

SNOWSHOE MAGAZINE FEATURED ARTICLE:

L.L. Bean at 100 Years

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The story actually began in 1911 when Leon Leonwood Bean, then of South Paris, Maine, developed plans for a waterproof boot when he got sick of returning from his outdoor activities with water-logged boots. Backing up a bit, Bean was born in nearby Greenwood on November 13, 1872 to Benjamin Warren Bean and Sarah (Swett) Bean and he loved the outdoors.

When both parents died four days apart young Leon was 12, one of six sons, and was sent to South Paris to live with extended family, where he spent as much time outdoors as he could and killed and sold his first deer at 13. What education he attained beyond public school he paid for himself: one semester at Hebron Academy and a business course at Kent's Hill School.



One hundred years later the company founded by Leon Leonwood Bean in 1912 has grown from its humble, one-man origins in a basement in Freeport, Maine, to a global organization with

annual sales of 1.44 billion. Company headquarters are still located in Freeport and the company is still family-owned. This is the story of how it all happened.

L.L. Bean's Golden Rule

“Sell good merchandise at a reasonable profit; treat your customers like human beings and they will come back for more.” L.L. Bean promised 100 percent money back to anyone unsatisfied with his original hunting boots and that guarantee continues today. Much has changed since 1912, but the company has endeavored to adhere to the simple values of the company founder, who was raised to revere nature, respect family ties and be neighborly to other people. Bean believed strongly in the Golden Rule and made it the foundation of the business he established in 1912 with the birth of the Maine Hunting Shoe.

The Maine Hunting Shoe



L.L. conceived these boots with an upper section of lightweight leather and rubber bottoms to keep out water, and took his ideas to a cobbler who helped him make his plan. With the first boots in hand he prepared a list of non-resident Maine hunting license holders and sent them a mail order circular.

Unfortunately, 90 percent of the costs for the first 100 pairs of boots purchased had to be refunded to these customers who found that the rubber bottoms had a tendency to crack. It was clear the boots were popular though, and Bean's keen business sense prevailed. He took out a \$400 loan, set off for Boston and contracted with the United States Rubber Company to produce a better boot for him.

Back to Maine he went, and beginning in Freeport in his brother's basement, he had sold enough of the new boots to buy the original L.L. Bean building on the main street in town. In 1918 he was granted a patent for the Maine Hunting Shoe and he moved on to inventing and improving more outdoor equipment and expanding the business to what it is today.

L.L. Bean, the Company

“Our values are very human ones and our founder personified these values – basic Maine values of trust, honesty and the outdoors,” says Mac McKeever, senior public relations representative for L.L. Bean.



The L.L. Bean store in 1934

“Our single greatest marketing asset continues to be the brand affinity that we have developed and strengthened over the years,” he adds.

Customers come back again and again when looking for outdoor gear because of the superior quality and the 100 percent satisfaction guarantee. Along with the retail expansion, print catalog and the internet (website opened in 1995) is the most coveted marketing tool of all, word-of-mouth. L.L. Bean stands behind their product and people know that.

In 2010, the company produced more than 50 separate catalog titles that were distributed to customers in 50 states and more than 160 countries. On one December day alone that year more than 127,000 L.L. Bean orders were placed online, a Web record for the company. In addition to ordering products, online browsers can search out information on state, national and international parks and watch product videos before they make a selection on a new piece of equipment.

L.L. Bean Outdoor Discovery School Programs

Visitors to www.llbean.com can also check out the L.L. Bean Outdoor Discovery School programs, which include basic snowshoe instruction and a starlight snowshoe tour. Year-round programs costing \$20 include the venue, the gear and instruction. See the sidebar for a complete list of offerings. Everything is provided and this writer can attest to the thoroughness of instruction in archery. I had not shot in 40 years but with a total of two walk-on lessons, and then one private session, I purchased my compound bow, had my arrows sized, set up a target at home and proceeded to put one in the center first shot.



The L.L. Bean store in 1965

If you have ever wanted to try snowshoeing or any other sport on their agenda, this program is not only inexpensive, so you are only out \$20 if you decide you hate it, but you have the experts right there. They can tell you what your realistic outlay will be for equipment, as well as where

you can go to practice your new activity. The Discovery Series program schedules are online for convenience.

Evolution of the L.L. Bean Snowshoe

Snowshoes have been used by man for thousands of years. Prehistoric man between 6,000 and 8,000 years ago invented them for travel and different designs developed over time to handle various types of snow. Eventually the Scandinavians took them further and invented skis. L.L. Bean began producing and selling their product in 1925.



L.L. Bean carries many styles of snowshoes but there are a few basic factors to consider when purchasing a pair. “The first is the user’s total weight,” says Mac McKeever, senior public relations representative for L.L. Bean, “which would include a backpack or other gear. The total weight determines the amount of ‘floatation’ you’ll need and therefore, the overall size of the snowshoe.”

And will you be skiing on the coast of Maine where there is more packed snow, or out West, say in the deep powder in Utah? A shorter snowshoe will work for the former but you’ll need a longer model to help you stay afloat in loose powder. Thirdly, will you be mostly walking, hiking or running?



“The answer to this question will guide you toward what kind of traction you want on your snowshoe, as well as the binding system and the shape of the frame,” adds McKeever. You will find it all at L.L. Bean retail outlets and their print and online catalogs.

A Special Anniversary for a Special Company

What is a customer? Check out the founder’s answer under “Company Values” at www.llbean.com.

“A customer is not an interruption of our work; he is the purpose of it.” Think about that the next time you are in a retail store where there is no sales person in sight until you ring a bell, push a button or yell “hello!” This has been part of the L.L. Bean philosophy since the beginning of the company in 1912, and it is reflected in the helpfulness and kindness both in their retail stores and



at their call centers where orders are phoned in. the person who answers that phone lives in Maine (not India!).

Along with its retail growth has come its commitment to environmental stewardship. Paper use is a part of L.L. Bean's business as a direct marketer; so too is their promotion of sustainable management of the forest resources. The company now uses 100 percent recycled content in company printers and photocopier machines and they support the Maine Forest Certification Initiative, first such program in the nation. Corporate stationery contains 100 percent post-consumer recycled content and a their goal is to have 90 percent of the fiber in catalogs certified under one of several certification systems in Maine, or be made from all recycled fiber.

In 2003 the company converted its heavy duty truck fleet to biodiesel fuel, and in 2008 they began adding hybrid gas/electric vehicles to the fleet. L.L. Bean's support of Friends of Acadia (\$3.5

million donation) helps provide 30 eco-friendly propane buses used in Acadia National Park and nearby communities.

Special Anniversary Products

Snowshoes, yes! "In honor of our 100th anniversary, we developed a line of special 100th anniversary products," says McKeever, and these are heritage-based items like the Old Town Canoe, this one a limited-edition, handmade product.

Also available is a hand made bamboo fly rod, a trout knife, and the snowshoes: "These are a replica of the classic wooden snowshoes originally designed for trail-breaking in the woods of Maine, virtually identical to those worn by Maine woodsmen 100 years ago, as they tended traps and performed other chores in harsh winter conditions," he adds.

“If there is a better snowshoe made we would certainly like to see it,” wrote the founder Leon Leonwood Bean himself in the company’s 1941 catalog. “The steam-bent white ash is hand-selected to ensure the grain runs the full length of the shoe for maximum strength, adds McKeever, “and the decking is hand-laced, top-grain rawhide varnished to keep out moisture. The leather H-style binding adjusts at the heel and forefoot for a secure fit and the narrow profile and long tail make getting around in thick woods easier. These are truly heirloom quality and great for being passed along from generation to generation,” says McKeever.

The Founder’s Legacy

In 1942 Leon Leonwood published his book, *Hunting, Fishing and Camping*, and in 1960 his autobiography, *My Story: the Autobiography of a Down-East Merchant*. Bean died in Pompano Beach, Florida on February 5, 1967, at the age of 94 and at the time of his death L.L. Bean company sales had reached hundreds of millions. He is buried back home in Freeport, Maine, at the Webster Cemetery.



In 1951 the Freeport flagship store established its 24-hour open door policy and if you happen to come in late at night you just might see a celebrity browsing quietly among the products. 1982 saw the debut of the L.L. Bean book pack, which you will see on many Maine children today on their way to school. And in 1990 the company was a sponsor and equipper for the Everest Peace Climb. Quite a legacy for a boy from the Maine woods.

SIDEBAR 1 – OUTDOOR DISCOVERY SCHOOL OFFERINGS

- Archery
- Biking
- Canoeing
- Cross-Country Skiing
- Fly Fishing
- Hiking and Camping
- Kayaking
- Hunting
- Multi-Sport Adventures
- Outdoor Leadership and First Aid
- Snowshoeing
- Sporting Clays
- Stand-up Paddle boarding

SIDEBAR 2 – SOME POPULAR MAINE SNOWSHOEING TRAILS

- Table Rock – Grafton Notch – 2.8 miles
- Douglas Mountain – Sebago – 0.6 miles
- Gulf Hags – Greenville – 8.2 miles
- Sabattus Mountain – Lovell – 1.6 miles
- Wolf Neck Woods State Park – Freeport – 2.6 miles
- Baxter State Park Loop – Millinocket – 6 miles
- Burnham Hill Loop – Rangeley – 7.4 miles
- Witch Hole Pond – Bar Harbor – 5.5 miles

For more trail ideas in Maine, visit www.snowshoes.com. Look also at the Roberts Farm Preserve on Penesseewassee Lake in Norway, Maine, for several opportunities.

SOURCES:

1. www.llbean.com – company info; products; 100th anniversary; Outdoor Discovery Schools programs; founder profile
2. Mac McKeever, senior public relations representative, spokesperson for L.L. Bean, interviews by e-mail
3. www.trails.com/toptrails.aspx?area=13231
4. Roberts Farm Preserve – <http://wflmaine.org/index.php?page=roberts-farm-preserve>
5. Cindy Carney, senior editor, L.L. Bean website, editor for the 100th anniversary page.