

Lansing's Early History

A Pioneer Cobbler

In the pioneer days in Lansing the male population rarely wore shoes, those commodities so common now were considered fit only for women and children, handmade boots being the exclusive footgear for the sterner sex. For everyday work boots those made of cowhide, heavy and cumbersome, better known in those days as "stogies" were worn, while the Sunday or fine boots were made of calf skin and were worn only on special occasions, the dress boots frequently lasting for years.

Then there were no styles in footgear to be changed by the fads of a few so that a pair of calf boots could be worn as long as they looked well and remained intact, there being no fear of being ostracized for the use of out of style footwear.

Henry A. Woodworth, the Washington avenue shoe dealer is one of the pioneer boot and shoe dealers in this section, having learned the trade from his father who began business in 1854 on the same ground now occupied by his son's store. The latter has continued the business in the location until the present time, more that 50 years. Mr. Woodworth relates the following very interesting anecdotes regarding boot and shoe making in the early years.



Woodworth Shoes, circa 1898, located at 115 N Washington

"Yes there have indeed been many changes in this business during the past 50 years," said he. "My father started a shoe shop in a wooden building on the very ground now occupied by my store, the shop

being in the front of the building while the rear was used for living apartments for his family. I was then only a boy and learned the business with my father as instructor. Of course the men only wore boots and as far as the first cost of the class of footwear is concerned they cost the customer about the same as the shoes of today bring per pair. Cow hide boots or stogies brought \$3, kip boots \$3.50 and \$3.75, while the American calf and French calf boots sold for \$5 and \$6. Not long ago a man came into my store to purchase a pair of shoes and pulling off a pair of calf boots he was wearing said they were made by me and asked how long I thought he had worn them. I had no idea for we had not made boots for many years and in response to a question from me he said he has worn the boots over 14 years.

“So you see asking the durability of the old fashion calf boots into consideration they were much more economical than the present style of footwear.

“For more than 20 years there has been no demand for handmade boots,” continued Mr. Woodworth, “although there have been a few pairs made in my shop since that time.”

“I will never forget a remark made by a customer who came into my place of business shortly after shoes had commenced to be popular among the men. As was customary I asked him if he wished boots or shoes. ‘Boots, of course,’ was the reply. ‘Shoes are made for women and children but boots are for the use of man.’

“There were only about four cobblers in Lansing when I commenced the trade,” said Mr. Woodworth, “and it kept us all busy to supply demands made on us for footwear and repair work. In those days there were no machine sewed or nailed boots or shoes, all work being done with hand pegs for the soles, the latter having gone out of use only recently.”

“Rubbers have been in use but a short time,” replied Mr. Woodworth when asked if those commodities of recent years were in use in the pioneer days, “people had no use for them 30 years ago. The women usually had an extra heavy pair of shoes for use in the winter and during wet weather and the men wore their heavy boots.

“The cobbling business is nothing today as compared to the early days” said he, “now only repairing is done on the bench, soles are furnished almost ready for use and in my estimation it does not require the skill formerly required.

“Some of the leather we used 50 years ago was tanned right here in this city, there being a tannery located on the corner now occupied by the Dodge block, Ottawa street and Washington avenue.”¹

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¹ NE corner N Washington and Ottawa. Current site of Capitol Bancorp Ltd.