

A photograph of an elderly woman with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a red jacket and dark pants, standing in a cluttered workshop. She is smiling and pointing towards a piece of machinery. The workshop is filled with various tools, machines, and equipment, including a large green machine in the foreground and a wooden stool. The background shows shelves and more machinery, suggesting a long history of craftsmanship.

A Real Hardboot

*After more than 100 years, Maryland fixture
A.M. Kroop and Sons still standing tall*

By Sandra McKee

Photographs by Anne Litz and Barrie Reightler



When the telephone rings in the big, square, white building on C Street in Laurel, Md., Randy Kroop answers the phone with a cheery “A.M. Kroop and Sons.” But when the caller asks for the owner, a little confusion arises.

“I’m the owner,” she says, without pause.

The caller, “I’m confused. Isn’t this A.M. Kroop and Sons Inc.?”

“Yes,” says Randy Kroop. “I’m the Inc.”

Indeed. Randy Kroop is the Inc., but she is much more than that. She is the fourth generation of a Maryland family that has been in the shoe and boot business for more than 100 years.

By reaching a fourth generation, the Kroop family has already done more than all but 3 percent of family businesses in the United States, according to the Family Business Institute.

Over the decades, Kroop boots have become well-known throughout the horse industry. Everyone from Thoroughbred horsemen and jockeys to fox hunters and show horse riders swear by them. Even best-selling fiction writer Dick Francis mentioned Kroop boots in his 1971 novel, *Rat Race*.

More recently, when the movie *Seabiscuit* was made, the movie company ordered 25 pairs of exact replicas of the Kroop boots originally made for the horse’s jockey George Woolf by Randy’s grandfather. And, the company also counts Madonna, Carly Simon and Lyle Lovett among its customers.

In March, trainer Graham Motion, who expects to have Tampa Bay Derby winner Ring Weekend in the May 3 Kentucky Derby, said he has friends in Europe who insist on going to Kroop’s to buy boots every time they come to visit his Maryland stable.

“Kroop’s makes boots to a certain comfort level,” Motion said. “What they do is unique in this day—and it’s fair to say those boots don’t wear out.”

It’s a long, storied history. But after 91 years in Laurel, Randy Kroop, 60, fears there won’t be a next generation—or even a business in the too near future.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to keep the business going to its 100th birthday here,” Kroop said. “We’ve been in Laurel since 1923 and in this building since 1927. But it’s hard. I can’t find help. Right now, I have one man, Rick Brown, a very good worker who has been here for [31] years, and I don’t want to train anyone else.

“People today don’t want to do hard work, they don’t want to get their hands dirty, and my two children [son Ari and daughter Afee, her sister’s child whom she raised after Afee’s mother died] have no interest. There’s no one to pass the business on to. It breaks my heart.”

A Long Line

Adolph Michael Kroop learned the shoemaking business from his father, who made boots for the Russian Army in Latvia, and brought the trade to New York in 1907. Eventually he moved to Maryland and had boot and shoe shops in Baltimore and Ellicott City before moving to Laurel.

But specializing in jockey boots started by happenstance. One day at the Laurel store, then on Main Street, jockey Henry Erickson came in and asked if a special boot could be made to fit his tiny feet.

The answer, of course, was yes and the business grew as word spread. In the company’s heyday, Randy’s uncle Israel estimated the company made boots for

65 percent of jockeys in the United States, including the famed Eddie Arcaro and Willie Shoemaker.

The original lasts (wooden shoe forms) used in the making of many of them, including Shoemaker’s size 1½, are still in the store, sitting on a shelf on a back wall, along with hundreds of other solid maple lasts that gleam gold in the sunlight. There’s a pair for every foot size.

But in 1979, some 56 years into business in Laurel, Adolph Kroop’s sons Israel and Morris were looking for someone else in the family to run the business. Eventually, it came to Randy Kroop, Morris’ daughter, the only one willing to step in.

A Difficult Transition

A graduate of Towson University with a degree in fine arts, Randy Kroop had moved away four years earlier to escape what she felt was a “smothering” family business.

“When my dad called asking if I’d come home and take over the business, I was working in Michigan and almost starving,” she said.

But she still didn’t know if she wanted the job. Women were breaking into unusual professions, but with difficulty. Becoming the president of A.M. Kroop and Sons was no different.

Add to that the family component, which was substantial, said her Aunt Mary (Kroop) Kleinman, now 92, a career medical secretary who worked as a secretary at the boot business in 1945.

“I think Randy was always interested in the business,” Kleinman said. “But I’m sure when she was there as a young girl, my father, my brothers, me—and all telling her how to do this and that—the poor girl. And if they didn’t like something, they told her to do it their way. I’m sure that was hard because she is a very handy, talented person.”

And then, there were the physical demands on Randy, a slim, 5-foot-1, who not only would do all the office work, which included bookkeeping, ordering supplies, finding repairmen and measuring customers’ feet, but who would also be working on machines built in the 1940s for men.

Over the years, she’s torn muscles in her shoulders and had surgeries on six fingers—all work-related. Locked fingers, she said, are a common complaint.

But Morris, her dad, made it clear if his daughter didn’t come home to become president of the business, the family would shut the door. And so, she came home.

Her dad and uncle had 10 employees, most of them men. One in particular made it clear she was not suited for the job.

“Me taking over, it didn’t fly very well,” Randy recalled, sitting at a sewing machine on a cold, snowy March morning with her large Labradoodle, Kloe, at her side. “I was ‘Daddy’s little girl.’ I was 25. There was this lovely little Korean guy, Chang IL Pyon, a phenomenal shoemaker. He was hard on me.

“I asked him to teach me how to run his machine,” she said. “He looked right at me and said, ‘You woman. You not married. You have no children. You no good.’ I’ll never forget it. But I needed to learn his machine.”

And so she did.

Eventually, when she got it down pat, her employee reconsidered.

“Humph, you pretty good,” she recalled him saying.

But Randy went home and cried more than one night.

Now, she sometimes feels like crying again. Thirty-five years later, the president of A.M. Kroop and Sons Inc., thinks she has come to the same place her late father was. There is no one from the next generation who wants to take over the business.

Family Differences

“I’ve told her she should sell it,” Randy’s cousin David Kroop said. “I’ve told her if she doesn’t sell it, it will just fade away. But Randy treats the business like it’s her baby and she’s not ready to sell.”

David Kroop is the son of Israel, who died in 1991. Israel designed the first pair of goggles specifically for jockeys.

While the Kroop brothers worked together to make jockey boots, they each had a business on the side. Israel operated his goggle business from his home, while Morris made girths in his.

David and his wife, Sandra, took over the goggle business from his father in 1985. They worked to expand it until five years ago, when David, who will only say he is in his early 70s, sold it to Andrew Trembley, who still operates the business in Savage as “Kroop’s” and supplies 75 percent of the horse racing market.

While Randy Kroop struggles with the idea of selling her company to an outsider, David Kroop said he had no such qualms.

Top: From a wall of custom boot lasts, owner Randy Kroop quickly puts her hands on Hall of Famer Willie Shoemaker’s for his size 1D foot. **Center left:** Leather awaits new life as boots. **Center right:** Old jodphurs get re-corked and re-soled for a customer. **Bottom:** Randy and Kloe, the official office greeter.





"It didn't hurt me [emotionally] to sell it," said David Kroop, an engineer. "My wife was the one primarily running it. She was getting tired of running it, but felt obligated because of it being a family business. . . But the business is not a child."

Memories and Stewardship

When Randy Kroop looks around the family shop, she sees large windows letting light in to a big room filled with antique machines. She also sees her dad working the old crimping machine.

As a child, she'd beg her dad to bring her to the shop on Saturdays. She loved the smell of the leather that permeates the building. And she loved the machines, the oldest of which dates to 1916.

Just finding parts and repairmen is daunting, but when she looks around the room, what she feels is love. She points to a "pull over" machine that as a child she thought resembled an octopus, with its long tentacles, and another which looked to her child's eyes like a praying mantis.

"I can see [my dad] turning those rods and I can see him at the clicker, cutting out pants," she said. "And I can see him with the customers. He loved to talk to them, even though he stuttered. My dad was a very generous, good guy and I have good memories.

"Unfortunately, none of us were business people. If we had been, we would have patented the things we created. But we didn't have a clue."

Though times have changed, the product hasn't.

The number of employees has shrunk to two, herself and Brown, the 31-year employee.

"When I came here, we turned out a lot of shoes," Brown, 50, remembered. "We took pride and it used to be we'd have a rack lined with 24 pair of shoes to be made and most days we'd do two racks. Now, we

have about a half-dozen shoes on the rack and take two days to make them."

The number of boot sales a year has gone from 7,000 to approximately 500. And the cost of buying a pair of tall boots from \$36 to as much as \$1,375, though Randy recalls a pair of size 12 polo boots of double thickness that "should have been \$2,000, but I couldn't say it. I'm afraid people will say no."

Kroop's still makes five basic styles—the zipper jodhpur, the Cuban heel jodhpur, the high heel Western exercise boot, the English boot and the famous jockey race riding boot that weighs less than a pound. The Kroops patented the boot in 1936, but failed to maintain the patent. Now, Randy said "all boots are made the way my family first made them."

"If you have a boot you like," Kroop said, "I can make it. The problem these days is that people want products cheap and fast. I had one jockey, who called to inquire, tell me my boots are too expensive. That the only way he would buy from me is if they were cheap and fast."

Maintaining the Program

There are no production lines or short-cuts at Kroop's. There is just Randy Kroop and Rick Brown. When you walk into her shop and buy a pair of boots you buy an entire process.

She and Brown follow a 125-step program, passed from generation to generation. The process begins when Kroop has her customer step on a piece of paper. She outlines both feet. She measures them toe to heel, side to side, feels the bones, notes the bunions and calluses, broken bones and scar tissue.

Then she hand-cuts the leather and Brown pulls the leather over the lasts and together they complete the shoemaking process.

"We've always been precise here," Kroop said. "That's why we've made it.

Some people don't think we've made it because we don't make any money. But it's not all about money. I made 3½ pairs of boots today and I feel good.

"We're still in business because we have a fantastic product. No paper. No plastic. All leather. They last so long I have some people who bring 30-year-old boots for repair. I turn them over and there is the date [they were made]. They bring them in for new soles three and four times."

Kroop let go a small laugh.

"What I need is a microchip that disintegrates the boots after 10 years and leaves a little business card that says, 'Time to call Kroop's for new boots,'" she said.

The longevity of her product is part of the problem. Kroop is always in need of new customers.

Reputation Unchanged

Maryland-based jockey Christine McManigell first heard of Kroop boots when she was a student at Hall of Fame jockey Chris McCarron's jockey school near Lexington, Ky.

"He was always telling us about Kroop boots," she said recently. "That they were the best."

Then last fall she needed a pair. She'd fallen from a horse and the boots she'd been wearing had to be cut off. Up till then, she'd been buying the off-the-shelf models for about \$200. But she lives in Laurel, about two blocks from A.M. Kroop and Sons Inc.

"I'd heard so much about them and I've always worn Kroop goggles, so I just decided to go there and get a pair," she said. "Oh, my gosh! Randy, the nicest lady in the world, she measured my feet exactly. She measured my ankle, my calf—to see exactly what the width should be. She knows about everything on and about your foot."

McManigell paid \$400 and was able to pick exactly what she wanted. The bottom



It takes skillful hands, 125 steps and 17 machines to make a pair of boots. Machines from founder A.M. Kroop's day include the shop's oldest, a 1916 Singer. In addition to the wall of boot lasts, there is a wall of dies to cut the leather.

two-thirds made of black leather with deep red leather around the upper third. The two-tone design is a stylish Kroop tradition.

"She told me I could have any color," McManigell, 25, said. "But I got the dark red. These boots, they're great. You ask any of the old time jocks, especially most of the great ones, they used to all wear Kroop's. And now I know why. You don't even know you have them on and they could last forever. It's crazy!"

At Laurel Park, Rodney Jenkins, a long-time show jumping star and Thoroughbred trainer, said he has been buying Kroop boots every year since 1998, when he moved his business to Maryland.

"They last," he said. "But I go through a lot of them and I buy them for my family at Christmas. I buy the jodhpur boot for myself. It's a high-top boot that fits tight around the ankle. It gives good support in conditions like the ones I work in, with uneven surfaces around the barn and track. The leather work is good and the fit—I broke my foot in nine places and her boots are the only ones I can stand. When you put them on, they're already broken in, that's how well they fit your foot."

Hearing his favorite boot maker might not be around forever, Jenkins said he hopes he gets an early closing notice if it actually comes to that.

"I hope she tells me," he said. "I'd have to buy a supply. It is disappointing that it's a dying industry. What she does is art. People who don't buy their boots from Kroop are missing the boat. They're worth every penny."





A Hard Decision

Over the past few years, Randy Kroop has received several offers for her business (some of them insulting) and a lot of advice—and not just from family. Some of her loyal customers, like Jenkins, want her to keep going. Others see it differently.

An auctioneer, who has sold off a number of family businesses, told her to just close it.

“He said once it’s sold it will never be what it is now,” Randy said, her eyes moist. “He said it’s best to just close. After almost 100 years, sometimes it is time to just end it. But it would be very, very emotional. I’m emotional now, just thinking about it.”

A company building condos next door to her building has indicated it might be interested in buying her property in the next two years. If an offer is made, she said she’ll at least listen.

“I lay in bed and think of all the scenarios,” she said. “Sometimes I wonder, ‘My dad, did he hate me?’ leaving me with this.”

Kroop, however, insists the story is not sad.

“It’s the story of our family’s history, of artistry and survival,” she said. “It’s life.”

And, like life, Kroop realizes it won’t go on forever.

But she’ll be at work just the same, following a family tradition and making some of the world’s finest boots. ✨

Top: Customer-supplied exotic leathers (including elephant hide) are only accepted if they are certified. **Center left:** Finished boots, boxed up and ready to go with the Kroop’s logo. **Center right:** Randy Kroop’s pride and joy, baby-sized boot lasts. **Bottom:** More tools of the trade.

GET THE BOOT

Take a behind the scenes tour of Kroop’s boots with owner Randy Kroop and the Laurel Historical Society and Museum.

Where: 26 C Street, Laurel, Md., 20707 (Parking available).

When: Saturday, May 31, 7 p.m.

What: An in depth, two-hour reception and tour. Wine and light refreshments and a personal tour from fourth generation owner Randy Kroop, who will take visitors through the 91-year-old family shop, demonstrating leather boots are made by hand.

Tickets: \$20. Reserve a spot with the Laurel Historical Society and Museum. www.laurelhistoricalsociety.org or (301) 725-7975.