



“EVERYONE SHOULD GET BOOT WHISPERED AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR LIFE,”



SOLE MATES: HOW WIMBERLEY'S WILD WEST STORE WAS WON

By Jordan Gass-Poore' Photos Andres Sotomayor

Good shoes have taken Wimberley resident Ulli Johnston to good places.

Ulli Johnston has an almost psychic ability to match the perfect pair of boots with a customer, an act that one customer in 2006 dubbed “boot whispering.”

Johnston, AKA the Boot Whisperer, can look at a customer's legs and the arches of their feet and find them the perfect pair of boots. Size doesn't matter: she can gauge a customer's boot size at a glance.

The more than 700 boots at the Wild West Store tell the story of Johnston's journey from Texas tourist to business owner. From the beat-up to the hand-tooled beauties, boots line every nook and cranny of the German expatriot's store off the Wimberley Square.

Ulli and her husband Bill used to travel across Texas selling vintage and antique items at events,

TIPS:

There's a certain sound that's made when someone puts their foot into a boot that's too big

-Ostrich skin is harder to scuff

-Litmus test: if your toes aren't happy the boots aren't for you

-Rubbing alcohol inside the boot can stretch the boot shaft to help get your foot inside

-Landis and Austin Shoe Hospital handles boot repairs

-Most boot beginners assume a pointy toe is uncomfortable, but that's not always the case

-Boots with a shorter shaft are better to wear in warm weather

including boots, which routinely sold well. An established dealer taught Ulli the vintage boot trade in 1990.

Three years later, Bill and Ulli put boots on the ground in Wimberley when they opened the Wild West Store. Two years later, they relocated to their present location.

Her large inventory, which includes some Western clothing and accessories, spills out onto the store's porch.

There's short boots and tall boots, square-toed and pointy-toed, boots made of leather, ostrich and lizard skin and vintage boots that have never been worn.

A good pair of boots “changes your posture. You walk differently. They become a part of you,” Johnston said.

They don't make boots like they used to, Johnston lamented, because in the late 1980's boot manufacturers began to move overseas and the overall quality declined.

The proof is in the boot shaft: a pair of rare 1940s Tony Lamas have a leather boot shaft that feels like a stick of butter, compared to a more modern pair with a fake leather boot

shaft that feels like cardboard.

Most vintage boots in Johnston's store show superior craftsmanship and have their original heel and sole. That's why customers from around the globe buy and trade boots from the Wild West Store. “The bar's set very high now,” Johnston said of the quality of boots the store will take in trade with customers.

Although Johnston sports a pair of sneakers for workouts and Crocs for the garden, she said she owns 35 pairs of boots to do everything else. The boots are displayed in her home's living room because “you don't want to hide them in a closet.” They're works of art.

There is a pair of boots for everyone, Johnston insisted, sometimes multiple pairs.

To see Johnston in action, you can make an appointment with her by phone or email, or stop by the Wild West Store when there's a sign outside that reads “The Boot Whisperer Is In.”

“Everyone should get boot whispered at least once in their life,” Johnston said.

wildweststore.com

Open by appointment only
Please call 512-847-1219