*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Remembering those annual trips to the boot store**

An important tool on any farm or labor job starts from the ground with the right footwear.

Recently my wife, Sherry, purchased a new pair of work boots in advance of spring gardening season. She spotted a good deal in a sales flyer that came in the newspaper, went online and ordered a pair in her size.

She wanted to be sure the boots fit, so instead of doing home delivery, we went to the store. She tried them on at the service counter before taking them home.

My how times have changed. Quality leather work boots have never been cheap, but my parents knew my brother and I needed them. We usually received a new pair each year as we rapidly grew.

Even though Mom was a purchaser through the catalogs of both Sears and J.C. Penney, finding boots with the right fit needed an in-person purchase. Our usual choice was Gene’s Bootery, a local shoe store in Black River Falls.

The mid-1970s were the heydays of downtowns across rural America, and Black River Falls was no different. There were several clothing stores, several hardware stores, an appliance store and my favorite — the “5 and Dime” where I could spend hours sifting through the toy bins.

But on a certain day, our mission was a pair of boots. Gene’s was named after the owner Gene Dana, who had purchased the shoe store in 1964. The store itself dated back to 1912. Ed Locken, a Norwegian shoemaker who came to Wisconsin in 1884 at the age of 17, built a new building at 216 Main St. that year. It was a year after downtown Black River Falls was wiped out in the flood of 1911.

Locken died in 1945. The business passed into the hands of his son Enoch, who sold it to Dana, who had worked for the Lockens.

I can still remember the pleasant smell of all the leather shoes as soon as I walked in the door. The walls were covered with shelves of boots and shoes of all sizes. A person didn’t just walk to a shelf to grab a pair. A customer would sit down, take a shoe off and Dana would use a shoe sizer to measure the person’s foot.

But we didn’t buy the size that fit. The challenge for Mom was to guess how much my foot would grow that year — and buy something that was comfortable now but would accommodate future expansion. Several pairs would be unboxed and tried while I never left my chair.

“Wiggle your toes,” Dana would say.

I showed where the end of my toes came under the stiff leather. I think that’s why to this day I like to wear shoes with a little extra toe space.

I liked the high-top work boots better but they were more expensive. Sometimes I got them. Sometimes I didn’t. The purchase would usually include some waterproofing treatment and perhaps the most important protection — rubber overboots.

Nothing will hasten the demise of a good pair of boots or the admonishment of Mom than repeated exposure to cow manure. The overboots were to be worn when working in or near the barn, or when working in wet environments.

But I couldn’t wear them all the time – especially on hot summer days when I was putting up hay. And I couldn’t always anticipate when I needed to jump a fence to chase a cow through the creek bottoms or when I was going to need to dodge cow pies.

Today with my feet no longer growing and boots only working part-time, I can get years out of a pair of boots. This past summer, I finally gave up on a pair that lasted me 15 years. The soles were worn thin and nearly smooth, and the leather was thinned.

The boots’ final act was slogging through the mud after a flood had taken down part of a fence in the pasture. I left them outside to dry and we had more rain. The boots were left a muddy and sodden mess, which combined with their fragile state prompted me to finally throw them away.

Gene Dana sold his shoe store in 1979. It moved into a larger building next door in 1986 but eventually closed. Dana died in 2000. His former building at 216 Main St. is the location of The Merchant General Store, an old-time mercantile operated by Darren and Trish Durman.

Today when I buy a pair of boots, I can scarcely find a stool to sit on if I can even find the right size on the shelves. I know that I’m a 12D — sometimes E — but it would be fun for old time’s sake to hunt down a shoe sizer just to verify it.

But to this day, as soon as I try on a pair of boots or shoes, I think of Dana and I wiggle my toes.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at chardie1963@gmail.com.*

*030520-agrv-life-hardie-1: Chris Hardie’s winter work boats are more than 20 years old.*

*030520-agrv-life-hardie-2: Worn boots finally hit their end after 15 years of use by Chris Hardie.*

*030520-agrv-life-hardie-3: Ed Locken, a Norwegian shoemaker who came to Wisconsin in 1884 at the age of 17, opens a bootery in 1912 in a new building at 216 Main St., Black River Falls, Wisconsin. The inside of the Locken Shoe Store is full of stock and offers personalized help. Photo courtesy Jackson County Historical Society.*

*030520-agrv-life-hardie-4: A shoe sizer determines the width and length of a foot.*

*030520-agrv-life-hardie-5: Norwegian shoemaker Ed Locken is a new immigrant in 1886 to Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Photo courtesy Jackson County Historical Society.*

*030520-agrv-life-hardie-6: Ed Locken builds in 1912 a home for his shoe store at 216 Main St. in Black River Falls, Wisconsin. A flood wiped away most of the downtown in 1911.*