“Sunday” pair of shoes and a “Sunday” suit of clothes for relatively formal dress-up wear, principally on Sundays. When chill fall days brought reminders that winter was about to move in, my brother and I would be outfitted with cowhide boots for school and everyday wear. They had sheathlike, snug-fitting “legs,” without laces or other fastenings, that rose almost to the knee. (It may be noted that from boots of this type were derived the terms “bootleg” and “bootlegger,” used in the Volstead era in reference to the smuggling of liquor.) The thick, heavy soles and heels were thickly studded with steel or brass nails. Sometimes, instead of metal nails, they had wooden pegs; but, sooner or later, those with pegs got their full quota of nails. A few times we got boots adorned by red leather tops. Some boots had copper-armored toes; this was by no means a bad idea. Men commonly wore heavy leather boots for outdoor winter work. A few wore fine calf boots for dress at all seasons, the tops, almost knee-high, inside their trousers.

When new, our boots were black and shiny, the leather smooth and pliable. But soon the shine disappeared and
wrinkles began to form, impressing themselves deeply and permanently in the leather from a point an inch or so below the ankle to a point several inches above. Each boot would accumulate three or four rings of wrinkles, making the ankle section look something like a concertina. Two straps at the top of each facilitated pulling them on. One could usually get new boots off fairly easily, but after they became wet a time or two and the wrinkles got a permanent set, someone had to pull them from your extended leg or you had to use a bootjack.

During all of our boot-wearing years, we had a bootjack in the house, within convenient reach. This device was strictly utilitarian, made from a piece of board about fifteen inches long. It had a V-shaped notch at one end, and a cleat was nailed to the underside, just back of the notch. To use it, you stepped upon it with one foot, thrust the counter of the boot on the other foot into the notch, and then pulled vigorously.

Without actually meaning to do so, we got the leather of our boots pretty well saturated with water just about every day. This commonly resulted from wading in water or wet snow just for the fun of wading. Occasionally, it came from accidentally stepping into a deep water-filled hole or from falling into some ditch or puddle and getting one or both boots filled with water. On taking them off at night, we would range our boots about the stove to dry. Sometimes they did dry a little. Invariably, though, when we came to put them on in the morning we found them almost as stiff and unyielding as if they had been made of wood. The drier they got, the stiffer the leather became. If the fire had not been going long and well, they were sure to be uncomfortably cold and clammy. From time
to time we greased the leather well with warm tallow or a mixture of lard and tallow, to which might be added a little pine tar. This treatment improved the appearance of the boots. It also restored some pliability and for a short time made the leather impervious to water.

Our boots stood up against an incredible amount of hard service. Getting them really clean, though, was extremely difficult. Furthermore, to use an expression long current locally, they were ugly as a mud fence. If these shortcomings were ever apparent to us—I don’t recall that they were—our attitude toward the footgear was not affected at all adversely. We liked boots and they suited us to a T for the simple reason that nearly all the boys we knew wore boots just like ours. A boy’s boots were supposed to withstand the wear and tear of a whole winter. They might do that unless he inadvertently got them too close to a hot stove and burned the leather, so that it cracked open, or unless they had to be resoled so often that they would no longer hold nails. In such a case he might be allowed to take his Sunday shoes for everyday wear; or he might get a new pair of “plow” shoes, which were hopefully intended to carry him through the remainder of the winter and, barring bad luck, well into or through the summer.

Plow shoes, supposedly, were to be worn when one plowed—if his feet were shod at all. They were designed to withstand hard knocks in any kind of work or play, being made of tough unlined leather with heavy, closely nailed soles and heels. They differed from boots only in that they came with buckles or laces and their tops were only ankle-high. For a long time few of the farm implements we used had any provision for riding. That meant
a lot of walking. When the ground was wet our shoes became weighted with mud. Dragging that heavy footwear about gave a fellow considerably more leg exercise than he would ordinarily regard as essential. Working in loose, dry soil, more or less of it was scooped up and thrown into our big brogans. That, of course, was conducive to dirty feet and a long succession of dirty socks. Endless scuffing and kicking, attempts (favorable and unfavorable) to slide at every opportunity, and walking to and from school over our piked roads took an appalling toll of sole leather. In desperation a number of men in the community bought do-it-yourself cobbler outfits with generous supplies of nails and tough leather, determined, come what might, to keep their offspring shod. In general they were successful. Their handicraft was rough and very patently that of amateurs, but they managed to nail on soles and heels so firmly that they would stay nailed on. It may be stated for the record (if necessary) that those nail-studded boots and shoes, whether home-cobbled or cobbled by professionals, made frightful inroads upon floors and carpets.

For years oxfords or low shoes were worn only by women and girls, mainly in summer—they were far too sissyish for males. Dress shoes for boys were commonly fastened with buttons. "Congress" shoes or "gaiters," with elastic side gores and with prominent pull-on loops fore and aft, at one time enjoyed much popularity among men and boys. They were handy when it came to putting them on or taking them off—a moderate yank in one direction or the other sufficed. But, once the gore rubber failed, the shoes tended to give one a sloppy unkempt appearance. In addition to that, one or more of the pull-on loops would
nearly always be found holding up, at a rakish angle, a portion of the bottom hem of the wearer’s pants.

For a long time only black shoes and boots were worn. Only a few ever thought of polishing their footwear. These Beau Brummells used a polish that came in a tin box and was applied with a handled implement having a dauber on one side and a polishing brush on the other. The user first spat on the dauber or on the polish, then applied a coating of the waxy compound to his shoes. He finally went over them vigorously with the brush. This could produce quite a lustrous shine, but it tended to be a short-lived one—mud or water readily dissolved the polish. In dry weather the shoes quickly collected and stubbornly held a thick layer of dust. There was a real need for rubber overshoes for protection against mud and snow. Style-conscious young men frowned upon them—they made big feet look bigger and clumsier. Apparently, no argument against wearing rubbers carried any weight with me in my preschool years; they had an irresistible appeal after I had seen others wearing them. At the first opportunity I went with Dad to town and headed straight for a shoe store. There a pair of the coveted rubbers was fitted to my shoes. Handing the clerk my purse containing my meager accumulation of cash, I asked him to take out the amount due. It happened that the man was one of Dad’s friends, and he thought the story too good to keep; so I was embarrassed many times thereafter by hearing details of the transaction recounted.

Most of the older men wore ankle-high, cloth-covered arctics over their shoes or calf boots. Men who did much outdoor work in winter often wore felt boots. Occasionally, boys were outfitted with them too, but most boys preferred
leather-soled footwear because it was better adapted to skating and sliding. The felt boot was an extraordinarily clumsy affair, made of wool felt nearly half an inch thick and molded to conform roughly to the shape of the foot and lower leg. Canvas reinforced rubbers with buckle fastenings were worn over them. Though heavy and ugly, they were warm and comfortable, even in the coldest weather. But many complained that sooner or later they caused their feet to sweat excessively.

Some farm boys suffered from chilblains during part of every winter. This should have surprised no one because, until brisk exercise gets the blood into lively circulation, feet shod as ours were can become extremely cold when the thermometer stands well below the freezing point. In chilblains the tissues are not quite frozen; the after-effects, therefore, are not quite so serious as when actual freezing occurs. Nevertheless, I can state with the voice of experience that chilblains can be very bothersome. The trouble usually continued until well into spring, the affected areas itching, burning, and aching during prolonged periods each day. The discomfort was intensified if the victim forgot and held his feet too near a hot stove.

Toward the first of May our boots or shoes were likely to be completely done in. This never worried anyone much; May 1 was traditionally the time to start going barefoot. That was one thing that was done on the farm strictly by the calendar—boys stoutly insisted on that point. No matter how warm and pleasant April weather might be, no one thought of discarding his footgear—if he did, some higher authority was sure to veto the idea. But let May 1 come; then, even though the day might be cold and blustery, one could find barefoot kids cavorting everywhere.
It was a satisfying change, after a long winter, to go about our daily activities on unshod feet; but there were disadvantages: thorns, broken glass, nails, and splinters seemed to lurk in the most unexpected places, ready to puncture unprotected soles and heels. Moreover, the foot-washing routine was an inflexible daily pre-bedtime requirement. Throughout the summer, a wooden pail—we called it a “foot bucket”—was kept just outside the kitchen door for our use. For those nightly ablutions we used water pumped directly from the well. (For baths we depended, like nearly everyone else in those times, on water in a basin or tub and a sponge or cloth. The water was heated in pails on the kitchen stove or dipped from the stove’s reservoir.)

One summer, after going shoeless for weeks, I developed what was called a stone bruise on my heel. It was a big black spot that became very puffy and, finally, extremely sore. Considering then that it had become “ripe,” Dad lanced it with his razor, cleaned it well, and applied a bandage. That brought marvelous relief, and within a short time it healed completely. Once I accidentally dropped a heavy file. Its tang, like a very blunt spear, pierced the unprotected nail of my big toe and went on through the appendage. For a long time I was not only a barefoot boy with cheek of tan but I could also have been identified by an incredibly sore toe.

In our earlier years harvesttime sometimes found us with nothing to wear for the protection of our feet against the sharp stubbles of the hay or wheat field or from dry thistles that might be encountered. The soles of our feet by that time were so thickly calloused that they had a leatherlike toughness, but the sharp stubbles scratched the skin of ankles and legs unmercifully. And how those scratches did
smart and sting when we washed our feet before retiring at night!

One year buttoned, cloth-topped shoes were the height of fashion for males. Some time later, after oxfords had come into general use by young men (for summer wear only), all who made any pretense of being stylish dressers wore them with red laces. This was about the time that all young fellows who really knew what was what in fashion were wearing derby hats (preferably brown), gaudy vests, black coats, light gray pants, and extremely high stiff collars that a sensible giraffe would almost have balked at.

Nearly all of the clothing worn by small boys was homemade. Often, their pants were made from cloth cut from the soundest parts of garments discarded by their dads. Men bought their work pants and overalls ready made. Socks were factory-knitted but men’s work shirts—even their underwear in some instances—were homemade. The first “store” pants we boys had were made from a tough cotton fabric with triple-sewed seams and riveted buttons. Accompanying them was a folder that glowingly set forth their super-excellent quality and announced that the dealer would “cheerfully” give the buyer a new pair if they ripped, and pay him a quarter for each button that came off. One day, after we had worn the garments almost to tatters, Dad was setting off for town when my brother came running with his worn-out pants wrapped in a newspaper. “You know they were guaranteed,” he said. “Take ’em back and make the man give me a new pair.” Feeling that the dealer would not do that very cheerfully, Dad managed to talk him out of the idea.

Attached collars for dress shirts were practically unknown. All such shirts had neckbands made for attaching
stiff linen collars by means of inserted collar buttons. All were white, generally with broad, stiff bosoms with tabs for anchorage to a button on the trousers waistband. Here and there, a few celluloid collars and cuffs appeared; but all were so shiny and so patently imitations of the real thing that they never gained widespread popularity. One could buy fancy, ready-knotted “teck” ties. They offered the undeniable advantage of being easy to put on, but many considered the knots too perfect. Besides, they had a droll way of coming loose at inopportune moments and lopping down, wrong side out, over the wearer’s front.

One winter, “Way” mufflers appeared in all the clothing stores. They caught the fancy of men and boys and not a few girls. The best were made of fine knitted wool with a thick, warm fold to encircle the neck over the regular collar and fasten at the back with snap buttons. A wide “bib” in front tucked inside coat or vest. All were designed to make it appear from the front that the wearer had on a turtle-neck sweater inside his coat. Few were interested in this make-believe quality; the muffler’s popularity was due mainly to the warm comfort it afforded and to the convenience of putting it on or taking it off.

At that time women and girls were wearing “fascinators,” which had been in use long before Way mufflers appeared, and continued in favor long after the latter were forgotten. The fascinator was usually made of loosely crocheted wool yarn, in the form of an isosceles triangle with a broad base. It was worn, folded a time or two, over the head, the ends wrapped about the neck.

Almost everybody wore heavy knitted underwear in winter, nearly always two-piece suits, with full-length sleeves and legs. Men who worked outdoors in winter often wore
two pairs of pants or a pair of rugged overalls over heavy pants. Over vests and blouses they wore roomy denim jackets, often blanketlined, with an interlining of oilcloth to shed water and break the wind. For everyday wear in winter men and boys bought heavy mittens made of ticking, lined with a fleecy material and having a cotton-felt layer between ticking and lining.

At one time a few men wore round, black felt hats with flat-topped crowns. They were not railroad men, but the hats were known as railroad hats because some engineers and other railroaders wore them at their work. In winter farmers and farm boys favored a sort of lumberman’s cap for work and dress wear. This was made of heavy woolen cloth with a moderately long peak and folding ear flaps.

Suntan had not come to be regarded as an essential attribute of feminine pulchritude or of rugged manhood. Women and girls went about their outdoor duties on the farm in summer wearing big, homemade cloth sunbonnets that sheltered faces completely from direct solar rays. Men and boys had broad-brimmed hats of coarse straw for wear as they went about their everyday affairs. In spite of this protection the faces, as well as hands, of older men, exposed to sunlight during long periods every day, often took on a mahogany tan by midsummer. A few young men wore canvas or goatskin gloves at their work throughout the summer. This was to keep hands soft and white and thus, supposedly, put their owners in an elite class.

Boys generally had to be satisfied with “homemade” haircuts. A number of boys and young men patronized a self-taught barber in our neighborhood. This fellow actually cut his own hair (it was done with mirrors, to a considerable extent). Something like a third of the older men
wore mustaches. Some kept them neatly trimmed, but the majority allowed them free rein, and they tended to assume the walrus or handlebar form. Often in winter icicles would form on long mustachios, giving wearers an absurd, grotesque appearance.

A good many men of fifty and older wore full beards; a few shaved the sides of their faces regularly and grew only chin beards and mustaches. Often the effect produced when bewhiskered fellows chewed tobacco fell far short of being an aesthetic asset. And how a full-panoplied mustache or a grizzly-like growth of beard did alter a man's appearance! Conversely, shaving off a growth that had been cultivated a long time might produce an effect even more striking.