland says. "Watching him draw out patterns for shoes was like watching Walt Disney draw his characters." He believes the school will be an intense learning experience that will feed students into the shoe repair industry. "When we draft somebody after they finish the programme," he says, "they're going to know the basics."

In the meantime, Mr McFarland is not disheartened by the long waits at shoe repair shops across North America. "What I'm excited about," he says, "is that this is our industry's biggest problem." 🌱