

A business of heart and sole



Mike Strobel steps back in time with The Cobbler

"THAT A HOLE?" says The Cobbler.

I don't know how he sees it, from way over there in the shadows by the 1904 patching machine.

But, yep, there's a new hole in my old black Browns.

Bob, the black Lab, wanders by.

"If you don't like Bob, you don't like me," says The Cobbler. I swear, Bruce Tremblay, 50, stepped out of a Disney flick. Co-starring Gepetto and the Toy Maker.

For 38 years, since he was 12, Bruce Tremblay has mended, tended, resoled and shined shoes in this shop on Fifth St., just off Lake Shore Blvd. in New Toronto.

His late dad, Cliff, toiled here 50 years.

His grandfather, Wilf, opened the place in '29, a week after the stock market crashed. Bad timing for folks who sell new shoes, great timing for those who patch up old ones.

Wilf moved a few doors down in '46.

Otherwise, not much has changed.

The brass National sales register still goes *cha-ching*. Any sale over \$6, you have to ring in twice.

Wilf's tools, his boot-lasts and cobbler's hammers, still work just fine. His stitchers and patchers still hum in the shadows, with lots of oil and a little duct tape.

The three-seater shoeshine chair, plucked from the CNE Horse Palace, has been recovered four times.

Paul Henderson, the hockey hero, sat there.

So have generations of locals.

There was The Kite Man, named for the pastime he spent hours pursuing on the lake-shore.

And the old fellow who stared at the poster of the *Lusitania's* sister ship, *Aquitania*. A relative helped build her.

Regulars still come every week. Some are fourth generation. They talk politics or hockey while The Cobbler shines.



— Craig Robertson, SUN

■ **THREE GENERATIONS** of shoe repair will end with Bruce Tremblay's Toronto shop.

"It's like a barbershop," he says. "A shine is like a haircut."

There once were three shoe repairers in the neighbourhood. Tremblay's is the sole survivor.

Still, New Toronto hasn't changed much.

It's as small town as any part of the megacity.

Tremblay's pendulum clock is one of many around here. A salesman travelled through in the 1930s.

A neighbour pops by to pick up her son's cowboy boots and see Bob the Lab.

Out on Fifth St., a knife-sharpener clangs past. What's next, a milk wagon?

Some things have changed. Ol' Wilf charged a dime a shine. Now it's four bucks.

All of June, to celebrate the 75th year of Tremblay's Shoe Service, a dollar a shine will go

to local charities.

Maybe the Cobblers' Benevolent Fund, if there were such a thing, should be one of them.

Shoe repair is a dying art. The survivors are mostly old.

"Everything's plastic and vinyl today," says Bruce Tremblay. "My most-used equipment is the heat gun."

But the biz Grandpa Wilf started has been good to the Tremblays.

"He used to say, 'If you go big, really go big. If you're going to stay small, really stay small.'"

So they stayed small, and tight to the neighbourhood.

Locals still sometimes call Bruce "Cliff."

Platform heels got them through the '70s, cowboy boots through the '90s.

The line, however, will die with Bruce. One daughter is a teacher, the other soon will be.

Bruce figures he'll scale back, keep the shop open a couple of days a week. Family quarters are upstairs.

"We've done all right by this place," says The Cobbler.

"Everything has to end some time."

Speaking of which, he glances down.

"Listen, bring in those shoes when you get a chance."

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