

Tanner Finnell

Prof. Barker

History 204

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Weinbrenner History

The story of the company began in 1855 when immigrant cobbler Peter Weinbrenner moved from the Province of Wiesbaden (later part of Germany) to the United States where he settled in Milwaukee. There he set up a cobbler shop where he would work for seventeen years with his son Albert, who would take over the business and begin to transform it into one of the leading shoe companies in the world. In 1892 he would set up a partnership deal with a man named Joseph Peffer and called the business "Weinbrenner & Peffer." The business for the first eight years would only be shoe jobbing in which they bought and sold shoes for bigger companies. In 1902 the duo then decided to enter the shoe manufacturing business by renting a small building and changing their name to the "Weinbrenner Company." For the next few years the company would make men and boys shoes and grow until they had 1,200 employees by 1916. They would make 20,000 pairs of shoes daily with 82 clicker cutting machines; the most in any factory in the United States. Weinbrenner joined a joint venture with 13 other companies under the name of the "Manufacturers Box Company" in August 1919. When the Great Depression hit, Weinbrenner implemented drastic changes as the two stitch down process of making shoes was developed and dealers sold shoes at \$0.95 and \$1.05 to keep production going in those troubled times. In the mid 1930's business improved as the company expanded outside of Milwaukee.

In 1935 Marshfield approached the Weinbrenner Company about relocating there by building a factory to help create jobs to deal with the Depression. It was begun in 1935 and opened in January 1936. Before the opening, Weinbrenner asked a Marshfield school called Purdy to help train future employees to use sewing machines and upper cutting machines. Weinbrenner conducted similar training programs based on this model. In March 1936 Merrill businessmen invited Weinbrenner officials to build a factory in the town following the Marshfield model. The company agreed and the factory was built on Stange South throughout 1936 and was completed in January 1937. A bridge was built so that people could reach the factory made out of wood twenty foot wide with a four foot walkway. When the factory was nearly completed the city held a celebration on December 5, 1936, that would go on for two days and was arranged by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. This event was nicknamed the "shoe bang" and was held in the factory itself with concession stands, automobile exhibits, and dance halls with local bands providing the music. After the opening production began under general manager Alvin Jung. Even with these

two new factories the executive offices, shipping, and sole cutting of Weinbrenner remained in Milwaukee.

In 1937 Antigo made a request for a third factory to be located there in January 1938 the factory opened and specialized in making children's footwear. The company started to produce safety footwear after a meeting in 1940 when officials from H. Childs Company in Pittsburgh discussed a partnership deal. In the future Weinbrenner would become one of the major suppliers of safety shoes. Soon after WWII broke out and the US government convinced major industrialists to switch to war goods in 1942, Weinbrenner was one to them. The company split the factories into making two different types of shoes for both the army and navy. The Marshfield and Antigo plants focused on making steel-toed shoes for the army, while the Merrill plant focused on making softer shoes for the navy. After the war the City of Rib Lake asked Weinbrenner if they could produce shoes independently for the company and would do so until the operation was absorbed into the Marshfield factory in 1950. On July 4, 1949 Albert H. Weinbrenner passed away leaving behind one of the biggest shoe producing companies of the twentieth century.

In the 50's, the company began to make special types of shoes with the name "Job-Fitted" being trademarked and applied to these new styles. Weinbrenner entered into another venture in October of 1951 with two other companies to form the "manufacturers" chemical company. This was designed to supply each company in the venture with tanning, footwear, chemicals such as adhesives, finishes, and other materials. On July 1st, 1960, the Weinbrenner family ownership ended and the company was bought by Textron Inc. in Rhode Island, though many family members still acted as corporate officers. Throughout the next few years production in children's footwear in the Antigo factory would be slowly phased out and replaced with men's casual footwear. The new shoe making technique called Process 82 in which a vulcanized rubber sole was attached to the leather upper part of the shoe was implemented at the Merrill factory. The company also made a contract with the Boy Scouts in 1960 and made their shoes for a while with the same model of shoe now being popular in Asia and is one of the biggest product the company makes today. In 1965 hand-sewn moccasins would increase in popularity throughout Wisconsin so a plant in the town of Kimberly produced them for Weinbrenner until production began in Antigo. On July 1st, 1966, Weinbrenner became part of the Bata Shoe Company headquartered in Toronto and in 1970 the company was finally dissolved becoming a division of Bata. The headquarters was moved from Milwaukee to Merrill in 1969.

The Bata Shoe Organization was a decentralized marketing operation that had ninety footwear factories, five engineering works, 5,000 retail stores, and employed 86,000 people when Weinbrenner was under its ownership. The philosophy of the whole organization being "The Customer is our Master" became the prime concern that Weinbrenner follows even today. Under this new ownership Bata executives would come from Toronto and would run Weinbrenner with sums of the income now sent to Bata. A retail factory for damaged shoes was also opened in 1973 within a space at the Merrill plant with a new Factory Outlet Store taking its place in the following year with two similar being built near the other two factories. In 1986 the company consolidated

its production facilities and closed the Antigo plant moving all its equipment to Merrill. Weinbrenner came back into local ownership in 1988 through the efforts of a local investment group that purchased the company from the Bata Organization. During the same year a new type of safety shoe was developed with new technology in a new division called "ThoroGard." In 1992 significant improvements were made to the injection molding process of shoes as eighteen new stations of Desma Polyurethane which could now attach the outsole directly and replaced the older twelve station units. In the same year the company would have a celebration similar to the opening of the Merrill plant with employees from both companies came and celebrated the 100 years the company has remained open for business.

Today shoe manufacturing is rare in America as shoe imports have replaced many of the factories in the US with only 2% of shoes still made in America. Weinbrenner is one of these companies and has stayed alive through selling uniform shoes, postal shoes, and safety toed shoes which are considered to be niche markets with the main buyers being the Merrill Fire Department, Merrill Police Department, and Merrill Postal Services. Shoes are also made for high temperature environments so to make sure these shoes fit requirements of the job they are also tested in a lab which costs \$15,000 for each test. They also make shoes for the military and make shoes for some bigger companies with the biggest being Fleet Farm. Outlet stores next to these factories still exist in order for people to buy ThoroGard shoes if they please. Smaller factories do exist as well in order to build upper parts of the shoes that are then shipped to the main factories. These are located in Wausau, Chicago, and St. Nazian. In Merrill part of the factory is split into different sections with some parts that were added on later being owned by Weinbrenner while the original factory is owned by the city of Merrill. This did change as in 2016 the whole building will own all of the building after the 124 lease. The company has also become part of ISO which is an international quality management system that has helped the company sell product overseas. Today production for both plants is 2000 shoes per day with 325-330 employees with 75 in the offices. The company is now owned by the employees through an ESAP in which many employees own stock of the company that act as part of their retirement plans when the stock is redeemed at the end of the employees career. About Five percent of the company business is done overseas with 60% being made in the factories here with the last 40% being made in overseas factories. Weinbrenner today has effected the Merrill community for decades as generations of families have worked for it and even today and people in Merrill use it as a stepping stone to advance better in their working career.

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Notable People/People Interviewed: David Finanger, Beverly King, Bianca Boettcher, Stan Gavic, Patrick Miner