



# The Selvedge Yard

## BEST IN CLASS FOR BUILT TO LAST | CHIPPEWA BOOTS

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by JP

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*Circa 1939, Ola, Idaho — Farmers turned Loggers with a load ready to go to their self-help cooperative sawmill, started with a Farm Security Administration loan.*

*From the desk of Contributing Editor, Eli M. Getson—*

The thing about great American design is that, for the most part, function is the driving element. It's this functionality that's ultimately the true spirit of what MADE IN AMERICA stands for. It ain't about being pretty; it's about being tough and working the way it's supposed to. A lot of it harkens back to a time when Americans toiled long and hard outside, with their hands, and demanded gear that could hold up to their hard-scrabble lives, and unforgiving the elements. The gear was simple, honest, and true. You got your money's worth.

Our forebears would probably be more than slightly amused by the fact that many of today's American workwear brand purists are not loggers, miners, and metal workers— however, the quality, core values, and classic designs behind these brands still resonate deeply within us. I believe down inside, most of us value the dignity of hard work, quality goods, and simpler times. There's something honest and pure that's sadly missing in the daily gadget grind of our increasingly disposable lives. It's like some of us have a primal itch that we just can't scratch— so we gird our loins with garb from days gone by, to pay tribute to a life and times we'll never know, but long for so badly.



*Circa 1908— Lumberjacks in Northern Minnesota —Image by © Minnesota Historical Society*

Recently I had the honor of sitting down with Clark Perkins, brand manager for legendary **Chippewa Boots**. Full disclosure— I am not exactly Charlie Rose, I am a cultural observer and men's wear guy who gets excited about a lot of different things, especially product I use and love. I traffic in hyperbole, but in this case everything I pen about Chippewa boots is 100% true! Ok, maybe a little opinion is thrown in there, but when I interview brand managers, merchants, and design folks I admire, I melt into the form of a 13 year old girl watching *Twilight* than an objective observer, but what the hell. When you're talking about 'best in class' products, respect is due.



*Circa 1930s – Loggers (or Lumberjacks) working every muscle in their body, and living off the land.*

### ***Tell me a little about the Chippewa Story?***

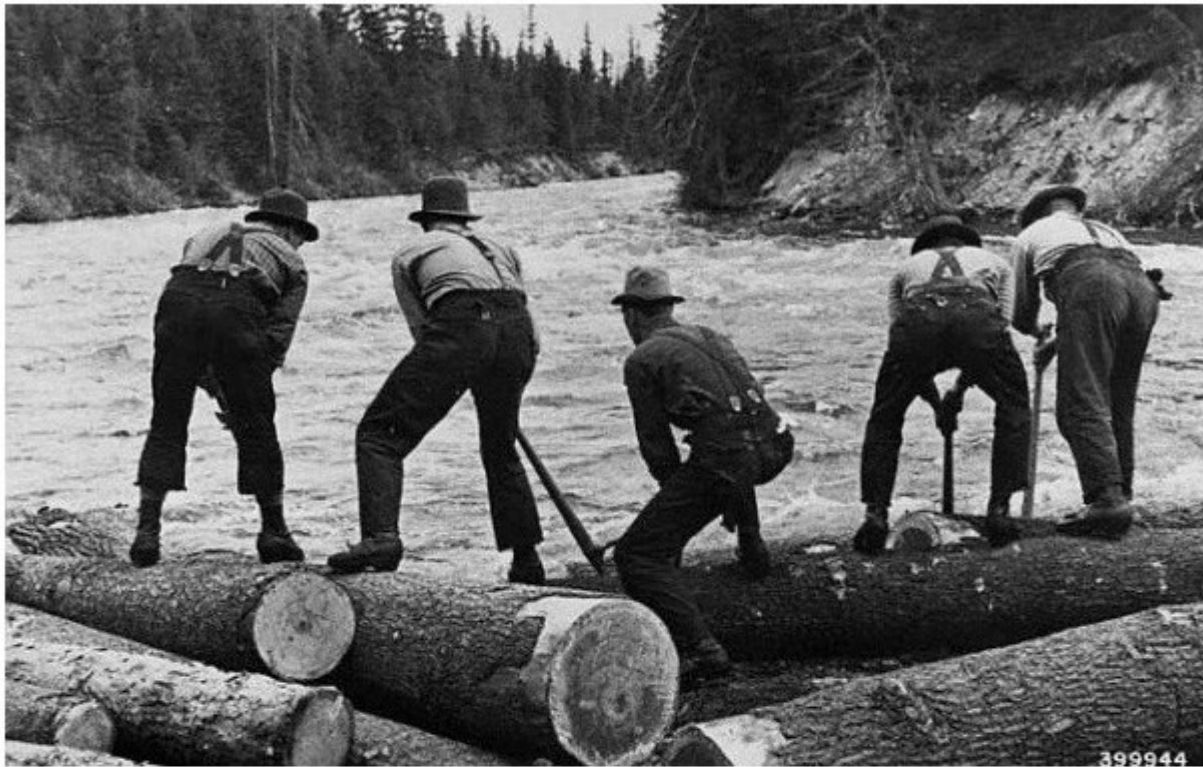
*“Chippewa was founded in 1901 in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin and produced boots primarily for the pulp, paper, and timber industries. From day one the Chippewa Logger (Eli’s personal favorite) was produced for lumberjacks who needed the right equipment for what was and is a dangerous job. We started as an innovative company who placed quality, best in class materials and performance as our main focuses. As the industrial revolution got into full swing Chippewa expanded into Engineer boots (still one of the all time great models). During WWII Chippewa developed the Arctic boot. Fleece lined, these were built for the infantry to use during extreme cold, and many an army grunt wore Chippewa during the Battle of the Bulge. With the post war boom outdoor sports became a passion for many Americans and Chippewa again innovated-introducing the snake boot for those outdoor’s men who wanted to hunt and not worry about the stray rattle snake nest.”*

**Author’s Note:** I have seen these worn by outdoors men (and women) in those noted hunting and fishing hot spots Tokyo, London, and Milan. Bottom line: Chippewa has produced ruggedly handsome, functional, and reliable footwear for 100 plus years.



***What's the biggest market for Chippewa outside of the US?***

*“Japan– we produce Japan specific styles using fashion leather, like mixing cordovan and sand suede, don't know if we are bought by the working guy over there, it's pretty high end. In the last ten years there has been an amazing embrace of iconic American brands and they love us for our heritage, style, and commitment to quality. It's fun for me when I am there to see Chippewa snake boots matched with mini-skirts, and \$2000 handbags in Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo. It is very common in Japan for someone to pay \$1000 USD plus for a pair of vintage Chippewa's. We are considered a rugged luxury item there and will be doing this type of product for the US and Europe soon.”*



*Circa 1939, Idaho—Log Drivers Freeing Log Jam in River. — Image by © CORBIS*

***So even in this economy there are plans for expansion?***

*“Yes, we have a great opportunity to expand our brand globally to people who just want well made, rugged luxury. In 2010 we plan to launch some of the product we are selling in Japan for Europe. We are deep into the development process on this.”*

***When will it launch?***

*“It will launch when it meets our expectations for quality. We are in no rush; we have over 100 years of history to protect.”*



*Circa 1935– Lumbermen Spend Sunday Repairing Shoes – Image by © Minnesota Historical Society*

***I've worn Chippewa Loggers for a long time, why are they so great?***

*"We don't settle, we look for best in class materials, largely made here in America. We use non tarnishable eyelets; leather Robus mid soles, leathers that are beautiful, heavy, and rugged (between 4-6 ounces per sq. ft.). We use Vibram outsoles and are the only company who does joint development with Vibram; so every shoe and boot has an extra element of performance and durability. This is a macho product, so it has to last. We are not the cheapest, but we are the best value in terms of what you get."*



***So how do you feel managing such a venerable brand and writing its next chapter?***

*“It is captivating to have a brand that has this rich heritage and traditional about it, now that I am in a position of stewardship, we want to promote the brand and keep its core DNA while at the same time growing our audience and making sure that they understand the heritage of the brand. You have to have the passion for what you are doing, this is the difference between ‘me too’ and ‘just me’. It’s a unique brand– can be worn by Japanese hipsters and construction workers and will exceed their expectation. Today’s consumer is very different– in a fractionalized world where function, style, fashion, and a value conscious consumer is all over the place our brand still resonates, we just try to tell our story.”*



*Circa 1950s – Washington loggers showing their stuff – and boots. Check out the spikes for extra bite.*

***What is your favorite model in the range?***

*“Style number #27914, the Mystiquero ( The Mythic Cowboy, NICE) . It’s a 12” pull on with harness, made from old bomber jacket leather; The Mystiquero is the one... You can wear these epic boots with everything – short of a tuxedo.”*



*Circa 1930s– What do you call lady Lumberjacks? Why Lumberjills, of course. Here they've taken over the job of felling and stripping young trees – Image by © Hulton-Deutsch Collection*

Final author's note: After the interview was over, a single tear formed in my left eye and slowly trickled down my face– sort of like that commercial in the 70s where the Indian is stoically sitting on his horse, but inside he's devastated by the sight of litter on his native land. The hardest thing about managing any brand is staying true to what it is, but knowing when to push forward, innovate and draw new customers. Most companies and brand people botch this, and either alienate their core consumer or stick their heads in the sand and ultimately become irrelevant. Thankfully this is not the good folks of Chippewa, as they said "our brand still resonates, we just try to tell our story."

Amen brother, Amen...

Eli M. Getson