

Shoes

Dan Weatherington 33°

The world is changing. This isn't news. It has been changing since the beginning of time. As an example, long before speculative Masonry began, a need for a pair of shoes was the first step in a lengthy process. First a suitable hide would have to be found. Hopefully, it was wrapped around tonights, but if not the man needing footwear would have to head for the woods. If the hunt went well the hide would have to be cleaned and tanned. We won't explore this lengthy process here, but it took time and labor.

Once he had a pelt that was soft enough to use, yet sturdy enough to withstand the unpaved roads and rocky soil, he measured his feet, cut his pelt, and hope to design, contrive and sew something that would protect his feet and be practical to wear. He would adjust here, cut there, and re sew and rework his creation until it was perfect. At that point... he had his "shoes". They were exactly what he wanted.

Later "cobblers" came on the scene. All that was needed was to visit the cobbler and tell him what you wanted. He would measure your feet, purchase a skin from the tannery that had purchased it from a hunter and within a few days or weeks you would have your new shoes. Since someone else made them, they weren't exactly "perfect", but the little imperfections were still better than having to make your own.

A few decades passed and giant steps in mechanization and the influx of cheap labor fresh from Europe allowed a person to walk into a "shoe store" and buy "off the rack". These shoes were made in arbitrary "sizes" and though your feet might be the length of 9 1/4 barleycorns (yes, that's the original unit of shoe size) you might have to settle for a pair of size 10s which were really too large or a pair of size 9s that were really too small. (half-sizes wouldn't appear until later) But, in either case, a few corns and calluses were a small price to pay for ready-made shoes you could get instantly and a whole lot better than heading for the woods, etc. to make your own.

For years, the shoe store, just like the dry goods store, the dress shop, the men's shop, the sporting goods store, the toy store, the pet shop, the pharmacy, the corner grocery, and a hundred other specialized shops were a vital part of every community. These stores were the mainstay of every town. They provided jobs, they paid taxes, they provided services, and in many ways... they were the town.

But like the hunters of three hundred years ago, the cobblers of two centuries ago, and the family owned stores of a century ago, these "shops" and "stores" are leaving the American scene. These icons of Norman Rockwell paintings are no longer practical. They are being replaced by the "Big Box" stores like Wal-Mart, K-Mart and Target. In one visit to a Big Box one can buy his shoes... and also the week's groceries, hardware items, a dress for mom and pants for pop. People can get prescriptions filled and have their tires rotated.

And, ironically, now that the Big Boxes appear to command the American marketplace, their

replacement is already taking hold... quite substantially. Purchases on the Internet are growing by literally billions of dollars a year. Even the Big Boxes are establishing their own “dot coms” to compete with this trend.

Each change means a gain. And every change has casualties. One no longer has to make his own shoes, or wait days or weeks to get them. These are gains everyone enjoys. But one of the first casualties is quality. There’s no arguing that the mass-produced shoe on the store rack didn’t possess the quality of the shoe hand made with pride by the cobbler. Yet, it still had more quality than the pressed-out vinyl and nylon creation found in the Big Box store. People don’t pretend that the quality of the merchandise purchased from the Big Box is the same as the product purchased from the “mom and pop” store uptown or at the mall. It’s not. But in many cases even though it’s not the quality you really want, it is cheaper and most likely it is there when you need it.

Another casualty of change is those who are left behind refusing to see that things are different. The little shoe repair shops of years ago are almost gone. Today, in many cases it’s cheaper to buy a new pair of shoes at the Big Box or off the Internet than it is to have a pair resoled. It’s cheaper to buy a new dress or pair of pants off the Internet or from the Big Box than it is to get them repaired.

What has this to do with Masonry? What have a bunch of old men who had rather feel the quality of a Florshiem shoe on their feet even after its fifth new sole got to do with a group of men whose best shoes are mass-produced in Taiwan and will be thrown away long before the soles are even worn? What has a group of men who enjoy being known by name at the men’s shop or grocery store got in common with a group whose idea of “friendly” service is the canned “good morning” said by someone paid to say it at Wal-Mart? Today’s men are different. They have a whole different set of problems... they have a whole different set of solutions.

Too many Masons condemn the “Big Box” quality of those available to us yet passionately embrace a “Big Box” method of making our message known. The combination, just like “2B1Ask1” bumper stickers simply doesn’t work. The best quality shoes in the story above were made one at a time. They weren’t mass-produced. They weren’t standardized. Each time the volume increased... the quality declined.

There are still good men out there and there are more of them than ever before. There are honorable men, but it’s up to us to lower that bridge between us... it is difficult and in most cases we have failed! Proof? Take a test that I fail miserably. How many Scottish Rite Masons have you tried to keep involved in the Rite? How many have you brought to a reunion? How many have you gotten involved in the work? If you’re like me, it would be a safe bet that the number of men you know who dropped out after the Shrine downgraded its requirements for membership exceeds the number of present members you have diligently tried to keep involved. Just shuffling them through a reunion and hoping it sticks, just isn’t enough.

The same is true with the Lodge. We condemn people for not coming back, but don’t we really condemn them for not coming back ON THEIR OWN? What have we done to keep them involved?

We're not hurting for members. Neither the Scottish Rite, York Rite, nor the Blue Lodge can handle the members we have this very minute. All we have to do is bring back a few we've ALLOWED to leave because we didn't make the effort to keep them and we'll have lots of members. A lot more than we're going to get from bumper stickers.