

The last of an era

By Aileen Campbell

HASTINGS STREET WILL lose not only a familiar face but a link with the city's past in the days before the First World War when Pierre Paris & Sons Ltd., "the oldest operating bootmaker in Western Canada" moves out.

The four-story building at 15 West Hastings which since 1913 has housed both retail store and factory, as well as the vacant Strathcona Hotel is up for sale.

The retail store will be closed out by the end of September. Stephen Paris, grandson of the founder, hopes to relocate on a smaller scale in the Fairview area. The present Paris building is now on the market for \$75,000.

"We'll still make loggers' boots and orthopedic shoes but will get out of the retail end," stated Stephen Paris.

"It's a lost art," he said of custom bootmaking. "But I love the business and I'm staying in it. There's the satisfaction of knowing you are making a quality product. My grandfather who was from the Beauvais area of France appreciated it as much. He was originally trained in orthopedics. He was both a shoemaker and a trained chiropodist.

"I used to come down here on Friday afternoons and on holidays when I was nine or ten. My grandfather and grandmother, my dad and an uncle would be here and we'd telephone together on Friday night."

Side of the building is an estate matter, following the death of his grandmother Grace, in March of this year at age 88. As widow of the founder she always took an active interest and came into the store daily until she was 85 remained Stephen. He is one of the 11 children (nine girls and two boys) of Dr. Roger Paris, a practicing podiatrist and head of the firm.

The name Pierre Paris was a household word for decades in Vancouver for orthopedic and corrective shoes, loggers' boots, workshoes for miners and laborers, ladies' boots for both men and women and combat boots in the Second World War.

Until 1940, generally could see loggers' boots being made in the front window. But that year the factory was moved from the basement and a portion of the main floor on the second floor, where it runs the length of the building from Hastings to the line.

"I have seen pictures showing someone at every machine," said Paris indicating two long lines of machines with just three women working.

The one-time 30-man manufacturing plant is down to 12, he said. Where once there were 11 sticklers, there are now three.

Still on the job however is the longest-term employee, Bruno Mariani, 84, who started in 1941. Hurt to a mine accident, he came to have Pierre Paris make a special pair of shoes. He stayed on to learn the trade and make them himself.

While the factory was at peak production in the Second World War, it was still turning out 60 to 70 pairs of boots a day in 1971 when Stephen Paris came into the family business to learn it from the bench.

"Today we're down to 20 pair a day," he said. "This is due to lack of experienced personnel and lack of sufficient top quality leather."

"That is one of my biggest problems today—procuring a sufficient quantity of proper quality leather."

Paris explained: "Up to 15 years ago, people of North America were eating beef which average was was two to three years. Due to public demand, and changes in agriculture, the average age has dropped to 18 months before slaughter."

"The hide is not as thick. The cell three are not so close but the weight is the same. Fed lot operators guarantee a 4½% weight gain in four to six months.

"As a result, the skin is stretched thinner over the same weight. It's stretched too far. You get stretch marks on leather just as a woman does after giving birth."

"You are getting fewer boots per square foot of leather over than 15 years ago."

Paris said all the leather for the soles of loggers' boots comes from Austria now.

"There is nothing in North America that meets the quality of austrian-oven hides," he said, indicating piles of great hides, three eighths of an inch thick.

"We cut and grade our own leather. We don't use pre-cut. That's one way of maintaining quality—doing our own cutting and grading. We use the multi-manufacture substitute for leather."

He said leather has a peak, just as wood, with all cuts for his boots coming from "the prime area—no belly area material for soles. For soles, we use the belly area for linings."

Paris added: "There is no machine that can handle the thickness of leather."

Paris said he aims to maintain the standards laid down by his grandfather.

"Materials are as important as the workmen. That's why my grandfather started the tannery closed out about 12 years ago to get the quality of materials he wanted."

Paris said his grandfather emigrated to Canada in 1906 and started on Main Street in 1907. About 1911 he moved to Hastings Street and in 1913 took over the present West Hastings building.

It was erected about 1904 as the Deeks Building and Paris said it must have originally been a warehouse type building as there were no interior supporting walls. He felt the upper two stories must have been turned into a hotel about 1909 when the water service was changed.

"My grandfather came from a large family and as there were four or five heads still in family hands, he emigrated."

He died in 1966 at 77. Of his three children only Dr. Roger Paris, Stephen's father, survives.

"My grandfather started repairing shoes. He did custom work as a shoemaker and within two years was doing new orthopedic work. The firm was known across Canada for hiking and regular work boots and throughout B.C. for logging boots.

Pierre Paris patented a special process of stitching as an improvement "in construction of loggers' boots and others in connection with the vertical boot seam."

His message to "old and prospective customers" in 1954, the firm noted:

"We submit this catalogue with all faith in the products shown and back this up with a positive guarantee of general satisfaction covered all materials and workmanship."

The catalogue referred to "longer mileage, all sizes and the Cheyenne riding boot, an assid tester." Another boot was described as "resist tarra acids."

The Cheyenne riding boot that once sold for \$20 is now up to \$28. A good quality logging boot that once sold for about \$15 is now between \$22-24.

"Two years ago we got a pair of 1924 ladies' hiking boots in for repair," said Paris. "We sent them back to the granddaughter of the lady who had bought them here. They were 11 inches high, all leather, and had cost \$17."

Married, with two daughters, Paris did underground survey work in a mine out of Golden, B.C., after finishing school. But wary of frequent layoffs, he got into repairing and installing Strava A tracks in cars for six months.

"I joined the firm in 1971 and started working on shoes," he said. "We have no formal apprenticeship in the factory. I do a lot of custom work on heavy work boots. I'm a bootmaker. Shoemaking is more demanding."

Both store and factory of Pierre Paris & Sons at the same Hastings St. address since 1913

Picture: David Clark



Stephen Paris, a seiler machine made in 1910



Children's



Circa 1960. Pierre Paris, centre, with his two sons and grandsons.

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