

Most operators in the Shoe Repair industry are non-employers, meaning that the owner is the sole employee. Of the estimated 4,444 shoe repair enterprises in the United States about 77.5% are non-employing. The majority of shoe repair companies serve their local communities, with very few companies operating more than one establishment.

Cobblers at the nation's roughly 7,000 repair shops — down from more than 100,000 in the 1930s — are thriving, yet bordering on overwhelmed, says John McLoughlin, president of the Shoe Service Institute of America (SSIA), an industry group composed of volunteers.

Luigi Conti known to many as Gino comes from a long line of Italian shoe makers. He is a 3rd generation cobbler who opened a modest shop in the village of Warwick, New York in 2014.

In 1912, Luigi Conti came to the U.S. to make enough money to start a business in Italy. After two years he returned to Italy he returned to Messina, Sicily and opened a custom shoe business which specialized in making boots.

By the time of his untimely death due to appendicitis at the age of 52, Luigi's empire consisted of a factory with 80 employees and two big high end shoe stores (equivalent to Saks Fifth Avenue).

It was in the factory that Gino's parents met. His mother, Carmela, was the daughter of a modest shoemaker. She worked as a machinist who "sewed uppers" and Gino's father was a salesman.

After his Luigi's death in 1938 war started the business began to die down.

Luigi's son's Enzo moved to Rome to open a shoe boutique. By the end of the war the Conti empire in Italy was no more.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S. Colangelo (Charles) Drago opened his business in 1912 with 13 original shoe repair stores in Manhattan which flourished to 52 repair shops and the largest shoe repair chain in Manhattan.

In 1958 Arnie Drago, Charles' son came to Italy for a visit. Two years later Gino's great aunt, Giovanna Drago, sponsored Gino's family into the U.S.

The Drago family became a wealthy family by hard work and sheer determination. As one Drago cousin became a pilot and another an engineer, Uncle Charles was hoping that Gino, who had remained faithful to the family trade would take over the Manhattan stores. The last remaining Drago shoe repair store is located inside of Penn Station in New York City.

Gino owns a single shoe repair shop where his mother occasionally comes to help with the sewing. People drop off and pick up footwear, handbags, belts and leather goods usually pausing for some friendly conversation. Gino dreams of someday making shoes like his grandfather.

It's a small world after all

I was very happy to discover a traditional cobbler's shop in nearby Warwick Village, since I possessed a faded collection of near and dear, dust-collecting footwear. Last year I literally wore off the rubber heels of my wedding booting while marching with my church (which won 1st place for their Star Spangled

Banner theme float) in the Montgomery Day Parade.

There were only three shoe repair shops that I knew of (Monroe, Butler, NJ, and Trinity Place, Manhattan) before Gino opened right around the corner from my favorite Italian restaurant Fratello's.



As mentioned earlier I have a healthy collection of shoes, minus the five years or so when I encountered a self imposed shoe buying strike because shoes had become just too ugly with thick cow hoof heels. During this time I purchased a pair of Capezio tap shoes and had rubber soles put on them for street wear. I may even still have these shoes today.

Eventually the ugly shoe era passed and I was able to buy shoes again. It was about this time I learned to purchase two pairs of shoes when I found pairs I really liked and if I could afford it. This being said I have six pairs of Aerosoles, which seems to be paving a path to my heart these days.

My latest excursion was to the mall (and malls are rarely on my point of destination list) to exchange a pair of shoes purchased online. Needless to say I exchanged the shoes and also bought another pair as well.

Here we go again...

When a co-worker suggested that a pair of shoes in an Aerosoles catalog "would look cute because you have small feet" I ordered two pairs. They arrived and were comfortable and pretty but too big. I went to exchange them and was thrilled to find yet another pair of shoes that were made just for yours truly.

Before I get my Harley back on the road I'll need to replace my well worn riding boots. Mooney's here I come!

If you have an a' *Mouse-ing* perspective or poetry to share send us an e-mail and maybe it will get published. After all, life doesn't always have to be boring!



Impulsive but never regretted Anne Klein boots purchase, late 1990s.



Luigi Conti and his 84 year-old mother, Carmela.

*In Loving Memory of Bernice Floyd
Sunrise December 26, 1922 - Sunset June 9, 2015
- William Anthony, Ram, Clarissa & Billy, Jr.*