

Of Cobblers, Tailors and Watchmakers

The other day, Val asked me to try and get one of her shoes fixed. There was a Velcro strap used to tighten the shoe, but it wasn't holding tight. It turns out that there were several shops listed in the greater Cincinnati area, including one right here in Fairfield. But when I called, their number had been disconnected. That seems to epitomize the story of cobblers and shoe repair shops.

The second shop I called wasn't too far away, in the vicinity of Tri County mall, less than a half hour away. He was still in business. It was on a street that intersected a busy north-south thoroughfare we've driven on dozens of times. He was located on a strip mall lined with Mexican stores; a *taqueria* (taco restaurant), *carniceria* (meat shop), even a *Michoacan* ice cream shop (Michoaca is a southwest state in Mexico). I never knew this place existed, we had never ventured around this particular block. Little Mexico instantly came to mind. There must be more Mexican or Hispanic heritage people in the area than I imagined.

The shoe shop couldn't have contained more than 100 square feet of open floor area. The rest of the space was occupied, almost floor to ceiling, with products. There were shoe supplies such as polish, brushes, inserts, leather laces; finished products like vests, a few jackets, purses and beautiful hand tooled belts; all leather, of course. In the back, behind the counter, were a couple of antique looking machines. You could tell they were antique, with the hand cranks, exposed drive belts and lack of a computer screen. The man was gruff, past middle age, with an accent. When I said "good morning," his response was "what's so good about it?" After I dropped off Val's shoes, I was determined to find out more about him. But first, some research on the internet was called for. Why are cobblers hard to find?

A generation ago, there were 60,000 cobblers listed in the U.S. Today, it is down to about 10 percent of that number. The remaining ones are typically immigrants, or children of immigrants whose fathers passed on their craft. There are few, if any, native born Americans who would dream of being a cobbler.

When I was growing up in Manila, it was quite common to have bespoke shoes. A favorite store among friends and family was called Camara. I can't remember exactly what the shoes cost, but they were pretty reasonable. The shoemaker, or *zapatero*, showed you a catalog and you picked the style you want. They would measure each of your feet, and two weeks later, you'd have a pair of shoes. We liked to add metal heel taps to the finished shoe, which made a clicking sound when walking on hard surfaces. I wonder if Camara or other shoemakers are still around in Manila. I'll have to find out during my next visit. If they are, I'll choose from a Gucci or Ferragamo catalog!

When I returned to pick up Val's shoes a few days later, the cobbler was no less gruff. I asked for a few minutes of his time, to talk about his craft. He was reluctant at first. His family came from Italy, in the Veneto region. When I told him I had worked in Galliera Veneta, staying in either Bassano del Grappa or Castelfranco, he started to warm up a little. In fact, his family came from the Castelfranco area, emphasizing that you have to state Castelfranco Veneto, to

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distinguish it from other Castelfrancos. Jerry and his family came to Kentucky, the father farmed, but he got into the shoe repair business, along with his brother Tony. They were trained by an old cobbler in Hamilton. But over the years shoe manufacturing shifted from the U.S. to Asia. Prices dropped. You didn't have your shoes repaired, you threw them out and bought new ones. Besides, fashion changed. So our cobblers, with fewer and fewer shoes to repair, shuttered their shops. I asked about the equipment he was using. They date back to the 1960s.

I asked him if I could buy him a cup of coffee so he could relate the rest of his story. The gruffness returned, saying I make my own coffee. Well then, I said I'd drink his coffee. His final words were "the shoemakers are all dead or dying."

Serendipitously, a cousin in the Boston area sent me an article about an Italian immigrant cobbler who was still repairing shoes at age 84. He has tried to sell his shop, but there haven't been any takers. So he soldiers on. I showed the clipping to our local cobbler and he instantly recognized the machine used by the Bostonian. He said "I use the same kind of machine." Like Vincenzo in Boston, Jerry and his brother Tony in Tri County keep repairing.

From the subject of shoes, I got to thinking about other types of craft, like tailoring, that are disappearing in the U.S. I have several pairs of pants made during the times I visit Manila. There is a world of difference between off the rack and the bespoke kind. They look better and feel more comfortable. For material and labor, it costs \$30 on up in Manila, depending on the fabric.

The husband of Rina, one of Val's volunteer friends, is a retired tailor. Rina and eighty three year old Elvino are Italian immigrants. Rina's father worked as a shoemaker back in Italy. Elvino worked most of his life as a tailor for Sears and Roebuck. Sears, too, is on its last legs. Any men's suits, pants and jackets in the remaining Sears stores are most certainly made in Asia. American tailors are long gone.

Haberdashery shops are still a booming business in Hong Kong and Singapore. Oftentimes, the Asian tailors would travel to the U.S., setting up shop in a hotel room, where you can come in for measurements. Trivia question - name the U.S. president used to own a haberdashery shop.

We have a mantel clock given to us by our children. It broke down one time, and like the cobbler, finding a watchmaker was a challenge. I found an old shop in Mt. Lookout, east of Cincinnati. His story was similar to our cobblers', he was older and came from Europe. His shop was more presentable, with beautiful wall clocks, some playing music, sometimes made of metal, sometimes ceramic. A few were collector's items, with four figure price tags. At least that's what they were listed for. There were clocks with a merry go round, others with Hummel figurines. But who buys these kinds of clocks anymore?

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You might say that I'm bemoaning crafts that are going the way of covered wagon makers, cigar rollers and blacksmiths. But for one, we are talking about shoes, an item that each of us use every single day. A survey determined that each American man owned twelve pairs of shoes, women twice as many. That's more than six billion pairs! You'd think there would be a great demand for cobblers.

But more than that, I consider the loss of a craft as a sad occasion.

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