



Boots from J.B. Hill Boot Company cradle the feet of actors, country singers, and ranchers, as well as corporate executives, surgeons, cowboys, and cowgirls. Judging by the beauties that come out of the small factory in El Paso, it doesn't hurt to know about horses when you set out to make truly fine footwear.

These head turners command prices that can range from \$795 to \$5,000. The people who handcraft them are second-, third-, and fourth-generation bootmakers, and the owner of the company, a retired equine veterinarian, creates most of the designs.

Backed Into Bootmaking James M. Hill, who spent most of his life taking care of Thoroughbreds at some of the most famous racetracks in the country and co-owned Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew, insists that he never intended to be a bootmaker. "I backed into it," he says. "I financed a bootmaker who was trying to get his team going again. My due diligence was probably not what it should have been."

The man spent the money but didn't make any boots. So Jim moved to El Paso from Florida and took over the business. "I had no background in it and didn't know anything except that I used to wear cowboy boots," Jim says. "But I thought, 'This can't be rocket science,' so I just started doing it."

Making the Curve Smiling at the memory, Jim confesses, "Actually, it may be tougher than rocket science. There's a manufacturing component, where you have to purchase leather and materials such as thread, soles, cement, and all the things it takes to put boots together. You have to fit people's feet, and you have to fit their minds. It's been a very steep learning curve."

So Jim came into the boot business in October 1996, at the

The Best Little Bootmaker in Texas

The most stylish and comfortable boots you may ever find come custom-made from a small company far away from the high-fashion stores of Dallas and Houston. By **Karen Lingo**



ABOVE, LEFT: James Hill, a retired equine vet, owns J.B. Hill Boot Company. **FAR LEFT:** Boots are molded with a deliberate upward curve of the toe, which gives them a hammock-like feel. "That's one reason cowboy boots are so comfortable," says Jim. **LEFT:** The bootmakers at J.B. Hill, many third- and fourth-generation artisans, learned the craft from their fathers and uncles.

PHOTOGRAPHS: MEG MCKINNEY

end of a popular era for western wear. “Tony Lama was here, and Lucchese had moved here from San Antonio. Justin Boots had just closed a 120,000-square-foot factory here. In their heyday, they were making 3,500 pairs a day,” he says. “I don’t make 3,500 pairs in a year. All the big companies were buying all the little companies, just sucking them in and building this tremendous infrastructure. Then the bottom fell out of the boot business.”

To maintain position in the industry, the larger companies had to find ways to cut costs. “They used cheaper-quality materials and assembly-line construction,” Jim says. “When that didn’t help, they started using cheap labor in Mexico and China. I knew that I couldn’t compete that way. So what I’ve tried to do is make the very finest boot that I can.”

Hard To Choose Picking out just one pair from the different styles on display at the factory seems impossible. Jim doesn’t make it any easier, holding up first one pair and then another and describing them with the same kind of appreciation a sommelier might show when explaining the qualities of a great wine.

Pointing out a pair made with American bison leather, he says, “It’s wonderful leather and extremely soft. It’s got a little bit of stretch to it, and it’s very tough.”

Holding up another, he says, “We call this our Sonoma Light. It’s like putting on a sock. I designed it for people who are



used to wearing Gucci loafers and Allen Edmonds shoes.”

The boots come in a range of leathers, including alligator, bison, lizard, and ostrich. “We try to buy leather as economically as possible,” Jim says. “But our first goal is to buy the best leather we can get our hands on—the most appealing leather.”

It Takes a Team Four bootmakers from the original team still work for the company. Of his 16 bootmakers, Jim says, most learned the craft from their father or uncle.

All J.B. Hill boots are handmade, and finding skilled workers isn’t easy. “It’s a dying art,” Jim points out. “Most young people aren’t interested in doing this for a living. You can’t blame them.



ABOVE, LEFT: Customers come to the factory to be fitted for boots. They can also visit one of the select stores that carry the designs or place orders by phone. **ABOVE:** It usually takes nine days to create a boot.

It’s a hot, monotonous, dirty job, and they’re limited as to how much they get paid.” Typically, an experienced bootmaker earns \$10 to \$12 an hour. “Across the border, you can find fantastic bootmakers working for \$6 an hour,” Jim says.

When Hollywood Comes Calling

Walking through the factory, Jim points out different workstations and says, “If everything goes well, it takes nine days from the time the boot is cut until it’s ready to go out the door.”

Looking at a boot in progress, he notes, “This one has a zipper. I know who that belongs to.” Most of his business consists of repeat customers, which include some of the biggest names in Hollywood. That’s not bad company to keep for a small bootmaker out in far West Texas. ●

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