

Boots

My father looked down on me from a height I would soon match as my growing frame spurted toward age 13, a milestone I couldn't wait to reach and finally call myself a teenager.

"Look, Dave," he said, "I used to be a skier and I'm telling you these boots are meant to go on skis. You just can't walk around in them. The soles don't bend. They're not supposed to bend. There's a piece of steel in them."

"Well, they look OK to me," I said, standing in the basement of Berger's Department Store on Columbia Street in Utica, the shopping haven for middle class families, according to my father. In reality Berger's served folks like us in the early 1950s who had barely climbed our way out from steerage.

"They would be just perfect," I said, "to wear to school and church and ... and if I get a job ... next year."

I was in love with a pair of boots. I had been in love with them for the past six minutes, since I saw them on the bargain table. They were constructed over a tough frame and covered with lustrous brown leather. The blunt toes were smartly squared and the thick soles sported a washboard bottom. When I ran the soles over the edge of the table they made a sound like a motorbike muffler. I could have a lot of fun with them in school. But their crowning glory was the bright red laces that wound through tiny triangular eyes arranged around the tongue. The boots were absolutely the neatest footwear I'd come across since I began wearing shoes. Back when Mom was rumored to have put tiny baby booties on my feet late one afternoon and airily told me go play in the road. Whenever I asked her if that was a true story, she always said I was a very noisy baby.

"Here," said my father, "try to bend the soles. You'll see what I mean."

I took a boot in my hands and almost disjointed my elbow trying to bend it. I looked down at the floor to hide my face as I gritted my teeth so hard my eyes almost popped out. Dad chuckled as I hunched my shoulders and lined up my entire body in support of the task. He had nothing to lose. Either I'd fail and prove his point or I'd bend the boot and make him the owner of the only boy in Utica who could twist an eighth inch steel shank in half..

I thought I curved it just a little

"See?" I said.

But Dad said my imagination had run away with me. My imagination ran away so much at that age it's a wonder my parents didn't put a leash on it.

I already had a pair of boots, but my father knew I wanted work boots like the other kids were wearing. When the snow began to fall a month before, I was the only kid in school still wearing black buckled galoshes ... buckle boots we called them. They fit right over your street shoes.

On our way down to Berger's that day, Dad said if I found work boots in the store's Bargain Basement that were cheap, he would consider buying them for me. While he was in Hardware, I ran ahead to the shoe department.

I suppose the red laces and the washboard soles may have clouded my thinking. They were the most unusual work boots I'd ever seen. That's because they were indeed ski boots. Berger's never sold sporting equipment, so the boots had somehow taken a wrong turn in Sandusky or somewhere and then another while bound for Walla Walla. They wound their way through a national distribution system and ... however miracles happen ...ended up in Utica on Berger's "Last Chance" table.

Good ole' Dad relented.

"You're going to wear these every day?" he said.

"Sure, Dad. They're just great!"

I'm quite lucky I have no permanent damage to the back of my head or the base of my spine, given the number of times I fell on my ass that winter when the shoes slipped out from underneath me on snowy sidewalks, bare sidewalks, school hallways and polished classroom floors. The washboard soles

didn't grip any surface known to man, except the rubber bases they were designed to fit into when mounted on skis.

With my shins forced forward by the angled back of the boot, I walked around like a duck, loudly clomping across the Parquet flooring in the library at our Catholic school or down the aisle at church. Father Blackie could hear me coming to confession as he sat in his little closet and listened to my approach.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," I said.

"Where the hell did you get those shoes, kid?"

"At Berger's, Father," I said.

"It sounded like you were coming in here on stilts," he said.

I had only two methods of locomotion. Either I slid my feet forward flat on the floor or I picked them up and slammed the hard leather soles down, step by explosive step. Either way, I made a lot of noise and was continually slipping and falling. I was lucky I didn't do any permanent damage to my ankles or knees during the month that I endured my new boots.

But I would not give them up. Kids in my class laughed at me and first graders ran the other way in fright when I maneuvered myself down the halls. I found my demeanor changing to match my shoes. I became sort of an ogre. But I just loved those boots.

Finally, Sister Marie Jean sent a note home requesting I no longer wear them for safety reasons. I clomped home from school that day with mixed emotions.

"David's boots create quite a spectacle each time he moves across the floor," she wrote. "One is never sure if he'll arrive at his destination without his feet sliding out from under him. I can't call him to the black board for algebra drills without disturbing the entire class. He leaves the lunch room early and no longer associates with peers, who deride his shoes and speak of the fright he instills in the smaller children. Instead of going outside with the other youngsters after lunch, he sits alone on the stage in the auditorium reading James Thurber anthologies, which by the way I believe are too advanced for him. He appears unfazed by his situation, but I sense he is frustrated. When asked why he sits on the stage, he

answers that on stage he can choose any role he wants. I told him he can do the same in life and it is probably time he chose one. I suggested he needn't play the role of a misanthrope."

I gave my father the note that evening and wondered if the banning of my boots might not be for the best.

"I guess you were right, Dad," I told him when he put down the note from Sister.

"I would have bought you workboots like the other kids wear," he said.

"I know," I said. "It's OK, I can wear the buckle boots for the rest of this year. Maybe Spring will come early."

"You're breaking my heart," he said.

"No, no," I said. "I don't mind being the oddball in the school in the buckle boots."

"I guess you shouldn't," he said, "since you've been the oddball in ski boots."

"I suppose I can understand." I said, "why a hard working father can't afford to be embarrassed for a son who has to wear buckle boots."

My father sighed.

"OK," he said. "Get your coat on and I'll take you to a real shoe store. But this time you'll listen to some advice."

The terrific ski boots with the red laces sat on the floor of my closet for years. I took them to Goodwill along with other parts of my life shortly before I got married. My wife surely never suspected I was an odd duck, until I found a terrific pair of orange shoes a few years later. I loved those shoes.

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The Windswept Press
Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

dave@windsweptpress.com