

The Boot Shack:

Minnesota Favorite Fits 'Em Like No Other

MARY RUOFF

Though country music artist Wade Hayes lives outside Nashville, Tennessee, he buys his western boots from The Boot Shack in St. Cloud, a city 65 miles northwest of Minneapolis in central Minnesota. Unsurprisingly many customers hail from these parts, but Hayes and lots of others come from further afield, even outside the country. They shop in person when they're in or near the area, or by phone – this proudly traditional store (a.k.a. The Shack) doesn't do e-commerce. Even if it did, a chat would likely be in order: the longtime NSRA member stocks 7,000-plus pairs of footwear, mostly western and work boots in sizes 3–18 and widths 4A–4E. Western styles include custom-designed beauties in a myriad of colors, patterns and leathers, with exotic options like elephant and alligator.

Usually going for black or brown, Hayes recently stepped out in a pair of gray-green ostrich leather R. Watson Boots, a Texas brand that wasn't on his radar before he connected with The Shack. "For them to offer such a selection in my very odd size (13.5 AA) is virtually unheard of," muses the 55-year-old, who started having problems with "off the shelf" boots in his 30s. Yet his feet aren't oddly narrow. "Even if you were measured years ago, the human foot changes as you age so your boot size should be adjusted to accommodate these changes," explains the "Proper Fit" page at www.thebootshack.com. "The bones in the foot elongate from constant pressure and weight placed on them, so your boot size generally gets longer and narrower."



Sells More Narrows Than Other Stores

The Shack carries **New Balance** sneakers as well as casual shoes (Dunham and other brands), also in mostly narrow sizes, just like the western and work boots. Probably the small independent shoe retailer sells more narrows than any other U.S. shoe store relative to its size. Western boots should be snug, but that's not why. It's because the store fits all customers using the Brannock device, measuring feet from the heel to the ball of the foot to determine the size of the arch, not simply from heel to toe and width.

That's how it was designed to be used – but these days, if used at all, the arch isn't measured, insists Kevin Durken, who owns and runs the business with his wife, Deb. "We are the only store in the country that measures feet like they did in the old days," proclaims the website. It's common for a 300-pound male customer to switch shoe size from, say, 13 EE to 15 B. During a typical week, The Shack may only sell one pair of wide boots or shoes. We call it "the first-timer's smile," says Kevin of customers' reaction to trying on footwear that provides good arch support and is level, so they stand correctly



The store opened in 1980 in a former watchman's shack. A few years later it moved next door to its current location behind a saloon.



The Boot Shack owners Deb and Kevin Durken, with their sole employee, Gabe Junkin.

instead of inadvertently leaning forward. “Once we’ve got the customer they keep coming back.” Adds his wife Deb, “People are referred here from friends and relatives not only for boots that fit but for the ‘experience’ of getting fit!”

The Shack Is Big on American-Made Boots

While The Shack’s reputation has spread through western boot online chat groups, social media and word-of-mouth,



Kevin Durken with the Brannock Device he uses to fit all customers, assuring that their arches are sized correctly.

Hayes spotted The Shack when performing nearby about 10 years ago and checked it out. The singer and musician stops in when he’s back in the area on tour; the Durkens catch his shows. “I’ll always buy from them and am glad to. I try to turn other people on to them,” says Hayes, who dons “peak condition” boots for performances so purchases more than he otherwise would. “I’ve never met anyone who went to that much trouble to help me out. They’re extremely thorough, professional and nice people.”



The store’s stockroom takes up just under two-thirds of the store’s square footage, housing over 25 boot brands, New Balance sneakers and other casual shoes.

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Many of The Shack’s 25-plus boot brands – some western, some work and some both – are made in the United States or Leon, Mexico, the famed leather footwear-making center. For hikers and hunters there’s Kenetrek boots, produced in Italy for the Montana company. Work boots retail from \$250–\$300 for Carolina boots to \$500–\$700 for White’s Boots. On the west-

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ern side prices run from \$200 to \$5,000 – alligator leather is priciest. The website mostly showcases the store's custom-designed western boots, many handcrafted by esteemed Texas bootmakers Lucchese, Rios of Mercedes, Rod Patrick Boots and Stallion Boots & Leather Goods.

A “Passionate” Business Approach

Kevin's been with the business since it opened in 1980 in a former watchman's shack for livestock barns, going from sole employee to owner in a few months, a deal financed with a \$22,000 bank loan that wasn't approved until his dad put up the cows on the family farm as collateral. A few years later The Shack moved next door to the space it leases behind a saloon/eatery. Soon after, a sales representative schooled the shopkeeper on proper use of the Brannock device. Kevin laments that corporate shoe brands, with their eye on the bottom line, don't make more narrow widths. Boot brands as well as sneaker-maker New Balance have told the Durkens their store sells far more narrows than other retailers.

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“There is nobody more passionate about what he does than Kevin. He doesn't understand why the whole world doesn't measure feet and follow his philosophy on things,” says Lee Zimmerman, The Shack's H.H. Brown Work & Outdoor Group's sales representative for Carolina and Double-H Boots as well as private label work boots made for the retailer at Carolina's Martinsburg, Pennsylvania, factory. “They've really built a niche with what they offer and the way they fit customers.”

H.H. Brown is part of Berkshire Hathaway Shoe Holdings, whose Justin, Tony Lama, Chippewa and Nocona boots The Shack also carries. The store is among Zimmerman's top ten accounts – and No. 1 by far in terms of sales per retail square foot. With such a large inventory, the retail side takes up only 750 of the business's 2,000 square feet. Display boots pack five-tier shelves in the shop. While the vibe is rustic and homey, fitting chairs sit throne-like. Western-style accessories like wallets and belts with silver buckles are sold, along with work gloves, wool socks, etc.



Kevin Durken at work in the early days of The Boot Shack.

Donates Shoes to Those in Need

NSRA's credit/debit card processing program and seminars have been a big help to the business. On the giving side, it donates footwear to several nonprofit groups: Angel Reins Stable, which provides equine therapy to veterans, human trafficking survivors and others suffering trauma (The Shack helped launch its horse show fundraiser); St. Cloud StandDown, which assists homeless veterans (along with donations, the retailer sells the group footwear at cost); and Catholic Charities. Kevin gives talks at a community college and businesses about the importance of properly fitted work footwear. Every week he shares stories about helping customers with feet problems on local radio “talking ads.”

While there isn't a second generation in line, the couple hopes to sell the business in the years ahead to Gabe Junkin, 28, their sole employee. All three work full time and multi-task. Deb, who joined The Shack in 2003, keeps the books; Kevin does most of the ordering, Junkin some. “As long as I've worked here, Kevin's been kind of a father figure to me,” says the aspiring entrepreneur and former Boot Barn chain salesperson. “We can bicker a little bit, but at the end of the day we know we're both important to each other.” Says Kevin of his protégé: “He is very good – very conscientious and loves the business.” ■