

Boots and the *Fabrication* of Houston's Identity

By José Solís

Illustration by Mikey Tehrani

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FOR ALL THE EFFORTS TO REFORM THE IMPRESSION OF OUR CITY FOR VISITORS—the “world city,” the “unexpected city,” the “proud city”—mention Houston to many outsiders, and they still wrongly conjure up the image of cowboys, horses, and wildcatters. Houston’s early wealth did not come from cattle drives and ranching. It came from cotton shipping, financing, and marketing, which later on provided the necessary business infrastructure for oil companies.

That said, Houston loves to contribute to the Western mythology and pretend it has strong cowboy roots. Every year, men and women dress up for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. It is a wholesale “fabrication,” as in making things up. The oldest of the Houston rodeo trail rides date from the 1950s, not the 1850s.

Out of all the ahistoric activities, it is the wearing of custom-made cowboy boots more than anything else—whether under a pair of starched Lee Jeans or an Armani suit—that represents the American West and all of its romanticized notions of freedom and individualism. It is worth a look at how the boots are actually made (the fabrication behind the fabrication) for perspective. Though the method of making cowboy boots has hardly changed in the last century, our relationship to their original purpose has.

James Morado Sr. started making custom boots in 1947—first for the now-closed Model Boot Shop in the Heights, and then in his own shop, Custom Boots by Morado, which he started in 1986. Over the years, Morado, his son James Morado Jr.—who now largely runs the shop—and a few employees have carefully crafted each unique pair of boots in a compact backyard workshop filled with leather hides, shoe lasts, work benches, and a decades-old machine. While the number of people working in the shop has fluctuated, the way the boots are crafted—mostly by hand—has not.

When starting a new pair of boots, James Jr. works closely with the customer to determine the style, color scheme, and details. After closely measuring the customer’s feet and calves, he then creates a unique pattern based on a standard size that the bootmakers will use to cut pieces of leather for the new boots. Once cut,

James Jr. adds the various decorative inlays and stitched patterns while the leather is still flat. After they have selected the lasts that most closely approximate the customer’s measurements, the bootmakers then begin to stretch the pieces of leather into their final shapes. They wet the leather to help set the final form—once before the shaft is attached to the foot and once after. While the bootmakers sew the leather pieces edge to edge for the upper portion of the boot, they attach the sole to the boot with glue and stitching in a series of layers: the welt to the leather foot to the midsole to the outer sole. Finally, they nail the heel to the sole and cut, grind, and polish away the excess sole material to finish the boots.

Most elements of the boot are crucial for one of its main uses: riding a horse. Roughly seventy-five percent of the construction of the boot—the seams, the stitches, the joints, the laminations—is essential for holding the boot together as the foot stresses and strains each portion of it. The narrow toe and tread-less sole allows a rider to easily insert his foot into the saddle’s stirrups, while the tall heel prevents the foot from sliding completely through them. The long shaft of the boot protects the calf and ankle both from rubbing excessively against the stirrups but also from passing brush, thorns, or rocks. The shaft’s length and loose fit provide a secure enough hold on the foot to keep it in place in the absence of lacing, yet also allows the foot to slide out easily if the rider’s foot gets caught in the stirrup as he is thrown from the horse. Even elements of the boot that seem extraneous actually serve a useful purpose. The stitching on the boot shaft, though decorative in appearance, provide stiffness, thereby making it easier to slide the boot on. Even the toe bug—the simple stitched pattern located just behind the base of the toes—reinforces the shoe at one of the highest stress points in the entire boot.

Today the car has replaced the horse in our world, and many of the boot’s essential design elements have lost their practical purpose. It has gone from a valuable tool to a nostalgic emblem that has little connection to its original utilitarian purpose—a fact reflected in some of the more wildly elaborate and colorful designs that Morado’s customers ask them to make.

The cowboy on his horse invokes the image of the lone individual in wide open spaces, free from the constraints of society, an attitude we still carry towards our city. We see freedom of movement—specifically in a car under our control—as the ultimate

birthright, and the detached house surrounded by a large, green lawn as the last vestige of that home on the range. The fabricated identity of Western individualism was manifest in the built environment.

Dressing up like cowboys and closing streets for historic-sounding trail rides is good fun. Moreover, many of Houston’s best traits resonate with cowboy-ism: the entrepreneurialism, the do-it-yourself ethic of the Art Car Parade, and the general sense that what you can do is more important than who your parents are. And yet, in our sprawling city with its traffic-choked arteries and ever expanding geographic waistline, it is time Houston re-examined its relationship with the Western. A car is not a horse and a yard of fertilized St. Augustine grass is no ranch.

Perhaps the best irony of the Houston Livestock and Rodeo Show is that attendees have to ditch their cars at distant lots and pack into the METRO rail like it’s a Tokyo subway. These boots were made for walking, the song goes. That’s a myth I wish more people believed in. ☺

