

Profile: Barbour Welting Co.

114 years of welting

A welt is just a narrow strip of leather but it has become much more than that as a means of attaching a sole to a lasted upper. It came about so that the sole could be attached while the last was still in place, thus ensuring better a shaped and better fitting shoe for the wearer. It was in use as early as the 13th century and became the principal method of making shoes up until the 19th century when riveting and other sewing systems were invented. Even then, it remained the preferred construction for men's shoes until the mid 1900s. Today, it is still used on the very best quality men's shoes.

Prior to 1862, all welted shoes were sewn by hand. In that year, however, a patent for a curved-needle sewing machine was granted to a mechanic named Augusto Destory and assigned to James Hanan, a shoe manufacturer. Hanan showed the machine to Charles Goodyear who, in 1871, formed the Goodyear Sewing Machine Company. For three years the company's machines were used only to make shoe uppers. In 1874, Goodyear developed machines to sew-in welts and sew-on outsoles. This was the birth of the Goodyear welted process that revolutionised the footwear industry.

A tradition is founded

In 1892, John Barbour established the Brockton Rand Company in a small building in Brockton, Massachusetts. Business prospered and, after moving to larger quarters, a heel department was added. The firm saw the potential of the Goodyear construction and began to manufacture leather

welting. In 1909 the business, comprising the three separate departments, was moved to another location in the Montello section of Brockton where a current state-of-the-art tanning operation was also added.

John's son Perley became sole owner after his father's death in 1910. His two sons, Walter and Richard, worked together for many years until Richard gained control in the early 1960s. When the company was sold to an independent holding company in 1968, he became chairman and Robert W. Hynes was promoted to company president. Robert Hynes had joined in 1948 and served in many capacities including plant manager, sales manager and vice president. In 1975, he and CFO Anthony Matteoli acquired the business. Following the latter's sudden death two years later, Robert became sole owner. His son, Richard K. Hynes, took over as president in 1987 and, today, Barbour continues as a family business, owned and operated by Richard Hynes, Bruce Pearson (son-in-law of Bob Hynes) and Nancy Pearson, Robert's daughter.

Expansion

The early manufacture of rands and heels was soon dropped and the entire production concentrated on Goodyear welting. The original name of the company became a misnomer and it was changed in 1923 to the Barbour Welting Company. The building was enlarged ten times over the years and modern offices added to accommodate growth until it became the largest producer of Goodyear welting in the world. It has



Sewing in a welt


The new Brockton plant

retained this position ever since.

The company did not confine its output merely to plain welting, as its expertise in tanning and finishing leather allowed it to address other needs in the field of Goodyear welted manufacture and to develop specialty products for many types of shoe. It became an innovator in its field and patented many inventions such as the Barbour Stormwelt, Split Reverse welt and Stoutedge welting that helped the US shoe industry grow to a position of world dominance in the first half of the last century. Most of the American soldiers who fought in both World Wars went to battle in combat boots with soles that were sewn to the uppers with Barbour welting.

In 1892, John Barbour had set out to service the needs of his customers and this has remained the primary goal of the company ever since. By always using the best raw materials and workmanship, the company has worked hard to maintain its position in the footwear industry. Like many mature companies, however, the activities of the business have changed and evolved over the years. In the 1960s it began to produce and sell quality vegetable-tanned leather for men's belts, cases and other leather accessories. This business was sold in 1998.

Diversification

In 1971, Barbour Corporation entered the plastics business to satisfy a growing demand for a lower cost alternative to leather welting. PVC welts could be extruded on long rolls that also made them faster to sew to the insole rib, particularly after the USM company developed foot-operated welt cutting and splicing in the late 1970s. Before that, most welts were individual strips and, if they were to be sewn around the seat, the operator had to stop, cut and butt the welt ends, and then over-sew the join.

As the US footwear industry declined in the latter part of the 20th century the company reinvented itself through diversification and, in the early eighties, saw further opportunities in the field of plastics that led it into other market segments. Barbour Plastics, Inc. currently has the most extensive line of extruded mouldings, trims and structural components for the boat-building industry in the USA. Other diversification projects followed, leading to what is today a well diversified manufacturing corporation with locations worldwide, serving a multitude of applications.

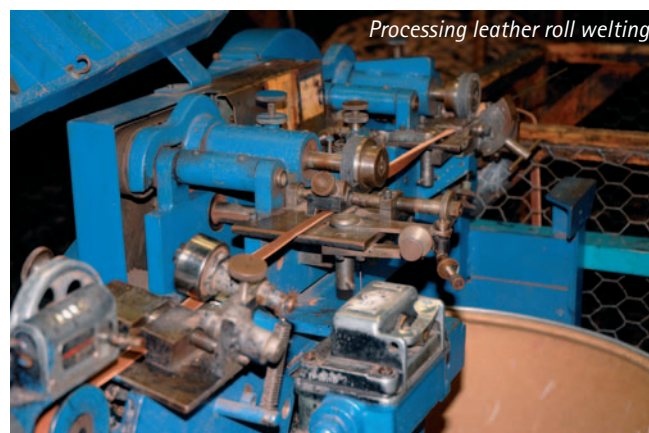
At the same time, it also returned to its roots as far as the footwear industry is concerned. With the shift in production of mid- to low-priced shoes to countries with less expensive labour, it nevertheless became apparent that a niche remained for supplying the world's leading shoe companies with high

quality welting components. With this in mind, Barbour acquired its two main competitors in the United States, W.L. Johnson Co. in 1991 and L. Farber in 1997. It then began to concentrate on selling worldwide.

A quality product

Making the very best Goodyear welting sometimes involves two conflicting objectives. The first is the aesthetic requirement to make a product that, when sewn into the shoe and edge-finished, finishes so cleanly that the welt literally blends in with the sole. This suggests the use of a rather solid non-porous material.

The second is that a welt should be made from a soft, supple and flexible leather capable of holding a stitch but that also has sufficient tensile strength to hold the shoe together in wear. What makes Barbour welting different from others is years of experience in securing the world's best vegetable tanned leathers since most are not really suitable.


Processing leather roll welting

Producing such welting calls for craftsmen with the ability to select and cut the leather according to the requirements of the specific type of shoe in which the welt is to be used. Due to fibre variation within one shoulder or butt, the entire piece is never cut for one lot; only certain portions with similar temper and fibre characteristics are used. The machinery used is almost 100% engineered and built in-house and, the company believes, is still superior to any available elsewhere.

For example, the strips of leather from the cutting department are joined on an automatic line, which yields a cement bond reliability of about 99.8%, resulting in joints that are almost invisible. It is this level of quality that has convinced many doubting shoemakers that 'continuous' welting was reliable and, more importantly, would save them money over the traditional cut welt which required the sewing of individual strips of welt into each shoe. In addition, special chemical treatments are used to further 'fine tune' the product to a customer's specific needs. This also helps to maintain consistency of performance from shipment to shipment.

Today, Barbour supplies top quality shoemakers all over the world. In order to do this, it claims to have 'thousands' of different styles of welt and randing. So, whether you need welting for Goodyear constructed shoes or randing for cemented footwear, it should have what you are looking for. What is also interesting is that it is yet another example of a long-standing business that has survived and prospered through the involvement of a single family. 