

CROSS-COUNTRY JOURNAL

Acclaimed boot maker employs rare materials and rarer technique

By Sally Ruth Bourrie, Globe Correspondent

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REDMOND, Ore. - When you think of the world's best cowboy boots, think handmade. Think Oregon.

On a juniper-sprinkled volcanic plain about 150 miles east of Portland, D.W. Frommer II makes Western boots that have won every contest he's entered. With colorful inlays, fancy stitching, and exotic leathers such as elephant and stingray, Frommer's creations range from gaudy to elegant.

But it's not just about looks; the precise fit caresses bunions and bone spurs. And the boots are built to last 50 years.

"As far as Western bootmakers, he's the man as far as I'm concerned," says D.A. Saguto, a master bootmaker in Williamsburg, Va., who also heads the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's shoemaking program.

Though Saguto says Western bootmaking is "real hot" in Texas, California, and the Pacific Northwest, he estimates there are fewer than 100 professional-caliber shoemakers in the United States.

Frommer, 54, believes his skill derives from not continually repeating what he knows. Instead, he has made boots he could never turn a profit on, and practiced on himself.

Attention to detail

For a Denver client, he imposed a cowboy on a wildly jumping buffalo on a glossy black alligator background. He trimmed hummingbird-and-morning-glory-decorated boots, which took 300 hours to make, with minuscule braiding woven from near-threads of kangaroo leather whose edges he beveled.

The former guild Bootmaker of the Year has a three-year waiting list, and his boots are displayed at the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum in Los Angeles.

"You have to choose whether you want to make boots or whether you want to make money," says Frommer, for whom the shoemakers guild created its "Best of Show" award after he won every competition. "When you choose to make boots, anything and everything you need to do to make the best quality. If it means throwing all your patterns and everything out the door and starting all over again, is what you'll do."

Started with a hobby kit

Originally from the Midwest, Frommer feels he's been destined for this trade since his parents gave him a leather wallet-making kit when he was a child. But by age 24, after serving in Vietnam, attending the University of Minnesota, and marrying Randee (who has worked with him for about 15 years), he had no direction.

Based on the wallet-kit story, an Oregon unemployment office sent him to apprentice in a shoe repair shop. The owner made boots as a hobby, and Frommer was hooked.

Frommer makes four styles, traditional frontier cowboy boots known as Dress Wellingtons; lace-ups known as Western Packers; flat-sided Napoleons, favored by 1930s and 1940s Hollywood cowboy stars; and Full Wellingtons, popularized in England around 1830 by the Duke of Wellington and used widely in the United States in the 1800s.

Frommer first takes a print of the foot, then measures its girth and notes any idiosyncrasies. He and his customer determine design and materials, which can include calfskin, kangaroo, goatskin, water buffalo, American alligator, and snakeskin.

Frommer then builds up a last, or standard foot model, to match the customer's measurements. Leathers are cut and sewn, including a full lining. Pieces are placed on crimping forms to stretch around a three-

dimensional foot or leg. Leather heels are cut and layered. Even soles are polished.

Unlike modern footwear, Frommer's boots have no nails, plastic, or paper. Stitching and diamond-shaped wooden pegs attach the upper to the sole, and traditional tanning methods are used. Rubber cement and sewing machines (from the 1930s) are concessions to modernity.

Prices range from \$800 for a relatively plain boot to about \$3,000 for those with lots of ornamentation and exotic leathers. Among shoemakers, that's relatively low. Frommer prefers to have his prices reflect the costs of locating his D.W. Frommer II Bootmaker shop in Redmond (population 12,464).

Old-school, old shoes

Frommer teaches courses, has written books on Western bootmaking, and has created a 27-hour instructional video. He, Saguto, and others founded the Honourable Cordwainers Co. in 1984. (Cordwainers work with new leather; cobblers, or shoe repairmen, work with old.)

In 1987, the company was officially recognized by its parent guild, the Worshipful Company of Cordwainers in London, established in 1272.

Using antique tools in a centuries-old process brings Frommer close to his predecessors, making him feel he's making boots partly for "those guys who are looking over your shoulder."

And in Oregon, "those guys" are ancient. The world's earliest known shoes, crushed sagebrush-bark sandals dating from 9000 BC, were found in Fort Rock Cave, about an hour from Redmond.

Sally Ruth Bourrie is a Globe correspondent.

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