

## ABSTRACT

### Beck Boots: The Story of Cowboy Boots in the Texas Panhandle and Their Important Role in American Life

Tye E. Barrett, M.A.

Mentor: Douglas R. Ferdon Jr., Ph.D.

Merton McLaughlin moved to the Texas Panhandle and began making cowboy boots in the spring of 1882. Since that time, cowboy boots have been a part of the Texas Panhandle's, and America's rich history. In 1921, twin brothers Earl and Bearl Beck purchased McLaughlin's boot shop. The Beck family has been making cowboy boots in the Texas Panhandle ever since. This thesis seeks not only to present a history of Beck Boots and cowboy boots in the Texas Panhandle, but also suggests that the relationship between bootmakers, like Beck Boots, and the working cowboy has been the center of success to the business of bootmakers and cowboys alike. Because many, like the Beck family, have nurtured this relationship, cowboy boots have become a central theme and important icon in American life.

Beck Boots: The Story of Cowboy Boots in the Texas Panhandle  
and Their Important Role in American Life

by

Tye E. Barrett, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of American Studies

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Douglas R. Ferdon Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Douglas R. Ferdon Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

---

Barry G. Hankins, Ph.D.

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Sara J. Stone, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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To Harry Beck and the cowboys he serves

## EPIGRAPH

*Charlie Dunn - by Jerry Jeff Walker*

Well...if you're ever in Austin, Texas, a little run down on your sole.  
I'm going to tell you the name of a man to see,  
I'm going to tell you right where to go.  
He's working in Capital Saddlery. He's sewing in the back of the place.  
He's old Charlie Dunn, the little frail one with the smilin' leathery face.

Charlie Dunn, he's the one to see.  
Charlie Dunn boots that are on my feet  
It makes Charlie real pleased to see me walkin' with ease...  
Charlie Dunn, he's the one to see.

Well...Charlie's been making boots over there,  
he says about 50 some odd years.  
Once you wear a pair of handmade boots,  
you'll never wear a store-bought pair.  
Charlie can tell what's wrong with your feet, just a feelin' them with his hands.  
He can take a look at the boots your wearin'  
...and know a whole lot about the man.

Charlie Dunn, he's the one to see.  
Charlie Dunn boots that are on my feet  
It makes Charlie real pleased to see me walkin' with ease...  
Charlie Dunn, he's the one to see.

Now Buck's up front he's a countin' up his gold.  
Charlie's in the back patchin' up a sole.  
There are other people coming in smilin' at him,  
...they all wonder how's old Charlie's been.  
Old Buck's a makin' change, he never sees no one.  
He never understood the good things Charlie done.



Yeah, old Charlie never had his name on the sign.  
He never put a mark in a boot.  
He just hopes that you can remember him the same way that he does you.  
He keeps your measurements in this little book,  
...so you can order more boots later on.  
Well, I'm writin' down some on Charlie's size, 'cause I'm makin' him a song.

Charlie Dunn, he's the one to see.  
Charlie Dunn boots that are on my feet  
It makes Charlie real pleased to see me walkin' with ease...  
Charlie Dunn, he's the one to see.

Yeah, old Bucks a makin' change, never sees no one  
...and he never understood the good thing Charlie done.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

When Jerry Jeff Walker penned the words to his song praising the work of bootmaker Charlie Dunn, he captured the importance of bootmakers in American society, especially in the West. Bootmakers have provided a service to hardworking Americans throughout the existence of the craft. Because of their importance, it is critical to capture and preserve the stories of these craftsmen. The Texas Panhandle was one of the first areas in America to nurture the cattle and beef industry, providing thousands of new jobs for men willing to work on horseback. Bootmakers quickly went to work crafting footwear able to stand up to the heavy beating a cowboy undoubtedly put on his shoes. Because of its early adoption of the cattle industry, the Texas Panhandle proved to be a birthplace for some of the best boot crafting in the world. Specifically, Merton McLaughlin and the Beck brothers fostered this tradition before passing it along to Harry Beck, who continues the craft today.

Today, Beck Boots operates out of a small shop on Georgia Street in Amarillo, Texas. The family business of making boots has not always been easy, but Beck Boots satisfies customers today just as it did nearly one hundred years ago. Thus, it is important to preserve the history of the Beck family and Beck Boots. Beck Boots is one of Amarillo's, and the Texas Panhandle's, oldest and most respected businesses. Cowboy boots aided the ranch and cattle business, which made Amarillo the largest and

most important city between Denver and Dallas.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the importance and impact of cowboy boots is essential in order to gain a true understanding of Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle. Cowboy boots serve as a cultural identifier, not only for Amarillo and the State of Texas, but for the United States of America as well.

Preserving the history, influence, and legacy of Beck Boots in the Texas Panhandle, will preserve something uniquely American, and illustrate the deep connection between cowboy boots and the history of our country.

This thesis seeks not only to present a history of Beck Boots and cowboy boots in the Texas Panhandle, but also suggests that the relationship between bootmakers, like Beck Boots, and the working cowboy has been the center of success to the business of bootmakers and cowboys alike. Because many, like the Beck family, have nurtured this relationship, cowboy boots have become a central theme and important icon in American life, and thus worthy of study.

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<sup>1</sup> Clara T. Hammond, *Amarillo* (Amarillo: George Autry, 1971).

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Culture of Boots

#### *Cowboy Boots: An American Icon*

Author Jennifer June suggests, “The history of the cowboy boot is the history of America.”<sup>1</sup> She further argues, “Over the past 145 years, you can find evidence of America’s economic, political, and social development through a careful look at the cowboy boot.”<sup>2</sup> June’s statement holds true when observing Beck Boots. Throughout its history, Beck Boots faced economic struggles linked to the American economy, employed immigrant workers seeking a better life in America, and in part made the American beef industry possible. While the story of the Beck family has been chronicled to a slight degree in several city newspaper articles, little scholarly research has been done on the Beck family and Beck Boots. Minimal effort outside of the family has been taken to preserve this clan’s rich history and examine its impact on the Western culture prominently existing in Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle. Thus, it remains important to preserve this important story, as it is a part of crafting what has been described as “arguably the most identifiable element of American fashion iconography.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer June, *Cowboy Boots* (Hong Kong: Universal, 2007), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dwight Yoakam, as quoted in June, 16.

### *Varied Historical Accounts and the First Cowboy Boot*

There is no “first” pair of cowboy boots. This fact has been basically agreed upon by historians, boot makers, and cowboy boot connoisseurs for many years.<sup>4</sup> However, the stories and accounts of how the cowboy boot became the cowboy boot are as varied as the tops and stitching on the boots themselves. This paper pieces together collected information and interpreted facts to create the most reasonable account of the development of cowboy boots in Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle, so as to best understand the legacy and importance of Amarillo’s Beck Boots.

Because of the varied needs of cowboys in different parts of the country, it is likely the cowboy boot in the Texas Panhandle evolved differently than in other parts of the country, like Kansas or Missouri. Most agree that the evolution of cowboy boots was determined largely on personal taste and style.<sup>5</sup> It is reasonable that fashion preferences would be varied among states and regions in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century just as they are now.

This thesis does not follow any one historian or boot maker’s account of the history of the development and evolution of the cowboy boot. However, it is true to the account given by Mr. Harry Beck, who most likely pieced his history together from the stories and accounts presented to him from his father, Earl, and uncle, Bearl, two of the Texas Panhandle’s earliest boot makers who had personal contact with Merton McLaughlin, the Texas Panhandle’s first boot maker. It also relied on the account of Ed

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<sup>4</sup> Beck, Harry. Interview by author. Personal interview. Amarillo, Texas, December 29, 2009.; June, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.; June, 35.

Martin, who started making boots in Amarillo in the late 1920s and knew McLaughlin and the Beck Brothers, and worked for Beck Boots for a period of time.

Boots, in general, were not a recent development in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Horsemen and soldiers had been wearing boots for hundreds of years. Some suggest that boots have been around as long as people have been riding horses.<sup>6</sup> Early Roman soldiers on horseback often wore leg or shin guards that resemble the tops of riding boots worn by later European soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Napoleon is famously depicted crossing the Alps on horseback and sporting a pair of black riding boots.<sup>8</sup> The cowboy boot, while distinct, owes much of its existence to the boots that preceded it. The Hessian boot, probably the earliest well-known boot, had tassels on its top and was popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Soldiers and civilians alike wore Hessian boots.<sup>9</sup> The Wellington boot followed the Hessian boot in popularity. The Wellington boot came about after the first Duke of Wellington asked his shoe maker to modify his Hessian boot.<sup>10</sup> The Duke's shoemaker tightened the fit around the shin and calf and used a softer leather to make the boots more comfortable.<sup>11</sup>

Much in the same way that Hessian boots were modified to make Wellington boots, cowboy boots are the result of American Civil War boot modification. After the

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<sup>6</sup> June, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Tyler Beard, *Art of the Boot* (Gibbs Smith, 2006), 17.

<sup>8</sup> "GMU Library Web Guide: Resources in French - History." University Libraries - George Mason University. <http://library.gmu.edu/resources/french/Francais%20History.html> (accessed February 28, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Beard, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Beard, 78.

Civil War, many Southern soldiers went to work as cowboys, wearing boots issued to them by the Confederacy. Civil War boots were ill-fitting and had no specifications for differentiation between the left or right foot. Each boot was nearly the exact same. Soldiers would receive two identical boots and were forced to break them in while fighting.<sup>12</sup> Cowboys found that Civil War boots were not suitable for their tough lifestyle. Besides the fact that Civil War boots were poorly made, and thus did not last long, they were uncomfortable because of their poor arch support.

The evolution of the cowboy boot is in many ways linked to changing horse riding styles and the necessary saddle modifications the new styles demanded.<sup>13</sup> Horsemanship changed greatly when horses began to be used for gathering cattle rather than for simple transportation or battle. Riding styles changed, and thus the saddle changed. Cowboys needed their horses to move quickly in order to separate and corral loose cattle. During the Civil War, traditional English and European saddles had metal stirrups and were the primary fashion.<sup>14</sup> Little arch support was needed in riding boots when on an English saddle because horsemen put the majority of their weight on the balls of their feet. English style riders use the same method today.<sup>15</sup> Cowboys, on the other hand, often had to ride with their heels butted up against the stirrup, putting great amounts of weight and pressure on the tender arch of the foot. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>12</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.; Beard, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Many ignore the impact of the saddle in their history of the cowboy boot. However, for Harry Beck and several Texas Panhandle museum curators and historians, the relationship must not be overlooked.

<sup>14</sup> American Quarter Horse Museum. Saddle and Stirrup Collection, American Quarter Horse Museum. Amarillo, Texas. Private Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Batson, Ryan. Interview by author. Personal interview. Waco, Texas, February 19, 2010.

the Miles City saddle was produced, offering a different riding position for cowboys.<sup>16</sup> In the Miles City saddle, cowboys could put their bodies closer to the horse and slide their boots easily into its thicker and more substantial stirrups. The Miles City saddle brought about the popularity of the Oxbow Stirrup, in which cowboys were no longer forced to ride exclusively on their heels.<sup>17</sup> The Oxbow Stirrup, however, still caused pain and discomfort in the arch of cowboys' feet due to great amounts of pressure on the feet.<sup>18</sup>

Cowboys needed the arches of their Civil War boots modified to complement the new saddle design. Cobblers began placing a forty-penny nail into the shank of the Civil War boot to relieve pressure on the arch of the foot. To many, including Harry Beck, this nail marks the birth of the true cowboy boot.<sup>19</sup> Other modifications, such as heel height and shape, toe box shape, and top stitching evolved over time, as cowboys would tell their cobblers what worked well and what didn't. The relationship between cowboy and cowboy boot encouraged the evolution of heel design, leather type, and numerous other designs. When cobblers began to make boots for cowboys rather than just repair Civil War boots, they kept these suggestions and modifications in mind, and thus the cowboy boot was born. To put simply the history of the evolution of the

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<sup>16</sup> American Quarter Horse Museum

<sup>17</sup> Fay E. Ward, *The Cowboy at Work: All About His Job and How He Does It* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 109.

<sup>18</sup> American Quarter Horse Museum. Exhibit of Working Cowboy Horses, American Quarter Horse Museum. Amarillo, Texas. Permanent Display.

<sup>19</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.



cowboy boot, cowboys needed footwear that could hold up to the high demands of the trail and ranch life.

As the responsibilities and jobs of the cowboy became more numerous and increasingly demanding, the relationship between cowboy and boot maker became even more important. Historian Raymond F. Adams describes the role of early boot makers in his book, *The Old-Time Cowhand*. He writes:

Like the good hat he wore, the cowboy was mighty proud of his boots, and they were generally the most expensive part of his riggin'. When he had the money to match his pride, you'd see 'im wearing boots so fine you could nearly see the wrinkles in his socks. If he couldn't put his feet into a decent pair of boots, he shore wasn't going to put 'em into an entire cow.

But no matter what style he wore they were high heeled, thin soled and of good leather. The tops were made of lightweight high grade leather, and all that stitching on them wasn't just for fancy decoratin'. Up to a certain point this fancy stitchin' had a practical value. It helped stiffen the leather so the tops wouldn't break down at the ankles where they contacted the stirrups; and preserved the tops and kept 'em from coming to pieces after they got old.

His boots were custom made, that is made to order. When a puncher once got a fit that suited 'im, he never changed bootmakers. Them old bootmakers took a heap of pride in their work. A man who knowed the cattle country could tell, almost at a glance, who made 'em.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy to see how important both the cowboy boot and cowboy boot makers were to the cattlemen and cattle industry of the American west in the late 1800s, the time of rising prominence of the beef industry. Although not everyone agrees on which boot makers had the most influence on the evolution of the boot, the impact the boot has made on the American cowboy is obvious in almost every part of American culture.

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond F. Adams, *The Old Time Cowhand* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 88.

## *Cowboy Boots and Texas*

There are more boot crafters in Texas than in the rest of the world combined.<sup>21</sup> In fact, cowboy boot historian Jennifer June suggests, “Although there has never been an official count, it is safe to say that more cowboy boots are made and worn in Texas than anywhere else in the country.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the large number of boot makers in Texas prompted *New York Times* author Jim Yardley to write, “Many Texas men, of course, are more loyal to their boot maker than to their first wives.”<sup>23</sup> This statement is representative of the great amount of respect boot makers are given in Texas.<sup>24</sup> Boot makers have worked hard for more than a century to gain and preserve the respect they are given by producing fine boots that are as rugged and dependable as their customers.<sup>25</sup> Almost every county in Texas had its own boot maker around the 1920s.<sup>26</sup> A few of those between Amarillo and Ft. Worth along Highway 287 still exist today.<sup>27</sup>

Cowboy boots play an interesting role in Texas. They serve utilitarian purposes, stand as high-fashion pieces, and in many ways, tell us something about the people who wear them and the places they come from. Not even the ten-gallon cowboy hat has achieved the same prestige and notoriety in Texas as the cowboy boot. Perhaps this is

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<sup>21</sup> June, 220.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Jim Yardley, “Vicarious Consumption: Boots Made for Walking Down Pennsylvania Avenue,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps also evidence of why Harry Beck was asked to join the Rotary Club at such a young age as discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>25</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>26</sup> June, 220.

<sup>27</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

because no one ever had to take his boots off while in church, never went “hat-scooting,” or found himself in trouble after letting his hat fall under the wrong bed. Cowboy boots in their earliest forms were often embedded with lone stars to indicate the wearer was a proud Texan to his fellow cowboys who were usually illiterate.<sup>28</sup> Pride and Texas know each other well. As June suggests, “There is unmatched joy and pride to making and owning a Texas boot, perhaps because a love of Texas is something deeply felt by customer and boot maker alike.”<sup>29</sup>

For many Texans, the cowboy boot is another appendage of the body, an extension of the leg. John Moore Shannon, famed Texan and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century sheep and cattle rancher, well-embodied this ideal. It pained Shannon to remove his boots in order to cut his toenails. In fact, Shannon even wore his boots until his toes bled. There was an obvious emotional connection between Shannon and his boots. When asked why he always wore the same pair, Shannon replied that, “breaking in new boots would be worse than the prickly pear.”<sup>30</sup> This sentiment is understandable, as a pair of comfortable, well broken-in boots often gets referred to as being, “as comfortable as house shoes.”<sup>31</sup>

Texans are notorious boot wearers. Three of the five major boot manufacturing companies, Justin, Nocona, and Tony Lama, started in Texas. The other two

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<sup>28</sup> June, 221.

<sup>29</sup> June, 221.

<sup>30</sup> Shannon, John Moore. Handbook of Texas Online. Accessed 1-14-10.

<sup>31</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

companies, Hyer and Acme, were eventually sold to Texans or Texas-based organizations.<sup>32</sup>

The phrase “everything’s bigger in Texas” certainly applies to cowboy boots. Extremely large boots can be found throughout the state. Perhaps the most famous oversized cowboy boots reside at the Texas State Fair on the feet of Big Tex. The Texas State Fair has had “Big Tex” as its representative and mascot since he made his debut in 1952. Standing at a height of 52 feet, the iron cowboy sports a pair of size 70 bright yellow cowboy boots.<sup>33</sup> At 7 feet, 7 inches, Big Tex’s boots aren’t even the biggest pair in Texas. San Antonio holds the record for biggest boots in Texas, and thus the biggest boots in the world.<sup>34</sup> Sitting outside of San Antonio’s North Star Mall, two oversized boots sit proudly next to the highway, serving as both a landmark and a way to attract customers. Officially named “Giant Justins,” these boots stand 40 feet tall and weigh almost ten thousand pounds.<sup>35</sup> In 2009 these giant boots turned forty years old, proving they can last as long as the real thing.<sup>36</sup> These Giant Justins were created by Bob “Daddy-O” Wade, an Austin native, in 1969. The art installment has been placed in other parts of the United States as well. The boots once sat just a few miles from the

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<sup>32</sup>Beard, Tyler. "Texas Monthly January 1999: Art of the Boot." *Texas Monthly: the National Magazine of Texas*. <http://www.texasmonthly.com/2000-01-01/excerpts/artoftheboot.php> (accessed February 28, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Nancy N. Wiley, *The Great State Fair of Texas* (Dallas: Taylor, 2000), 78.; Sometimes these boots are painted red, often times depending on sponsorship and advertising occasionally placed on the boots.

<sup>34</sup> Davila, Vianna. "Northstar Boot turn 30." *San Antonio Express News (San Anotnio)*, November 12, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

White House. Wade designed the boot piece “as a monument to the cowboy boot.”<sup>37</sup> Often times a cowboy may joke about living in his boots. Giant Justins are no different. Maintenance workers once removed a squatter from the left boot who was apparently sleeping in the heel. Vianna Davila, a San Antonio writer, reflects, “maybe those boots weren’t made for walking, but they seem to be kickin’ just fine.”<sup>38</sup>

Texas also boasts the most expensive pair of boots ever made. The El Ray III boots, made by Tony Lama, have been referred to as “The Mona Lisa of cowboy boots.”<sup>39</sup> The El Ray III are valued at more than fifty thousand dollars. The El Ray III boots are made from soft English calfskin leather, alligator skin, gold inlays, rubies, and several hundred diamonds.<sup>40</sup> Because the first two pair of boots in the El Ray series were stolen, the El Ray III’s travel with their own security guards.<sup>41</sup> That Texas is home to both the biggest and most expensive cowboy boots serves as an example of the prominence of cowboy boots in Texas culture, and perhaps to a slight degree, says something about Texas pride.

### *Fit for the President: Cowboy Boots and Politics*

Politicians wear cowboy boots in Austin, Washington, D.C., and around the world. President George W. Bush, the most recent American president to hail from Texas, was often photographed wearing cowboy boots during his two terms in office,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Beard, 61.; Yardley, *Vicarious Consumption*.

<sup>40</sup> Beard 61.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

often times custom made with either the presidential seal or other American iconography.<sup>42</sup> President Bush has one pair of custom-made boots showcasing the Presidential seal on black exotic leathers, which he flaunted to the media at the 2001 Texas Black Tie and Boots Ball, held in Washington, D.C. President George W. Bush also has a pair of Cordovan boots commemorating the Western White House in Crawford, Texas, a pair of black cowboy boots made especially for the G8 summit, and one pair featuring the White House and the president's initials. Rocky Carroll, a Texas boot maker who works from an unpretentious shopping center location in Houston, made this pair, as well as most of the boots George W. Bush wears.<sup>43</sup> In May of 2001, the New York Times reported that many boot makers felt as though the election of President Bush led to a rise in sales.<sup>44</sup>

President George W. Bush is not the only president to walk the halls of the White House in cowboy boots. President George H. W. Bush occasionally wore cowboy boots, as did presidents Clinton, Reagan, and Carter.<sup>45</sup> President Lyndon Baines Johnson, also a native Texan, owned a pair of custom-made Lucchese's featuring an outline of Texas and detailed stitching.<sup>46</sup> LBJ also had a pair of cowboy

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<sup>42</sup>June, Jennifer. "Cowboy Boots -- The Cowboy Boot Web Page, by Jennifer June.." <http://www.dimlights.com/> Photo

<sup>43</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Bush Memorabilia Waiting to go to on Display." December 31, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Yardley, Vicarious Consumption.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. University of Texas. Austin, Tx. Permanent display.

boots featuring the presidential seal, and another bearing his initials.<sup>47</sup> Carroll, who made several pairs of boots for George W. Bush, has made boots for many American politicians, all free of charge. His clients include: President George W. Bush, President Bill Clinton, President George H. W. Bush, President Ronald Reagan, President Jimmy Carter, President Gerald Ford, Texas Governor Rick Perry, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, Representative Tom Delay, Queen Elizabeth II, and even Pope John Paul II.<sup>48</sup> Carroll alone has outfitted enough politicians to warrant the discussion of politicians in cowboy boots. U.S. Representatives Tom Delay and Dick Armey were, at one time, members of the Congressional Boot Caucus, a group of congressmen who favored cowboy boots.<sup>49</sup>

It is not uncommon for presidents to receive criticism for their boots. Both LBJ and George W. Bush received criticism for putting the presidential seal on their boots. A 1968 article in *Time Magazine* suggests that the presence of President Johnson's initials on his presidential boots reflected his hubris and a dangerous self infatuation.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, George W. Bush was criticized for placing the presidential seal on his boots, even though this was a common practice for presidents by his time in office. Some in the media suggested that Bush's cowboy boots, along with his Crawford, Texas ranch home, and straw cowboy hat, reflected a gunslinger approach to governorship and a

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<sup>47</sup> *Time*, Man of the Year: Lyndon B. Johnson, January 5, 1968.

<sup>48</sup> Yardley, *Vicarious Consumption*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*; Apparently, owning and wearing cowboy boots was the only requirement for gaining membership into this caucus.

<sup>50</sup> *Time*, Man of the Year: LBJ.

Wild West attitude toward foreign policy.<sup>51</sup> In September 2007, President George W. Bush received even more criticism for his cowboy footwear when Mexican boot maker Martin Villegas, who had crafted boots for many politicians, including then President Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox, was arrested for laundering money and selling exotic leather boots made from the skin of endangered species.<sup>52</sup> Bush had at least one pair of boots made by Villegas that were given to him by Fox in 2001.

Many politicians and tourists arrive in America wearing business shoes and leave for home sporting a pair of cowboy boots.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps this is because there is nothing more representative of America than the cowboy boot. Standing tall and steeped in a tradition of excellence and hard work, the cowboy boot in many ways reflects and tells American history. As Harry Beck and those working at Beck Boots continue their craft today, they carry on not only the tradition of their ancestors, but also the tradition of the United States.

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<sup>51</sup> David Model, "Bush Legacy: Gunslinger". Posted: August 9, 2008 at 06:29:24 on mydd.com. Accessed 2/28/2010.

<sup>52</sup> Lisa J. Adams, "Bootmaker to Bush and Fox Jailed in U.S.," *USA Today*, September 22, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Taiwans former president Chen Shui-bian did exactly this in 2001 according to Yardley.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Merton McLaughlin and the Panhandle's First Cowboy Boots

#### *An Irish Immigrant*

Merton McLaughlin was Amarillo's premier bootmaker during the early cattle ranching days, and a pioneer of the boot making craft.<sup>1</sup> Regretfully, most residents of Amarillo and its surrounding communities would not recognize the name Merton McLaughlin. History seemingly forgot about McLaughlin and his influence on the cattle industry that dominates the economic history of the Texas Panhandle. Sadly, little evidence and a lack of sources make it nearly impossible to write an in-depth and thorough biography of McLaughlin and give an account of his work. Only a few documents and several photographs of McLaughlin and his shop remain as artifacts of his legacy. McLaughlin's niece, Mabel C. Wright, who would eventually pen one of the only articles on McLaughlin, confesses to knowing little about her uncle Merton until she made an effort to seek out his story.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the only documented preservation of McLaughlin's story comes from the efforts of Wright, whose findings were eventually published in 1968 by *Frontier Times*, a magazine dedicated to preserving America's western heritage.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beck, Personal Interview.; Merton is also known and referred to as Martin McLaughlin. Martin was probably a spelling taken after his family's arrival in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Mayble C. Wright, "Uncle Merton," *Frontier Times*, October & November 1968, 31.

<sup>3</sup> There is a partial newspaper article referenced in this paper, however it tells more about Merton's business than it does about the bootmaker himself.

Even though history may have largely forgotten McLaughlin, his role as the first boot maker in Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle is important. In many ways, McLaughlin paved the way for future Amarillo boot makers like Earl and Bearl Beck, establishing Amarillo as a place where cowboys could find quality cowboy boots locally. Instead of ordering boots via mail order, many wise cowboys chose to have their boots made locally, ensuring better fit and satisfaction of personal style preferences. The history of any cowboy boots in and from Amarillo must begin with the story of Merton McLaughlin and a discussion of his influence.

Merton Francis McLaughlin was born in Ireland on August 20, 1854. McLaughlin grew up in Ireland until he moved to the United States at the age of fifteen. Nana McLaughlin, a widow and single mother of three, immigrated to the United States from Kilkee, County Clare, Ireland, with her three children in 1868.<sup>4</sup> The four McLaughlins moved to Chicago, but eventually relocated to Dayton, Ohio, in order to be close to several relatives already living there. Almost no detail of McLaughlin's childhood was recorded. Apparently at the appropriate age, McLaughlin became an apprentice to a cobbler in Dayton and began learning the shoe- and boot-making craft.<sup>5</sup> After finishing his apprenticeship, Merton left his family following a quarrel. Little is known about the nature of the fight, except that Merton was, "a headstrong boy and would take no discipline from Nana."<sup>6</sup> The quarrel ended with Merton leaving the family's residence with nothing except for his cobbler's tools. The McLaughlin family

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; Nana is probably not her real name, rather the name she was called by her children and grandchildren.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Quote from one of Merton's sisters.

had no idea where their son and brother had gone for several months, until they finally received a card from Merton postmarked St. Louis. Before settling in St. Louis, McLaughlin had worked in numerous places, including Pittsburg, and Chicago.<sup>7</sup> No one in the family would hear from Merton again, despite his repeated failed attempts to send letters from the Texas Panhandle.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Matador's Bootmaker*

Merton's family remembered him as a ruddy-cheeked, blue-eyed, happy-go-lucky Irishman.<sup>9</sup> His demeanor may have been one of the factors in his ability to find work at such a young age in the big city of Ft. Worth, Texas. By the 1880s McLaughlin was working for Sam Frye as a cobbler. McLaughlin, however, was having difficulty living off the wages provided him by Sam Frye due to a lack of business.<sup>10</sup> The Matador Ranch, located in the Texas Panhandle, was in need of a cobbler to mend the footwear of its cowboys. The Matador had a sizeable herd of about 150,000 head of cattle and employed a large number of cowboys to work them.<sup>11</sup> Around the spring of 1882, McLaughlin seized the opportunity to become an independent shoe crafter. McLaughlin and H.H. Campbell, head manager of the Matador Ranch, made a business agreement. Soon McLaughlin was in the Texas Panhandle making boots and repairing shoes for cowboys. At the ranch, McLaughlin repaired harnesses and other leather

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<sup>7</sup>Amarillo Public Library Online Photo Archive.

<sup>8</sup> The Texas Panhandle had poor postal services in the 1880s and is the probable cause for Merton's family not receiving his letters.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.

<sup>10</sup> Frye boots are still available today.

<sup>11</sup> J. Evetts Haley, *The XIT Ranch of Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 3-83.

goods two days each month. In return, McLaughlin was given room and board and provided a workspace in which to create and repair boots. The remaining days of the month, McLaughlin was free to work at his own pace. Cowboys working for the Matador Ranch paid McLaughlin directly for his services.

Martin initially traveled to the Texas Panhandle by train to Harrold, Texas, close to present-day Electra, and then on by buckboard another 120 miles to the Matador Ranch.<sup>12</sup> Upon arriving at the ranch, McLaughlin found not only the cowboys of the Matador in desperate need of his services, but cowboys from neighboring ranches waiting for him as well.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, many cowboys had either broken trail or traveled during their time off to greet the much-needed cobbler and place their orders for new boots. Shortly after arriving at the Matador, McLaughlin began measuring the feet of the cowboys using a size stick and measuring strap, two necessary tools of the early boot maker. McLaughlin recorded the measurements in a little notebook. He kept this notebook as a permanent accounting of different cowboys and their foot sizes, style preferences, and monetary records. This notebook allowed McLaughlin to make boots for cowboys in the future without having to re-measure their feet, a luxury when cowboys would often have to travel miles to be measured. One cowboy could travel to McLaughlin with several previous clients' orders for new boots and later return to pick them up, rather than all of the cowboys having to break trail or leave work to get new boots. This recording system was an ingenious way of doing business and exists as a

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<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.; A buckboard is a four-wheeled wagon usually drawn by horse.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

part of many boot makers' practices today.<sup>14</sup> McLaughlin's little books would eventually contain the names and measurements of more than 20,000 cowboys before his eventual retirement.<sup>15</sup> McLaughlin also established the use of a red and white cross stitch on the boot tops that was very pleasing to the eye. This red and white stitching eventually became one of McLaughlin's trademarks.<sup>16</sup>

Arriving just in time for spring roundup, McLaughlin quickly took about 60 orders for new boots, and most likely rapidly repaired many boots needed for the spring round up. McLaughlin took these orders without having procured the leather needed to make them. Ranch manager "Old Paint," McLaughlin's nickname for H.H. Campbell, sent a wagon to Wichita, Kansas, to bring back \$1,200 worth of leather and supplies for McLaughlin to get started. McLaughlin worked on the Matador Ranch for four years and crafted about five pairs of boots a week, totaling about one thousand pair, in addition to the boot mending he was doing for cowboys who were not able to afford new boots.<sup>17</sup> During his tenure at the Matador Ranch, McLaughlin became known as a "wizard with leather" and was credited as the reason some Panhandle cowboys began saving money.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Beck Boots is one of many boot shops that keep size records. Beck however, keeps not only size information, but the actual last, a sort of mold of the foot used to ensure proper fit, for every customer they have ever had.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.

<sup>16</sup> Amarillo Public Library Photo Archive

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.; \$1200 was a large amount of money at that time. This amount would be just over \$26,000 in 2009 when adjusted for inflation.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

### *McLaughlin Branches Out*

In 1886, McLaughlin decided to leave the Matador Ranch and open up his own shop in Tascosa, Texas, located on the opposite side of Palo Duro Canyon from present-day Amarillo. Tascosa was a growing cattle community and was known as a “maverick” town.<sup>19</sup> McLaughlin arrived in Tascosa with all the supplies necessary to start business immediately. McLaughlin had saved more than \$4,000 while working at the Matador Ranch and brought the money in cash. McLaughlin also brought with him all his sewing machines, horses, and several buggies.<sup>20</sup> These horses and buggies served McLaughlin well, as he decided to expand his business by traveling to different ranches to take orders and deliver boots. His shop in Tascosa served as a home base for the “circuit-riding bootmaker” as McLaughlin would come to be known.<sup>21</sup> The ranch headquarters McLaughlin traveled to were sometimes as far as 250 miles apart. McLaughlin relied heavily on his horses and buggy to get him across the plains safely and timely. Traveling to so many different ranches allowed for the reputation and clientele of his business to grow, and solidify his reputation as a serious bootmaker.

Because of its proximity to the Palo Duro Canyon, Tascosa proved to be a poor place to settle.<sup>22</sup> As the town’s population began to slowly migrate to nearby Amarillo, McLaughlin began making preparation to move as well. After a brief residence in Channing, Oklahoma, McLaughlin relocated to Amarillo in 1894. He moved his

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<sup>19</sup> John Lawton McCarty, *Maverick Town: The Story of Old Tascosa* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 12-88.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See chapter 1.

business into a corner room in the Amarillo Hotel, located downtown. McLaughlin paid seven and a half dollars a month for use of the space. After seeing just how successful McLaughlin was his first month in Amarillo, the Amarillo Hotel manager raised McLaughlin's rent to ten dollars a month.<sup>23</sup> McLaughlin's handling of his rental agreements shows just how wise of a businessman he was. McLaughlin refused to pay the rate of ten dollars a month to the Amarillo Hotel. Instead, he rented a nearby lot for one dollar a year, and built a small shop. The owner of the lot offered to sell McLaughlin the land for seventy-five dollars. McLaughlin refused, suggesting he preferred to pay only one dollar a year if that meant he could avoid paying property taxes.<sup>24</sup> Martin would eventually settle into a shop located on Polk Street, which runs through the heart of downtown Amarillo. McLaughlin remained at 510 Polk Street for 26 years and satisfied many customers there.<sup>25</sup> On May 22, 1901, a fire destroyed McLaughlin's boot shop, crafting tools, and his stock.<sup>26</sup> Even though he had insurance of three hundred dollars, it was insufficient to cover the nearly four thousand dollars worth of damage done by the fire.<sup>27</sup> McLaughlin rebuilt the shop on Polk Street and was married to a woman named Fannie in 1902.

After selling his business on Polk Street to the Beck twins, Earl and Bearl, McLaughlin made his final move, this time to 114 East Fourth Street. The aging

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Amarillo Public Library Photo Archive.

<sup>26</sup> It is likely that McLaughlin kept his "little books" either on his person, or at home, seeing as they were not reported as being in the fire. The loss of these would have been almost more detrimental than any thing else, since they could not be easily replaced. The fire that took out McLaughlin's business also destroyed much of the Amarillo downtown business district.

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.; Amarillo Public Library Photo Archive.

McLaughlin decided to take on a business partner, R. E. Storr. The two men did make boots at this new location, but also expanded their business by making shoes and providing shoe repair. McLaughlin eventually retired in 1932. McLaughlin lived the remainder of his life playing cards at the Elk Club, as gambling was a favorite pastime of his and many other boot makers.<sup>28</sup> McLaughlin died on September 15, 1936, in Amarillo, and is buried at Llano Cemetery, only a few miles from his Polk Street boot shop.

McLaughlin had a large following of loyal customers throughout his career, evidenced by the density and thickness of his little books. McLaughlin also gave Amarillo something to be proud of. A 1932 article from the Amarillo *Daily News* boasted of McLaughlin's skill and notable clientele.<sup>29</sup> The article states, "McLaughlin boots are known around the world and are seen in every theatre around the globe where American pictures are shown."<sup>30</sup> McLaughlin certainly made boots for many famous people, including Billy the Kid, who was notorious for being well dressed. Ironically, McLaughlin also made boots for Jim East, the sheriff who was the first to arrest Billy the Kid.<sup>31</sup> Movie star Tom Mix toured Europe with more than thirty pairs of McLaughlin's boots. Actors Will Rogers and Charles Russell also got their boots from McLaughlin, often after sending in a sketch of a particular design they wanted.<sup>32</sup> It is

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<sup>28</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.; McLaughlin once lost his party while in Tijuana, Mexico and was spotted at numerous betting tables by those trying to get him back across the border before the six o' clock closing time.

<sup>29</sup> M'Loughlin, Dean of Bootmakers, Tells Story, *Amarillo Sunday News-Globe*, October 30, 1927.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Frontier Times*.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



no surprise then that Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle were proud of McLaughlin and the work he did in Amarillo. When he sold his boot shop to the Beck twins, McLaughlin passed on a legacy of quality craftsmanship and pride still found in Amarillo boot makers to this day.

In many ways, McLaughlin embodies the spirit of the boot maker as described by Raymond F. Adams in his book, *The Old Time Cowhand*. Like Raymond describes, McLaughlin took great pride in his work and reputation. McLaughlin is credited with having said, “I can make a boot as light as a feather which will be as strong as any boot made by any other concern. Every boot I ever made has been properly proportioned, has been strong and has positively been made as ordered. I have worked hard and enjoyed every day of it.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Earl and Bearl Beck: Beginning a Legacy

#### *The Beck Family Comes to the Texas Panhandle*

Harry Beck's grandfather, Aaron Beck, arrived in the Texas Panhandle in the early 1880s.<sup>1</sup> He moved from Mississippi to Mobeetie, Texas, and quickly went to work for the Mill Iron Ranch.<sup>2</sup> After proving himself a hard worker and responsible hand, Beck was eventually made foreman of the Mill Iron Ranch. Beck lived in Mobeetie and continued to work at the ranch until the day he died. He fathered eight children, all born in Mobeetie, including twins Earl and Bearl, who eventually began the family boot business. The twins were the oldest of the bunch. The next oldest son was O.V. Beck. O. V. made his living as a cowboy and was employed by the XIT Ranch, located just a few miles from Mobeetie. O.V. later went to work for the railroad and became a boilermaker. O.V. ran into some luck with his earnings from working the railroads, and in the early 1900s he purchased a small piece of land near Oklahoma, Texas, near present day Houston. The famed oil corporation, Texas Company, opened up drilling on the land and O.V. became wealthy from a prosperous well.<sup>3</sup> Because of

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<sup>1</sup>The information in this chapter was obtained through a recorded interview with Mr. Harry Beck on September 10, 2009, unless otherwise noted. Mr. Beck, son and nephew of the chapter's major subjects, proves to be most authoritative on this subject.

<sup>2</sup> While researching, I came across an interesting story of the naming of Mobeetie. The local American Indians told settlers that Mobeetie meant Sweetwater in Cherokee. The settlers initially desired to name their town Sweetwater, but a post office would not be granted since a Sweetwater in western Texas already existed. Apparently, the name Mobeetie was given by the Cherokee as a joke, as the name actually means "horse dung."

<sup>3</sup> The Texas Company is better known as Texaco.

greater automobile production and increased oil demand from WWI, the Texas Company quadrupled its assets during the mid 1910s.<sup>4</sup> O.V. invested his money wisely and purchased two hundred sections of land from his former employer, the XIT Ranch, in the mid 1920s. O.V.'s decision to purchase ranch land in the Texas Panhandle demonstrates the rural identity and cowboy heritage of the Beck family. Just as the Beck twins served the footwear needs of Panhandle cowboys, O. V. met their needs by offering them jobs on his sizable acreage.

### *The First Boot Shop*

In 1916 the Beck twins, Earl and Bearl, bought a boot-making shop in Dalhart, Texas, approximately 70 miles northwest of Amarillo. Interestingly, no one knows where the brothers learned the boot-making craft, or what for sure they did professionally before making boots.<sup>5</sup> While it is possible that the two learned to make boots after having purchased the boot-making shop, it is more likely they learned the craft prior to opening a business they knew nothing about. Harry Beck, son of Earl Beck, suggests, "Apparently they knew something about it before they got their shop, but where they learned before that is a mystery."<sup>6</sup> The twins bought their first boot shop from Mr. Lethewith. No information on Mr. Lethewith could be found, and little other than his name is known to Harry Beck. It is possible that Earl and Bearl worked

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<sup>4</sup> Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History:2, s.v. "U.S. Economic History."

<sup>5</sup> It is likely that Earl and Bearl worked for the railroad for a while, as it employed many residents of Dalhart. It is even more likely considering their brother O.V. did in fact work for the railroad at one time.

<sup>6</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

in Mr. Lethewith's shop for a period of time learning the craft before purchasing it from him.<sup>7</sup>

The brothers agreed to pay Mr. Lethewith five hundred dollars for the shop, and began making monthly payments directly to Mr. Lethewith. The railroad's railhead was located in Dalhart at the time, bringing many cowboys and cattle to town.<sup>8</sup> The prominence of cowboys in and around Dalhart certainly made the prospect of buying a boot shop more appealing to the Beck brothers. Earl and Bearl got their supplies from traveling salesmen who often worked out of Dallas, Ft. Worth, or Wichita, Kansas. Their first major supplier was Charles Tandy, a wholesale leather provider in Ft. Worth, Texas.<sup>9</sup> They sewed the Tandy leather on three sewing machines operated by foot treadle. Unlike the more sophisticated sewing machines available to boot makers today, these machines were uncomplicated and simple, the basic machines available at the time. The brothers completed the sewing by hand, including the stitching of the welt. In order to meet demand, the Beck twins employed two or three people at a time to assist in the process.

In 1921 Earl and Bearl decided to relocate to the larger city of Amarillo. By this time, Amarillo had well established itself as the center for development and economic growth in the Texas Panhandle. It is probable the Beck twins moved in part because they would have a larger clientele in Amarillo than in Dalhart, partially due to a greater

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<sup>7</sup> That little is remembered or known of Lethewith may be because he was not a very successful bootmaker or businessman, this idea could also explain why he sold his business that could not have been very old due to the relatively few number of years bootmakers had been in existence.

<sup>8</sup>As discussed in Chapter 2, the location of the railhead greatly influenced the economy of the Texas Panhandle, as well as the prominence of Amarillo.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Tandy would eventually progress into crafts and then electronics and start Radio Shack. Mr. Tandy's son offered Harry Beck a job working for Radio Shack. Harry laughingly states that he didn't see any future in the Tandy Company."

number of residents, but also because many cowboys working in the Texas Panhandle would travel to Amarillo to have other needs met, be it boots, clothing, whiskey, or women.<sup>10</sup> By moving to Amarillo, the twins continued to build upon the success they achieved through hard work at their first boot shop in Dalhart. Eventually the Beck Boot shop in Amarillo employed ten to twelve employees at any given time.

The Beck Brothers, like most any other boot maker of the time, made boots that were unique, and thus easily identifiable as Beck Boots. The Beck twins took great pride in their extremely undercut heels. These heels butted up against very tiny and narrow shanks, a display of fine craftsmanship. The Beck brothers also tried to keep the heel counter of the boot as low as possible. They also kept their stitching small and tight, an impressive feat considering the simplicity of their machines. Harry Beck states, “There is no way that they [my uncle and father] wouldn’t have been able to tell if they had made a particular pair of boots.”<sup>11</sup> A lot of these unique features were stylistic in nature and resulted in a beautiful and desirable boot. Early boots of this style were popular, and as such, were often given as grand prizes to rodeo queens, as special occasion gifts, and to people of high prominence.<sup>12</sup> Being skilled workers, Earl and Bearl were able to maintain the integrity of their unique style even when fashioning children’s boots.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hammond, 83

<sup>11</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>12</sup> Photos at the Beck Shop reflect this statement.

<sup>13</sup> Hand crafted children’s boots were rare and an extreme luxury because of the difficulty it took to make them and the short lifespan they had because of how rapidly they were outgrown by the child. Beck Boots only has one remaining example of an early Beck Childrens Boot.

In the beginning, Beck Boots turned out about six pairs of boots each week. As their demands increased, so did their productivity. Like many crafting operations, a system was put in place in order to maximize efficiency. This system was organized around a team of three boot crafters. The men responsible for crafting the uppers could piece together two tops each day. A worker fashioning the bottoms provided one unit each day. So, one person making uppers could supply two workers fashioning bottoms. Three people then, were all that were necessary to produce twelve pairs each week.<sup>14</sup>

The first Beck boot customers were, for the most part, working cowboys, the same clientele Harry Beck and Beck Boots serves today. The Beck twins also made a good number of boots for cowpeople.<sup>15</sup> A cowboy would wear his boots all the time. There are even poems about cowboys who sleep in their boots and take them off only on the rare occasion of bathing time. A good number of cowboys went to great lengths to ensure that they would be buried while wearing their favorite pair of boots.<sup>16</sup> Even though the western boot was worn by some bankers, lawyers, and doctors, contrary to Hollywood images, not everyone in the Texas Panhandle wore cowboy boots. Most of the businessmen, servicemen, and industry workers wore regular lace-up dress shoes. Payment for the boots was always taken up front, to ensure that no one walked away in a pair of undeservedly free boots. The Beck brothers sold their boots for twenty five to thirty dollars, depending on the complexity and intricacy of the order. The cost of a pair

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<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, with all the new technology and larger number of employees, Bek Boots currently only produces an average of twenty-five pairs each week.

<sup>15</sup> Cowpeople are different than cowboys. A cowperson may be an investor in the ranch who lives and works in the city and needs boots only when traveling out to the countryside to check up on his investments and workers.

<sup>16</sup> June, Jennifer. Personal interview. 26 Feb. 2010.

of Beck Boots was almost as much as the monthly salary of one of the cowboys working on a nearby ranch. For this reason, among others, cowboys demanded they received a quality product from the Beck brothers, who were proud to satisfy and meet the cowboy's demands.

The development of COD tags, or cash on delivery tags, by the United States Post Office changed the boot-making business drastically. Evidence of this statement can be found in the catalogues and sales receipts from early Beck Boot publications. The cash on delivery system allowed boot makers to ship products to customers through the postal service. Clients would then pay the postman upon receiving the package. The postman would return the payment to the boot maker after collecting a reasonable fee. This system allowed boot makers to ship catalogues to various markets and fill orders without either party having to leave their present location. Unlike Merton McLaughlin, the Beck brothers did not necessarily need to travel around the Texas Panhandle. The Becks could simply ship their boots and trust the postmaster to collect payment. The cash on delivery system eventually allowed for Beck Boots to enter other Texas markets, like Ft. Worth and Dallas. The prices in these catalogues, dated in the early-to-mid twenties, included the price of postage. The least expensive pairs were available to be purchased for just a few cents less than seventeen dollars, while extra feature options could send the price well over thirty dollars. Clients would be sent a measuring form that they would use to get the correct sizing of their feet. These measuring forms were very efficient, so long as the person measuring their feet had reasonable sensibilities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Many times the Beck brothers would go get an initial measurement. Most bootmakers will only guarantee the fit of a boot if they took the measurements of the client's feet personally.

The Beck brothers were not afraid to seek out business the old-fashioned way. Earl would regularly travel to stock shows around the state with his measuring supplies and several different examples of boots with various options. At these stock shows, Earl attracted many customers to their business by displaying Beck's quality craftsmanship and unique style offerings. Many times, Earl would leave the city early in the morning on Sundays and meet with cowboys on the range at their chuck wagons. Together, the cowboys and Mr. Beck would share a meal cooked over the campfire before Mr. Beck got to work measuring feet. Harry Beck remembers accompanying his father on several of these trips at an early age.

Like Merton McLaughlin, the Beck brothers also made use of a recording system for keeping clients' measurements. Because of this recording system, a cowboy could write to the Beck brothers and ask for another pair of Beck Boots because his first pair had worn out. Unlike McLaughlin, the Becks used information cards, much like a Rolodex, to file the measurements of clients. Several of these cards are on display in the Beck Boot shop today, and show the information of clients from diverse Texas locales as Boerne, Polaner, Walnut Spring, Texarkana, and Belton, and even Sydney, Iowa. Harry's mother would do much of the managing of this system and is credited with preserving the few surviving information cards. Just like today, most of the customers remembered through these information cards were small-town ranchers and cattle people.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Personal Information Cards. Private collection of Harry Beck.



### *The '20s to the '50s*

The Beck twins employed many fine boot makers throughout their career. One of their employees was a Swedish immigrant named Borgstrom. Borgstrom was one of several talented boot makers to come from Europe and find a job, first with McLaughlin and later with Beck Boots.<sup>19</sup> Borgstrom took his craft seriously and always wore a tie to work. Other workers arrived from Yugoslavia, where they had usually either taken courses in shoe making or served as apprentices to cobblers. Several of these European immigrant workers had been trained by their fathers from a very young age, much like Harry Beck.

Ed Martin was one of the boot makers who worked for Earl and Bearl. Martin still works today as a boot maker in Ft. Covington, Colorado, about five miles east of Las Animas, where he runs E.P. Martin Boots. Harry Beck comments, “His family members were all fine boot makers.”<sup>20</sup> Martin went to work making boots at a very young age, even skipping grade school to learn the craft. Martin’s mother worked as a top stitcher for several boot makers in Amarillo. Because of his early reputation as an experienced bootmaker, Martin was hired to work at Beck Boots at the age of nineteen. Martin had worked for about eight years prior to working at Beck’s at Ingertons Boots, also in Amarillo. There, Martin honed the skills that made him beneficial to Beck Boots. To this day, Martin tries to dress well while working, due to the impression Borgstrom made on him as a child.<sup>21</sup> Martin remembers that, “Beck had a good name

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<sup>19</sup> Martin, Ed. Personal interview. 25 Feb. 2010.,;Ed Martin considers Borgstrom to be the finest boot maker he ever knew.

<sup>20</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, Personal Interview.

even before I came on the scene.”<sup>22</sup> Harry Beck states, “Without a question, Ed makes the finest boots made anywhere in the world.”<sup>23</sup> Coming from another boot maker, Beck’s praise for Mr. Martin is quite profound. Martin suggests, “Because I started at such a young age, I have had a lot of time to practice getting good.”<sup>24</sup> A pair of boots made by Mr. Martin today costs at least thirteen hundred dollars, and the price rises with each additional option chosen by the customer.<sup>25</sup> Mr. Martin moved to Colorado to make boots because both he and his son suffered from asthma, and thought the mountain air would do them good.<sup>26</sup>

Not all boot makers working in the early boot shops had the finest of reputations. While individuals who owned the shops were usually respected around town, their employees were often thought of as heavy drinkers by the community and were known to gamble on more than one occasion.<sup>27</sup> “Alcohol was a part of the trade” remembers Harry Beck, “and they always drank Four Roses for some reason.”<sup>28</sup> Paul Jones began making Four Roses whiskey in the early 1880s at a distillery in Kentucky. Jones’s distillery was one of the few allowed to operate for “medicinal purposes” during prohibition. Even during prohibition, Four Roses was readily available to boot makers who had the necessary contacts. The availability of Four Roses during prohibition may

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, Personal Interview.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.; Beck Personal Interview.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, Personal Interview

<sup>27</sup> The reputation of Mertin McLaughlin serves as a fine example of a boot maker being known to gamble.

<sup>28</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.; One of Harry Beck’s boot-making friends called him just moments before my interview and jokingly asked him if he had any bottles of Four Roses around.

be one reason boot makers took the whiskey as their brand of choice. Many of the boot makers had half pints of Four Roses that they carried in their back pockets and would sip from all day. Harry Beck reflects that this probably impaired the quality of a few pair of boots.

The Beck brothers did not have a monopoly on the boot business in Amarillo. From the 1920s to the late 1940s there were as many as ten to twelve boot makers at any given time operating in Amarillo and the surrounding area. Martin's Shoes, owned in part by Mertin McLaughlin, Ross Boots, White Boots, and a handful of other boot shops all worked to serve the cowboys and cowpeople of the Texas Panhandle from Amarillo. From the twenties to the late forties, boot making was a well practiced craft throughout the state of Texas. Almost every town in Texas employed at least one boot maker during this time, including smaller Panhandle towns like Henrietta, Childress, Vernon, and Clarendon. Sadly, not many of these boot makers continue to operate today. Competition with factory boot making, changed demographics, and economic stress forced many small boot makers to close their doors and send their few loyal customers elsewhere. Surviving Texas boot makers include M.L. Leddy in Ft. Worth and San Angelo, and Beck Boots in Amarillo. While several others still exist today, most of these operations have been bought out by big-name shoe companies and serve in name only, like Justin, Nocona, and Tony Lama who were bought by the Basset Corporation.

The quality of handmade boots today far surpasses those made in factories. Currently, factory-made boots are centered on the ideal of getting the most money with

the least effort.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, factory-made boots from the early-to-mid 1900s were of about the same quality as handmade boots. Factories of that time used good leather that was stretched enough so the leather would not shrink or become malformed. They also made far fewer pairs per month than do the factories of today.<sup>30</sup> A pair of boots made in a factory would last about as long as a custom made pair. The fit however, was, and remains, the most determining factor in a cowboy's decision to have his boots custom-made rather than buy a factory-made product.<sup>31</sup> Factory-made boots usually came only in limited sizes and lengths, whereas a custom boot maker could fit each foot individually and ensure a nearly perfect fit. Special designs, stitching, engraving or tooling, colors, and shapes were other reasons cowboys chose custom boots over those made in a factory. However, the phenomenon of bright color combinations and personalization did not begin until around the 40's, when movie stars became influential. Most cowboys simply needed a good-fitting pair of work boots they could beat up. For a lesser-discerning cowboy, a pair of Justin boots would have served him as well as a pair of Beck boots.

### *Beck Boots During World War II*

World War II impacted nearly every part of the American economy, including the boot industry.<sup>32</sup> Because Americans were fighting a costly war in Europe, many of

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<sup>29</sup> Beck, Personal Interview. Surprisingly, this sentiment is also reflected in much the modern beef industry, as discussed in chapter six.

<sup>30</sup> Irvin Farman, *Standard of the West: The Justin Story* (Ft. Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1996), 143-229.

<sup>31</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>32</sup> *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History:2,*

America's resources were being used in the war efforts rather than being sold to civilians for pleasure or personal use. The beef and meat industry, which employs almost exclusively the American cowboy, also changed dramatically during the war. Americans at home were allowed to buy meats and fats approximately once every twenty days. Even though it was more difficult for civilians to purchase meat products, the economic demand for meat changed very little.<sup>33</sup> Beef was being shipped overseas to feed hungry American soldiers, as well as the soldiers in the armies of America's allies. Cattlemen, as well as farmers, were encouraged to continue, and even increase, their production of food. A propaganda poster distributed by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1943 encouraged those in the food industry to keep producing food. The poster declares food producers as "soldiers without uniforms," and states, "You also serve – [in the war effort]...pledged to feed the Soldier, the Worker, the Ally, and, with God's help, all the hungry victims of this war."<sup>34</sup> Because farmers and cattlemen were encouraged to continue and even increase their production, they hired more workers (occasionally cowgirls) to perform necessary tasks.<sup>35</sup> The cowboys who worked during WWII needed boots just like cowboys working at any other point in the history of Western America.<sup>36</sup> Because leather and other supplies were being redirected to the war effort, a burden to creatively fulfill the footwear needs of cowboys

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<sup>33</sup><http://www.ameshistoricalsociety.org/exhibits/events/rationing2.htm> USDA poster.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; This ad was also an insert in popular magazines and catalogues like the Sears and Roebuck Catalogue.

<sup>35</sup> June, Personal Interview.; Men were away fighting, opening up jobs for brave women willing to mount horses and round up cattle.

<sup>36</sup> Beck, Personal Interview

working to feed soldiers, allies, and the world was placed upon boot makers across the country.

Earl Beck was one of three boot makers invited to go to St. Louis in the early 1940s for discussions on how boot and shoe makers would go about rationing supplies and enacting restrictions in order to meet demand, but not detract from the war effort.<sup>37</sup> It was decided that several restrictions must be placed on boot makers during this time of war. Color was seen as an unnecessary element in cowboy boots. It was reasoned that a cowboy in brown boots could work just as comfortably and efficiently as in pink or baby blue ones. Black or brown soon became the only acceptable colors for boot production. Fanciful stitching was deemed secondary, and only one row of stitching around the top of the boot was allowed.<sup>38</sup> The color of the stitching had to match that of the leather used. The height of the tops of the boots was also limited, something which no doubt upset many cowboys who worked in tall brush and wore extremely high-topped boots. A cowboy had to hand over a rationing stamp, which was often precious, in order to get his boots. Americans could use Ration Stamp No. 18 from the first ration book, or Airplane Stamp No. 1 from the third ration book, for one pair of boots or shoes.<sup>39</sup> The Beck family adhered to all of the restrictions and regulations. Beck Boots even had a box full of rationing stamps that no one ever cared to collect from them.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> St. Louis was considered by many as the shoe capitol of America at that time.

<sup>38</sup> The stitching on and around the tops of the boots is important to the structural integrity of the boot, although not essential.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.ameshistoricalsociety.org/exhibits/events/rationing2.htm> USDA. War Ration Book #3- October 1943.

<sup>40</sup> Beck, Personal Interview. The Beck family kept these stamps for many years after the war and eventually threw them out when they decided no one was ever going to pick them up.

Not everyone adhered to the rules and restrictions as did the Beck family. The Justin Boot Company released boots with tooled, or engraved, tops as a way to get around rules.<sup>41</sup> Bob Birches, an Amarillo resident and former Beck Boots employee, decided to make a living selling boots to cowboys without a rationing stamp. Birches would sell his boots to anyone willing to buy them. He would make boots in any color, include fanciful stitching patterns, and even make the tops as tall as the customer wanted, so long as the customer was willing to pay for the extra features. Birches lived in the San Jacinto neighborhood of Amarillo, and opened up his boot shop in his garage. In the morning, Birches would set out the machinery, leathers, and necessary supplies for the day's tasks, and begin making boots for customers not seeing the need to follow rationing regulations. At night, Birches would hide his equipment behind his closed garage door. Mr. Beck laughingly reflects, "Well Bob, he broke the rules, and his business was great." Birches was surely not the only boot maker to ignore rationing standards, and many boots from that time period exist today as proof.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Birches was a very religious man who avoided alcohol, and even served as a deacon in his Baptist church, not one who would seemingly be a rule breaker.<sup>43</sup>

From the first shop in Dalhart, Texas, to working into the war years in Amarillo, Earl and Bearl Beck served the need of the cowboys in the surrounding areas well, and did so with integrity, ingenuity, and were profitable as a result. The Beck brothers

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<sup>41</sup> June, 186.

<sup>42</sup> June, 118.

<sup>43</sup> If you feel like Birches got away with something, he did. But, later in life while twirling his newborn son around by the legs, Birches disfigured one of his son's legs, and as a result, one leg grew longer than the other. Thus, Birches was forced to create special heels and soles for one of his son's boots.

continued the legacy left by McLaughlin, and passed that legacy on to their son and nephew Harry Beck.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Harry Beck

#### *From Early Memories to a Young Professional*

Earl and Bearl Beck continued to make boots until the time of their deaths.<sup>1</sup> Bearl was the first brother to pass away, dying in 1940 at the age of 48, shortly before Beck Boots began to endure the economic hardships of World War II. Earl died in 1942 at the age of 49, just a year after traveling to St. Louis as a representative for Texas Panhandle boot makers. The death of Earl and Bearl did not, however, bring the Beck Boot operation to an end. Harry's mother began fulfilling many of the office and managerial duties of the business, while thirteen-year-old Harry, being relatively young at the time, began to go to work crafting boots. Beck Boots continued to employ several boot makers and remained profitable following the death of Earl and Bearl.

At an early age, Earl and Bearl instilled in Harry the skills and ability to fashion boots with the same care and precision as they did. Harry remembers leaving grade school as a young child and going to the shop, and has memories of the many leathers, the personable customers, and practicing hammering nails into the workbench. Harry's practice of taking small nails out of a bag and hammering them into his workbench would be one of the valuable lessons he learned from being in the boot shop at such an early age. "My dad would let me make anything I wanted to in the shop," Harry recalls.

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<sup>1</sup> Because both Beck brothers died relatively young, they never reached an appropriate age to retire. However, it is not uncommon for many boot makers to continue crafting well into old age. Ed Martin continues to make boots into his eighties.

“I made many pairs of little boots, just so I could play with stuff.”<sup>2</sup> Harry would also take what he thought was scrap leather and fashion it into watchbands, wallets, or anything else he could think up. During the depression, Harry once mistook a piece of expensive alligator skin for scrap, and cut a watchband right out of the center of the skin. Harry’s father, Earl, was a kind and patient man who used this instance to teach young Harry the value of precious materials, rather than to harshly rebuke him.

To be a good boot maker, one must possess a keen eye for detail and steady hands. Harry’s hands were developed from childhood. Personality also plays a key role in the success of boot makers. A good boot maker must have the patience to work with demanding customers, imperfect and always differing feet, and machines that occasionally fail. While almost each pair of hand-crafted boots differs, the way in which the boot maker fashions each boot is almost always exactly the same.<sup>3</sup> Monotony could easily become the enemy of an undisciplined boot maker. Being in the shop at such a young age and being allowed to learn, create, and practice making boots facilitated the skills and temperament Harry needed to become the fine boot maker he is today.

While finishing his schooling, Harry would make the uppers to the boots and stitch the tops before and after school, a task he would gladly perform for seven years. Harry continued to work this way until he was twenty years old, when he began to work at the shop full time. Harry was active in managing Beck Boots during his teen years, and at the age of seventeen took over the head-managing role in his family’s business,

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<sup>2</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>3</sup> Beck Personal Interview.; June, Personal Interview.

even though he was still enrolled in school. At the age of eighteen Harry was asked to be a member of the Amarillo Rotary Club. Harry remembers, “The Rotary Club is known as an old man’s club, but I was a Rotarian at the age of eighteen, with the classification of boot maker.”<sup>4</sup> Harry occasionally missed mandatory assemblies at Amarillo College, where he was taking business classes, in order to attend Rotary Club meetings. Harry’s absence from these assemblies often perturbed the college president, who belonged to a different fraternal organization in town. Harry’s invitation to become a member of the Amarillo Rotary Club serves as evidence of his good civic status and his reputation as an excellent boot maker and businessman.

While sitting in an economics class at Amarillo College in the early 1950s, Harry decided to adopt the assembly line system of production promoted by Henry Ford, a person the economics class studied.<sup>5</sup> While the assembly line process was popular with the workers at Ford, the employees at Beck Boots terribly disliked it. Beck Boot employees were making complete pairs of boots almost entirely by themselves.<sup>6</sup> Harry noticed that an assembly line process could take advantage of particular boot makers’ strengths and diminish their weaknesses. But Harry’s employees did not see things the same way. Harry believed the assembly line process could be more efficient and provide a higher quality boot to consumers. Despite an extra day off each week and a ten percent annual salary raise, all the boot crafters at

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<sup>4</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Ford’s method of an assembly line was put into place in Detroit in the early 1900s, although there is evidence that many boot makers, including Earl and Bearl Beck, used an assembly line type method. Earl and Bearl employed one man to make tops that were provided to two bottom makers.

<sup>6</sup> This process of each crafter completing an entire boot alone is different from the way Earl and Bearl ran the shop. It is unknown as to when the practice changed, although perhaps after the death of Earl, workers were given more freedom to craft as they saw fit.

Beck Boots decided not to return to work again. The workers preferred to make entire boots themselves, rather than work on only one part of the boot-making process. Harry remembers, “Monday came and no one showed up to work, every last one of them.”<sup>7</sup> To further complicate the problem, Beck Boots still had many customers waiting for orders to be filled. Harry traveled to San Angelo, Texas, in hopes of contracting with a boot company there to complete the orders Beck Boots would be unable to fill due to a lack of workers.<sup>8</sup> Harry made a deal with J. L. Mercer, who operated Mercer Boots, to complete the existing orders that Beck Boots had. Mercer agreed to make the boots in the same fashion and with a similar method as Beck Boots. Mercer was only able to make the boots in true Beck fashion because Harry provided Mercer with the Beck Boot pattern and specifications.<sup>9</sup> While the assembly-line method worked well for Ford, Beck Boots employees were not willing to give it a try. The Panhandle cowboy suffered for many years as a result, having to rely on other boot makers with less tradition, skill, and heritage to mend and craft their boots or be forced into buying factory-made boots of lesser quality. The decision of the Beck Boot employees not to return to work, and that decision’s ensuing problems, prompted Harry to question his desire to be in the boot business, which he eventually left for numerous years. Harry closed Beck Boots and left Amarillo in search of new opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup>Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>8</sup> Harry went to San Angelo specifically. He believed there were more good boot makers there than anywhere else.

<sup>9</sup> Mercer Boots currently operates today, although J. L. Mercer has retired and given operation over to his son. Today, a pair of Mercer boots closely resembles a pair of Beck boots due to similar leather types and vamp shape and design. Mercer boots operates out of its original location at 224 S. Chadbourne Street in downtown San Angelo.

## *Women's Shoes*

Due to the difficulty in finding quality workers and the hardship of having Mercer Boots help fulfill Beck Boot's orders, Harry decided to leave the Texas Panhandle and move to Colorado for an additional year of schooling. The difficulty of finding good help in the boot-making business steered Harry to focus his skills toward a different area. Harry decided to use his knowledge and skill as a cobbler to make women's shoes rather than cowboy boots. In the late 1950s Harry went to work as a retailer in the women's shoes industry. It wasn't long until Harry had proven himself and was offered a job as a sales representative for Chinesco Shoes, based out of Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>10</sup> However, Harry found this work less satisfying than being in business for himself. A great believer of the free-enterprise system, Beck wanted to make things himself. In 1970, Chinesco approached Beck and asked him to be a representative for the company and sell their first Brazilian import line. Beck agreed, and soon there after moved his family to California, the base of the Chinesco import operation. Beck's job was to call the major department stores and retailers and convince them to purchase the shoes Chinesco imported from Brazil. Beck called upon all major retailers west of Denver. He remembers, "I never dreamed a little old country boy could go into downtown L.A. and do what we did. We had a lot of fun."<sup>11</sup>

At the time Harry was working for the retail stores, the operating philosophy within the retail industry was changing. Large retailers would retain a limited inventory and wait to see which products were selling before placing larger orders.<sup>12</sup> This system

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<sup>10</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

gave retailers the ability to provide exactly what consumers were demanding. However, the process was somewhat risky because it cut down on the lead time a company had to provide the demanded merchandise before it went out of fashion. This became an extreme disadvantage for the imports Harry was selling to major retailers. Imported shoes had to be ordered nearly an entire year in advance, making them a risky purchase for retailers.

With the retailers' new philosophy in mind, Harry opened his own shoe factory in downtown Los Angeles, California. With more than 180 employees, Harry's modern factory could produce shoes quickly, and was located close to many of the major retailers. Quick delivery was central to Harry's operation. Harry's shoe factory was also innovative in other ways. Harry and his workers designed nothing. They would wait for a retailer to tell them what specific shoes (manufactured by another party) had been selling well. The retailer would then provide Harry with a sample shoe that Harry would deconstruct and use to make a pattern. Harry's factory would then make an exact copy of those particular shoes and produce them for the retailer at a discounted rate. Harry could get the demanded shoes to retailers in a matter of weeks, and as a result, his company served more than 2,200 retail stores.<sup>13</sup> Soon Beck's shoe operation became the sixth largest producer for the Macy's Corporation by doing this.<sup>14</sup>

Harry also used his ingenuity to keep the cost of the shoe at fourteen dollars and seventy-five cents for the retailer. At this time there were laws concerning the

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<sup>13</sup> Many times Macy's would order a fairly small number of imported shoes to be placed in their downtown stores. After seeing which of those shoes sold well, they would place an order with Mr. Beck to make enough shoes to fill all the Macy's stores in the area.

<sup>14</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

percentage of mark up a company was allowed to sell their product for.<sup>15</sup> By keeping the cost under fifteen dollars, retailers were able to sell the shoes made in Beck's factory for forty dollars, an optimal price to be able to make money on the shoes even after their price is reduced. Harry states, "The magic number was fourteen seventy-five." Retailers could sell their shoes at a mark up rate of sixty-two percent, making the cost \$40.00. Retailers could then lower the price to \$29.99 and still have a fifty percent mark up on the shoes.<sup>16</sup>

Making two thousand pairs of shoes each day, Beck's factory soon became successful, and even newsworthy within the shoe industry. Los Angeles was good for the Becks and they enjoyed life there.<sup>17</sup> They had a house sixty miles from the factory, but lived during the week in a condominium in Pasadena, just a short drive from downtown Los Angeles.<sup>18</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Beck frequented the ballet and supported the art initiatives of Los Angeles. But while the Becks enjoyed life in California, legislative decisions were being made in Washington that would soon make it nearly impossible for American shoe factories to compete with overseas companies exporting their shoes to America.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid,

### *The Trade Bills*

When answering why he got out of the business of women's shoes and factory shoe production, Harry simply answers, "Ronald Reagan. It was the signature of Ronald Reagan."<sup>20</sup> In 1986, and again in 1988, Ronald Reagan vetoed a trade bill that would have protected many American manufacturing industries from foreign competition within the United States marketplace. The passage of the Trade Bills of 1986 and 1988 would have placed tariffs and taxes on some imported goods, particularly footwear and copper, in order to keep their would-be lower prices about the same as the price of American goods, which were often higher due to minimum wage laws and greater energy costs.<sup>21</sup> Reagan vetoed both bills because he believed they were focused too heavily around a protectionist philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Reagan also argued that if the measures became law, American exports, as well as America's place within the global economy, would diminish and suffer.<sup>23</sup>

Beck, and the others in his industry, saw the 1986 and 1988 Trade Bills as necessary in order to keep American manufacturers competitive in the American marketplace. Not surprising to Beck and his colleagues, the shoe manufacturing industry was the first of many industries to virtually disappear in the United States, as many American shoe manufacturers were forced to either close or relocate overseas.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Clyde H. Farnsworth, "Trade Bill Nears Passage As Key Obstacle Is Cleared," *New York Times*, August 3, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Steven B. Roberts, "President Vetoes Bill That Limits Imported Textiles," *New York Times*, September 29, 1988.

<sup>24</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.



In the late 1980s there were approximately 120 shoe companies in Los Angeles.<sup>25</sup> The owners and managers of these American operations gathered to discuss ways to influence President Reagan and the American public to support the Trade Bills. These factory owners and managers named a delegate to go to Washington, D.C., and take money they had raised to lobby on their behalf. The efforts of those in the American shoe manufacturing industry proved futile, as the money raised, which was believed to be more than sufficient by the Californian factory owners, was not enough to ensure an audience with the president or anyone of great influence in Washington.<sup>26</sup>

Beck wrote letters to powerful politicians pleading the case of the American shoe industry. California Senator Alan Cranston responded to a letter from Beck, arguing that American shoe companies would have to adapt and change in order to increase their global competitiveness if they wanted to remain in business.<sup>27</sup> Beck believed that his modern factory was quite competitive. Beck's factory was the only one in Los Angeles to use a flat belt conveyor system, and he could make a shoe in merely twenty minutes. Beck flew to China to observe a shoe factory that produced shoes at a lower cost than his factory. Harry learned the speed of his operation was not what held his factory back, but rather the cost of employment. Beck remembers, "The Chinese were doing pretty much the same thing we were doing, except we couldn't get anyone to work for fifty cents a day."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.; Roberts, "President Vetoes Bill."

<sup>26</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

In the mid and late 1980s, many American banks were owed a great deal of money by foreign interests, especially the governments of Argentina and Brazil. Allowing those countries who owed American banks to sell their discounted goods in America without having to pay duty fees enabled them to boost their exports and national revenues, thus making it easier, and in some instances possible, to repay American banks. In essence, Regan's veto of the Trade Bills served as a big bank bailout.<sup>29</sup>

When Reagan vetoed the Trade Bills, 285 million pairs of shoes were sitting on boats waiting to enter American ports.<sup>30</sup> Once these shoes and the subsequent shipments arrived, the American shoe manufacturing industry collapsed. Beck, and most other American shoe manufacturers, either declared bankruptcy or were forced to close their factories.

Due in large part to the disappearance of American shoe factories, it is no longer feasible to tan leather for use in boot and shoe manufacturing domestically. For this reason, it is both impractical and nearly impossible to make a pair of cowboy boots exclusively from American leather. What has been described by some as America's most identifiable fashion is now pieced together with foreign leather, often in foreign factories.

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<sup>29</sup> Roberts, "President Vetoes Bill.;" This sentiment is shared by Beck and the many who lobbied on behalf of the legislation.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.; Beck, Personal Interview.

### *Making Shoes in Mexico*

Luckily, Beck's factory was well financed and previously successful, allowing for Beck to avoid bankruptcy.<sup>31</sup> Beck, however, was not able to keep his Los Angeles factory open. Beck filed the necessary papers and moved his operation into Mexico. Beck now admits, "I made the most horrible mistake of all. I got the papers together and became the four hundred and fiftieth Maquiladora in Mexico."<sup>32</sup> Beck was the last of the four hundred and fifty international companies licensed to open and operate a factory in Mexico. When asked why his decision to move his outfit to Mexico was a mistake, Beck laughingly replies, "Because I lost all my money. It was a disaster."<sup>33</sup>

Beck moved into a brand new building in Tijuana after waiting almost two months for trucks containing his machines to be cleared to cross the Mexican border. Because he was a Mequiladora, and part of a Mexican government program, Beck was forced to closely follow government protocols that were more costly and slower moving than he had anticipated.

Once moved in and set up, Beck tried to turn one of his machines on, only to discover that his building was not receiving electricity. Beck was unaware that a request for electricity was necessary weeks in advance of delivery of power. Beck's landlord, alongside his electrician, decided the best option was to run a line to a powered electricity box a few hundred yards away that belonged to a building that had recently burned down. The electrician dug a trench to the pole on which the box sat and connected the necessary wires to power Beck's new factory. Beck maintained his

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<sup>31</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

factory for five years, all the while receiving power from the box that belonged to the burned building. Beck never received an electricity bill the entire time he lived in Tijuana, Mexico. Beck remembers that every so often, a man would check the box powering the factory and shut off the power. Beck would run outside and meet the man with a handful of cash. The man would then turn the power back on. “That’s just one of many good stories,” Beck declares.<sup>34</sup> Beck also was once charged fifty dollars for having his trash stolen because collectors were delinquent in removing the waste. Beck states, “So, there were a lot of funny things, but financially it was a disaster.”<sup>35</sup> The numerous problems faced by Beck, as well as the financial struggle his operation faced, practically forced Beck to leave Mexico and his shoe manufacturing business.

### *Harry Beck Needs a Job*

After leaving Mexico, Beck needed a job. Beck presumed that with his vast experience and stellar reputation in the shoe industry, it would be relatively easy to find work within the industry. He placed an ad in *Footwear News*, a publication Beck had subscribed to for many years. Beck’s ad simply stated, “Harry Beck needs a job.”<sup>36</sup> The ad also presented Beck’s phone number and the message, “call me.” Beck states, “I thought somebody knew me, so I ran a quarter of a page ad. Needless to say, I didn’t get one phone call.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Beck contacted a company in Los Angeles that was getting into the river sandal operation and convinced them his expertise would prove useful in their pursuits. Beck helped the company to develop a river sandal and described the sandal as, “probably the greatest product I ever made.”<sup>38</sup> Beck drove from Los Angeles to Fort Smith, Arkansas, the shoe-purchasing location for Wal-Mart. Beck used his experience and expertise in retail sales to convince Wal-Mart to carry the river sandal.<sup>39</sup> At the time, Wal-Mart had not yet spread to the West Coast, and Beck’s employers did not understand the magnitude of the order. Because of a failure to agree upon a price point at which to sell the river sandals, Beck decided to leave the company. The company Teva, and a few other companies, eventually forced Beck’s former employer out of business.<sup>40</sup> While working in the river sandal business, Beck discovered the material that would eventually become the Beck-Tec sole, a unique feature for boot soles that performs like leather in the stirrups while lasting much longer. This space age technology is offered exclusively by Beck Boots. The lessons learned by Beck in the women’s shoe industry and river sandal business gave him skills and knowledge for future enterprises.

### *Getting Back to Boots*

After five difficult years in Mexico, Beck decided it was time to retire. At the age of sixty-two, he had enough money saved to make retirement a feasible option. Beck’s sister was moving out of the Texas Panhandle and made her house available to Beck and his wife. After many years away Beck was finally back in Amarillo. Beck

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> In true Wal-Mart fashion, Beck was forced to travel to St. Louis to order a particular box wanted by the mega retailer.

<sup>40</sup> Beck, Personal Interview

started looking around town for a part-time job to provide additional income to supplement his retirement. But as he says, “no one wanted to hire a sixty-two year old man.”<sup>41</sup>

Beck eventually found employment in the trade his father and uncle had taught him many years ago. Beck’s friend, Mrs. Wilkinson, approached Beck and asked if he would make her husband, Doug, a pair of black cowboy boots.<sup>42</sup> Beck cut the leather by hand and stitched the boots on his nephew’s sewing machine. Beck enjoyed making the pair of boots and decided getting back into the boot business would be an enjoyable way to make money to supplement his retirement. Not wanting to work out of his garage, Beck leased a space in the Las Siendas shopping center in western Amarillo. Beck was still used to wearing short pants and his river sandals while working, and often crafted boots in this very outfit.

Beck’s renewed boot business began to grow. Beck would travel to Dalhart, that small ranching and farming community north of Amarillo, once a month to take measurements and orders out of a small hotel room. Word of the boot maker began to spread, and soon, many in the Texas Panhandle were traveling to a Dalhart motel to place an order for a pair of Beck Boots. Soon, Beck had too many orders to complete on his own. At the urging of a local salesman, Beck participated in a trunk show in Littlefield, Texas, just southwest of Plainview. A trunk show consists of different retailers who set up booths in a large storeroom to peddle their goods to interested consumers. Beck was wary of the idea at first because of his experience with trunk

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix

shows while working in the women's shoe industry. To his surprise, many people attended the Littlefield trunk show, and quite a few of them placed orders for Beck Boots.

Because his initial invest for materials and leather was rather costly, Beck could not afford to make a pair of boots from expensive or exotic skins only to find that they did not fit the customer's feet. For this reason, Beck began to make a pair of boots from less costly materials in order to ensure a proper fit before crafting boots from more precious materials.<sup>43</sup> Many customers liked the look of the test-fit pair and asked to purchase them, in addition to the more expensive pair. A cowboy from Vega, Texas, approached Beck and asked to purchase just a pair of the test-fit boots, since he could not afford a pair crafted from the more costly materials. After several cowboys came to Beck requesting a pair of trial, or test-fit, boots, Beck recognized the greater demand for less costly boots reflected the Beck Boots long time ethos to reach the working cowboy, the customers who have always been in the minds of the Beck family. Beck decided to no longer offer the more costly materials, such as alligator and other exotics, in order to keep overhead costs low and the starting boot price reasonable for their working clientele who were often not able to afford extremely expensive boots. This decision led to the particular look all Beck Boots share today.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Although crafted from less costly materials, these test-fit boots were of the same quality as any pair of boots Beck makes. One Beck customer living in Oakland, California has worn his test-fit pair for more than thirteen years and had them resoled by Beck numerous times.

<sup>44</sup> A Beck Boot customer, and many others in the Texas Panhandle or boot business can distinguish a Beck Boot from the many other brands available to consumers.

Although making boots is somewhat different today than it was when his father and uncle were making boots, the process, challenges, and rewards remain basically unchanged. Beck receives many of the same complaints as his father and uncle, and no doubt any other boot maker. These complaints are due in a large part to feet. Feet grow and change, making them a complicated variable in the boot making process. Beck states, “Sometimes you just don’t completely fulfill the customer, although for the most part, ninety plus percent is the right, just as it was back then.” Finding decent workers is also a challenge that Beck faces today, just as did his father and uncle. Beck’s father and uncle often had to deal with replacing boot makers who drank too much. Beck has challenges finding skilled and talented workers, as fewer men take on the craft than in years past. Knowing that a customer has been satisfied with his custom boots is a reward that remains the same for Beck as it was for his father and uncle.

Beck Boots has been centered on a simple philosophy since its inception. Beck often puts it this way, “We make working boots for the working cowboy.” Having watched his father measure feet around a chuck wagon, Beck is correct in stating that this philosophy has always been in the minds of Beck boot makers, even if his father and uncle did not assert it quite as often, or in the same manner, as he. A look at Beck Boots’ long history of serving working cowboys, as well as a few modern day rodeoers and bull riders, reveals that the Beck family has always had a special relationship with those who made a living working with cattle.

“C-O-W boy boots, not H-O-R-S-E boy boots,” Harry remarks, “and there is a difference.”<sup>45</sup> “A cowboy is hard-working, has a handshake as meaningful as a signed

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<sup>45</sup> When pressed, Harry said he wished not to have to explain the difference between a horseboy and a cowboy.



check from the bank, looks you in the eye, and is the same in Amarillo, Mississippi, Alabama, or Wyoming. There is a thread of people in the cattle business that are just really solid people. This was true back then and it's still true today."<sup>46</sup> Harry Beck will tell you this sentiment is the reason he makes boots for the working cowboy, and that it is the same reason his father and uncle made boots for the working cowboy.

"[Cowboys] are sweet kind people, they were then, and they are today. They rode horses, which was nothing more than the very vehicle for them to work."<sup>47</sup>

Currently, most of Beck's customers are not from Amarillo, but rather the small surrounding towns. Beck suggests his clientele may be a result of most city dwellers preferring an exotic skinned pair of boots or a pair crafted by someone known for intricate detailing not practical for a working cowboy boot. "Our boots cater to the country rancher and farmer," Beck states.<sup>48</sup> Beck once received a call from an attorney in Maine who asked if he could order a pair of "boot boots," recognizing that Beck Boots are built to sustain genuine cowboy work.<sup>49</sup> But still, Beck Boots' clientele has expanded from working cowboys to those who want the look, feel, and quality of genuine working cowboy boots. These city dwellers looking for authenticity in their boots include Southwest Airlines CEO Garry Kelly, who sports Beck Boots in the business world. Beck has also sold over a dozen pair of boots to an investor who works for Goldman Sachs in Atlanta, Georgia. Beck has sold boots to non-cowboys the world over. In September of 2009, Beck Boots filled several orders from Paris, France, and

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<sup>46</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

even Greece.<sup>50</sup> In 2008, Beck Boots sold thirty pairs of boots to a group of three Japanese touring the United States.<sup>51</sup>

Beck Boots has employed a variety of marketing methods and advertising to reach potential customers all over the Texas Panhandle, and even the world. Today, Beck Boots advertises primarily in *Livestock Weekly*, a way to reach many of the ranchers who work in numerous small towns not always in the same media markets.

Beck and his wife also travel to many ranch and rodeo shows and set up a booth displaying examples of their craftsmanship while measuring and taking orders.<sup>52</sup>

Technology and the Internet have also become new ways for Beck to reach customers. Thus, Beck suggests, “Merchandising and marketing are probably the two strongest things we have now.”<sup>53</sup>

The economic recession of 2009 impacted many American small businesses, including Beck Boots.<sup>54</sup> During this time, Beck Boots received fewer orders for custom boots, but remained profitable due to the foresight of Harry Beck. Beck realized Beck Boots would need to offer a less expensive pair of boots to those not able to afford a custom-fit pair, but who still sought the quality and craftsmanship of a hand crafted pair. Beck Boots began offering a stock boot to complement their express and custom boots. The stock boot is a handmade boot built around lasts that have not been shaped

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<sup>50</sup> Beck Purchase Records.

<sup>51</sup> Beck Purchase Records.; Beck, Personal Interview. These Japanese came to Amarillo seeking three things: A steak from the famous Big Texan restaurant, a photo of Stanley Marsh’s Cadillac Ranch, and several pairs of Beck Boots.

<sup>52</sup> Beck Boots already has plans to attend three such shows in 2010. These shows are similar to the trunk shows that initially helped grow Beck’s customer base and reputation.

<sup>53</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

to fit a particular foot. A Beck stock boot is somewhat like a factory boot, in that a customer purchases a boot in his size. However, the Beck stock boot is offered in every length and every last size, allowing for a much better fit than a factory-made boot usually offered only in several last sizes. Beck Boots had never made boots like the stock boot before the recession of the late 2000s, but the practice has paid off. Beck took a risk in moving away from a more customized product.<sup>55</sup> However, Harry's previous experience in the river sandal business and women's shoes allowed him to anticipate problems and adjust his business strategy accordingly. Ed Martin states, "Harry is the smartest businessman I know. He is better in boots than anyone else I know, and is a credit to boot makers everywhere."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Some think this practice should not be done by custom makers.

<sup>56</sup> Ed Martin, Personal Interview.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Future of Cowboy Boots

There was a time in American history when most American inhabitants wore moccasins or other primitive foot covering.<sup>1</sup> American Indians wore the shoes for many of the same reasons cowboys wore boots. Moccasins were utilitarian, lasting, comfortable, and made possible the hunting or gathering necessary for Indian life.<sup>2</sup> As the American Indian way of life began to disappear and European goods were made available through trade, the need for moccasins waned. Today, moccasins are worn rarely, and primarily for the sake of fashion. It is possible that as the cowboy lifestyle and culture changes and fades, the boot could end up in the same category as the moccasin: simply a fashion piece. There are several factors that endanger the future of the cowboy boot. However, there are many reasons to believe the cowboy boot will always be a part of American life and culture.

#### *The Internet*

Boot makers have been selling and advertising boots outside of their shops from the very beginning of the craft. Both Mertin McLaughlin and Earl Beck traveled to visit cowboys on the range. Later, Beck Boots, and most every other boot maker and boot factory, sent out mailers and catalogues to ranches and potential customers. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Eunice Wilson, *A History of Shoe Fashions* (London: Pitman, 1974), 289-311.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

technological age, computers have taken the place of these mailers and catalogues. Beck Boots now uses a tracking software to monitor activity on their website. Beck Boots also allows for customers to see examples of most features offered in a custom pair of boots. Anyone searching for a particular feature, style, or fit can search the Web until they find a boot maker suitable to them. The Internet has also allowed consumers to find boot makers outside of their surrounding area. Since many states do not have custom boot makers, the Internet makes a custom boot maker, often in Texas, just several clicks away.

The computer has become a new tool in the Beck Boot shop. Like most any other business or industry, Internet sales and marketing have given smaller boot makers a global presence, and made them accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Beck Boots' on-line home is a relatively small site that Beck describes as, "intentionally low-tech."<sup>3</sup> In regard to the Web site, Beck argues, "It is probably the most important marketing tool one has."<sup>4</sup> The Beck Boots Web site features the many options offered to customers planning on ordering a custom pair. The site also allows visitors a chance to view photos chronicling many of the steps in the boot-making process. One unique feature of the Beck Boots Web site is that visitors are able to view photos of most every Beck customer who has picked up his or her boots in the shop. These photos show pleased Beck customers proudly boasting their new unique Beck Boots, a powerful marketing tool in itself. The Web site initially attracted the Japanese tourist who purchased thirty pairs of boots to Beck Boots.<sup>5</sup> Before the recent recession made

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<sup>3</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

money a bit tighter, Beck Boots paid a small fee to Google to be the first name that showed up when viewers entered certain criteria into their search bars.<sup>6</sup> Beck suggests that most new customers have at least looked at the Beck Web site before coming into the store to be measured or requesting a measuring kit to be sent to them through the mail. Beck Boots also uses another sophisticated computer program that tracks the number and location of the visitors their web site receives each day.

Similar to Beck's approach, author Jennifer June hosts a Web site and a blog that lead interested consumers to nearly every boot maker or manufacturer in the world, including Beck Boots. June's Web site not only offers information about cowboy boots, but also serves as a place to preserve the many stories that are sure to accompany any pair of cowboy boots. The site offers photos of several boot-making shops, poems about boots written by cowboy poets and songwriters, and an on-line diary of the author's daily interactions with cowboy boots.<sup>7</sup> Several boot makers, including Rocketbuster Boots in El Paso, Texas, even have Facebook profiles and Myspace accounts to reach younger or more tech-savvy audiences. The Internet has allowed boot makers to reach out to potential customers and for consumers to seek out boot makers to the benefit of both parties. June suggests, "The Internet has opened up a lot of room for people to find you. Tex Robins was able to move locations and never miss a beat. The Internet provides a different kind of connection. Word of mouth has moved online."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of the interview, Beck planned on paying Google for this feature again in the future.

<sup>7</sup> June, Jennifer. "Cowboy Boots -- The Cowboy Boot Web Page, by Jennifer June.." *Cowboy Boots -- The Cowboy Boot Web Page, by Jennifer June.* N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.dimlights.com/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; Tex Robins is a well-respected Texas bootmaker working in Abilene, Texas.

Computers will continue to play a large role in the boot-making business if the business trends seen by Beck continue to grow.

*Life Forever in Popular Culture*

The cowboy boot is prevalent in nearly every book telling the story of American life in the West. Many of these stories are set in the American Southwest and Mexican borderland. Characters in these stories wear boots that serve as cultural and geographical identifiers, have utilitarian purposes, and often act symbolically and as a tool for shaping important themes. Cowboy boots are an important detail in American popular culture and should not be overlooked.

In popular culture, there is no such person as a cowboy who does not wear boots. You may find a cowboy who does not smoke, refuses to drink, abstains from gambling, or keeps away from the whore house, but you will not find one wearing a pair of Chuck Taylors while riding across the plains to gather a herd of cattle. Even famed cattleman and inventor of the Chuck Wagon, Charles Goodnight, refused to wear cowboy boots, that is, until Texas Panhandle boot maker Merton McLaughlin crafted Goodnight a pair. After slipping into his new boots for the first time, Goodnight quickly asked Merton how long it would take to make him twelve more pairs.<sup>9</sup> While there are many ways to remember, present, and identify the American cowboy, boots are rarely excluded from the picture. Including boots when telling stories of cowboys is necessary for storytellers, not only in a practical manner, because cowboys after all wore boots, but also to convey something deeper about the subject to the audience. A man's boots give insight into his character much in the same way a white hat

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, Uncle Merton.

distinguished the good guy from the bad guy wearing a black hat in the old John Wayne movies. Silver screen actors Tom Mix and Roy Rogers served as actors who chose specific boots to tell audiences something about their characters. Tom Mix had boots especially crafted for many of his roles and died owning several hundred pair as a result.<sup>10</sup> In his 1935 appearance in *The Miracle Rider*, Mix's meticulous and always clean boots perfectly represented the Texas Ranger attitude of the lawman Mix portrayed.

Cowboy boots are obvious in many books set in the American Southwest, suggesting they belong in the Southwestern American literature genre. Citing the definition J. Frank Dobie gave in 1934, Southwestern literature encompasses, "Arizona, New Mexico, most parts of Texas, some of Oklahoma, and anything else north, south, east, or west that anybody wants to bring in."<sup>11</sup> The corpus of Southwestern American literature includes common themes of the hardship of life on the frontier, the struggle between civilization and the wilderness, and the waning way of life for cowboys and American Indians alike. Storytellers embrace these themes in their work and join in the practices of other authors writing in this genre to tell the story of hard-working Americans. Most writers of Southwestern American literature make use of the cowboy boot, at times in unconventional and revealing ways.

Elmer Kelton's novel *The Man Who Rode Midnight* embodies these exact themes. When Kelton's Jim Ed arrives in the ranching community of Big River wearing running shoes and a small brimmed hat, Jim Ed instantly becomes an outsider

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<sup>10</sup> Beck, Personal Interview.

<sup>11</sup>J. Frank Dobie, *Guide to Life and Literature in the Southwest* (Quill Pen Classics, 2008).



who draws unwanted attention. The characters in Larry McMurtry's *Horseman Pass By* find themselves searching in the dark to find their boots because their day on the ranch starts before sun-up. Cowboy boots are more than simply apparel in this genre, serving as telling objects that help craft the story. Often for storytellers, boots make the man.

Like Kelton, McCarthy, McMurtry, and writers for the silver screen, storytellers use boots to establish the cowboy nature of their characters, boot wearers who embody the ethics and values commonly associated with hardworking cowboys. It would make little sense for an author to describe a man slipping his penny loafers into the stirrups before riding off into the sunset. Boots identify characters as cowboys.

Even American pop culture icons identify with boots. Tom Cruise wore a pair in *Top Gun*. John Travolta can be seen in numerous films wearing cowboy boots, perhaps most notoriously in *Urban Cowboy*. In 2008, country singer Eric Church released a song title, "These Boots," which chronicled the singer's never ending love of his most trusted companions: a pair of boots handed down to him from his grandfather. Jessica Simpson was just the most recent of several to cover Lee Hazlewood's "These Boots are Made For Walking," in which she dances scantily clad while sporting a pair of brown cowboy boots in the music video. In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, famed country singer Toby Keith proudly sang, "We'll put a boot in your ass; it's the American way." As long as people continue to tell stories in books, songs, movies, art, and other mediums, the cowboy boot will have a place in popular culture.

### *The Meat Industry*

Cowboy boots have, from their birth, been connected to the meat industry. When cowboys began gathering cattle that would eventually be slaughtered and served

at mealtime, they needed boots to adequately perform their tasks. The demand for beef was the greatest factor in the development of the cattle industry.<sup>12</sup> Whether driving cows to feed soldiers in the Southwest, or wrangling a herd that would be shipped to the Midwest, slaughtered, and put on refrigerated railcars headed to New York City, cattleman and cowboys had jobs only at the sake of American beef consumption. The cattle drives glorified in dime store novels, the silver screen, and in picture books were worked only by about 40,000 cowboys. These “real McCoy” cowboys initiated an industry that would drastically shape life in America. As the meat and beef industry has changed, so too have the needs and styles of the cowboy boot.

Beck Boots has always made boots expressly for the working cowboy. In fact, Harry Beck had at one time been known to refuse to make a pair of boots for a city slicker.<sup>13</sup> Because of its location in the Texas Panhandle, Beck Boots has had a continuous supply of local cowboys to serve. Amarillo, as well as the rest of the Texas Panhandle, has continued to produce a large percentage of the nation’s beef supply ever since Charles Goodnight set up his first ranch in the Palo Duro Canyon in 1876.<sup>14</sup> Today, cows outnumber people in the Texas Panhandle by a ratio of two to one.<sup>15</sup> The Texas Cattle Feeders Association, which is best known for suing Oprah Winfrey, is

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Howard Carlson, *Amarillo: The Story of A Western Town* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> John Mark Beilue, “These Boots Are Made for Wearing: Harry Beck keeps Cowboys-and others-In Step,” *Amarillo Globe News*, October 15, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> J. Evetts Haley, *Charles Goodnight, Cowman and Plainsman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> "Texas Cattle Feeders Association." *Texas Cattle Feeders Association*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.tcfa.org/>>.

headquartered in Amarillo, and works daily to convince Americans to eat more meat.<sup>16</sup> Amarillo is certainly a cow town.<sup>17</sup>

So far, Beck Boots has been able to keep up with changing practices in the cattle and meat industry. One such shift in cattle industry practices is in the feedlot. Rather than letting cows graze naturally on grass until slaughter, many cattlemen and ranchers have decided to send their cattle to feedlots where cows are force-fed antibiotic-laced corn.<sup>18</sup> There are currently more than 13 million cattle entering into Texas feedlots annually, many of which are located in the Texas Panhandle.<sup>19</sup> The built-up manure and waste present in feedlots can quickly wear out the soles of even the best cowboy boots. As mentioned previously, several years ago Beck introduced the Beck-Tec sole that gave cowboys longer-lasting boot soles in feedlot-working conditions.

There are further advances Beck Boots has made to adapt to the changing cattle industry that do not involve new technology. Many of the traditional boot-making styles and techniques can be used to keep up with change, like adjusting the height of the tops to keep feedlot cowboys' legs out of the muck. If a customer desires, he or she can order boots outfitted with nylon boot pulls that allow for easy mending. Changing the heel shape for cowboys not working on horseback can also be a useful adaptation.

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<sup>16</sup> "Texas Cattle Feeders Association." *Texas Cattle Feeders Association*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.tcfa.org/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Many, including the author's parents, live in Southwest Amarillo, at the end of cul-de-sacs butted up against grazing fields for black angus cattle.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 183.; While corn does make cows grow bigger and fatter, it also makes them sick and harms their immune system. This is one of the reasons antibiotics are put into the corn fed to the cattle.

<sup>19</sup> Texas Cattle Feeders Association.

On the surface, things look great for the cattle and meat industry. The average person eats more meat now than in any point in human history.<sup>20</sup> McDonald's, the largest consumer of beef in the world, has more than 31,000 locations, and opens a new restaurant somewhere in the world at a rate of one every three hours.<sup>21</sup> In 2008, Americans consumed 27.3 billion pounds of beef.<sup>22</sup> Beef can be purchased in virtually any grocery store in any town in America.

While Americans are eating large quantities of beef, several factors may prove to put pressure on Beck Boots' mission to serve the working cowboy. While the meat industry currently employs more workers than ever before, many of these employees are not the traditional boot-wearing cowboy. Factory farming has become the way most Americans get their meat.<sup>23</sup> While the image of the cowboy is often used to sell meat to consumers, meat currently has less to do with cowboys and more to do with machines, corporations, and a bottom line.<sup>24</sup> Because of the regular use of antibiotics, cowboys are no longer needed to check on the health of each cow daily. Some ranchers use four wheelers, dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles, and even helicopters to herd cattle. These vehicles make their operation faster and in need of fewer horse-mounted cowboys.<sup>25</sup> Temple Grandin, a professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, has

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<sup>20</sup> Foer, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Consumerism Binge-And Why We Must* (Brattleboro: Harper, 2000), 78.

<sup>22</sup> "FAS Commodity Trade Info: Meat, Livestock, Poultry & Eggs ." USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) - Homepage. [http://www.fas.usda.gov/dlp/livestock\\_poultry.asp](http://www.fas.usda.gov/dlp/livestock_poultry.asp) (accessed March 2, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> *Food, Inc.* . Film. Directed by Robert Kenner. Los Angeles: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

designed many stockyards, corrals, lairages, corrals, chutes, and loading ramps that make cows feel more comfortable during transportation and relocation.<sup>26</sup> The systems and structures require fewer cowboys to successfully deliver cattle to slaughter because cows need less force or coaxing to move.<sup>27</sup> In addition, advances in animal science, cattle transportation, and slaughterhouse design have reduced the number of cowboys needed to work cattle. The number of urban cowboys, like John Travolta and Garth Brooks, may have grown exponentially in the past hundred years, but genuine hardworking cowboys are becoming increasingly rare.

The disappearance of cowboy jobs could prove problematic for Beck Boots and other boot makers who craft especially for the working cowboy. Either these boot makers will not have a clientele to serve, or their new clientele won't be in need of, or willing to pay for, the features that make a true cowboy boot suitable for the working cowboy. These crafters will either have to create and ensure more jobs for the working cowboys they serve, or adjust their motto a bit. Beck Boots has already experienced a slight shift in their clientele, as they increasingly make more and more boots for men and women working outside of the cattle and ranching industry.

Several authors have recently released books questioning America's eating habits. Michael Pollan, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Eric Schlosser, have written books and articles, and even appeared on television encouraging Americans to rethink what they are eating and where they are getting their food. These authors argue for

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<sup>26</sup> Temple Grandin, *Thinking In Pictures* (New York: Vintage, 2010).; Grandin is also known for writings on Autism, which she has. Grandin suggests her autism allows her to think in pictures, and thus better identify with the way cows think.

<sup>27</sup> Grandon, Temple. "Behaviour of Cattle, Pigs, Buffalo and Antelope During Handling." Temple Grandin's Web Page. <http://grandin.com/behaviour/transport.html> (accessed February 24, 2010).

Americans to eat less meat, especially beef fed corn or given growth hormones, antibiotics, or other similar products.<sup>28</sup> Foer argues that the only way to be a conscious and contributing member of society is to avoid meat altogether.<sup>29</sup> These authors are receiving quite a bit of attention from readers and the media at large. The *New York Times* released numerous articles on vegetarianism and veganism in the past two years.<sup>30</sup> The *New York Times* also positively reviewed every book aforementioned, and even ran several articles written by a few of these authors. The release of “Food Inc.,” a movie financed in part by Pollan, was featured in a January episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show, and reached millions of viewers as a result. Americans are increasingly being asked to question their beef-eating practices.

While it may seem that these authors’ influence would be detrimental to the beef industry, and eventually boot makers, it may prove, contradictorily, that their influence leads people to purchase grass fed and finished beef from ranches and cattle operations that employ growing numbers of working cowboys. Grass-fed and grass-finished beef is available in nearly every part of the state of Texas, as well as most of the nation. Grass-finished beef comes from cows who were never fed corn or hybrid feed to fatten them before slaughter.

David Meyer owns and operates Tall Tex, a ranching and beef supply operation located in the Texas Panhandle. Tall Tex is one of the newly popularized ranches offering grass fed and finished beef. Meyer, who started Tall Tex in the early 1990s, is

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<sup>28</sup> Foer, 78.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 81. Foer does suggest that the beef industry is more humane, cleaner, and more sustainable than the poultry or pork industries.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 127.

one of only six ranchers in Texas to raise American Belgian Blue cattle, which provide arguably the leanest red meat or beef products available.<sup>31</sup> One reason Meyer chose to raise this breed of cattle is their ability to produce a quality weight and good flavor without the need for artificial or hybrid feeds. Meyer, who previously fed the majority of his beef hybrid feed, discovered he could earn more money raising his beef on grass and having a local slaughterhouse butcher his cattle than he could make by selling them at cattle auctions, which often prove more favorable to bigger outfits often selling upwards of fifty head.<sup>32</sup> When asked if he is a real cowboy, Meyer says, “No, hell, I ain’t no real cowboy, but there’s lots around me. I prefer to wear a ball cap than those other ones.”<sup>33</sup> However, by all accounts, Meyer is a real cowboy, regardless of his headwear. Meyer wears his boots in the snow, rain, and hot summers, and is frequently in the market for a new pair as a result. Undoubtedly, Meyer will purchase a pair of boots that will hold up to the rigorous demands he puts on his boots while raising grass-fed American Belgian Blue cattle.

The Texas Panhandle has also made a strong stand against PETA and others fighting against the beef industry. In 1998 the Texas Cattle Feeders Association sued Oprah Winfrey for airing a show on mad cow disease in which she claimed the disease, “just stopped me cold from eating another burger.”<sup>34</sup> Although the TCFA lost the law suit, they succeeded in making Oprah think twice about speaking poorly of beef, as

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<sup>31</sup> "American Belgian Blue Breeders, Inc. - National Belgian Blue Beef Breed ." *American Belgian Blue Breeders, Inc. - National Belgian Blue Beef Breed* . N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.belgianblue.org/ind>

<sup>32</sup> Meyer, David. Personal interview. 25 Feb. 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> [www.cnn.com/US/9801/21/oprah.beef/](http://www.cnn.com/US/9801/21/oprah.beef/)

evidenced in January 2010 show, on which she tries to make fun of her past with the beef industry.<sup>35</sup> In 2008, Danny Byrd, a Canyon, Texas business man, refused to lease his giant boot wearing cowboy statue to PETA, who wanted to hang a sign around the cowboy statue's neck protesting the beef industry. Even though PETA offered Byrd a substantial amount of money, Byrd refused, stating, "In this area, we kind of make our living on cattle and agriculture and that's part of our heritage."<sup>36</sup>

There are other signs that the cowboy way of life, though changing, is going to be around for a long time to come. Greg Moore, a graduate of Truett Seminary at Baylor University, pastors the Top Hand Cowboy Church in Valley Mills, Texas. Moore serves those working in the ranching and agricultural business, as well as those who simply prefer to live a cowboy lifestyle. Moore suggests, "There will always be enough mystique and infatuation with the cowboy and the cowboy way of life, that in Texas and the West, there will always be people wearing boots and jeans while making an honest living."<sup>37</sup> Moore bought a pair of Beck Boots in 2006. He liked his first pair so much that he eventually ordered two more pair. Moore respects the good quality, custom fit, and the style of Beck Boots. Moore suggests, "You know what you are paying for when you buy a pair of Beck Boots. Not a lot of frills, just good craftsmanship and good materials."<sup>38</sup> Moore has introduced many of his congregants,

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<sup>35</sup> "The Truth About Food with Michael Pollan - Oprah.com." *Oprah.com - Live your best Life - Oprah.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow>

<sup>36</sup> Packard, Dan. "Tall Tex snubs PETA: Owner says no to proposal to hang sign." *Amarillo Globe News* 11 Nov. 2008: Unknown. *Amarillo.com*. Web. 25 Feb. 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Greg Moore, Personal Interview. 25. Feb. 2010.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



especially those working in ranching and agriculture, to Beck Boots. These congregants have been pleased with Beck Boots and their way of doing business.<sup>39</sup>

### *A Dying Craft?*

Some may think that boot makers are a dying breed. In his novel, *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, Elmer Kelton wrote, “If bootmakers still depended on working cowboys for their trade, theirs would have become a vanished art.”<sup>40</sup> This sentiment is understandable. Someone born in the 1920s may be able to remember a time when every county in Texas had at least one boot maker, oftentimes two or three. While there may be fewer people practicing the craft of boot making today than in the 1920s or 30s, the craft is alive and well. Jennifer June states, “I don’t agree with those who say that boot making is a dying craft. While there is less of a family tradition today than there used to be, there are a lot of people coming into the craft at older ages.”<sup>41</sup> June has recently dubbed a group of younger boot makers the brat pack, and considers them a large influence in the future of boots. Some of those in the brat pack began learning the craft as a student of an established boot maker, like Tex Robins who teaches students in his Abilene, Texas, shop.<sup>42</sup> Others have learned at workshops or trade fairs around the country.<sup>43</sup> June argues that the increasing number of women in the boot-making

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Elmer Kelton, *The Man Who Rode Midnight* (Ft. Worth: TCU Press, 1990), 36.

<sup>41</sup> June, Personal Interview.

<sup>42</sup> June is one of many who have learned to make boots from Tex Robins.

<sup>43</sup> There is a bootmakers roundup once a year in Wichita Falls, Texas, that is a sort of conference for boot makers. Individuals interested in the craft can come and take a workshop in boot making.

business suggests that interest in the craft is spreading.<sup>44</sup> June states, “There will always be boots. The demand never really goes away. They are an American fashion icon, and as long as people wear jeans, they will wear cowboy boots too.”<sup>45</sup>

Ed Martin may present the biggest reason cowboy boot makers will be around forever. Martin states, “Making boots is chasing a dream. The perfect pair has never been made, but every time a boot maker begins to make some boots, he is going after the perfect pair. I still want to make that perfect pair.”<sup>46</sup> Having overcome many difficulties in its nearly hundred-year existence, Beck Boots will surely operate long into the future seeking to produce that perfect pair of cowboy boots.

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<sup>44</sup> June, Personal Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, Personal Interview.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Beck Boots has, throughout its long existence, provided a quality product that allows for cowboys to efficiently perform their difficult and varied tasks. These cowboys have responded in kind by purchasing Beck boots and supporting the work of the Beck family. Although the business of boot making was at times challenging and difficult, the Beck family used business skills, expert craftsmanship, and a commitment to producing a quality product to keep Beck Boots and the Beck family an integral part of the history and culture of Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle. When Merton McLaughlin sold his boot shop to Earl and Bearl in the 1910s, he probably did not foresee the impact that his craft would have on America's culture and image. The special relationship between bootmaker and cowboy (or those wanting to look or feel like a cowboy), although ever changing, will continue to keep cowboy boots a part of American life.

## GLOSSARY

Beck-Tec Sole	A unique Polyurethane sole offered exclusively by Beck Boots. The Beck-Tec Sole wears the same as leather in the stirrup, but lasts much longer.
Cattleman	One who owns cattle, and does not necessarily know how to work cattle.
Cowboy	One who works with cattle, and has different responsibilities from a cattleman or ranch owner. Some ranchers can be considered both a cowboy and cattleman; although most ranchers are cattlemen.
Counter	The piece of the boot covering the heel of the foot.
Heel	Can be straight, or underslung, angling inward toward the toe.
Last	A wooded or plastic form used in the boot making process. Beck Boots builds up a last to match the exact size and shape of a customer's foot. Most bootmakers keep used lasts as a record of client's feet sizes and shapes.
Shank	The part of the sole directly under the arch of the foot. Beck Boots uses a forty-penny nail to strengthen and secure the shank.
Tops	Often stitched with intricate patterns to keep them from slouching.
Uppers	The top pieces of the boot before they are stitched onto the last and sole.
Vamp	The piece of leather that covers the foot.
Welt	Leather between the sole and top. The sole and the top are both sewn to the welt, connecting the two.

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