

A trip to the US at the start of the twentieth century provoked a lifelong passion for cowboy boots in Spanish leather expert Andrés Sendra. A hundred years later, his grandson, Javier, is keeping the passion alive.

Sendra stays the course

It's 100 years since Andrés Sendra returned from a long trip to the US to his home in the small leather and footwear-producing town of Almansa in Spain to set up his own boot brand. A passionate admirer of the cowboy boots he had seen on the other side of the Atlantic, he founded Sendra Boots and set about making his own designs based on the original. A century later, the company is still there, still producing in Almansa, still specialising in western-style boots, still successful and still run by his family.

"It seems like a miracle," says his grandson Javier Sendra, now the company president. He relates that, even before the boot brand, this business was in the Sendra family's blood: Andrés Sendra was the son of an artisan tanner (also Andrés) from Mislata, near Valencia, who built up a business supplying footwear manufacturers of the day with patent leathers. In 1900, Andrés junior went to find his fortune in the US and used the knowledge and skills he had learned from his father to work as a leather trader there, mainly supplying footwear firms.

American dream

He took great interest in the western-style boots many footwear firms produced, recognising in them a style of riding boot that Spanish settlers took to the Americas in the fifteenth century. The style had evolved, of course, with people in the US wearing them not just in the saddle or in the stockyard, but also on construction sites and for other physical jobs. Andrés Sendra admired the workmanship that went into them and the design and decoration that bootmakers were able to add, adapting each pair to the taste of their customers. In 1905, still aged only 20, he went home, taking with him his new-found love of the cowboy boot. With the footwear industry in Almansa beginning to grow, he left Valencia with one of his brothers and set up his own footwear operation, which in 1913 became Sendra Boots. His son, José, and now his grandson, Javier, have

Sendra Boots intends to mark its centenary by working harder than ever. CREDIT: SENDRA



continued to make his American dream a reality.

The current company president says now that it took until around 1960, when he was born, for his father to begin to secure some export business. "Spain was beginning to open up a little bit by then," he says, although because this was fully 15 years before the end of the inward-looking regime imposed by General Francisco Franco at the end of the Spanish Civil in 1939, he admits that it must have been a difficult step for his father to take. "As everyone knows, Spain is going through a very tough economic crisis," he continues. "But the country has gone through tougher crises in the past. My father had no reliable electricity supply, for example."

Rich in knowledge

Even so, Javier Sendra believes that setting the business up in Almansa has also brought advantages. He says he is far from the only one in the company to be carrying on the work of previous generations of his family. He has people making boots (and shoes) now whose parents and grandparents also worked for Sendra. "The company has managed to retain a tremendous amount of know-how," he says.

Its founder never lost his desire to learn. He visited the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition and was greatly taken by displays of the Goodyear welt method of footwear construction that he saw there on a stand set up by Leicester-based United Shoe Machinery. Andrés Sendra invested in the necessary machinery and learned the technique and brought Goodyear to Almansa. "We still have the invoices for the machinery he bought," his grandson says. "In fact, we still have machines that have been in the factory and they still work. My grandfather leased them at first. They had a counter on them and once a year or so, the United Shoe representative would come from Barcelona and make out a bill for what we had used."

Material concerns

He adds all this received wisdom and experience to high-quality materials to make the Sendra collections of the present day. He picks model 9479 (they all have numbers), a Goodyear-welted brogue, as an example. It has a calfskin lining and upper leather from Les Tanneries Du Puy in central France ("theirs is the only leather that we feel we can use to make this type of footwear"). The thick sole leather comes from Igualada near Barcelona. But the knowledge that has gone into making the shoe is also hard to find and takes a long time to amass, he adds.

Mr Sendra himself prefers boots to shoes. Among his current favourites are cowboy boots in colourful python skin (reticulated python from a reptile farm in Indonesia) with lots of rivets for their metallic effect. This makes you think that while his grandfather and his father would recognise the shape and the feel, perhaps the look would seem a little strange to them.

"They'd be astonished," Javier Sendra says. "Things used to be a lot simpler. This business today means you have to keep changing, trying to keep up with fashion and trends that move so fast. It's almost as though we have to have different samples for every city in which we have a presence. It's madness. But by travelling a lot and listening very carefully to



Cowboy boots with some Spanish flair have been Sendra's trademark for 100 years. CREDIT: MESSE DÜSSELDORF

customers, you can learn to interpret their tastes and their requirements. It's a business that requires complete dedication. You don't have time for hobbies or leisure. Either your footwear factory becomes your hobby or you cannot continue. This is a total passion and there is nothing part-time about any of it. I'm lucky because I love every aspect of it, every part of the process."

He says Sendra will mark its centenary by working harder than ever. 🌀