

Al's Shoe Repair

by
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A decade ago, I was one of those people that couldn't sit in a chair very long. I was always walking from place to place. I liked to move especially at work. As a result, when I would buy a good pair of shoes, they would last maybe four or five months.

That all changed some years ago. Today, sixty days a year, I wear the same pair of good shoes to work that I have worn for the last 10 years. Amazing?

In this disposable age, I am also proud to say that I am wearing the same pair of leather loafers I have owned for 13 years. I know what you're thinking. How terrible do they smell? They don't. They also look great. How?

Nestled in the heart of Vandergrift on Columbia Avenue is a building with a retro sign that simply says "Al's Shoe Repair". Walk inside and you walk back in time. Surrounding the walls to the left are these big whatever machines that do things with shoes. To the right is a little stand with polishes. Behind the counter is a guy with an ever-present grin on his face.

When I bring Al a pair of shoes, he looks at them the way an archaeologist looks at dinosaur bones. You wonder what the heck he sees interesting in those things but he does. "What do we have here," he begins as I bring my first of two pairs out of my shopping bag.

"So look, I know this is a tough call. Can you do anything with these," I ask. "Sure, sure these are nice shoes," he reassures me. "Nothing wrong with these. You need new heels," he declares. Then there is a pause. "Uh-oh, he's going to tell me to pitch them. I know it," I think to myself. "This sole is fine but the thread is worn out on this other one," he states flatly. Thread? What the heck? "Oh is that bad," I ask. "No, no I can fix that. You just need a new sole," he says with a smile. "Ok, if you say so. Just do your magic and make them look like new again," I say.

I reach back into my bag and pull out pair number 2. "Umm, something happened to these other shoes. First they are six or seven years old. They used to be cordovan. But they were getting too light and someone told me to use black shoe polish to make them darker again. It didn't work. So I put two more coats of black polish on. Now they look weird. Do you think you can possibly do anything with these," I gasp embarrassingly.

A twinkle shimmers in his eyes as he tries to hide his amusement. He looks them over. "I think I can do something with these. When do you want these - tomorrow?" he asks. With Al it's either tomorrow or the next day but usually tomorrow. "No whenever, I'm fine. I still have those other three pairs you fixed up for me," I say.

Fixing shoes is a dying art form. Al's Shoe Repair may be one of the last we'll ever see. "No young blood," Al declares. For thirty five years in Natrona Heights and the last seven in Vandergrift, this gentleman has been fixing shoes. It's hard to find someone handy in the Pittsburgh area but no one does it better than the fellow we have right here in the Kiski Valley.

Since going to Al's Shoe Repair, I have been privately using a little system I devised. Every two years over the last ten years I have bought one new pair of work shoes. That's it. I then rotate them into my collection of Al's repaired shoes. I just got done shining them today. They don't look too bad. Thrilled? I thought so.

It's not that I'm thrifty. I'm not. I buy some of the craziest computer gizmos. It's just that Al's shoe repair makes too much sense. Good shoes cost a lot of money and before repairing shoes becomes extinct, I can have a few extra bucks for gizmos.



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