

Fancy feet

Weinbrenner steps outside

By Jim Lee

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Outdoorsmen know that comfort begins with the feet.

If toes are cold, wet, cramped or blistered, it won't be a good day in the woods.

So grouse hunters and hikers look for a boot that is waterproof, yet lightweight, durable and won't hold perspiration inside.

Trout fishermen search for wading shoes that slip on easily, resist abrasion, dry quickly and have soles that won't slip on slime-covered rocks.

Loggers want a tough, warm boot with steel toes for protection.

Deer hunters and ice fishermen put a premium on well-insulated, waterproof boots and would prefer that they not be heavy or bulky.

The needs are well-known.

Finding solutions has helped keep a north central Wisconsin shoe manufacturing firm in business for more than 90 years.

The Albert H. Weinbrenner Co. was formed on Jan. 1, 1890, in Milwaukee. Today, after several changes in ownership, the company is held by a group of Merrill and Wausau investors and operates two manufacturing plants, one in Marshfield and the headquarters operation in Merrill.

Weinbrenner started out making men's work shoes, dress shoes and boots. By 1916 the company employed 1,200 people and production reached 20,000 pairs of shoes daily, making the firm one of the top shoe manufacturers in the U.S.

Over the years, the company added military, police and postal footwear as well as safety shoes, children's and women's footwear to its lines. It also weathered hard times brought on by the 1930's depression and foreign competition.

Today, Weinbrenner produces 4,000 pairs of shoes a day, with outdoor boots and shoes comprising 20 percent of its production.

Many Wisconsin outdoorsmen are walking around in Weinbrenner shoes, without realizing the product was made in their midst.

"We produce few outdoor boots under our own name," explains Lance Nienow, vice president of operations.

The company puts out its own outdoor line under the Wood n' Stream label.

But you're more likely to run into the firm's boots under the Browning, L.L. Bean, Cabela, Gander Mountain, Eddie Bauer, Bass Pro or Mason label.

Weinbrenner bills itself as the company that builds "serious boots for those who take the outdoors seriously."

Bob Zembruski, sales administration manager, says the company tests its boot designs in the lab and field before a model is approved for production.

He notes that Weinbrenner's "snake-proof" boots were tested by a man who wore them into a pit of rattlesnakes to see if the material withstood the penetration of snake fangs as intended.

"I don't advise anyone else doing that," he adds. "I know I wouldn't do it. Not that the boots won't do their job, it's just that I don't care for snakes."

The company is currently experimenting with leather boots for hunters that come impregnated with birch-popple or pine scent. If successful, that would mask human scent and make it unnecessary for deer hunters to switch to rubber boots, which hide human scent better than leather.

A camouflage boot made especially for bow hunters is also in the offing.

In promoting its boots in the market, Weinbrenner is quick to tout the quality of its workforce.

"We are a locally-owned company where people take pride in what they're doing," said Steve Kellman, vice-president for marketing.

Weinbrenner boots generally fall into the midrange when it comes to price.

Kellman says they are second-to-none in quality.



Rob Orcutt/Wausau Daily Herald

Best foot forward: Displaying some of the outdoor footwear produced by Weinbrenner Shoe Company, Merrill, are (from left): Lance Nienow, vice

president of operations; Steve Kellman, vice president of marketing; and Linda Herber, a technical designer for the company.

Leather boots make use of new synthetics

Today's leather boots are constructed for all-around usage. A premium is put on a boot's ability to be lightweight, comfortable and waterproof.

Here's a look at the materials used by Weinbrenner in the manufacture of some of its boots.

- **Cambrelle lining**, which lets air in and wicks moisture out. Helps keep feet warmer in winter, cooler in summer.

- **Sympatex membrane**, a waterproof material that lets perspiration evaporate, keeps feet warm and dry.

- **B400 Thinsulate** insulation to keep feet warm.

- **WeatherTuff leather**, a waterproof, supple, lightweight, breathable leather that is easy to keep clean.

- **Aerowick contoured**, breathable, removable and washable footbed insole for comfort, warmth and dry feet.

- **Aerowick insole** as an added barrier against cold feet.

- **Sealed seams** that ensure boots remain waterproof.

- **Polyurethane midsole** absorbs shock, provides comfort when walking. Insulates against cold and heat.

- **Indy 500 Rubber outsole** has traction tread for improved gripping on wet, slippery surfaces.

- **Padded leather collar** for added comfort.

To keep feet dry and warm, waterproofing is a must. Weinbrenner officials say their leather boots are so well constructed, you can wade in water and won't get wet feet unless water splashes over the tops.



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Footwork: Weinbrenner produces a varied line of outdoor footwear, including a snake-proof boot (front row, far left) and a wading shoe (second row, middle).