

Weinbrenner leaves footprint in industrial shoe market

By Carolyn Tiry

Gannett Central Wisconsin Media

MERRILL — You won't find fashion at Weinbrenner Shoe Co., and customers have just two color options: brown and black.

At least, that's what Human Resources Manager John Henson said of the Merrill-based shoe manufacturer, which makes occupational footwear such as specialized workboots for factory employees and shoes for postal service, police and fire employees.

But that somewhat limiting array of colors hasn't limited the company from developing and patenting new styles of shoes, investing in its production capabilities and expanding to overseas markets.

Weinbrenner is striving for innovation on both the design and the manufacture of its shoes. The company is investing in a new \$2 million injection machine to help it fulfill a \$68 million, five-year military contract, President Pat Miner said. The machine, which is used to attach soles to boots, would double the company's production capacity — and give Weinbrenner a leg up on the competition.

"We're expanding

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WEINBRENNER SHOE CO.

Address: 108 S. Polk St., Merrill

Phone number: 715-536-5521

Website: www.weinbrennerusa.com

Established: 1892

Top executive: Pat Miner

Number of employees: 300

Description: Weinbrenner Shoe Co. manufactures occupational footwear, which includes military boots, industrial workboots and shoes for uniformed employees, such as police officers, firefighters and postal workers.

EMPLOYEE PROFILE:

TARA BAUMAN

Residence: Merrill

Position: Product developer

What you should know: Tara Bauman has been with Weinbrenner for 15 years, but to her, the job is new. Bauman recently transferred from the factory to the product development team, which creates shoe designs and makes by hand a model of each shoe, which includes cutting leather and stitching the pieces together.

She still is in training in product development — learning how to use a computer program and make templates — but already has found that her time in the factory has helped her make connections between the process of designing the shoe and assembling it.

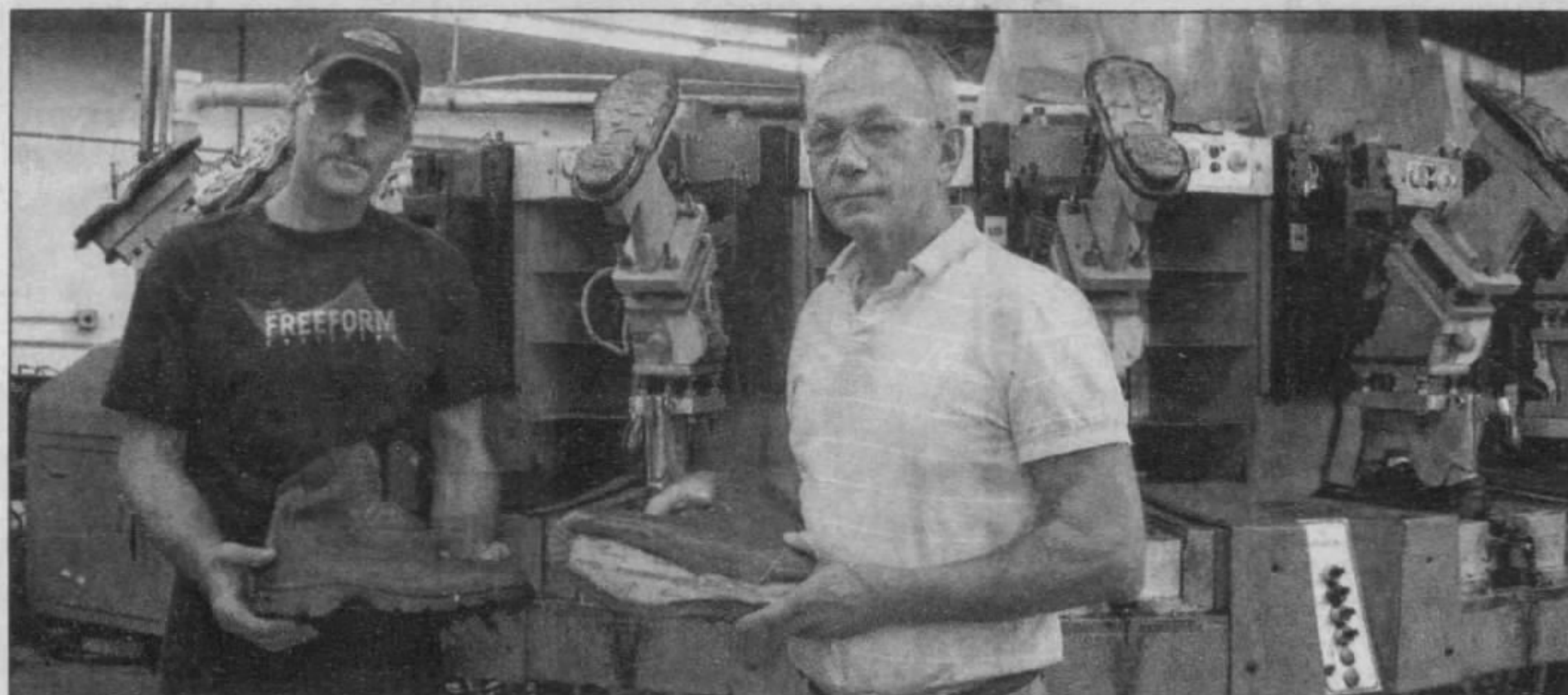
"I'm still getting used to all of this, but the transition so far has been going smoothly," she said. "I'm grateful that I've been given this kind of opportunity to move up."

President Pat Miner said Bauman exemplifies the way in which many of the company's employees work their way through the company from the ground up.

"She has stepped out of the role of working in the factory to working in product development," he said. "We're investing in our people, as well."



Above: Tara Bauman watches as Linda Herber demonstrates how to properly cut leather using a template. PHOTOS BY CAROLYN TIRY/GANNETT CENTRAL WISCONSIN MEDIA



At left: Worker Greg Zais, left, and plant superintendent Craig Seis with boots before and after they have been through a sole injection machine, which the company plans to upgrade.

Shoes

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where others are contracting," he said.

But that's not the only innovation at the century-plus-old company.

Members of the product development team are transitioning to a new computer design system that will give them more control over design and sizing. And when you're in an industry where an eighth of an inch separates a size 8 from a size 9, Miner said, that control and accuracy is important.

On top of its multi-million-dollar government contracts and a rise in popularity overseas, particularly in Japan and central Europe, Weinbrenner recently has made a name for itself in many niche markets, such as boots for loggers in the Pacific Northwest. One product, which sales coordinator Dave Hinke described as "the Cadillac of boots," has gained a reputation for lasting about four months — an eternity



Weinbrenner Shoe Co. in Merrill CAROLYN TIRY/GANNETT CENTRAL WISCONSIN MEDIA

in the harsh conditions in which those men and women work.

Manufacturing shoes is a labor-intensive process because much of the work — from initial design to stitching together of each shoe's constituent parts — simply can't be done by computers or machines. Only human hands can work the leather properly.

"No matter how hard you try to automate that process, it just doesn't happen," he said.

But finding people who have been appropriately trained can be difficult, Miner said, which is why Weinbrenner and other manufacturing companies are working with the

state to develop a training program to prepare workers for the industry.

And for Weinbrenner, which is employee-owned and emphasizes how important its employees are to its success, that training is crucial to keeping the business local. About 54 percent of Weinbrenner shoes are manufactured in two factories in Merrill and Marshfield, Miner said. At a time when more than 90 percent of the shoes sold in the U.S. are imported, that is something in which the company and its employees take great pride.

"When you look at those statistics," he said, "it shows what a gem Weinbrenner really is."