

Professional Pedigree: Third-Generation Boot Maker Deana McGuffin

By Brian D'Ambrosio

It took Deana McGuffin a year of haggling with her father, L.L. McGuffin, to convince him to teach her how to make a pair of boots. Only after 10 years in the business did her dad finally tell her that she was “a good bootmaker,” without qualifying his approval with the all-too-familiar “but...” Now, at age 73, Deana McGuffin represents more than 100 years of family craftsmanship and practice.

“My dad was gracious and he gave me his praise,” Deana says, now four decades into a boot making career. “But it wasn’t easy for him to say those things. At that time, women and girls didn’t learn to expect too much. We were not taught to expect too much. It might have been hard for someone like my dad to learn that a woman could do anything that they wanted to.”

Ancestry and Ability: Three Generations of Boot Makers

The McGuffin generational artistry can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century in Carrizozo, N.M. There, L.L. McGuffin’s father,

Charles Claudius McGuffin, operated a shoe repair shop in which his 12-year-old son would competently repair boots. This was the pre-factory era, when most of the bootmakers in the country were located along the Chisholm Trail, supplying the cowboys and ranch hands with their footwear, Deana said.

“In my grandfather’s time, there were top makers and bottomers,” she said. “They were two different skill sets. There weren’t too many people making the whole boot. Along the Chisholm Tail, the cowboy boot was a modification of the German cavalry and military boot. It took on a life of its own.

“Dad was a bottomer. He would order tops and they’d send the tops and he would put them on last. Dad went to Portales and he met John Skinner, a boot maker and shoe repair man. Skinner was covetous, and he didn’t want to share (his knowledge of the work). Dad would watch over his shoulder. He was a self-taught top maker at a time when it was even more labor intensive.”

The McGuffins moved from Carrizozo to Roswell, where L.L.

began building entire boots from foundation to conclusion. In the late 1950s, he was selling his boots for about \$12.50 a pair. Later, he opened a mortuary in Roswell. In the back of the building, he kept a carving bench and tools, and that’s where he constructed and repaired boots.

Deana was about 30 years old when she finally asked her father if he would teach her the craft in the workshop he then had at his home. He said no. He said no many times – sometimes vociferously. He told his daughter that girls simply didn’t possess the hand and arm strength for it. Eventually, he changed his mind.

“I said, ‘I’ve been a farmer and a rancher, been in construction work.’ I said, ‘Dad, let me worry about the strength, just teach me. At that time, it was a dying art,’” Deana said.

As an instructor, her father was intense in some ways, gentle in others. At first, he let Deana do all of the things that he assumed she was capable of, such as fixing the bottoms of the boots. Then she started making her own boots and constructing heavy, heeled ones for family members. The stitch work on those first few pairs was too coarse, her dad told her. However, with each pair, the boots got nicer. If there was a blemish or flaw, L.L. would take over and smooth out the uneven spots.

“We hung the open sign shingle and opened for repair work and boot making,” Deana said. “I was very lucky to have learned from him. We worked together for three years and opened a shop in Clovis. The shop was there for nine years. Nobody was hostile too much. But sometimes some man would walk in and see me and turn around and walk out the door. You needed to be 10 times better (than your male counterparts) to get any recognition. The locals respected (L.L.) and that helped me ease through the door.”

Old Hand in the Industry

Deana said that women in the boot making business traditionally worked a particular section or task, such as top stitching. Some of them might have even been carrying out the whole operation on their own 100 years ago, “but you just never heard of them,” she said.

By the time L.L. died in 2015, his daughter was an old hand in the industry, a distinguished, award-winning maker of functional,



splendidly stitched and soled foot wear.

Some steps are easier because of modern machinery, and some components come pre-made now, but the general phases of construction that Deana adheres to remain relatively intact from her father’s time. She doesn’t badmouth factory boots and their lower price or their strictly uniform fit. She’d much rather emphasize the mantra that has nourished her own creativity and longevity: “Factory boots are made for everybody; custom boots are made for you.”

Before she was a boot maker, Deana said, she worked in several factories and as a cog worker on assembly lines, piecing together circuit boards and electronic parts. It was heavily routinized labor, and she has never forgotten the repetitive and unforgiving nature of toiling at such a brisk, controlled pace.

“As a boot maker, if I want to work at 3 a.m., I can. Eight hours today and two tomorrow, I can do that. This way of life has suited me.”

Deana pursued employment in several fields that were largely considered non-traditional for women in the 1960s and 70s, such as farming, ranching, and even construction. Boot making was similarly closed to most women in the early 1980s. Yet times have changed – and for the better.

“Half of my students now are women,” said Deana, who instructs a small number of apprentices at her Albuquerque shop. “There are some younger ones and a lot of them are impressive boot makers.”

In the iridescent nightfall of her career, Deana is primed to rest on her laurels as one of a kind and the last of the line.

“There are skiving machines that people use now instead of the knife,” she said. “But you still have to guide it through. I can still skive by hand if I need to. But my hands ache so badly. Fingers all swollen. Joints all crooked.

“My hands look just like my dad’s did.”



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