

Shop Around the Corner

Sole Proprietor

Story and Photography By Martha Horton

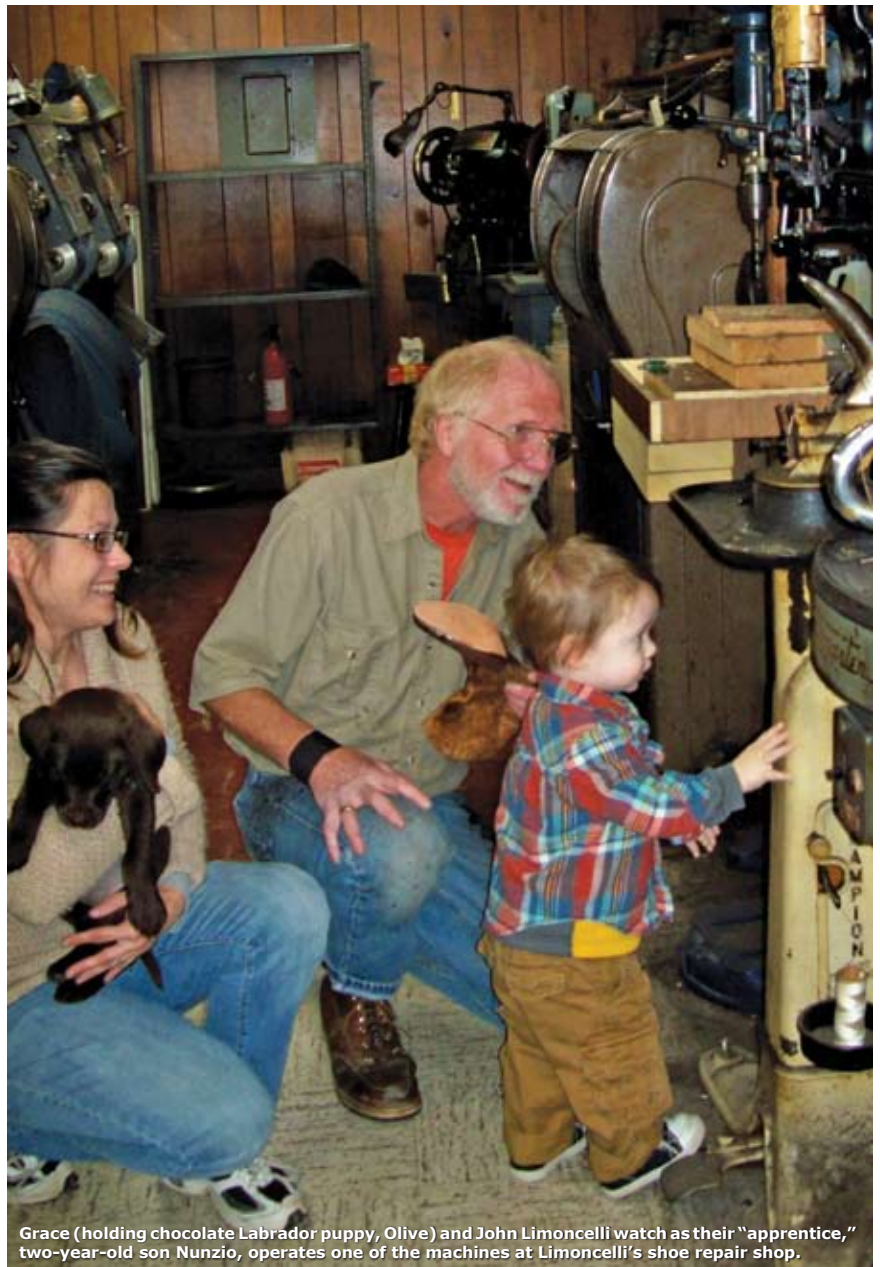
“I can fix anything that needs sewing,” claims John Limoncelli, third generation proprietor of Limoncelli Shoe Repair in Elmira Heights, New York. Whether he’s working on shoe soles or sofa cushions, tents or trampolines, backpacks or boat tops, he just sews, says John. All that varies is the thickness of the material and the type of needle and thread required for the job.

He’ll accept any challenge: “Often people think something can’t be repaired, but it actually can. I’ll try. And if I ruin it, I can fix it,” he laughs.

John’s greatest challenge was the repair of an ABC Sports trailer awning at Watkins Glen International Speedway. John had to take apart a sewing machine to load it into his truck, haul the pieces to the track, climb a ladder at the site, and reassemble the machine on a scaffold—all before he could even begin the repair. But he did it.

There’s only one job he won’t work on—the zippers on newer Jeep rear windows, which he says are designed to fail. John’s grandfather opened the first Limoncelli Shoe Repair shop on Water Street in Elmira in 1910, before electrification. It is one of the oldest continuous businesses in the area. The shop has been at its present location for thirty-one years.

The business has, of course, changed with each generation, along with changes in the manufacturing of shoes. Over the years, the Limoncellis have invested many thousands of dollars in a surprising array of machinery designed to work on the products of specific manufacturers. They have also diversified their services, says John, not only in repairing shoes but also in rebuilding them. One of his specialties is orthopedic build-ups for recreational and occupational footwear. You can see before-and-after examples of John’s



Grace (holding chocolate Labrador puppy, Olive) and John Limoncelli watch as their “apprentice,” two-year-old son Nunzio, operates one of the machines at Limoncelli’s shoe repair shop.

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craftsmanship on the Limoncelli Shoe Repair Facebook page.

Although plenty of folks drop into the shop with broken zippers and ripped handbags, John says the bulk of his business is still repairing and replacing shoe soles and heels.

Often, it's not a matter of soles wearing out so much as the materials they're made of deteriorating. Sometimes the soles are damaged before the uppers are even broken in. Owners of expensive heavy work boots often bring in new boots for John to fit out with proper rubber soles before they even wear them for the first time. Women may do the same with expensive dress shoes, having John put on better lifts for stability and durability.

There are fewer and fewer full-service shoe repairmen in the United States, says John. He notes that only 10 percent of the population in the United States utilizes shoe repairmen as compared to 70 percent of Europeans. And the bulk of existing shoe repair shops are located at malls or airports to provide quick, convenient service rather than quality repair—the “glue and grind” shops, John calls them. “They're just not equipped to do a thorough job.” If

you have to walk past racks and racks of new shoes to get to the counter, it's a good tip-off that this is not a place dedicated to repairing your old shoes, says John.

Will there be a fourth generation to take over Limoncelli Shoe Repair?

When John's son, Nunzio, was born, John watched the baby at the shop. Nunzio also watched John, and took a lively interest in the business. Last March, Grace left her position at Travelers Insurance to help John at the shop and to keep an eye on the increasingly active Nunzio. Now, at age two, Nunzio likes to play apprentice and turn on some of the machines.

But John does not foresee passing on the business to the next generation. A bone condition in his wrist may hasten John's retirement. His children from an earlier marriage have different career interests, and “by the time Nunzio is old enough to learn, I'll be too old to teach him,” says John.

Meantime, if you would like to have just about anything repaired by a true craftsman, you can visit the shop. You may also meet Grace and young Nunzio there, and Olive, their new chocolate Labrador puppy. It's all worth a visit. 🐾



An endangered species: Limoncelli Shoe Repair is a rare third generation full service shop.

Shop: Limoncelli's
Where: 162 East 14th Street,
Elmira Heights, NY
Phone: (670) 734-7305

Journalist and novelist Martha Horton is an occasional contributor to Mountain Home and lives in Elmira, New York.

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