

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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Historical photo of Matt McDaniel's last making shop in St. Louis, Mo., circa 1920. Patrickus bought this business in the early 1980s to start JP's Boots in Camdenton, Mo.



Feet and shoes underpin our daily conversations as fascinating sources of folkloric expressions. How often have you cringed at social gatherings when someone (perhaps acting like a real heel) puts his foot in his mouth? If you're a parent, more than likely you've had to put your foot down once or twice (after all, you're footing the bill for these kids). If you're too stern, don't be surprised if your children don't follow in your footsteps (although, my parents tell me there's real satisfaction in being a grandparent because now the shoe is on the other foot). It's easy to get off on the wrong foot, but good practice to put yourself in someone else's shoes (as immortalized by *To Kill a Mockingbird*). This obnoxious linguistic display giving you a headache? Get footloose.

Joe Patrickus, the semi-retired proprietor of JP's Custom Handmade Boots, is not a character from folklore, but his custom leather boots evoke a bygone era of craftsmanship and artistry. A fifth generation boot-maker and master artist in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, Joe has practiced the laborious art in the quaint Lake of the Ozarks town of Camdenton, Mo., for nearly forty years. Though he "retired" almost a decade ago, turning the reigns of the family business over to his former apprentice and oldest son, Joey, he still frequents the shop regularly, if only, he jokes, to "pick up his paycheck."

Walking into JP's is about as magical as anything you'll find in a Grimm tale, though discernibly more rustic American than bucolic Hessian. On a recent visit in May, I was greeted instantly with the delectable smell of aged leather. As I would later learn, JP's doesn't only traffic in your run-of-the-mill cattle or goat skins. Here, the boot connoisseur can dream up any number of exotic materials. With a bit of glee and a charming grin, Joe sorts through a box and lets me handle a dozen skins, rattling off the species at a glance: ostrich, iguana, stingray, butterfly fish, alligator, even South African frog. Seemingly, anything with a pulse can be turned into a boot.

What "magic" is there in boot-making? Joe wonders after I use that word to describe my first impressions of the shop. "We're the second oldest profession in the world," he laughs. If you believe the statistics, Nike makes twenty-five pairs of sneakers every second. Joe takes at least forty hours per pair. So what is it about these custom boots that attracts celebrities and commoners alike to JP's? Can a shoe be magical?

While trying to pinpoint the source of my wonder, I'm admittedly mesmerized by an assortment of shoe "lasts" dangling from the ceiling. "Their placement is a practical decision," Joe tells me. A way to create more space in a small shop, but its old-world charm is aesthetically seductive. Like ghosts of shoes previously created—and those not yet created. These incredibly dense, carved blocks of Canadian maple (back in the Middle Ages cast-iron was used but high-density plastic is now more common), shaped into an abstract concept of a foot, are the most fundamental objects in the cordwainer's trade. The last is the soul of the shoe, and the word comes from Old English, *laest*, meaning footprint. Once a



Custom boot lasts hang from the shop ceiling.



Boot-maker Joe Patrickus at his work table.



A pair of boots customized with the shop's logo.

cordwainer carves the last, he can use it as a mold, amending raw materials around the last to create a custom, fitted cavity for the individual's foot. Using wood lasts is fundamental, as the process draws out moisture from the applied wet leather, effectively curing the leather to help hold the shape of the boot better.

All puns aside, it's a strange idea—shoes with souls. It lends the last, and by proxy JP's shop, a kind of uncanniness. The Laws of Thermodynamics insist that creation *ex nihilo*, from nothing, is impossible. JP's swings like a pendulum between confirming that principle and turning it upside-down. To watch a boot come to life—painstakingly slow, stitched piece by piece—is to see something appear out of seemingly nothing. In our increasingly mechanized and automated world in which machines beget machines that beget other machines, this kind of craftsmanship is a marvel. Admittedly, there are plenty of machines at JP's, including sewing machines dating back to the 1940s and a leather-stitching machine from the late nineteenth century. Joe sold his 1898 lathe, used to create lasts, several years ago. These machines might have an antiquated romanticism for some, but for this traditional boot-making family, the machines are vital to their artistry.

For a young antiquarian like me, these shoe lasts evoke more than mere carved wood. It feels like touching a past that is centuries old, conjuring in me a nostalgia for worlds

I've never known. Folklore is rich with stories about shoes and feet. Before Elvis caused teens to swoon with his blue suede shoes, Cinderella danced in fragile glass slippers, and magical seven-league boots allowed heroes in "Hop o' My Thumb" and "Jack the Giant Killer" to leap incredible distances. A lesser-known conclusion to the Brothers Grimm's "Snow White" depicts the wicked queen maliciously forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she drops dead. And what would the legendary feline swashbuckler in Charles Perrault's "Puss-in-Boots" be without his boots? Puss-in...fur? Dorothy receives magical ruby slippers to aid her journey through Oz, and in *The Hobbit* the enigmatic woodsman Tom Bombadil sings songs about his sporty yellow boots. Stretching back further, Norse mythology tells of *helskór*—shoes placed on dead warriors enabling them to walk into Valhalla. In Greek mythology, the winged-sandals of Hermes assist Perseus in defeating Medusa and rescuing Andromeda. And let's not forget about poor Achilles who might have benefited from a pair of sturdy JP's boots to cover that delicate heel. ■