

Weinbrenner Plant Here Has Continued Its Growth

By WILLIAM WITT

Standing today as a huge monument to the foresight and initiative of a city, stands an imposing factory. The factory has grown to 114,000 square feet of manufacturing, storage and shipping area, from an original 4,500 square feet. Established in Merrill in 1895, the industry has added a vast warehouse holding up to 360,000 pairs of shoes, a new sole cutting plant, and two office additions to handle expanding sales through the years.

Popular products of the big company are Bondshire, Prouditt, and Thorogood shoes. And its name is Weinbrenner, Division of Tectron, Incorporated, Portland, Oregon. The Albert H. Weinbrenner Company, it was added to the far-flung holdings of Tectron of Providence, Rhode Island, in May, 1960. At this time, Tectron also assumed control of Weinbrenner's general offices in Milwaukee and two plants in Mansfield and Andigo. The biggest plant is located in Merrill and functions as a central shipping unit in addition to its own shoe manufacturing.

As many as 7,000 pairs of shoes a day are trucked and mailed from Merrill to chain and department stores, mail order houses, wholesalers, shoe retailers and sports stores in every state of the nation. The post office receives an average of \$2,000 a week for handling Weinbrenner's large parcel post orders, which amount to 400 items a day.

The number of shoes produced here is staggering. The plant turns out 3,600 pairs every day; enough to rank the entire company close to the top in shoe manufacturers in the United States.

Weinbrenner makes every conceivable style of shoe, ranging from 200 different models of children's and adults' dress and work shoes to eight models of a new, patented vulcanized boot.

It takes 600 employees in Merrill to cut, stitch, last, bottom, finish, inspect, pack and ship the fast-selling shoes. And the plant's payroll runs to a million and a half dollars a year.

All of this is a monumental tribute to the city of Merrill, and especially to the Merrill Industrial Foundation which labored long and hard in 1935 in behalf of the municipality to extend the warmest possible invitation to the Weinbrenner company, which was at that time conducting possible sites in Wisconsin for a large new factory.

Money was scarce in 1935. The Industrial Foundation was hard pressed to locate funds, but, somehow it raised enough. And the city, true to its commitment, contributed double the Foundation's fund to erect a building for Weinbrenner. P. Arvon, Grout, C. R. Livingston and W. B. Carlson were leaders in the Foundation, which held the firm backing of industry, business and the people.

And Weinbrenner moved in. The city had a new industry. Merrill's benefits increased with the years. The industry expanded. And expanded. Employment rose, and the payroll rose with it. More pay envelopes meant greater local stopping, higher living standards for workers, a healthier economy for the city.

All because a few men and an alert community had the vision to build an industrial home for a pro-

ducing company.

The story of Weinbrenner in Merrill is typical of the company's growth at all of its locations in Wisconsin. It is a down-to-earth success story, aptly illustrated by turning time backward to 1900 when Weinbrenner was only a two-man partnership manufacturing nailed work shoes.

The tiny shoe makers flourished. Hard work and enterprise carried them through depressions and wars, got a single interruption in operation until today they rub shoulders with the largest shoe companies in the nation.

Among the hundreds of models Weinbrenner produces today, there are outstandingly popular Bondshire dress shoes are manufactured in Merrill at the rate of 1,400 a day. Special economy models are the fastest sellers in the dress shoe group. Service shoes for policemen and firemen remain a high level favorite year after year. In a week's run, 50 down of these tough shoes are produced.

Prouditt, another Weinbrenner brand, is made in 30 different models to satisfy the selective shopper. And Prouditt has a loyal fan club, judging from sales. Every day 600 pairs are purchased.

Children's shoes, called "stitch-downs," are produced in 30 different models in Merrill. And the plant also makes eight models of a unique rubber boot bearing the Thorogood name. This hunting boot is gobbled up by sportsmen everywhere at the rate of 600 pairs a day.

A newly developed, patented process for manufacturing shoes results in a unique welt designed to simulate stitching. The welt accounts for the popularity item. It adds to the boot's attractiveness, making it closer in appearance to the conventional leather cousins which come by the welt naturally. Developed in February, 1961, the process is a successful attempt to move away from the all-rubber sports boot which looks like a smooth stovepipe elbow from top to toe.

Rubber for the boot uppers is cured at the Merrill plant. Soles are die-cut here also. The uppers and soles meet in a press, where they are vulcanized inseparably to each other and to the all-important welt. From raw rubber to finished product, the hunting boots and adult grade shoes by Weinbrenner are exclusively in Merrill.

Exemplified by the sports boot, appearance as well as durability and ease of wear is extremely important in the vast and competitive shoe market. The United States has produced an all-time high of more than 600 million pairs of footwear each year for the last two years. In a field as large as this, information on current shoe-fashion trends is a necessity. And efficient methods of gearing production to meet changing trends is even more necessary.

Shoe styles, according to Weinbrenner, last approximately six months. Seasons are two a year—spring and fall. And the company keeps abreast of current developments by following the major shoe shows in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. At these fashion shows, hundreds of new styles are exhibited for dealers who arrive from all over the nation to view,

order, and determine the year's footwear vogues.

Pointed toes are popular, most of us are able to observe. And black has won the color race with brown. But less evident is an increasing predilection for loafers, part of a general long-term swing to lower-cut shoes.

Seasonally, shoes vary from light to heavy in weight and color. In spring one fancies turn to light and bright colors, light weight, and casual styles with perforations and mesh. In fall the more conservative cord becomes predominant. Wang tips and U-wings begin to appear on the toes of our shoes. And we wear darker, heavier, and more weather-resistant styles.

To manufacture its big style selection, Weinbrenner purchases millions of dollars of full grain leather each year from both domestic and foreign ranches. And from domestic packers, Tanners in Milwaukee and Fond du Lac, in Chicago, in Boston in Red Wing, Minnesota, and in California furnish the top grade cowhide in foot sizes ranging from small to large; calf, kip, extreme, and side. The Merrill company uses two of the largest sizes: extreme and side.

Sheepskin, kidskin and synthetic leather are also used in Weinbrenner shoes. And kangaroo from Australia is made into fancy dress shoes that are extremely soft, strong and durable. Full grain cowhides for linings come from big packers: Curdaly, Wilson and Amour.

The best hides, says Weinbrenner, come from Western ranches. These ranch—bred beef cattle bear the fewest scars from barbed wire and are thus more desirable. In addition, packers are able to maintain the greatest standardization in hides because of the large number they process.

Of the different beef hides purchased for shoes, leather from

steers makes the best uppers, and leather from bulls makes the toughest soles. Cowhide quality varies inversely with the number of times an animal has calved. The oftener a cow calves, the weaker its hide becomes.

Rubber for the Weinbrenner sports boot is purchased in two forms: synthetic and crude. Goodrich Chemical and Shell Chemical furnish the synthetic, and New York brokers import the crude from Africa for the company. Chemicals used in vulcanizing the boot come from a variety of industries: Vanderbilt Company, Du Pont, Columbia, Southern Chemical, Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and American Cyanamid Company.

The great variety of small items necessary in shoe manufacture, such as thread, laces, eyelets, nails, tacks, hooks, waxes and sprays are furnished primarily by Milwaukee and Boston suppliers. These suppliers cluster in the big shoe producing centers, of which there are three in the United States: Milwaukee, Boston, and St. Louis. Thus, there is a three-way split in national shoe commissaryship as well as in production.

A revolutionary feature of Weinbrenner's Merrill production is the manufacture of plastic counters, heel lifts and welt lifts for its own use. Two inspection machines gulp the special plastic and form it into the intricate shapes. The company also began making its own dies for cutting molds, within the last two years.

These dies, resembling large cookie cutters, are placed over stacks of skins and inserted beneath the spatulate hammer of the clicking machine. With the touch of a toe on a foot lever, the clicking hammer slams the die through the skin in one clean blow. Shoe outers and linings are cut to fit

lasts in this manner. Each die is designed to cut a shape for one particular last. Two dozen clicking machines hammer out the patterns at Weinbrenner, making the third floor cutting room resound like a gigantic, modified machine gun.

Cut pieces then move to the stitching room, also on the third floor of the big plant. Lastings and uppers are sewn together here, on 175 buzzing sewing machines. The basic pieces of shoe uppers, assembled here are vampis (front), plugs (midsole), quarters (back), and tongue, linings, and eyelets.

The lined uppers move to the first floor lasting room, where they are fitted and attached to wooden lasts. Fitting must be perfectly tight and smooth or crooked and useless shoes result.

The uppers, now on lasts, move next to the bottoming room for soles. Welts are sewn to the edges of insoles on the lasts. Wood or steel shanks are inserted, and cork filler is smeared on the insoles. Finally the shoes are stitched or cemented on, and the shoes are almost complete and ready for trimming and finishing.

They now move in high racks on dollies to the second floor for a variety of processing. They are nailed on and several cutters trim the rough edges of soles.

Then color is affixed on the edges with heat. The shoes are cleaned with steam, and the heels brushed. Special styles are stained or striped, and the shoes move to the first floor for tracing and packing.

In this department, heel pads are put in. Soles are embossed with the Weinbrenner name in gold leaf, and the shoes are sprayed with a coat of lustrous wax. A pair of shoes completes each product. All shoes are given a final inspection, in addition to inspections at each stage of production, and boxed for storage and shipping.

The vulcanized boots, of course, undergo quite different processing. Uppers are fitted over molds which serve as lasts. Slab rubber outsoles are placed in presses with the mold, and eight minutes of heat and pressure vulcanizes the two units together. The boots are inspected, boxed, and stored with the shoes for shipping.

Orders for the boots and shoes pour in from all parts of the United States, and thousands of pairs are shipped daily from the company's big warehouse. Including everything from golf to dress shoes, the diversified Weinbrenner output today commands a healthy share of the four billion dollar nationwide market, a tribute to a company which rose in 50 years from a two-man partnership to one of the largest shoe manufacturers in the country.