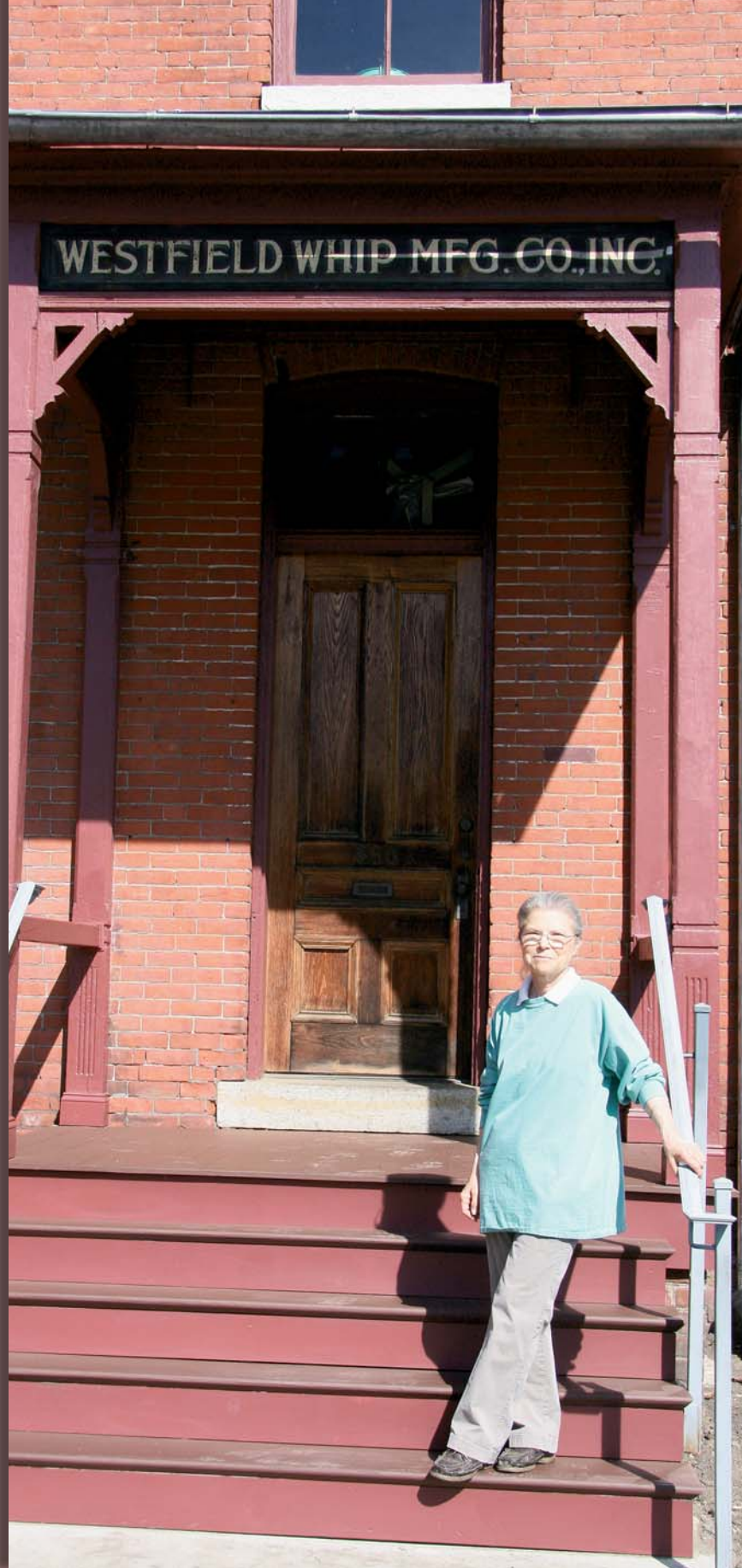


Made in America

A visit to the oldest US maker of dressage and other equestrian whips

BY MARGARET FREEMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY MARGARET FREEMAN



PROUD TRADITION: Owner Carol Martin continues the craft of whip-making at her Westfield Whip Manufacturing Co., which has operated continuously since 1886

For a seemingly simple piece of equipment, a lot goes into making a dressage whip. At the Westfield Whip Manufacturing Co. in Westfield, MA, much of that work is done by hand, just as it has been for more than a century.

Westfield whips are a truly American product, the last vestige of a once-thriving industry. The town of Westfield was once the center of the global whip-making industry, and at its height 40 whip companies were housed in this western-Massachusetts town, about 11 miles west of Springfield. Westfield's nickname is still "Whip City." Whips have been made at the Westfield Whip factory continuously since 1886, likely the only place in the country that can make that claim.

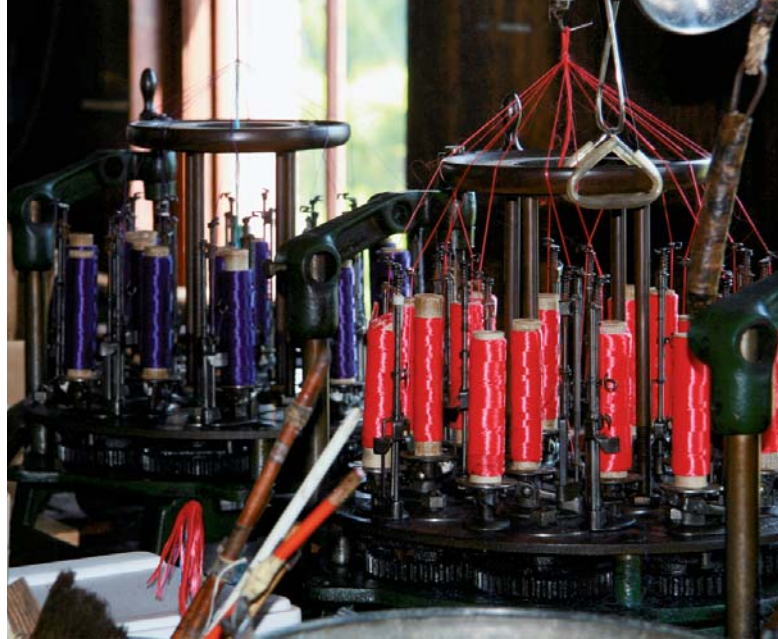
Current owner Carol Martin took over the company from her father, who purchased it in the early 1940s. Much of the nineteenth-century equipment is still in use. The building itself, now technically a museum, is on the National Register of Historic Places, and for the last year it has been undergoing exterior renovation through a grant. The renovation project reduced whip production for a while, but Westfield whips are now again available: carriage whips, lunge whips, gaited-horse whips, and jumping bats, in addition to dressage whips.

The factory's exterior looks like a typical century-old building, and walking through the door is like going through a time warp. The machinery and the atmosphere may be vintage, but the materials used are decidedly modern. Fiberglass has replaced whalebone and rawhide as the core material. Although Westfield can still make traditional rawhide whips with leather or fiber covering, the more common materials nowadays are a polypropylene-covered synthetic core for lower-end whips, or 100-percent cotton braid for higher-end choices. The change, Martin explains, came about in part because synthetics need less care, and in part because the available leather hides are of lower quality while the process to use them is more labor-intensive.

Whipped into Shape: Creation of a Westfield Whip

Martin takes us through the steps that go into making a Westfield whip.

1. A Fiberglass shaft (the core) is cut and rolled to the appropriate length, taper, and feel while the handle end is built up.
2. A loose braided cover is woven over the shaft.
3. A tight cover of braided cotton or polypropylene is then applied.
4. The whip is soaked in a vat and then rolled by hand to smooth out the weave.



COLORFUL CREATIONS: Westfield's weaving machines turn synthetic threads into stylish whip covers

5. A sizing of glue is then applied to provide a final finish.
6. The whip is rolled again to smooth its surface.
7. If the exterior is cotton, a layer of varnish is applied. The whip is dried and rolled again.

8. Handles, caps, ferrules (the metal area between the handle and shaft), and snap ends are attached.

"We use modern materials, but what we do with the materials, that process remains the same," says Martin. Whips are made either "whippy" or stiff depending on the cut of the core and whether varnish is applied.

Choosing a Whip

Whether you prefer a very stiff whip or one with more action may depend on the steadiness of your hands, according to Martin. Riders with very still hands may prefer a "whippy" action because a stiff whip requires more wrist motion, she says. But some riders whose hands aren't so quiet may also prefer a stiff whip because it won't be applied inadvertently.

It's important to choose a whip whose handle is comfortable to hold. A slim handle requires more grip, while a thicker handle may be easier to hold with less tension in the hand, Martin says.

Balance, Martin says, is a very individual choice. A whip's balance point—the place on the handle where the rider grips the whip so that it stays in the desired position without tipping up or down—is unique to each rider. She recommends choosing a whip in person when possible, unless you know the exact model you want. Wear your usual gloves, and borrow a set of reins in the shop in order to try out the action of various choices.

Weight is not always a deciding factor because a whip feels different once gloves and reins are involved. "A heavi-



CHOICES, CHOICES: Some of Westfield's dressage whips at the factory

er whip can actually feel better in the hand," Martin says. "Take the time to find you what works for you. Seldom is it only the weight."

Inspect the whip for any deficiencies to determine whether it will hold up to use. Look at the finish and weave. Look for a taper along the length of the shaft, not a uniform thickness. The snap should not slip down from its connection. Caps and ferrules should be firmly attached. If a whip has a seam in the handle, it should be flush with the surface.

An American Legacy

Dressage riders have many choices in whips, but not all come with a slice of American history. At press time, although the Westfield factory building is now owned by Westfield Museum Inc., it was not open yet to the public because of accessibility issues (no ramps or elevators). Also at press time, some whip styles were available through Big Dee's Tack & Vet Supplies (bigdweb.com). ▲

Margaret Freeman is a veteran equestrian journalist, a USEF "S" dressage judge, a USDF Connection editorial advisor, and the current USDF secretary. She lives in Tryon, NC.

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