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Jason Gawlik makes custom cowboy boots the old-fashioned way, even though he's a young guy. Gawlik posed for a portrait Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015, in Houston. Some of his equipment is more than 100 years old. He works in the back of Texas National Outfitters, 8933 Katy Freeway. (Steve Gonzales / Houston Chronicle)

Jason Gawlik is a young man in an old man's game.

He makes custom cowboy boots in the back of the Texas National Outfitters store on the Katy Freeway, surrounded by lasts and tools and machines several times older than he is. (One operates with a treadle, just like your grandmother's old Singer.)

Out in front, the store sells all sorts of good commercial boots but, says general manager Donovan Griffin, "It was a dream to make our own boots as well."

That's where Gawlik comes in. The boots aren't inexpensive - often four places before the decimal point - but they're art and heirloom and the wearer's personal vision all in one. "Building your dream boot" is what Gawlik calls it.

But it's more, even, than that. "We're not just selling boots. It's a bit of Texas," he says. "We're saving a culture."

Amid the old machines and the half-made boots, you can't miss the leathers: not just plain old cow, but alligator, salt-water crocodile, caiman, whatever is legal at the



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moment. "We love making boots out of hippo," says Griffin, as if that were a regular thing to say.

Spread out on a table is a scaly arapaima skin, as green and eerie as if it were the hide of a space alien. It almost is. The arapaima fish lives in the waters of the Amazon, a literal river monster. Boots made from that would get you noticed.

The boots are built around foot-shaped lasts made to conform to the exact measurements of the wearer's feet, up to 12 measurements for each. "You're not a size 10, you're a size you," Griffin says. An average boot takes 60 to 80 hours to construct. You can lose yourself in the intricacies of the inlays and tooling and stitching.



Gawlik, who is 35, hand-stitches all the critical seams, though some of the decorative work may be done by machine. Another young guy, Caleb Hilton, does the tooling.

Cowboy boots may seem like perfectly Texan footwear, but their history is as ancient as the Mongols. The Mongols, who were great horsemen, used stirrups and wore red boots with heels to ride. The Duke of Wellington - the Waterloo guy - in the early 19th century modified Hessian cavalry boots to make better riding wear.

But, the German immigrants who came to this country in the mid-19th century and settled in and near Fredericksburg made cowboy boots what they are, says D.W. Frommer II, the Academy of Western Artists' bootmaker of 2014. "That's where Western bootmaking went off on its own," he says.

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Frommer, who lives in Oregon and has made boots for more than 40 years, has seen many young people come into the trade, and he's seen a lot of them leave. "Quite a few come into the trade, but sometimes they don't stick around. To do this in the way it was done in the heyday of boot- and shoemaking is very difficult," he says. "It's laborious, and it's hard to get the tools and quality materials. It requires dedication for the rest of your life."



Lisa Sorrell, of Sorrell Custom Boots in Guthrie, Okla., is another young person, like Gawlik, who has stuck around. "The hardest skill to learn is patience and perseverance," she says.

She believes interest from young people is growing, especially from young women. "It's kind of an expressive thing to get into, the satisfaction of making things with your hands," she says. And now that custom shoemaking is very nearly dead, making cowboy boots is the only way to learn to make footwear.

Gawlik, who grew up in Austin and, with his wife, Lily, is raising three teenagers, started out as a financial adviser before getting into shoe repair. (Houston is big on shoe repair.) When he decided to get serious about bootmaking, he went to Budapest to study for two months under Marcell Mersan, a well-known bespoke shoe- and bootmaker, now a shoe design professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

"It's a calling, I guess. This is destiny," Gawlik says. "The whole world thinks cowboy boots were born in Texas." He'd like to train apprentices for the next generation.

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Texas National Outfitters doesn't just support custom bootmaking. For one thing, Gawlik also repairs boots and can add custom touches to commercial boots. The store, owned by Christy Conrad and her husband, Chris, sells other leather goods and handmade jewelry, and hosts live Texas music. Its sister store is on South Congress Street in Austin. "This is what we envisioned," says Christy Conrad.

Most of all, Gawlik likes the idea that he's creating something that can be passed down for generations but is practical and wearable too.

"If you want to make your troubles go away," he says, "wear comfortable boots."

