

Van's: Formula for success won't change

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MARVIN Van Lanen says the tools of the shoemaker's trade haven't changed much over the years. Neither has he. Neither has the business his father founded in Watsonville 58 years ago.

Hard work, long hours and competitive prices are still the standards at Van's Shoe Store on East Lake Avenue in Watsonville.

James Van Lanen, Marvin's son and the general manager of the store, said of his father, "This business was founded in the Depression era and he still has that mentality."

Indeed, until the elder Van Lanen's recent retirement, he could be found at the shoe store seven days a week, 10 hours or more a day. He still does vacation and relief work in the repair shop.

Marvin — who brings to mind the fairy tale "The Shoemaker and the Elves," and, as he bends intently over his work, could pass for either — tells when shoe repair took hold in this country.

"During World War II, shoes were rationed," he said. "You had to have a stamp to be able to buy shoes."

There were no such regulations on shoe repair, however. As it was, Marvin's father, Raymond Van Lanen, had to fight for the leather and other supplies he needed to fix shoes. Unlike the while-you-wait service the store offers now, people had to wait up to a week for their shoes, which — in keeping with Van's philosophy about shoe repair — were better than new when they got them back.

Although the store was started as a shoe-repair business, Van's today sells shoes, shoe-care supplies, some sports equipment and clothing.

To walk into the store is to take a step back in time. Green vinyl "shoe-store chairs" with rounded metal arms are arranged in back-to-back rows, the smell of leather and shoe polish is in the air, the walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling stacks of shoe boxes.

But Van's is an anachronism by design.

"We try to be what you don't see too much anymore," said James Van Lanen, "which is a full-service, family shoe store. The mall stores are cosmetically appealing, but they don't have a lot of what the old shoe stores had."

Isabel Rivas, who moved to Watsonville when she was 9 years old and is now a grandmother, can tell what some of those qualities are.

"I can remember going there when I was a little girl," she said. "My mom used to buy all our shoes there. When I got married and had kids, I got all their shoes there."

Today, Rivas's husband goes to Van's for his work boots. When her daughters are in weddings, they get their shoes dyed there.

"My daughter, when she was in color guard, we used to have her boots repaired and polished there," Rivas recalled. "One of my boys needed corrective shoes. At that time, they didn't have corrective shoes, so I took them to Van's."

Marvin customized Rivas's son's shoes.

James said orthopedic work is still a large part of their repair business. PG&E linemen with worn-out boots make up another large group of customers.

Marvin has designed a way of repairing and reinforcing the \$190-a-pair work boots that he will describe only as

a "trade secret." It must be a good one — customers come from the Bay Area and farther.

There's another reason why Van's hasn't changed its "look" in so many decades.

"I believe," James said, "to be successful in downtown Watsonville, you don't want to appeal solely to Hispanics and you don't want to appeal solely to Anglos. We keep a practical building, a clean building, but not one a farm worker would feel uncomfortable in."

Both he and his father also speak "shoe-store Spanish."

Van's is also sensitive to the agricultural community it serves.

In addition to keeping long hours, the store carries a wide variety of work boots in every price range.

"Most of the business thrives on the sale of boots," James said. "We strive to carry mostly American brands, but if you're in the shoe business, you're in the import business."

Van's unique formula for success is working. A Van's Shoe Store is planned to open in the new Prunedale shopping complex, The Prune Tree, in April of next year.

That Van's, James said, will resemble the more "cosmetically appealing" mall shoe stores. But Van's on East Lake Avenue won't change.

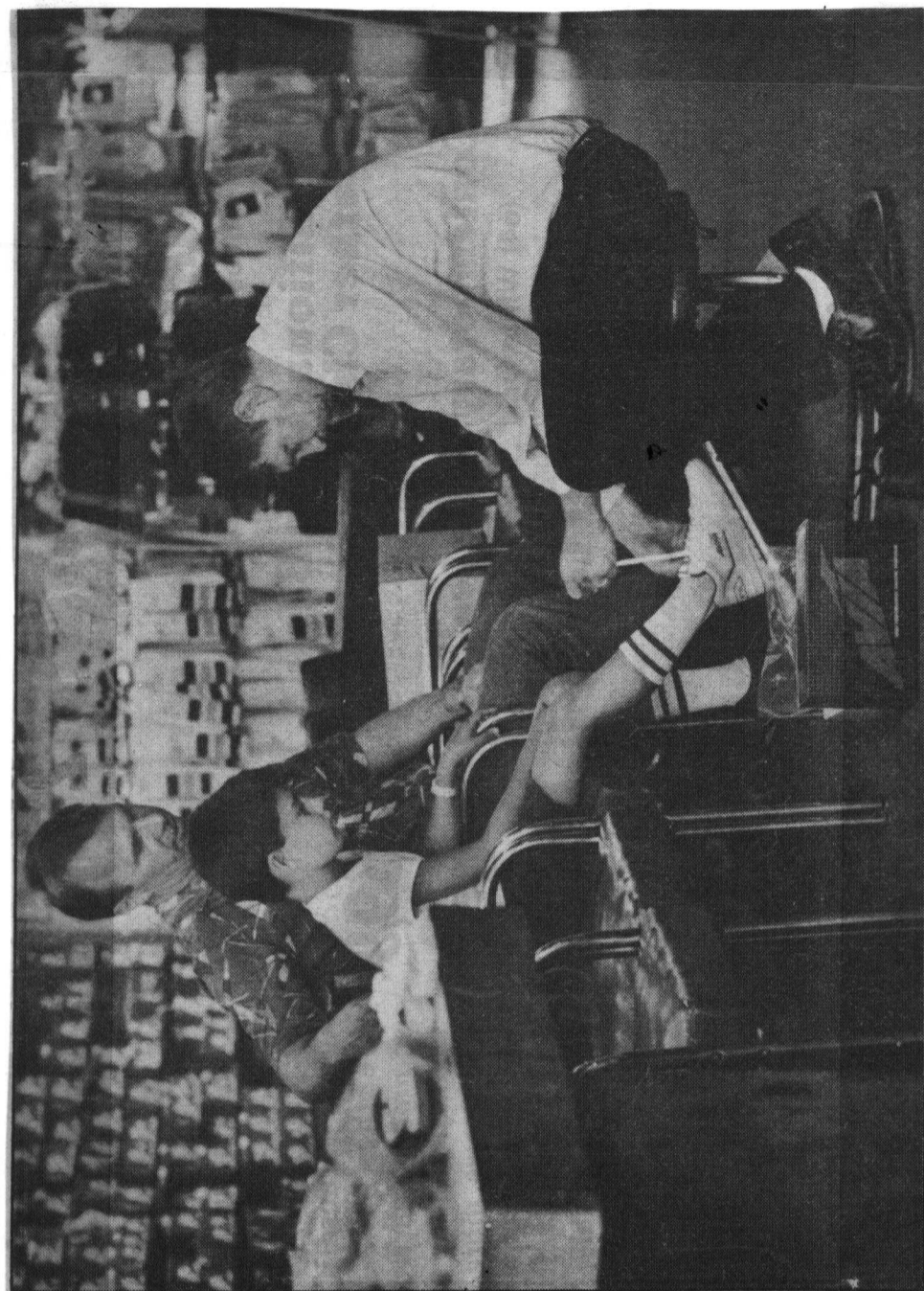
"Van's will always be this way," he said. "That's the way it's always been and that's the way it will stay."



A shoemaker's tools of the trade.



Marvin Van Lanen at work doing what he knows best.



Above, Domingo Nunes repairs a pair of boots. At right, James Van Lanen helps Robby Sullivan and dad, Tom, try on shoes.

Photos by Kurt Ellison