

PRESS-REGISTER

Cobbler on Conti: Dauphine Shoeteria is one of the last, enduring family-owned businesses downtown

Tuesday, December 05, 2006

By ROY HOFFMAN

Staff Reporter

In a small, gray building downtown on Mobile's Conti Street, behind an American flag in the window and a pair of gold shoes beneath it, the cobbler's shop -- Dauphine Shoeteria, which recently celebrated its 60th year at this location -- begins another day.

Elizabeth Leege, 79, answers the phone, handles the cash, pauses to relax in her favorite chair, while Brand Leege, her son, keeps on just as his father and grandfather did before him, nailing, gluing, dyeing, polishing, repairing every manner of shoe.

"If your feet hurt you hurt all over," says Brand, 59, who emphasizes, "I don't prescribe," but does his best to tend to people's therapeutic as well as esthetic demands.

A lot of people, explains Elizabeth, "wear shoes because they like how they look. They'll go through pain just to be in style."

Around the Leeges are hundreds of pairs of shoes in various states of repair, or waiting, if fixed up like new, to be reclaimed -- loafers, cowboy boots, moccasins, low-quarter boots, hunting boots, wing-tips, platform shoes, high heels, low heels, broad-toes, pointy-toes.

"The challenge is doing it right," says Brand, looking over the shoes, "using good materials. And keeping up.

"Sometimes," he says of the leather and suede creatures that multiply, constantly, two-by-two, "there's not enough of me."

But he keeps on, and, in doing so, maintains with his mother one among only a handful of traditional family-owned businesses still thriving downtown. Gayfers, Hammel's, Kayser's, Kress, Reiss Brothers -- the names of yesteryear's stores fade in memory. Shoeteria hums along.

Brand's grandfather, Fred, a German immigrant, arrived in New Orleans at age 14, and a few years later moved to Mobile, where he learned the cobbler's trade and, in 1922, opened a shop further down on Conti.

He called it Dauphine Shoeteria after Dauphine Street in New Orleans.

Brand's father, Otto, went off to battle with the Navy during World War II, surviving more than one ship that went down beneath him.

Otto and Elizabeth married in 1946, the same year that he took over the Shoeteria and moved it to this now-quiet stretch of Conti just a half-block from the Saenger Theater.

Brand grew up in the store. "It's all I ever wanted to do," he says of his trade. In 1985, when Otto died at age 64, it was Brand's turn to be in charge.

Cobbling is more than gluing on a sole, he explains, gesturing to an intricacy of cobbler's machines that cut, shape and stitch.

"I was still learning," says Brand, "25 years into the game."

On a sunny weekday in 2006, the year could still be, it seems, 60 years ago.

With the smell of shoe polish rich in the air, an antique mirror on the wall, and some customers, in no particular rush, taking time to chat and rest a spell, the only marker of time passing are the shoes themselves and their changing styles.

"I've watched shoes go from high heels to rounded heels, spiked to broad, pointed toes to round," Brand says. "It's going back to the more rounded toe now. Heels are getting broader. When I started, in 1968, men were wearing platform shoes."

Many people, he says, have a special affection for certain shoes. The gold ones in the window, Brand says, belong to a woman who no longer fits them, but who asks that they stay there, so she can see them when she walks by.

Gus Meaher, a lawyer who steps through the door this bright day, says he's been coming to Shoeteria for years, and likes the feeling of the shop, the atmosphere of the old downtown. He's practical-minded, too.

"If you've got a good pair of shoes, you don't want to have to throw them away."

He's come for a pair of dress shoes for his daughter -- they've been dyed pink, for a ball. He bundles up the pink shoes and heads back outside.

Stephen Crawford, another lawyer, enters with a pair of his own shoes -- black wingtips -- in hand. The soles are wearing out. He has had them re-soled at Shoeteria once before.

"You want half soles or full?" Brand asks him.

"My driveway," explains Crawford, "is full of rocks." He decides on full soles, and heads back to work.

Carol Brown, an office assistant, soon comes in. "I miss Gayfers, Kress," says Brown, looking around. "This is one of the few places left from back then. The young people don't know about places like this."

"Here you go," says Elizabeth, handing her two pair of repaired shoes.

Joelyne and Buck Trehern, married 51 years, are next.

They remember downtown Mobile from earlier days, when they lived in Pascagoula. "It was like New York City to us," says Joelyne, as she waits her turn at the wooden counter.

They live in west Mobile now, and Joelyne is a Shoeteria regular. She has left several pairs of shoes to be fixed, explaining that she has an unusually narrow foot, and that Brand has to shape her shoes to fit her.

Buck has foot problems, too, with one leg shorter than the other after an accident many years ago. He needs one sneaker built up higher than the other, to compensate.

Brand comes out from his little world of shoe machines, and takes a look at Buck's feet. He says he can build up a shoe for Buck.

Joelyne holds up a pair of shoes, which she describes as a wedge slingback. Brand has fixed them for her. "I wore the fire out of them," she says, smiling at the shoes.

When the Treherns leave, the store is empty of customers momentarily, Elizabeth settles back in her chair, and Brand returns to his workplace, where he is busy dyeing.

To clean the dye off his hands he uses straight Clorox.

In earlier times, the Easter season, recalls Brand, was the period when he did the most shoe dying. The repeated washings with Clorox wore the skin off his palms.

"Around Easter," he says, "I'd run around with red hands. That's not so much the case anymore. People wear tennis shoes to church."