

A Parade of Shoes

By Gail Kiracofe

It's tough to choose what you want to take with you to the retirement home. I was dealing with that distasteful duty when I came upon my baby shoe tucked in the corner of a dresser drawer.

"Come look at this," I called to my daughter, Shirley. "Isn't this sweet?"

The tiny shoe had followed me around forever and ended up here, tumbled in with some of my other lifetime treasures. It had a scuffed toe, soiled soft white leather and a crumpled top that leaned a bit, almost covering its dear little buttons.

Examining the tiny shoe, Shirley reminisced, remembering her own babies. "Is there anything more lovable than a baby's foot?" Then she went back to sorting things in the basement, and I fell into a reverie of shoe memories.

I grew up in Mishawaka, Ind., in the late 1930s. Each day, I walked to and from the Beiger School along U.S. 33—or Lincoln Way, as we called it then. It was a whole mile each way, and we came home for lunch and went back again for afternoon classes. My two brothers and I wore out a lot of leather. We were well acquainted with the man who half-soled our shoes on a regular basis.

One day I came home from school with the sole of my shoe flapping. Step, *flop*, step, *flop*. A rubber band around my foot helped for a while, but it kept slipping off. I knew that a new pair of shoes was out of the question in those hard times, so I didn't even ask. It took my mother's sharp eye to determine that the time had come.

And so, one Saturday, we were off to the Red Goose shoe store where my foot was measured carefully, then pinched thoroughly at the toe and sides as I tried on several pairs of shoes.

Finally I could stand and look down through the magical X-ray machine to see my foot bones fitting perfectly in the sturdy brown oxfords. A bit long

to allow for growing toes, they were great kicking shoes, as my brothers would find out, and I spent much time admiring them.

By the time I outgrew those shoes, they had kicked soccer balls, skipped and hopped, run bases, splashed through mud puddles and slid on icy sidewalks. My dad had cleaned and polished them every Saturday night to be worn to Sunday school and church the next day. Finally, when my feet could no longer be jammed into them, they were pushed to the back of the closet and forgotten.



Saddle oxfords and penny loafers dominated my footwear for a number of years. Along with bobby socks, they defined my age group as we watched the war from a distance. We hoofed it to school and back, walked downtown to the movies, and rode our bikes across town for music lessons.

At the Teen Center, our shoes protected our toes as we learned to dance—first, an awkward two-step, and later, a joyful, loose-jointed jitterbug. (Remember Glenn Miller's *Tuxedo Junction*?) But still, some good brown oxfords took me to camp each summer, and hiking and birding in the woods each spring and fall.

"Socks and flats, hose and heels, or hat and gloves?" These simple clues conveyed the dress code for social events when I finally got down to campus at Indiana University in Bloomington in the fall of 1947. Once you had that information, you could be sure you were dressed properly for the occasion.

Pictures from that era show me still in saddle shoes, but also in brown suede oxfords with crepe soles, or in pumps with 2- or 3-inch heels. I knew that the higher the heel, the dressier the occasion. But I was fortunate to be at college at all, and my clothes allowance did not cover a wide variety of shoes. I could only ignore the fact that my dressiest dress was blue and my highest heels were brown.

And so I adopted my mother's theory: "No one will notice such things on a galloping horse." My mother was nothing if not practical.

In the next chapter of my life, sensible low-heeled shoes for the role of housewife and mother were balanced with dressy sandals befitting the "lady" of a military officer. When single again, I went back to work, and exchanged that footwear for "dress for success" 2-inch-heel pumps.

Then, in an effort to redefine my life, I attended a 12-day session of Outward Bound in the mountains of North Carolina. The brochure warned, "Make sure your boots fit wearing two pairs of heavy socks and are well broken in before arriving at camp."

In preparation, I walked around the block each evening, building up my stamina and breaking in my new hiking boots ... I thought.

On the first full day of Outward Bound, our class of 10 hiked up the mountain to maneuver the ropes course. I arrived there huffing and puffing, wondering why I had thought a stroll around the block would season my now-aching muscles. The blisters on my feet proved that my strolls had done nothing to toughen my feet or soften my stiff, clunky boots.

My best friend became the moleskin patches

we'd been told to pack, as my boots and I hiked up mountains, rappelled down cliffs, dangled between peaks doing the "Tyrolean Traverse," and hid, waterproofed, in the raft as we shot down the Chattooga River, scene of the movie *Deliverance*.

On the day of graduation, I was bruised and bloody from head to toe, exhausted and tearful. But I stood 7 feet tall in my *now* well-broken-in-boots to receive a nomination from the class for having successfully completed the course.

"Mother," cried Shirley, emerging from the basement, "what in the world are you doing with this old pair of boots?"

She looked at me oddly when I insisted, "Put them in that box of things to take to the retirement home, dear. I'll find room for them." Carefully wrapping my baby shoe in tissue, I tucked it into one of the boots.

Now, those ugly but comfortable white athletic shoes everyone wears are moving me through the final chapters of my life. But I remember oxfords and saddle shoes and high heels and dressy pumps. And those doggoned boots. Led by that little buttoned baby shoe, they made a fine parade. ❖