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In dwindling industry, St. Albans shoe repair shop marks 100 years

By Lori Kersey



Charlie McCoy works on a leather shoe at his St. Albans shop. His business, St. Albans Shoe Repair, is celebrating its 100th year this year.

Charlie McCoy was looking only for a summer job when he first got into the shoe-repair industry. A recent high school graduate, he found work at Charleston's Fife Street Shoe Shop. That was nearly 40 years ago.

"It ended up as a permanent job because I found something I really liked to do — that was work with my hands," McCoy said.

McCoy has been the owner of St. Albans Shoe Repair since 1993, but the business has been around for much longer — it's celebrating a century of business this year. McCoy's shop repairs men's dress shoes, and ladies' heel taps and purses. He also fixes work and hunting boots.

"When you pay \$100 for a purse or a bag and you can put \$20 into getting it fixed and it's still as good as the day you bought it, then it's well worth the while of fixing it," McCoy said.

While there may be fewer shoe repair stores around, McCoy says the industry isn't dying — it's just one that not a lot of people think about going into.

With the recent closure of the Fife Street Shoe Shop this summer, at least three shoe repair stores remain in the Charleston area. Besides McCoy at St. Albans Shoe Repair, there's Paul's Shoe Repair on West Washington Street in Charleston and the Taylor Brothers Shoe Shop in South Charleston.

The Taylor Brothers shop has been in South Charleston since 1932 and according to owner John Taylor is the longest running business in the city. Taylor has worked for his family's business for more than 40 years and is the last in a long line of cobblers in his family.

Taylor said he's starting to see more business from people who would rather fix their shoes than simply throw them away when they're broken. It's always been cheaper to do so, he said.

McCoy said more people would take advantage of cobblers if they knew about them.

"People bring in stuff just for minor, minor repairs that they ordinarily would have to throw in the trash can if they didn't have a shoe repair shop," McCoy said.

Paul Denning, owner of Paul's Shoe Repair Shop, agrees.

“People are always gonna buy good, repairable shoes,” Denning said. “There is a certain percentage of people who buy disposable, of course, but there’s always gonna be people who buy good repairable shoes.”

McCoy said his shop stays busy.

“I’ve never seen a rapid decline in the amount of shoes that I fix,” McCoy said. “I understand that I’m never gonna be a multimillionaire fixing shoes ... but I’ll always be able to keep bread on the table and stuff like that. This shop has always been busy.”

Fall is an especially busy time for the shops.

“Once the weather changes, my business changes,” McCoy said.

Fall is when customers start bringing in their work and hunting boots as well as jackets with zipper problems in preparation for colder weather, he said.

“People wear more clothes in the winter time,” he said.

Where the industry might lose steam is in the next generation of cobblers. Few young people see the value in it, Taylor said.

Denning agreed.

“There is definitely a lack of interest in young people to learn the craft,” Denning said. “I think that for a lot of years now we’ve been sending children to college to be intellectuals when a lot of them really needed to go to vocational schools. That’s part of what’s driven manufacturing out of the country.”

Learning the ins and outs takes years, the cobblers said.

“I was told to look and watch and then repair in time,” Taylor said. “To learn each step as it came. I never stitched a shoe in my entire life until my brother died and then I knew I had to. Then I learned to.”

McCoy said learning the process takes time.

“It’s a process of years of learning because you always come across something that you have to learn how to fix,” McCoy said. “Even as long as I’ve been doing it.”

When McCoy’s uncle retired from the business in 1993, he bought St. Albans Shoe repair from him.

“For a couple years I worked for him,” McCoy said. “There were still things that I needed to learn to do and he was training me. ... This is not a type of job that you can say come in here and [learn in a day] ... it’s a process of years of learning because you always come across something that you have to learn how to fix.”

McCoy said the secret to having a long-lasting business in this day and age is offering customers something unique they can’t get anywhere else. He also tries to be honest with people about their shoes when they come in. If he doesn’t think they’re worth repairing, he tells them, he said.

“I like to keep my reputation as well as I can keep it [so people can say] ‘Well this is my shoe guy, if he tells me it’s worth fixing, it’s worth fixing. If he tells me it’s not worth fixing, it’s not worth fixing.’

“My word means a lot to people,” McCoy said.

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