

How to make the President's shoes

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Shoes painstakingly made in Port Washington tread the blue and cream colored carpet of the Oval Office. Allen Edmonds shoes are worn by President Barack Obama, just as they were by his predecessors George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George Bush Sr. and Ronald Reagan, who wore them to their inaugurations.

Many corporate presidents are shod by Allen Edmonds too, often in the classic black boardroom shoe.



The shoes imply status, and cost from \$199 to \$2,500 a pair, but it would be wrong to call them exclusive. It's not just heads of state or captains of industry who are wearing Allen Edmonds shoes. That's obvious from the fact that the company's Port Washington factory turns out 2,400 shoes every day for people who appreciate really good shoes.

What makes Allen Edmonds shoes so good? It's the people who perform the 212 steps required to make a pair of shoes, according to Todd Miller, who oversees the company's 46 retail stores. "We don't give many tours, but those who see the process are amazed at how many steps are involved and how much time and energy it takes," Miller said.

Skilled employees perform the cutting, fitting and sewing of each shoe.

Many of the heavy cast-iron sewing machines, which have been upgraded with computer technology, were used in a small factory the company once operated in Lake Church, and some of the same women still use them.

Arlene Klapperich of Fredonia has been with the company for 34 years and now her daughters Janet Nack and Cheryl McGarity also stitch leather uppers.

"We have lots of families here, lots of husbands and wives. If there is a family funeral, we've had to shut down the plant," said Miller, who has been with the company for 28 years and is a third-generation Allen Edmonds employee.

His grandmother retired from the Belgium plant in 1975 and his mother in 1995.

"I have a real appreciation for what they (employees) do, and they're very proud of what they do," said Miller, who knows almost every employee by name. "There is a real sense of pride and accomplishment.

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“We tried to use computer stitchers, but we just can’t get the same details as we can with hand sewing. Everyone is cross-trained on different machines so they can fill in for each other. Some shoes require single-needle stitching and some double-needle or even triple needle work.”

It all starts with a piece of high-quality leather that comes from tanneries in the U.S. or Europe.

Most shoes are made of calfskin imported from Europe. Alligator hides come from licensed farms in the U.S. and shell cordovan, which is made from horsehides and takes six months to develop the black burgundy finish Allen Edmonds requests, comes from the Horween Leather Co. in Chicago.

Calfskins from Italy, Poland and France cost \$8 to \$8.50 per square foot. An alligator hide that makes one pair of shoes costs \$800 and shell cordovan costs \$30 to \$35 per square foot.

Calfskin shoes sell for \$345 and up, shell cordovan shoes, which are popular in Europe, sell for \$500, and those who want alligator shoes will fork out \$2,500.

Shoe sizes range from 5AAA to 18EEE. The company has 50,000 lasts (foot-shaped fiberglass forms that shape the shoe) allowing it to make shoes for almost any size foot.

The leather pieces are cut by operators using laser or die cutters. All pieces for a pair of shoes are cut from the same skin so they match.

While the uppers are being stitched, a cotton flannel doubler to whisk moisture away from the leather is attached to the leather lining. The uppers and linings are sewn together and attached to insoles.

Teams of six to seven operators do the lasting and quickly move through the process that includes spraying the shoe with water several times, stretching the leather over the last, heating, then cooling the leather to set the shape. Machines now stretch the leather over the last, a process that until recently was done by hand, Miller said.

The shoe goes through a heat tunnel to set the shape.

The shoe is shrink-wrapped in plastic to protect the leather as the filled cork insole is applied, the welt sewn, heel attached and initial finish and burnish done.

The unique heated filled-cork insole that provides a soft cushion and allows the sole to conform to the owner’s foot is applied by hand to each shoe.

“We’re the only company in the world that uses the technique,” Miller said.

The 360-degree welt, in which a leather strip is stitched around the shoe to attach the insole,

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has been done the same way for 91 years.

The final finishing and polishing are done by hand to highlight the natural appearance of the leather and protect it.

Allen Edmonds is headquartered in a small town, and its roots reach to an even smaller town. The company was founded in Belgium in 1922 by Albert Allen. The rest of the firm's name came from salesman Bill "Pops" Edmonds. After the three-story shoe factory in downtown Belgium was destroyed by fire in 1984, a new plant was built on the north side of Port Washington by new owners.

Image Information: Burnishing creme was applied to a boot by Ramon Tamayo while Gustavo Ramirez applied antique to complete the first burnish. Photos by Sam Arendt