

Texas Cowboy Boots: Material Culture Melting Pot

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Literature Review. One of the most iconic apparel items that is associated with a particular place in the world is the Texas cowboy boot, which has ascended to iconic status in popular culture via movies, television, and music (Beard, 1999, 2005; Gibson, 2016a, 2018). This material culture product has also been documented in academic research of economic geographies (Gibson, 2016a, 2018) and design (Beard, 1999). There is also research covering specific immigrant groups that make cowboy boots (Geitz, 2011; Gibson, 2016b; Scambray, 2021). However, the current study seeks to combine these sources with interview data to develop a clearer picture of the multicultural history of this apparel product. The beginning of cowboy boots can be traced back to three cultural populations: Mexicans, Italians, and Germans (Barrett, 2010). Mexicans came to the area now known as Texas as early as 1541, while they searched for a city of gold (Geitz, 2011). Scambray (2021) notes that Italians came to Texas as early as the seventeenth century as explorers and missionaries, and this number grew to 186 by 1870, encouraged by work that was available in ports and railroads. The Lucchese boot making family arrived in 1882, equipped with shoemaking knowledge that was passed on by their father. German immigration to Texas dates to 1831, and by 1860 over 20,000 Germans had relocated to the Hill Country of Texas, bringing their customs, knowledge, and cultural influence, which is still felt in the state today (Haley, 2021). Even today, Texas custom bootmaking continues to have a strong international component, with many expert bootmakers from Mexico currently working in Texas. Materials are also sourced from Europe and Central & South America. Mexico is the primary source of custom *lasts* (foot molds for boots), and materials such as dyes and animal hides are sourced from Western Europe.

Methodological Framework. This study was grounded in Cultural Transmission Theory (Eerkins & Lipo, 2007) which allowed researchers to better understand the processes that boot makers' use to encode and disseminate "kernels of cultural meaning" to build a "cultural inventory through diffusion" (Eerkins & Lipo, 2007, p. 241). Loranger's (2017) study was also used as a guide for analysis of cultural apparel product industries, learning, practice, and significance. IRB permission was obtained. Nine (9) interviews lasting 60–90-minutes were conducted with Texas bootmakers. The intent was to gain a baseline understanding of participant experiences with learning and practicing boot making as well as the general status of the Texas boot making industry. Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding boot makers' demographics, practice, and community. Transcripts were coded by the PI & co-PI, ensuring an 80% inter-coder agreement rate (Creswell, 2007). Emergent themes related to *multicultural*, *cultural transmission*, and *differences*.

Results and Implications. Bootmakers were aware of *multicultural* influence on the origins of the modern cowboy boot. A majority of respondents (67%) stated *cultural transmission* occurred in the early stages of the evolution of cowboy boots and continues today. Greg credited German immigrants for the origins of cowboy boots: “I understand that it [cowboy bootmaking] was derived from the Hessians and the military, the military boot for the Hessians. German immigrants brought bootmaking knowledge here...outfitted cowboys in...good protective footwear for the work that they were doing.” *Cultural transmission* in bootmaking is reflected in both small and large-scale operations. Zephaniah acknowledged the international heritage of the two best-known mass-produced bootmaking companies: “The Justin Boot Company (German immigrants) and the Lucchese Boot Company (Italian immigrants) came to the US, started with one or two men, and began bootmaking to satisfy needs they recognized in various regions of Texas.” Contemporary bootmaking continues to utilize manufacturing techniques transmitted from *multicultural* sources, as bootmaker Bob explained, “We use the exact same way of measuring the foot for a pair of boots that the Italian shoemakers used in the 1500s.” Despite being an icon of American cultural dress, cowboy boots have a strong international appeal, given their *multicultural* origins. Nevena discussed how cowboy boots have such a broad fan base that transcends nationality:

Our customers are all over the world. Everyone is a cowboy. I always say, no matter what goes on in the world, no matter where we are, whether we’re loved or hated by the rest of the world, people will always love rock and roll and cowboy boots.

Bob described the contribution of Mexican bootmakers and *differences* between the boots they made versus the boots from these German immigrants:

I have found the first cowboy boots made in Texas was after the Civil War, in the late 1860’s, and progressed up through the 1880’s starting in southern Texas, influenced greatly by the Mexican boots that the Mexican cowboys used, which came from Spain.

Then a lot of German families moved into Texas and made a different type of boot.

Dave recognized *differences* in bootmaking techniques merged the protective function the Germans prized with the Mexican aesthetic to create the cowboy boot we know today:

Down in Mexico there were a lot of bootmakers and their boots were more fanciful and less “plain Jane.” They had ideas about boots that hadn’t really thought about [in Texas]. There was a clash between those two, which turned out to be good because there was a meeting of the minds, if you will. Guys that knew good, solid construction shared [knowledge] with guys that were all about fashion or the design of the boot.

Summary. The present research develops a clearer understanding of multicultural transmission that has occurred over hundreds of years amongst immigrant Texas bootmakers. This has resulted in the evolution of what we recognize as the contemporary cowboy boot, Custom bootmakers in Texas are aware of the multicultural origins of this transmission and continue to be influenced by it. These artisans are empowered by an indigenous knowledge pool consisting of aesthetic and production know-how created by generations of immigrants.

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