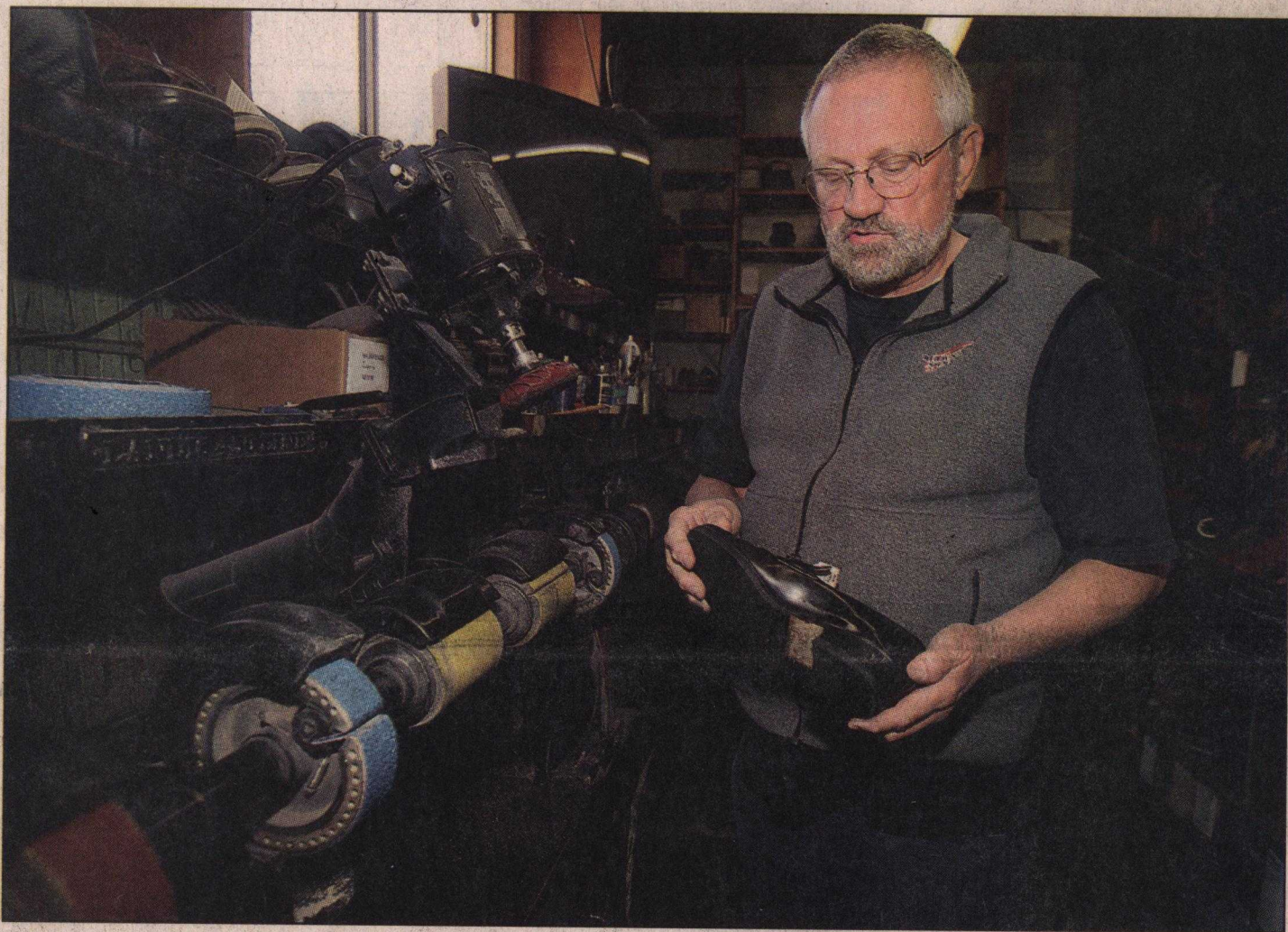


# Cobbling together a business



Photos by Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

ABOVE: James Van Lanen, owner of Van's Shoe Store on East Lake Avenue, talks about the various repairs and other services his third generation business performs. BELOW: The classic style neon sign above the front door of Van's Shoe Store has followed the business to three locations. The sign bears the names of two now defunct shoe brands.

## Bus-y Watsonville native runs 3rd-generation shoe repair shop

By TODD GUILD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

**WATSONVILLE** — Eighty-three years ago, a 31-year-old man named Raymond Van Lanen opened a small shoe repair and retail shop on Main Street where the Miramar Sports Bar now stands.

Using a shortened form of the common Dutch name, he called the place Van's Shoe Store, a name that has stuck with the business through three generations and three locations. The aged white neon sign that hangs above the store has come along for the ride.

Raymond Van Lanen in time handed the business over to his son, who eventually gave it to his



son James Van Lanen, who runs it to this day.

After relocating once, the shop moved in 1960 to its current location at 14 East Lake Ave., next door to where the Register-Pajaronian was once located.

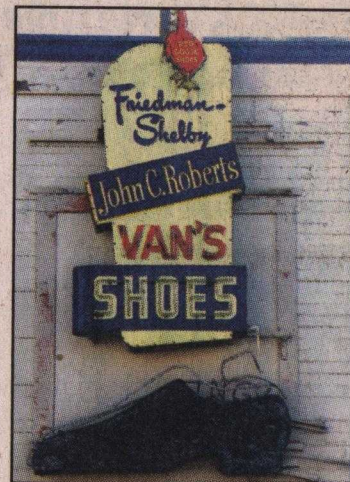
"When I was a kid I could hear the presses rolling," Van Lanen said.

When he retires, Van Lanen said he hopes to hand the business over to his stepson.

"I'm sure the business will go on, as long as there is a need for cobblers," he said.

Van Lanen said he most enjoys

Rp 10.22.13



See SHOES, page A8

# SHOES

From page 1

helping his customers get precisely the type of service they need.

“There is just something about fixing things and helping people,” he said.

The birth of Van’s Shoe Store came at a time that predated by many decades the idea that worn and damaged things should simply be discarded, and when people believed in repairing their possessions when possible.

Van’s soon became a Watsonville mainstay. Here, farmers, workers and businesspeople alike came from throughout town to have their footwear fixed.

The business is a place rich with old-world craftsmanship, where neat rows of well-used tools, supplies and equipment wait on weathered shelves and where metal shoe stands worn smooth from decades of use stand ready.

The shoe repair industry took a hit during the recent economic recession, when many workers were laid off and for a time sought fewer such services.

To make matters worse, Van Lanen and his colleagues are constantly battling overseas competitors, whose imported shoes make up approximately 99 percent of the U.S. market.

As a result, cheaper footwear from countries such as China often cost nearly as much as repairs do.

But as the economy rebounds, so do the numbers of newly employed tradesmen looking to repair their higher quality, American-made workboots, which can cost upwards of \$200 and are worth the money to fix, Van Lanen said.

“Now we have more repairs than we know what to do with,” he said.

Danny Lucas, a Watsonville firefighter who has been coming to Van’s for the past 40 years, said he has had a pair of workboots resoled 10 times.

“That’s a lot of use out of the same pair of boots,” he said.

Lucas said he has also brought baseball gloves for



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

**Jose Luis Castro, a cobbler at Van’s Shoes in Watsonville, uses an industrial strength sewing machine to repair the sole of a work boot.**

restringing.

“It’s the kind of business everyone uses,” he said. “They’re friendly and helpful, and they’ve always treated my family right.”

A steady stream of customers came into the shop Monday, some with shoes to be repaired and others to purchase new ones.

One couple bought several pairs of Ugg boots, a brand popular with young people and of which Van Lanen has several styles in stock.

Another customer brought in a leather belt he hoped to have re-colored, a service Van Lanen was happy to provide.

The store’s cobblers stand ready to stretch, dye, resole and stitch numerous types of shoes, in addition to dozens of other services.

Mike Lewis of Watsonville said he has been a long time customer.

“They do the old-style of repair and I like that,” Lewis said. “There’re just not a lot of places left that do that kind of service. I’ve had many pair of shoes repaired here over the years.”

The store also sells new shoes from such companies known for their quality as Wolverine and Red Wing.

“My grandfather’s motto was, ‘we sell the best and we fix the rest,’” Van Lanen said.

Cobbler Jose Luis Castro, 46, has been working at Van’s for 15 years. He said he was encour-

aged by his father to take up the craft, an idea he at first rejected.

But after Castro tried it, he realized he liked it.

“Every repair is different,” he said. “It’s not the same thing all the time.”

Van Lanen said he gets many young visitors he refers to as the “throwaway generation,” who he said frequently express surprise that anyone could — or would — repair their shoes.

“It’s like a giant recycling center,” he said.

A Watsonville native and Moreland Notre Dame Academy graduate, Van Lanen originally planned to be a Catholic priest, and in fact served for seven years including at Carmel Mission, where he said he once preached to crooner Bing Crosby.

But realizing the loneliness of the calling was too much, Van Lanen left the ministry to marry his sweetheart, and came home to Watsonville to work in the family business.

“I got an early start saving souls, now I save soles,” he said.

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Van’s Shoe Store is located at 14 E. Lake Ave. in Watsonville. For information call 724-9766.

Hours: Mon - Fri, 7:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.; Sat, 7:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.; Sun, 10:30 a.m. - 3 p.m.