

From Cowboy Boots to Army Boots ... and Back



IT SEEMS FITTING THAT NOCONA, FAMOUS FOR ITS LEGACY OF bootmaking, is the birthplace of Alan Franklin because that craft has come to define him. But Franklin claims Mineola as his home, having moved there as a lad in 1974 where his dad worked as a railroader. “Mineola is where I was raised,” he says. “I graduated from high school here. This has always been what I’ve called home, except for the 22 years that I was in the U.S. Army.”

Nocona left its mark on the boy Franklin was and the man he became. That boy loved his boots, and the man does, too. “I got my first pair of cowboy boots in 1974,” he remembers before pointing to a portrait on the wall. “See that man over there? That is Buck Sinclair. He had a boot and saddle shop in Mineola. My mom and dad bought me my first pair of boots from his store.”

Franklin then tells of how Sinclair taught another local, Bo Barbee, the trade. In 1985, Franklin bought Barbee’s boot shop on Commerce Street in Mineola. He credits Sinclair’s long-time employee, A.J. Berry, with teaching him the trade. And he gives a nod to another teacher, bootmaker Jack Reed from

Henderson, from whom he took lessons in 1986. Since those days, cobbling boots has been a joyful avocation for Franklin, even though it’s not his primary vocation. As it happened, he went from boots on the ground to rotors in the sky.

He tells of how his shop was situated just across the street from the Trailways Bus station, frequented by Army recruiters sending enlistees off to basic training. One of those recruiters stopped in the boot shop one day. Their ensuing discussions—and the pilot’s license Franklin already possessed—eventually led to Franklin enlisting as a candidate for helicopter flight school.

“The ’80s were a difficult economic time, and meaningful jobs were hard to find,” Franklin says. But the Army was building up because of Desert Storm. “It was a good opportunity for me and my family. I’m glad I did it and glad it worked out. It was very good for me, and it was very good to me.”

Franklin went on to serve 22 years as an Army helicopter pilot in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, the 1st Armored Division, the 10th Mountain Division and the 1st Infantry Division in far-flung places such as Korea, Somalia, Haiti and



Germany, plus three tours in Iraq. He retired a chief warrant officer 4. He's now turned to a second career as a Life Flight emergency medical pilot and muses, "It's turned into a life-long profession. At this point, I've been flying over half my life."

He tells those considering the Army, "If you are a young man or a young woman just out of high school and you are not sure what you want to do, I would consider spending a couple or three or four years. See the world. See the country. Learn a skill. And then get out and take your GI Bill, and go to trade school or college."

As much as Franklin likes to fly, through the years he also clung to his love of bootmaking and fashioned them when he could. Along the way, he collected many cobbler's tools and machines, some antiques, near his duty station in Germany. Then, when he'd visit Mineola on leave, Franklin would spend time in his dad's workshop, where he'd uncover his stored machines and tools to oil them, so they'd be in shape for his eventual return to the craft.

When he retired from the Army in 2012, that time came.

Franklin's Boot Shop, now located on Highway 37 in Mineola, has reopened for business. Franklin works seven days on and seven days off as a Life Flight pilot. But many of the days off are spent amid his leather and tools, making the custom boots for which he's gaining a reputation. He describes his boots as "middle-of-the-road boots," made for fit, comfort and durability. "I don't strive for glitter or glitz," he says. "That's just not me. I want to be known for making a boot that fits really well."

Quality matters to Franklin, and he doesn't strive for quantity. Right now, he limits himself to making 12 pairs a year. When a customer orders boots, they can expect to get them about one year later. The process is labor-intensive and time-consuming, but his customers agree the wait is worth it.

When a customer first visits the shop, they'll both smell and see an array of tanned and pre-dyed leathers hanging from the rafters. Those range from the more mundane, like calf and bull hide, to the exotic, such as water buffalo, ostrich, elephant and kangaroo. Most of the boots Franklin crafts feature a mix of patterns and materials, and for those he relies on help from his girlfriend, Michelle Raines. He credits her with



a good feel for the materials and colors that are aesthetically pleasing and that complement one another.

For the custom process, Franklin meets his customers in person at his shop. During that first visit, he measures and imprints their feet, and he learns the customer's preferences for style, color, toe shape and heel height.

He then makes an exact model of the customer's foot on a form called a last. This ensures that the length, width and throat measurements are perfect for each foot, which can vary in size from each other. He starts with a basic mold and then layers leather and glue to build it up. Once that's right, it becomes the base that the boot gets built around.

Only then does Franklin begin to work with the boot leather. First, he hand-draws a pattern onto a cardboard folder, then pokes small holes into it and lays it atop the leather material. When he powders the top of the folder, the powder falls through the holes to form a pattern on the leather, indicating where to cut and sew. Once all the pieces are cut, he sews the front and back panels together and begins the finishing process.

About 40 hours of labor go into each pair. Considering that amount of work, the typical starting price for a pair is \$1,000, depending on materials. Franklin says the best-selling feature of his boots are that they are one of a kind and truly custom-made. He has many customers who have hard-to-fit feet with high insteps or size differentials and even some with injuries.

"Anybody I make boots for, I really want to measure their foot," he says.

Another appreciated feature of Franklin's boots: They are made to last, and he says a wearer can get about 20 years out of a good pair.

Franklin is a quiet sort, and he doesn't really advertise. Mostly, his customers find him by word of mouth—and that word has spread across continents. His customers traverse Texas, of course, as well as Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Canada and the United Kingdom in their handmade boots.

When asked about his future, Franklin says he'll still be making boots when he finally retires from flying. "I want to do this as long as I'm healthy. This will be my post-employment gig." Jokingly, he says of his boot shop, "I want to still be in here when they have to come in and haul me off to bury me." And he agrees, hopefully, with his boots still on.

Franklin is taking appointments for his 2018 bootmaking calendar, but with only a dozen spots available for the year, those fill up fast.

To inquire about custom boots, call Franklin at (903) 497-1993. If he doesn't answer, he might be flying the friendly skies, so leave a message and he'll call you back. To view some of his work, find him on Facebook or in his shop at 125 CR 2303 in Mineola.

Franklin and his family are longtime members of Wood County Electric Cooperative.

No More Capital Credits Checks—But Don't Worry!

Payments to come in the form of bill credits

THIS YEAR, THE WOOD COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE BOARD OF DIRECTORS VOTED to retire \$1 million in capital credits. Just like in past years, we will be returning those to our members in December.

However, the board also voted to return them in the form of a bill credit instead of a check. They have made this change for several reasons: Foremost, it reduces postage expenses and the administrative costs associated with preparing all those checks. And it's eco-friendly.

But there are still more reasons. After checks are mailed, there is always additional administrative effort and cost to track and account for the checks. Many members just forget to cash the checks, or they may lose them. Or checks are returned because a member has not updated the co-op with their new mailing address. Also, there are the lost checks that must be reissued. That's a lot of accounting!

This new process also will work better for newer members, because they will receive credits much sooner. The past practice was only to send checks for credits worth \$10 or more. But now, even pennies will be returned to eligible members once they are retired.

As a nonprofit electric cooperative, WCEC strives to keep your bills low, and one of the ways we do that is to adopt efficiencies when they present themselves. This new process will bring economic savings and simplify the process for all.

As always, the credit for each member varies and is determined based on patronage (the amount of electricity purchased and years of membership). In total, over the last 28 years, the co-op has returned more than \$24 million in capital credits to our members, resulting in a tremendous positive impact on our local economy.

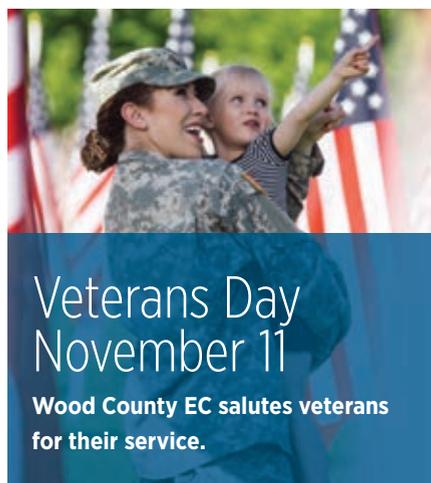
This year, the process has not changed; it's just become more efficient.

So be sure to look for those bill credits in December. As always, they should arrive just in time to lighten the load for holiday gift buying. Enjoy!



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