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*Cover photograph courtesy of
J and M Custom Boots. Juan Cruz,
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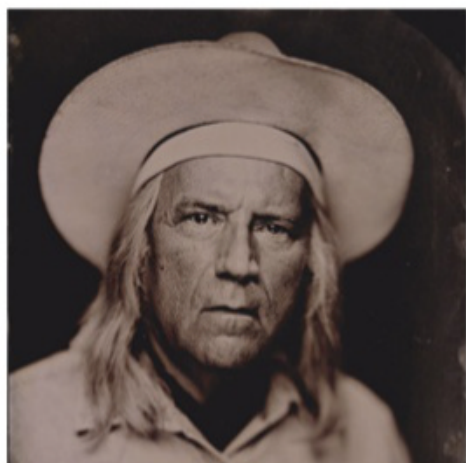
CONTRIBUTORS



NICK PERNOKAS

Nick Pernokas was raised in New England. As a boy he cleaned stalls for a hack stable in return for getting to ride the horses. He bought his first horse with money from a paper route, and showed in AQHA shows with him. At a young age Nick

headed west to play cowboy. He ended up in Stephenville, Texas, where he received a B.S. from Tarleton State University. In 1983 he began building custom saddles under the Pernokas Saddlery label. Nick competed successfully in the AQHA, the NRHA, and the PRCA, in which he earned a Gold Card. Nick won 5 Year End High Point Championships (Honor Roll), and 2 Reserve World Championships, in the AQHA in roping events. In the mid Nineties he wrote “All the Pretty Saddles”, a book about contemporary saddles. This led to writing for various magazines including America’s Horse, Trails Less Traveled, Super Looper, Loops, The Quarter Horse News, and of course, Shop Talk!. Nick has also written several screenplays and does other work in the film industry. He still competes in team roping events. Nick, and his wife, Lindy live on a ranch outside of Stephenville, Texas, with a multitude of dogs, cats, and horses. He’s still “playing cowboy”.



GENE FOWLER

A writer and performer based in Texas, Gene Fowler has written for *Cowboys & Indians*, *Oxford American*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *True West*, and many other publications. His books include *Mavericks*, *Border Radio*, and *Crazy Water*.



LIISA ANDREASSEN

Liisa Andreassen is the president of Write Away, Inc. (www.writeawayinc.com). She works with custom content publishers, national and regional magazines and B2B publications. She also writes blogs, website content and marketing material for

an array of industry niches. She has a Master’s Degree in Media Studies and lives in the beautiful mountains of Asheville, NC with her husband, John. They travel often and enjoy hiking, cooking, SCUBA diving, skiing and clay shooting.



LYNN ASCRIZZI

Lynn Ascrizzi is a freelance writer, artist, poet and home gardener who lives with her husband, Joe, in a home they built in the woods of Freedom, Maine. In the past four years, she has written extensively for Shop Talk!. Early on, she taught art and English in public schools and was senior

editor, illustrator and art director for Farmstead, a national magazine for small farming and home gardening. Later, she was lifestyle editor, feature writer and syndicated columnist for Central Maine Newspapers. Her poems have been published in several journals and in two anthologies by Down East Books: “Take Heart: Poems From Maine,” (2013) and “Take Heart: More Poems From Maine,” (2016).

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INFORMATION

industry news

THE HIDE REPORT

The following is used with permission from hidenet.com, the premier source for information regarding the worldwide hide and leather markets. Please remember that this information will be a month old by the time it reaches you.

ICT General Secretary Pearson to retire
Paul Pearson, who has acted as Secretary to the International Council of Tanners (ICT) since January 1998, has announced his retirement.

Pearson will retire shortly after the 2020 ICT Council Meeting, set to take place in Hong Kong on March 30. The ICT Executive Board said it has agreed that the Secretariat service would remain with Leather UK and that the nominated General Secretary would be Dr. Kerry Senior.

Senior and Pearson are to work together until April 11, when Senior will assume the role of General Secretary. “We thank you for all the hard work you have put in over the years to support our industry and to ensure that we have accurate facts to hand when we have needed them,” said Christine Powley-Williams, on behalf of the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemical Societies (IUTCS).

Pearson will remain available for consultation.

Leather and Hide Council of America officially launched

Washington, DC, January 6, 2020 – Effective January 1, 2020, the Leather Industries of America (LIA) and the U.S. Hide, Skin and Leather Association (USHSLA)

joined forces, launching the Leather and Hide Council of America (LHCA), a new, stronger industry association for the U.S. leather sector that combines the membership, expertise and resources of its predecessor organizations. With the formation of LHCA, the U.S. leather industry is better positioned to be a leader in the global leather sector with one collective voice.

The merger was the result of a year-long effort to bring the two associations together.

Former USHSLA President Stephen Sothmann assumes the helm as president of LHCA. Former LIA President John Wittenborn retired at the end of 2019, following 15 years leading LIA and more than 34 years working on behalf of the leather industry. The new organization, like its predecessor associations, is based in Washington, DC.

“The formation of the Leather and Hide Council of America represents an exciting and historically significant turning point for the U.S. leather industry,” said LHCA President Stephen Sothmann. “The new LHCA establishes a strong, cohesive and vibrant association that will serve as the premier voice of the entire leather supply chain, both in the U.S. and abroad.”

LHCA’s strength is drawn from the experiences and expertise of its diverse

CALENDAR EVENTS

INDIA INTERNATIONAL LEATHER FAIR

February 1-3, 2020
Chennai Trade Centre
Chennai, India

IFLS+EICI

February 4-6, 2020
Corferias
Bogotá, Colombia

NE MATERIALS SHOW

February 5-6, 2020
Boston, Massachusetts

PREMIÈRE VISION PARIS

February 11-13, 2020
Paris Norde Villepinte
Paris, France

NW MATERIALS SHOW

February 12-13, 2020
Portland, Oregon

THE MICAM

February 16-19, 2020
Fiera Milano
Rho, Italy

LINEAPELLE

February 19-21, 2020
Milan, Italy

MIFUR

February 20-23, 2020
Fiera Milano City
Milan, Italy

SOUTHWEST LEATHER WORKERS TRADE SHOW

February 28-March 1, 2020
Prescott Resort & Conference Center
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LEATHERWORLD MIDDLE EAST

March 9-11, 2020
Dubai International Convention & Exhibition Centre
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ANNUAL WESTERN LEATHER SPRING AUCTION/SHOW

March 20-21, 2020
Floyd County Fairgrounds
2818 Green Valley Rd
New Albany, Indiana
James Cox
513.889.0500
Starts at 9:30am

DALLAS WESTERN MARKET

March 24-27, 2020
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membership of approximately 75 companies representing nearly every facet of the leather supply chain, including meatpackers, hides and skins processors, traders, leather tanners, finished leather goods producers, footwear companies, chemical suppliers, machinery producers, trade media and market reporters and more.

LHCA is also now better-equipped, thanks to its integrated membership, to confront existing and emerging challenges to the industry, and to seize new opportunities. This includes lending additional resources to the organization's preeminent global marketing campaign—"Real Leather. Stay Different."—that celebrates the versatility, beauty and sustainability of U.S. leather.

A new LHCA website, housing comprehensive information about the industry and helpful resources, is forthcoming.

France warns retaliation over US planned tariffs

France has warned it will retaliate with the full backing of the European Union if the United States imposes tariffs on up to \$2.4 billion worth of French products, including Champagne, Roquefort cheese, handbags, and lipstick.

The U.S. is considering 100% tariffs on some French goods in response to France's decision to tax the local digital business of major tech companies like Google and Facebook. With a decision on the tariffs expected in coming days, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire met Tuesday with EU trade chief Phil Hogan in Paris.

"We believe that the American project of sanctions against the French digital tax is unfriendly, inappropriate and illegitimate," Le Maire said.

If U.S. tariffs were to be imposed, "we would bring the case to the World Trade Organization and we would be ready to react," Le Maire said.

Hogan said the question of the digital tax is a "very major bone of contention with the United States."

"The EU commission will stand together with France," he added.

France has, since last year, been imposing a 3% annual tax on revenues in France of digital companies with yearly global sales worth more than 750 million euros (\$830 million) and French revenue exceeding 25 million euros. France is pushing for a global agreement on how to better tax digital operations, which are typically reported in the company's home country instead of the place where it does business.

In a phone call with U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Monday, Le Maire said the sides had agreed "to intensify efforts in the coming days to try to find a compromise."

Nike recycles offcuts for retro Atsuma Runner

In an effort to reduce its ecological footprint, Nike has launched the ingenious Atsuma silhouette, a retro style running shoe that aims to re-engineer how cut-and-sew footwear is made. A second goal of the product is cutting down on material waste from the source.

The shoe is named after a small town in Hokkaido. The neon orange backdrop is just one small piece of the shoe and makes full use of pattern offcuts by making them integral components of the construction. Paneling from the heel wrap to the eye stay and then around to the forefoot arrangements affix in light tans or bright neons and even seldom uses of an ocean blue, making use of negative space as it opens up to black mesh all throughout. Elsewhere, laces blend in near perfectly to the more neutral elements of the palette, leading up to tri-marked logos on the tongue and a hang tab built from

a piece of the outsole. Inside, the shoe holds recycled sockliners.

Italy's Conceria Pasubio acquires US/Mexican leather company

Italian media are reporting that Conceria Pasubio has acquired a majority interest in the Mexican GD and the American GDI company. The Italian auto leather manufacturer, which is controlled by CVC Capital Partners, bought the stake from the Garcia family. GD-GDI is focused on the cutting of leather and the coating of steering wheels for the automotive industry.

David and Daniel Garcia will maintain the roles of president and administrator of the Mexican-American group and will be joined by the entire Pasubio top management team. Conceria Pasubio, based in Arzignano, is led by the brothers Alberto and Luca Pretto. Over 80% of the business is generated abroad, providing leather for the interiors of the most important luxury car brands, including Jaguar, Land Rover, the Volkswagen group (Porsche, Lamborghini, Bentley and Skoda), the FCA group (Maserati and Alfa Romeo), BMW and PSA. Pasubio has 6 factories — one in Serbia — and 518 employees, working across the entire production cycle and making more than 10 million square meters of leather annually. *La Conceria* reports that the project "aims to support growth outside European borders" explained Pretto to *Il Giornale di Vicenza*.

LVMH acquires stake in Masoni tannery

LVMH has acquired a minority stake in the Masoni tannery of Santa Croce sull'Arno (Pisa), known for producing the most beautiful, refined and innovative calfskins for major global fashion brands. In 2018, the tannery invoiced €46.1 million with €2.5 million net profit and employs 60 people. It was already working

for the French group. For LVMH, this is another move toward strengthening its supply chain. “With this operation, LVMH Métiers d’Art is committed to supporting and guaranteeing long-term investments at the Masoni tannery with the aim of consolidating artisan creativity and innovation, entrepreneurial strength and international development,” said a joint statement. The agreement provides not only for maintaining current employment levels but for expanding the workforce.

Italian company develops inflatable leather

The Solofrana company, which manufactures and markets chemicals for tanning, has created inflatable leather called Air Leather.

I Solofra, sheep and goat leather, is subjected to a tanning system that gives it a particular elasticity. The tanning method chosen by L’Officina is metal-free. The leather is then worked to be very light, as well as to have a minimum thickness. The finishing is at the discretion of the end user: The workshop for the prototype has opted for the gold color. The skin is then heat-sealed and made inflatable. In development since 2016, inflatable leather is based on the same heat-sealing technology that allowed them to make a duvet.

Air Leather (whose prototype was unveiled to the public during the Material

Preview on December 11 in Santa Croce) can hood air for at least ten days. The workshop is keen to test whether, by using helium, a leather balloon can be created. “We imagine that the article could be of great interest to designers,” continues D’Onofrio. “It has great fashion potential. We see it in leather goods, for example, but also in indoor or outdoor furniture.”

Belarusian footwear maker Belwest to use leather-cutting robots

Belwest intends to install robotic systems for die-cutting and treating leather in Q1 2020, the company’s Director General Yuri Sumaneyev told BelTA. The systems, which are supposed to be commissioned and trialed through 2020, are planned to reach full output capacity in Q1 2021.

The systems will use unique effectors, machine vision technologies, and self-learning control technologies. They are expected to improve the quality of leather die-cutting and treatment in addition to reducing the cost of components and materials.

The project was approved by the expert council of the State Science and Technology Committee of Belarus in summer 2019.

On the whole, efforts to redesign the manufacturing process are expected to allow the company to make custom-made footwear for every consumer in the future.

“It may sound like science fiction for now, but it is the vector of development we aim for. For instance, it was difficult to imagine robots working as part of the footwear assembly line but today we are about to accomplish that,” Sumaneyev noted.

The holding company will also develop manufacturing sites in Gorodok and Beshenkovichi, Vitebsk Oblast, while the outsourcing of production of components and intermediate parts in Vitebsk Oblast and some other regions will continue.

The possibility of manufacturing cooperation with Russian companies is under consideration. “We are now looking for opportunities for cooperation with any manufacturers inside the country and abroad. Partners just have to match the philosophy of our brand, take into account all the hygienic parameters, which can be achieved only if the quality of components is verified,” Sumaneyev said. The company will continue interacting with partners from Spain, Portugal, and Italy for the sake of footwear production.

At least Br30 million will have to be invested in the fixed capital of SOOO Belwest by 31 December 2023 for the sake of modernizing existing facilities and creating new ones. The average number of employees will have to remain at least as high as the figure registered in January 2019 till 1 January 2021.

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COWGIRL COUTURE

BY DIAN ALLRED OF
ALLRED LEATHER COMPANY

My name is Dian Allred and I am the owner/operator of Allred Leather Company. I established my business in 2016, a few months after I took my first tooling class. I fell hard and fast in love with leather and haven't ever looked back. I found leather and leather found me; it was the right time and it was meant to be.

I am a second-generation leather tooler, as my Dad dabbled in the craft. I asked him to send me his toolbox and I sat down every day to self-teach. He never taught me a thing about leather, but he taught me a lot about methodically building anything I've ever made and working hard, so I named my business after him.

I began by combing through old leathercraft books; Ken Griffin is my favorite! I also did my fair share of watching YouTube videos, taking classes in Texas and beyond, and by doing so have had the pleasure of meeting many great teachers in the industry. Jim Linnell, a fellow Texan up the road, is one I point to many times to take classes with. Paraphrasing, but truly appreciating his words, so many people's creativity ends with the last thing they've seen. I appreciate him for being a well-rounded teacher, while challenging so many to explore their talent.

Some of my most notable products are my leather and cowhide clutches. My favorite thing about the building process is the delicate balance between pairing the right hair on hide and design together. I also have developed and offer women's adornments and key keepers. A small reminder of yesteryear in hand is exactly what I want to run my fingers over, whether it be an earring or keychain. I would like to think my customers are of the same mindset. Hermann Oak is my go-to for veg tan leather.



I happily support small businesses like Rocky Mountain Leather and Springfield Leather online, and it's always a pleasure to walk into my local Tandy and visit with the friendly staff. The *Leather Crafter's Journal* does a great job of putting on trade shows around the country, and I've met many tool makers and small supply houses in person at these shows.

I have grown to understand what will best teach you is your own trial and error. Leather does not lie, and it will tell on you. I strive to live by the motto, "What you are willing to put your name on is a representation of self," and I strive to honor this sentiment in everything I make.

allreadleathercompany.com

J and M Custom Boots

A LEGACY OF RESILIENCY

By Nick Pernokas



ABOVE: Juan Cruz, a young boot maker at age twenty in 1955;
OPPOSITE PAGE: This J and M boot has the classic Z-4 stitch and initial design on Kangaroo tops.

The young boy reached Chihuahua City at dawn. He'd brought a couple of tortillas wrapped around some meat in a paper sack for breakfast. As he nibbled on them, he wondered if his family had noticed him missing from their home in Juarez yet. The year was 1950, and the 15 year old had hitchhiked down from Juarez to sign up for the Bracero program. He thought that nothing could be better than to arrive in North America as a migrant worker. He would soon be making a man's wages in the United States. As he walked towards the offices, the size of the mob intimidated him. Men were waiting for their names to be called so they could board the trucks to their new jobs. As he pushed his way up to an official with a clipboard, some of the men began to laugh at him. He asked one of them why they were laughing.

"Because you have to be 18, stupid," said the man. "Go home and grow up."

The boy hung his head and turned away. Fortunately, he was able to find someone from Juarez to give him a ride home.

By the time Juan Cruz arrived home, his relieved family knew what had happened. His Uncle Vicente Martinez took him aside.

"You know your brother is making boots," said Uncle Vicente. "Do you want to join us? I'll teach you how to make boots."

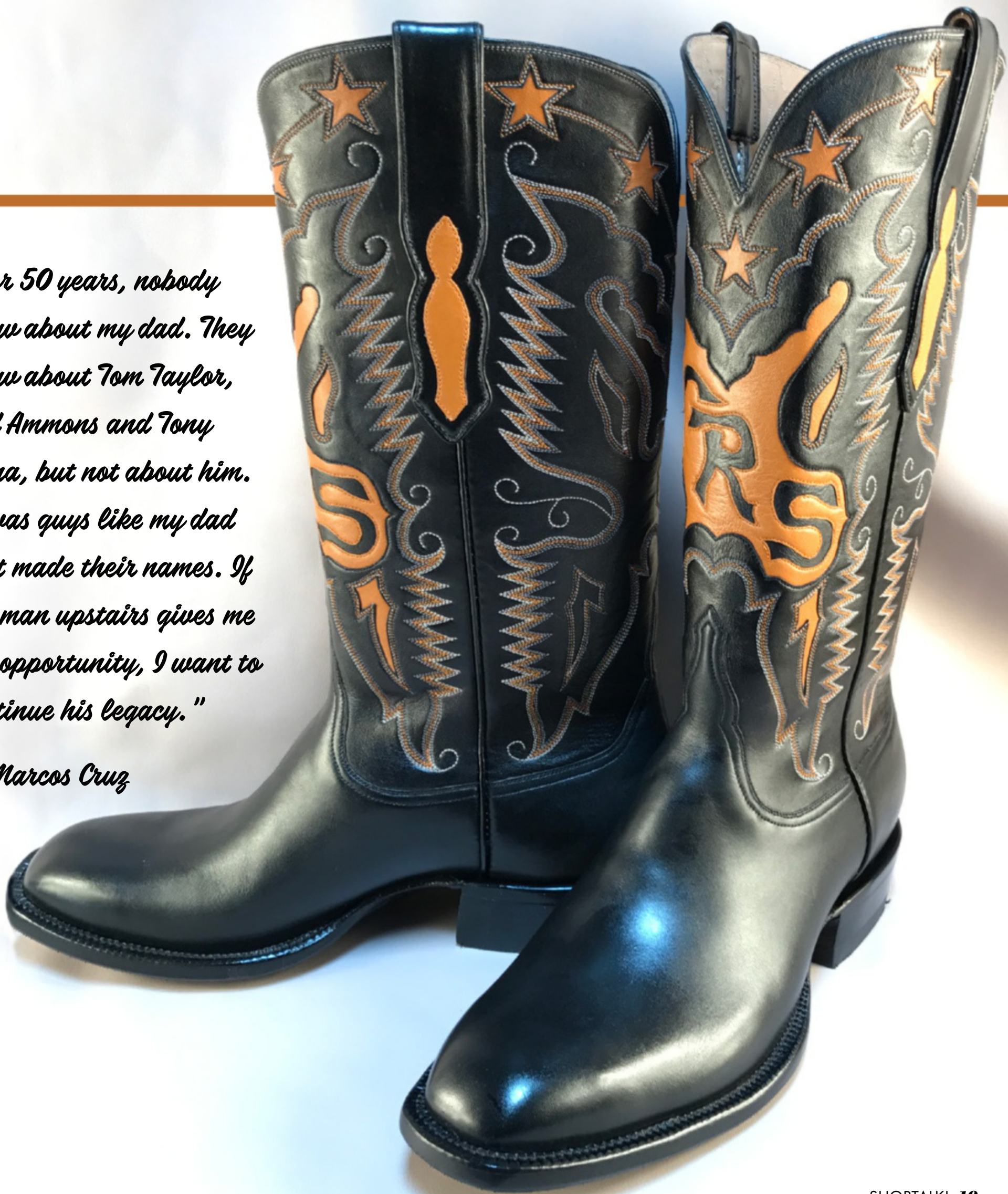
Sometimes fate moves rapidly. In Juan's case, the die was cast. He began his true journey that night.

Within a year, Juan became a master bootmaker. This meant that he had built a pair of boots by himself. By 1955, Juan had his own shop in Juarez. Juan, his brother Teodulo, and uncle Vicente and a couple of other workers began making the custom boots for a business across the river in El Paso, Texas. That company owned Franklin Boots and Bronco Boots, and did a thriving, custom mail order business.

Eventually, the three men moved their operation over to El Paso. They began to make boots for Ben Miller Boots. In El Paso they found that they had to specialize, so they began doing the lasting and the bottom work only. By the Sixties, they had moved on to Tony Lama Boots, which was rapidly growing. Again, the family concentrated on filling custom orders for Tony Lama. Tony Lama was so impressed with the trio, that they called them the "champagne of bootmakers." In 1979, Juan was the supervisor for the bottom

"For 50 years, nobody knew about my dad. They knew about Tom Taylor, and Ammons and Tony Lama, but not about him. It was guys like my dad that made their names. If the man upstairs gives me the opportunity, I want to continue his legacy."

— Marcos Cruz



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work at Tony Lama, but the demand for their boots had grown so much that Juan felt the company lacked the manpower to keep up. Faced with a frustrating situation, he decided to leave.

T.O. Stanley had recently left Lucchese Boots in San Antonio. Juan, and his brother, along with most of their male children, hired on with T.O. Stanley Boots in El Paso. Stanley had brought an old school bootmaker with him, from San Antonio, named Benny Gray. Gray had a reputation as an outstanding gentleman who made an outstanding boot. Gray would change the way Juan looked at boots.

Juan had become a pretty good bootmaker, but it was just a job for him. Then he met Benny Gray.

"He said that he didn't really fall in love with bootmaking until he met Benny Gray," says Marcos Cruz, Juan's youngest son.

Gray knew all of the fine points of making a custom boot and he inspired Juan with his knowledge. Juan always said that this was when he began enjoying his work.

It was also at T.O. Stanley that Marcos got his first taste of bootmaking in the summers.

At the end of the Eighties, Ammons Boots contracted Juan, and again he moved to a new company with his family. In 1992, 25-year-old Marcos was trying to finish school and he needed a part time job. He went to work at Ammons in the afternoons. Marcos began to take the boot work seriously.

"That's when I fell in love with the bootmaking."

Marcos decided to learn everything he could about boot construction. He also realized that quality bootmakers of his dad's generation were disappearing. Marcos concentrated on the bottom work since that was what his family did.

Juan always emphasized quality. He told Marcos, "If you're going to do something, you need to do it with love and care, or don't do it at all. There are too many people that do half-assed work and you need to take pride in what you do."

In 1994, Juan's mother passed away. He was devastated, and decided to make some life changes. Juan left Ammons.

In Santa Fe in 1994, saddlemaker and silversmith Tom Taylor was looking for a new bootmaker. Marcos and Juan heard about this and they decided to make some sample boots and show them to Tom.

"We made some sandwiches and drove up to Santa Fe to show him our boots in April. Tom said he'd call us," says Marcos. "He never called, but in September we got 15 boxes worth of boot orders from him."

J and M Custom Boots was the official bootmaker for Tom Taylor until Jean Taylor sold the store in 2009.



LEFT: These boots were made for a Texas cowgirl, and showcase J and M's inlay and stitching; **RIGHT:** This 2017 photo was taken shortly before Lilia Cruz passed away. Depicted in the photo was their daily routine; Lilia would sit with Juan in his shop in the house while he inseamed, and they would watch old classic movies together.







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Even though the name is "J and M," Juan (C) and Marcos (L), the talented Ismael Belman (R) has rounded out the bootmaking team since 1994; The short, retro style boots are decorated with a vintage flower; Juan Cruz in 1965, with his children Lily, Lourdes and Juan, getting the waxed end ready for the week. This thread is used for inseaming or sewing the welt on to the vamps and insoles.

Education was very important to Juan though and he wanted his son to go to college. Marcos would eventually get a degree in mathematics. Marcos was also good at sports and turned down a football scholarship. He played baseball for the Aggies at NMSU for two years.

"I hurt my arm and I decided I needed to do something with my life," says Marcos.

Marcos wanted to coach, but to do that he needed to teach other classes. He liked math, so he got certified to teach it. He ended up teaching and coaching for almost 20 years.

During the evenings, Marcos would come home and help his dad with the Tom Taylor boot orders. In 2001, Marcos met his future wife, Elizabeth, an elementary school teacher. They had two children.

In 2004, Juan was diagnosed with cancer. It was a tough time, but Juan was able to overcome a lot of adversity and he continued working.

"He's a resilient guy," says Marcos.

In 2007, Marcos began to notice that Juan was forgetting things. His habit of reading the Bible nightly, and then discussing what he'd read, tapered off.

In 2012, Marcos could see that Juan was falling victim to dementia and would not be able to continue working for much longer. Marcos quit teaching and went into bootmaking full time. Juan was revived by having Marcos around all the time.

Juan worked until 2019 making boots, but then his dementia took over and he couldn't do it anymore.

"For 50 years, nobody knew about my dad. They knew about Tom Taylor, and Ammons and Tony Lama, but not about him. It was guys like my dad that made their names. If the man upstairs gives me the opportunity, I want to continue his legacy."

Marcos's goal has been to honor his dad's legacy through J and M Custom

Boots. He continually tries to learn more, but also wants to show the public what a good quality boot is.

"You have to have the talent, you have to have the passion and you have to have the work ethic," says Marcos. "He and his brothers had all three."

Today, J and M Custom Boots is comprised of Marcos and Ismael Belman. Marcos considers Ismael his mentor. The 59-year-old craftsman, also known as Marce, has worked with Marcos since 1994. Ismael is a perfectionist; and he's not afraid to say if something needs to be done over to get perfection. It takes about 40 man hours to make a pair of custom boots. They make 50 to a 100 pairs of boots a year.

Marcos has been concentrating on the wholesale market because he has not been able to get out and promote their lines as much as he'd like. Boots and Boogie, an exclusive store in Santa Fe, carries their boots. The Santa Fe store sells primarily retro styles.

"The gentleman in Santa Fe, Ryan Wright, is very enthusiastic and has a passion for boots and bootmakers. I'm in the right place to make them, but not in the right place to sell them."

J and M Custom Boots has a website under their name, which shows examples of the many varied custom boots they've made, but customers usually have to tell Marcos what they want so that he can give them an estimate. Marcos sees a moderate square toe and larger base roping-type heel with a slight slant, as being very popular over the last few years in the mainstream market. Cowboys like PRCA saddle bronc rider Isaac Diaz gravitate towards these styles. The retro market is a little more extreme in the pointier square toe shape, as well as under slung heels.

"If you're going to do something, you need to do it with love and care, or don't do it at all. There are too many people that do half-assed work and you need to take pride in what you do."

— Juan Cruz



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The wholesale boots, Kaquis Legacy Boots, are shown on a separate website called KaquisLegacy.com. Marcos and Ismael have three other seasoned craftsmen that help them with these boots.

The J and M shop is 1000 square feet housed in a two-story garage in Juan's home. The humble Sunland Park, New Mexico, neighborhood is not even a mile from the border.

"In the El Paso area, the bootmaker is a dying breed. If you go from shop to shop here, most of the bootmakers are older than me," says 54-year-old Marcos.

Marcos feels that this is because so much bootmaking has gone to large production companies in Mexico and China, which has driven down wages for a bootmaker. Young people don't want to make boots because the money isn't there. Or it could be that bootmaking is a really tough job.

"Nowadays a lot of people buy a pair of boots for \$500, and that's a lot of money for them. But, it will cost me \$500- \$700 to make a pair of real American boots. It's what you can't see that makes a pair of boots authentic. If somebody orders a pair of boots today and they get them tomorrow, you know that's not right, not custom."

Marcos plans to continue to improve the quality of his work, as well as make the public aware of his brand – a boot that is as resilient as the folks who make it.

"My goal is to go completely custom, to go bespoke, because that's who we are."

To find out more about J and M Custom Boots, go to jandmcustomboots.com or call (915)-727-9701. ♦

J and M Custom Boots
207 Edgewood
Sunland Park, NM 88063



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: This design is known as a "Triad" style; This crisp, clean look is a stitch and initial design on honey ranch horse tops with brown lizard vamps; These "cowboy style" designer boots lace up the back; This is J and M's version of an original Juan Cruz design from the 1950's, with the Tom Taylor designed "Hollywood" collar and inlayed stars added.

EPIC LEATHER WORK, *on a Greek island*

Co-founders of Epos Custom Leather create powerful mythic imagery and historical recreations

By Lynn Ascrizzi

If gray winter ever gets you down, think of the Greek island of Rhodes, set like a rough-cut gemstone in the sparkling Aegean.

“It’s called the ‘Island of the Sun,’” said Natalie Orfanidi, a gifted leather artist born and raised in Rhodes, the fourth largest island in Greece, a place where remains of ancient city walls, temples and other monuments resonate with the brilliant spirit of Greek antiquity. “The island has over 300 days of sunlight. Everywhere is near the water. It is quite hilly. There are a lot of mountains,” she said.

In 2015, Natalie and Michael Dale, an equally accomplished leatherworker, co-founded Epos Custom Leather in Rhodes. They live and work near Rhodes Town, a small village located on the northwestern tip of the island. Their snug workshop, set up in a



LEFT: An ancient, scaled leather, thoracic armor, that Greek warriors wore to shield the chest area, made by Epos Custom Leather and commissioned by the Association of Historical Studies Koryvantes, based in Athens, Greece; BACKGROUND IMAGE: St Pauls Bay, south of Lindos, on the southeast coast of Rhodes.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF EPOS CUSTOM LEATHER UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED; BACKGROUND PHOTOGRAPH BY LUCAS ALBUQUERQUE

A scenic view of a coastal town, likely in Greece, featuring a harbor with several boats, a parking lot filled with cars, and a large, rugged island in the background. The water is a vibrant blue, and the sky is clear. The town is built on a hillside overlooking the water.

“I HAVE REPEAT CUSTOMERS FROM THE STATES. MY BEST CUSTOMERS SEEM TO BE LEATHERWORKERS WHO SEE A HOLSTER THAT I MADE ON FACEBOOK OR INSTAGRAM.”

—MICHAEL DALE,
CO-FOUNDER, EPOS
CUSTOM LEATHER



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gorgons grimace from a leather holster and storage box, crafted by Epos Custom Leather; Linen and leather composite, upper-body armor (linothorax) replicates a type of battle gear worn by ancient Greek and Macedonian soldiers; Remains of an ancient acropolis offers a breathtaking view, at Lindos, on the island of Rhodes, Greece; A replica of an ancient leather sheath designed to hold the ancient Greek Kopis sword; A detail of a leather handbag crafted by Epos Custom Leather, of Rhodes, Greece; Leather handbags created by Epos Custom Leather of Rhodes, Greece. The bag on top features an early Greek plate design.



12-by-16-foot room on the second floor of their home, is only a 7-minute drive from the ever-present sea. “It’s pretty tiny,” Mike said, of their shared workplace. “Some of our projects spill out into the rest of the house.”

The couples’ finely-crafted, custom-made leather goods include passport cases, wallets, maps, holsters, guitar straps, purses, key fobs, archery arm guards and quivers. The highly-skilled, imaginative versatility of their leather carvings and special, historical recreations bring a distinctive vitality and character to their work.

“Epos (pronounced EH-pos) is a Greek word that means epic,” Natalie explained, a term that calls up legendary poems like the *Odyssey*, a classic tale about the harrowing journey of the Greek hero-king, Odysseus, who encounters fearsome sea monsters, giants, bewitching goddesses, ghost-spirits and plenty more, while he tries to sail home to Ithaca over the “wine-dark sea.”

Indeed, the captivating leather carvings created at Epos Custom Leather have their own epic dimension — artwork brimming over with powerful mythic archetypes from ancient Greece and other bygone cultures.

For instance, for an archer, Natalie carved an enchanting depiction of the winged horse, Pegasus, on a leather armguard. Imagery inspired by other ancient civilizations, such as their Viking compass designs carved on leather vambraces (forearm guards), are also part of the workshop’s repertoire.



The Epos leather line includes unique, historical re-enactment projects commissioned by the Association of Historical Studies Koryvantes, based in Athens. Formed in 2009, the association is dedicated to researching and applying the military heritage of the Greeks, from the Bronze Age to the late Byzantine period. The large society encourages the construction and testing of fully-functioning, “battle-ready, museum quality replicas,” according to the organization. Projects created for Koryvantes require precise attention to detail and as much historic accuracy as possible.

Natalie’s involvement with Koryvantes stems from her passion for Olympic archery. In fact, making a quiver was one of her first leather-work projects. Later, the historical society asked her to create an ancient Greek-style archery set that included a leather quiver, armguards and finger gloves to protect the archer from the bowstring.

Her recreation of a Scythian quiver, originally depicted on a centuries-old artifact, makes use of natural materials relevant to the era, such as bee’s wax, linen thread and veg-tanned leather. She also crafted a Mycenaean helmet made of thick leather, whose crest holder is decorated with a long, plume-like horse tail. To make it, she worked from a helmet depicted on a circa 1350 BC clay vessel fragment.

A stunning armguard, crafted by Mike for a Greek traditional archer, depicts fierce Scythian lions. The images were drawn from a metal artifact that is at least 2,000 years old.

Their Koryvantes projects include colorful ancient Greek shields and scabbards. One of the most complex items that she and Mike have



ABOVE: Linen and leather composite, upper-body armor (linothorax) replicates a type of battle gear worn by ancient Greek and Macedonian soldiers; **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Columns on the hellenistic stoa of the Acropolis of Lindos on the island of Rhodes, Greece.

created, so far, is an example of early-Greek thoracic armor, built of thickly layered, leather scales. Warriors wore the archaic defensive equipment to shield the chest area. Natalie created the pattern for the ancient armor, and Mike crafted it.

Amazingly, the basic technology of composite leather armor is applied today in bulletproof vests, she pointed out. “It’s the same ‘philosophy.’ The leather layers prevent arrows from penetrating. Intact, ancient Greek thoraxes like these are not found. Linen does not withstand the flow of time. Leather deteriorates. We work from ancient depictions to make them as true as possible,” she said.

Was thoracic leather armor actually effective? “I subjected a test piece to attacks with a very sharp knife,” Mike noted, “and it stopped both the stabs and slash attacks.”

“I am currently making a series of thorax armor, a suit made out of leather and layers of linen, with glue,” Natalie added. “The very first forms of this armor were made in the 3rd or 4th century BC.”

“She is building most of the linen armor herself,” Mike said.

THE WORLD IS ONE ISLAND

Although they live on a relatively small island, Michael Dale and Natalie Orfanidi,

LIVE LEATHERWORK CLASSES, *Online*

[MICHAEL'S]
EPIPHANY BECAME
A REALITY, WHEN
HE LAUNCHED
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THE SITE'S GUEST
INSTRUCTORS ARE
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In 2013, before leatherworker Michael Dale moved from Chicago to Rhodes, Greece, to co-create Epos Custom Leather with Natalie Orfanidi, he attended the Rocky Mountain Leather Trade Show, held annually in Sheridan, Wyoming. The close-knit community of leatherworkers and the show's amazing instructors blew him away.

"It changed the course of my career. I saw things that I didn't dream were possible to make with leather, I wanted to give other people the experience I had working with leatherwork masters," Mike said.

His intensely creative experience sparked an idea — to set up an online site that provided live classes taught by top-notch leatherworkers. The classes would be geared for people with varying levels of skill, a place where folks could enjoy learning more about leatherwork in the privacy and comfort of their own homes.

His epiphany became a reality, when he launched learnleather.com. The site's guest instructors are industry pros like Robert Beard of Farmington, New Mexico, recipient of the prestigious Al Stohlman Award for Achievement in Leathercraft, and Chan Geer of Sheridan, Wyoming, a master of Sheridan-style leather carving and an Al Stohlman Award recipient.

The leatherwork classes are held video-conference style. "I create a portal, so people can sign up for a class. I advertise each class, individually. I field all the questions from students and forward them in an orderly way to the instructors. Students get to ask questions in real time. All classes are recorded live, so they get to refer to the recording as many times as they like," he said. The site also offers free videos.

The average class costs \$30. Classes are limited to 100 participants, a quota that is regularly realized, he said. "I want classes to be affordable. Every class I've ever done is now available, as a video. Generally, I try to do an average of one class per month. I think it's important to get the service out to interested people. There's definitely a need for quality leather instruction." ♦

“THICKER ACRYLIC
MAKES LEATHER
LOOK PLASTIC. I
DON’T USE A MATTE
FINISH. I MAY ADD
A HIGH-GLOSS
FINISH ON EYES, SO
THEY LOOK WET,
OR ON A SWORD,
BUT I USUALLY FIND
ACRYLICS DON’T
NEED A FINISH.”

—NATALIE ORFANIDI,
CO-FOUNDER, EPOS
CUSTOM LEATHER

like a growing number of today’s entrepreneurs, promote their leather art globally, through their website and social media. “I have repeat customers from the States. My best customers seem to be leatherworkers who see a holster that I made on Facebook or Instagram,” Mike said.

Epos leather products attract a diverse range of customers, from participants in live-action role-playing games (LARP), cosplayers (performance artists who take part in costume play), archers, hunters, competitive shooters, artists, police and fire personnel, outdoorsmen and everyday folks, he said.

Besides the income steadily garnered from their leather business, both he and Natalie hold down day jobs. Mike is a leather-work educator who sets up personal, live classes taught by himself and other professional leatherworkers, at learnleather.com.

Natalie works as a physical therapist for Med Life, a recovery/rehabilitation clinic, on Rhodes. She also does volunteer work at Rhodes Hippotherapy Center, a nonprofit that offers therapeutic horseback riding (equine-assisted therapy), to promote physical and mental health.

“Along with my full-time job, my biggest and most loyal customer is Koryvantes,” she said of the historical association.

TOOLS, LEATHER AND PAINT

“I do a little bit of everything,” Mike said of his work. “My biggest strength is carving and construction with an emphasis on embossed carving. I like to carve faces.”

His first step is to decide what elements will go into his artwork. “For instance, I did a holster with an eagle and a silhouette of the island of Crete. I drew up a couple of sketches, in different positions and sizes. Once the customer chooses an overall design, I transfer it to leather. I use plain copy paper. I don’t get

into fancy transfer methods. I’m very precise with my transfer,” he said.

His next step is carving with a swivel knife. After that, he uses standard leather-working stamps or tools, mostly bevellers, and also backgrounding tools, matting tools and modeling spoons.

“The majority of my tools are made by Robert Beard,” he said, of the master tool-maker based in Farmington, New Mexico (robertbeardtools.scalabledata.com). “His ProSeries (handmade) tools are widely regarded as one of the best.”

Mike also works with tools crafted by Barry King of Sheridan, Wyoming (barrykingtools.com/handtools.htm). “He’s an exemplary toolmaker,” he said. He also admires hand tools made by Wayne Jueschke of Elko, Nevada. “He’s incredibly old school. You can only reach him by telephone.” (1-775-738-4885)

The Epos leather workshop makes use of a Cobra Class 4 heavy-duty stitcher. “But we mostly do hand stitching,” he added. “Sometimes, it’s easier to machine stitch some of the thick leather pieces, like the leather armor.”

Natalie’s specialty is painting. “I like to spend all my time on painting and pattern-making — creating designs from scratch,” she said. For paint, she uses the brand Golden Acrylic.

“They have every color imaginable. It’s better if you add Golden Hi-Flow Acrylic. Golden Acrylic is a thicker version; Hi-Flo is a thinner version. Thicker acrylic makes leather look plastic. I don’t use a matte finish. I may add a high-gloss finish on eyes, so they look wet, or on a sword, but I usually find acrylics don’t need a finish,” she advised.

For their leatherwork, they use cowhide, goatskin and kangaroo. Most of their leather is sourced from Hermann Oak Leather.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LA KHAI-WAY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Natalie Orfanidi and Michael Dale, co-founders of Epos Custom Leather, enjoy the scenic vistas on a mountainside in Rhodes, the fourth largest island in Greece; This flute case design detail, carved by Epos Custom Leather, of Rhodes, Greece, depicts a musician playing an ancient Greek wind instrument called a “diaulos” (double-aulos); Remains of an ancient acropolis, at Lindos, on the island of Rhodes, Greece; **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Columns on the hellenistic stoa of the Acropolis of Lindos.



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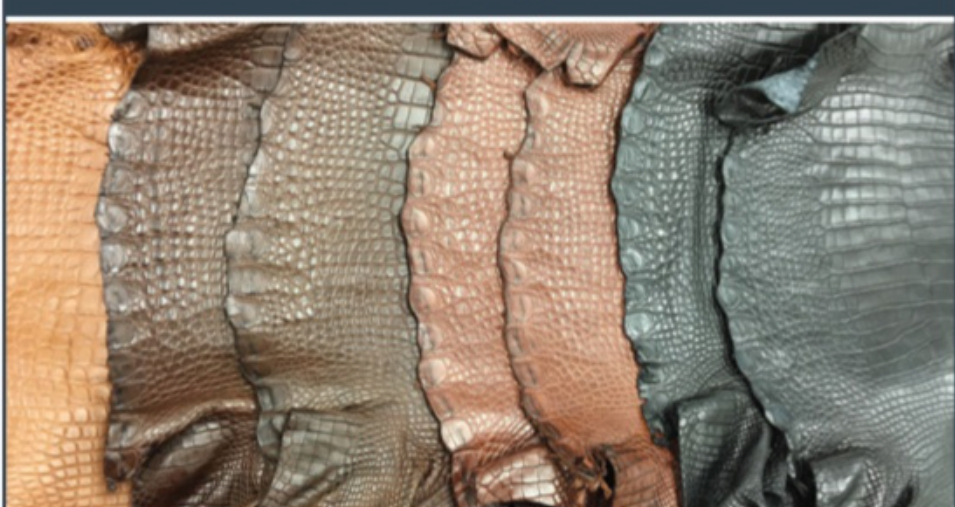
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A HAPPY COINCIDENCE

Epos Custom Leather was founded about five years ago, but it put out its first roots in 2012, when Michael Dale and Natalie Orfanidi met via the well-known leatherwork group, leatherworker.net. The forum was founded in 2006 “to provide education, entertainment and fellowship for leatherworkers,” its website states.

The site’s “How do I do that?” format includes business tips, leather tool and sewing machinery advice, and more. The online discussion site gets thousands of “hits” per day and claims to be “the biggest and most active leatherworking community on the web or in the world.”

At the time, Mike was living in Chicago, Illinois, doing full-time police work. He also had launched a small business called Michael Dale Leather. “I got my start making holsters. As a police officer, I thought I could do a better job than what was available. It’s not as easy as you think!” he admitted. But it wasn’t long before his interest grew into a passion. “I spent all my spare time involved in leatherwork.”

Natalie was living 5,678 miles away, on the Greek island, Rhodes. An archery expert, she had launched a small business, called Huntress Custom Leather. But she got stumped on tooling techniques for leather carving. For advice, she turned to leatherworker.net.

“Greece has no history of leather carving, at all,” she explained. “It’s completely unknown. I needed help. There is no leather tooling being done here. And, I didn’t have tooling leather. I was struggling to carve hides that were ‘uncarvable.’ I had no books, no way of learning how to do it.”

As fate would have it, Mike had gotten involved with the online chat group. By a happy coincidence, when Natalie posted her leather-tooling question, he was moderating the chat room for leatherworker.net.

“I sent her an answer. Her question led to more chat conversations. Chatting turned



into more chatting, which turned into more chatting. We fell in love,” he said. Thus, began his own epic voyage. In March 2015, he retired from the police force. Later that month, he moved to Greece.

“Natalie and I have complementary skill sets. We push each other and ourselves. She’s brilliant. It’s a collaboration effort. We each bring our own skills to every project. When we pull together, it’s usually better than what each of us could do by ourselves. It’s an amazing story. This is where my heart is. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Natalie,” he said. ♦

LEARN MORE

Epos Custom Leather

Michael Dale & Natalie Orfanidi, cofounders

info@eposleather.com

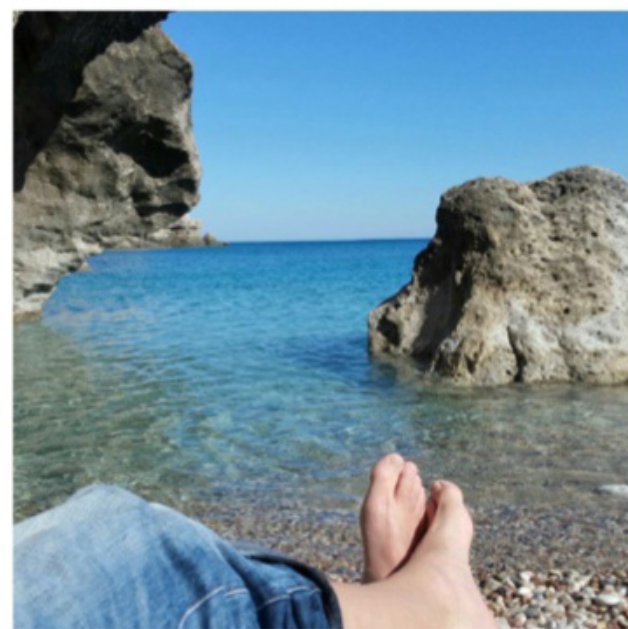
eposleather.com

Instagram@eposcustom

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learnleather.com

Mike@learnleather.com



FROM TOP DOWN: A leather carving of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and revelry, crafted by Michael Dale, co-founder of Epos Custom Leather; Mike Dale, co-owner of Epos Custom Leather of Rhodes, Greece, enjoys retirement from the Chicago-area police force, on the island.

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PECARD LEATHER CARE COMPANY

The Legacy Lives On

By Liisa Andreassen

It was in 1902 that the Pecard Chemical Co., Inc. first got its start as a small family-owned business in northeastern Wisconsin. Since then, it's gone through several changes, but its commitment to service and quality has never wavered. Pecard remains a trusted name for the treatment, preservation and weatherproofing of leather.

All in the family

The company's founder, Phil Pecard, experimented with formulas to protect, restore and prolong the life of leather gear. The first product, "Never leak," was created to protect lumberman's boots. The product lived up to its name and soon word got out. In fact, in 1928, Pecard made leather dressing history when Admiral Richard E. Byrd chose Pecard



A little Red Headed boy asked his Red Headed Mother for a Big Red Box of Pecard's Never Leak



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*Pecard remains a trusted name
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THE PROOF IS IN THE PRODUCTS

Robert Dante, a professional bullwhip artist, four-time Guinness World Record holder, and author of "Let's Get Cracking! The How-To Book of Bullwhip Skills," uses Pecard on his own whips and happily recommends it to others.

The Motorcycle Riders Club of America gave Pecard their Seal of Approval for its Motorcycle Leather Dressing and Motorcycle Black Weatherproof Dressing, averaging a 96% approval rating.

Leather Dressing to protect his crew and their gear on the first expedition to the South Pole. It was the only leather care product chosen by the crew of "Operation Deepfreeze," a series of explorations across the Arctic Circle. A plaque hangs in the company's vestibule today.

After World War II, Pecard built a factory in the Green Bay, Wisconsin area and then, in 1954, sold to another family man, Arthur Wadzinski. Over the next 20 years, the business continued to expand and evolve. Arthur's family, which was comprised of six children, all grew up working in the business during their formative years.

During these years, product formulas were refined, patented and legally protected. New formulas were developed. A "Never Leak" Duck logo was trademarked. In 1975, a larger manufacturing plant – one that boasted 5,600 square feet – was built. A one-man operation was now a full-service facility.

Upon retirement, Arthur sold the company to his son, Steven, who ran the business until his unexpected passing. At this point, one of Steven's brothers, ironically named Phil, bought the business from Steven's estate in 2009.

"When I took over the business, I started making personal sales calls to some of the company's private label customers and quickly learned that we were not merely considered a vendor that supplied products, but a partner who they trusted," Phil says. "That's something I've carried with me and continue to strive towards today."

Today, Phil's daughter works with him in the office and his wife, Beth,

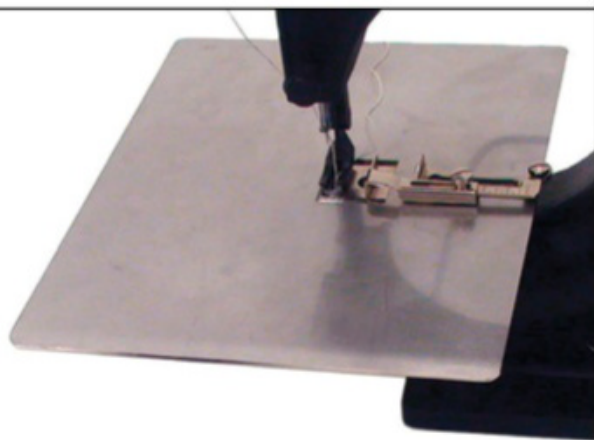


LEFT: Another happy customer shows off the results of Pecard's leather conditioner on a saddle; **OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** This old Pecard ad reads like an old commercial jingle; An incredible before and after photo from a happy Pecard Leather Care client; An old shoe oil label from 118-year-old leather care company Pecard Leather Care Co; Admiral Richard E. Byrd chose Pecard Leather Dressing to protect his crew and their gear on the first expedition to the South Pole in 1928. This recognition certificate hangs in the company's vestibule today; **PREVIOUS PAGE:** A variety of vintage containers illustrate Pecard's ability to stand the test of time.

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and older sister, Patricia, are on the board of directors. They have five full-time employees.

Day-to-day details

Since Phil has owned the company, he says the greatest change he's made to the business is adding additional production equipment, coordinating raw materials purchased for larger minimum order quantity requirements, adding a few cleaning accessories that complement the leather care products and trying to stay on top of marketplace trends.

"There's a big boom in the artisan niche," Phil says. "For example, we're working with small shoe manufacturers and a company that makes

bullwhips. We continue to find places in niche markets."

On average, Pecard keeps about \$200K of raw materials in stock. This includes containers, caps, lids, packaging and labels used to manufacture their products. The amount that it has on hand varies depending on incoming orders, but it keeps an adequate inventory of Pecard-branded product ready for immediate shipment or customer/dealer orders.

"Anything larger, we request for a four-week turnaround because we make everything by hand to order," Phil says.

Phil says that trying to manage his time in an efficient manner is also a challenge, along with keeping on

“We still implement the same high-quality standards and ingredients that Phil Pecard implemented in 1902.”

— Phil Wadzinski



FROM TOP DOWN: The classic Pecard Leather Care line; Phil Wadzinski grew up working in the business. His father Arthur purchased the company from founder Phil Pecard in 1954.

top of regulatory compliance which is ever changing.

“Being a small business, we wear a lot of hats so making sure our energy is used productively has been the best way to maximize proficiency,” he says. “You never know what you’re going to be doing from day to day.”

For example, the day I talked with Phil, he was trying to arrange transportation for inbound supplies and working on invoices.

“Paperwork is a bit of a nemesis,” he laughs.

While juggling jobs poses challenges, Phil says what he enjoys most is talking with customers, hearing their stories and helping them to select the right products to condition, preserve and protect.

When Phil does find a little free time, he enjoys motorcycle touring and spending time with his wife of 25 years (though he’s known her for 40) and his family and friends.

Handcrafted quality

Pecard’s Leather Dressing is the company’s top-selling product followed by its Antique Leather Dressing. Both are popular in many niche markets, especially among tradesmen, artisans, vintage leather aficionado’s and restorers.

“We’ve streamlined our product offerings to simplify customer options,” Phil says. “We’ve also added

mini leather care kits to make sampling our products easier, cleaning/polishing cloths, a brush for general cleaning of leather, another for Suede and Nubuck leather and added a foaming leather cleaner.”

The company purchases its ingredients directly from manufacturers or through their distributors and it sources its beeswax locally and tries to support other local business. Except for a specialty closure, all of its packaging, containers, labels and raw ingredients are purchased within the U.S.

“We formulate most of our products in-house with some help from third-party vendors,” Phil says. “And, since we still implement the same high-quality standards and ingredients that Phil Pecard implemented in 1902, we value quality over quantity. Our products are handcrafted with great care.”

What’s on the horizon? Phil continues to look for outlets that will allow growth of its Pecard-branded products.

Currently, Pecard sells its products all over the world through its dealer and distributor network or via e-commerce channels, if unavailable at brick-and-mortar locations. The website has an informative FAQ section, which answers questions about which products work best for specific applications and how to tell the difference between vinyl and leather. ♦

For more information: pecard.com/

STIDHAM OUTFITTERS & CUSTOM LEATHER

Ropin' and Toolin' in Johnson City, Texas

By Gene Fowler

Leather artist Seth Stidham has a front row seat on Main Street of the Texas Hill Country. When he sits at his workbench at Stidham Outfitters and Custom Leather in the two-stoplight town of Johnson City, tooling most any creation that befits the classic Sheridan style, he can look out a big picture window at the endless parade on US 290.

Not only does the rural highway take travelers to President Lyndon B. Johnson's boyhood home and ranch, it also leads to legendary Luckenbach, the tiny town made famous in song by Willie, Waylon and the boys. A little further west

beckons the German pioneer town and tourist mecca of Fredericksburg, as well as Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, a pink granite mountain that gave rise to Native American mystery and lore.

"You never know who's gonna pass by, see our shop and stop in," says Seth, who runs the Western wear and custom leather emporium with his wife Jasmin Arpin. Not long ago, for instance, the scene framed in his window turned especially cinematic when a BMW motorcycle stopped in front of the shop. A couple climbed off the iron steed, their auras infused with drama and intrigue. "It was like when everything

**"I really went
from hobbyist to
true craftsman."**

— Seth Stidham



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF GENE FOWLER UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED



A vintage auto side fender makes a handy display case for a line of hand-tooled belts.



ABOVE: Seth at work on a belt; **OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP DOWN:** Seth Stidham is seen here at his workbench in Johnson City, Texas, crafting a handmade leather item as traffic flows down US 290; This 1950s Levi's banner once adorned the dry goods shop Seth's folks operated in Georgetown, Texas; Jasmin Arpin and Seth Stidham at Stidham Outfitters and Custom Leather. The couple opened the popular shop in the "two-stoplight town" of Johnson City, Texas in 2014. But despite the fact that the shop is in a small town, Seth and Jasmin say they never know who might pop in. The couple looked up one day to see the popular artist Ronnie Dunn of Brooks & Dunn coming in their door. "We played it cool, though," says Jasmin, "and waited 'til he'd been here a little while before we all took pictures."

slows down for a minute and you think you're in a movie," Stidham recalls. "They were suave and in really great shape. They both wore gold chains."

The couple turned out to be Jorge Poza and Ilke Ikeda, Mexican telenovela soap opera stars, roadtripping the deluxe bike from Mexico City to Canada. "They were fascinated with the leathercraft process," Seth continues. "Jorge said his father or grandfather had worked with leather. He wanted a belt, but I didn't have one his size, so he ended up buying one from my 'mess up

box,' where I keep the things that don't turn out quite right. And then I made and shipped two belts to him in Mexico City."

Jorge Poza was so taken with the Johnson City shop that he learned to craft and tool and started his own outfit, JoPo Custom Leather, in San Miguel de Allende. "He makes things with a biker aesthetic," adds Jasmin. "They're really great people and we've kept in touch."

The international travelers, no doubt, were pumped to meet a genuine Texas rodeo cowboy and expert horseman in Seth

[Seth Stidham is] a genuine Texas rodeo cowboy and expert horseman. . . . A heritage of making things by hand and old-school entrepreneurship is baked into Seth's DNA.



Stidham. A heritage of making things by hand and old-school entrepreneurship is also baked into Seth's DNA. Originally from Georgetown, Texas, where several generations of his family ran a dry goods store, he learned to rope at the Wildfire Ranch in Salado, Texas. He also rodeoed while attending Hill College in Hillsboro, Texas.

Seth first experienced the challenges and rewards of working with leather at age 10, when his mom bought him a leather-work kit at an estate sale. He later expanded those childhood skills when he spent a year working with Dale Martin at Wildfire Saddlery in Salado. After moving to Johnson City around 2011, Seth worked for a rodeo company, a road gig that caused him to be gone from home four days a week for each of 23 rodeos a year. He then found work riding horses for area folks, fine-tuning and training them for roping. Doing "leather stuff" on the side, he established a workshop in the root cellar of the couple's 1918 Hill Country home.

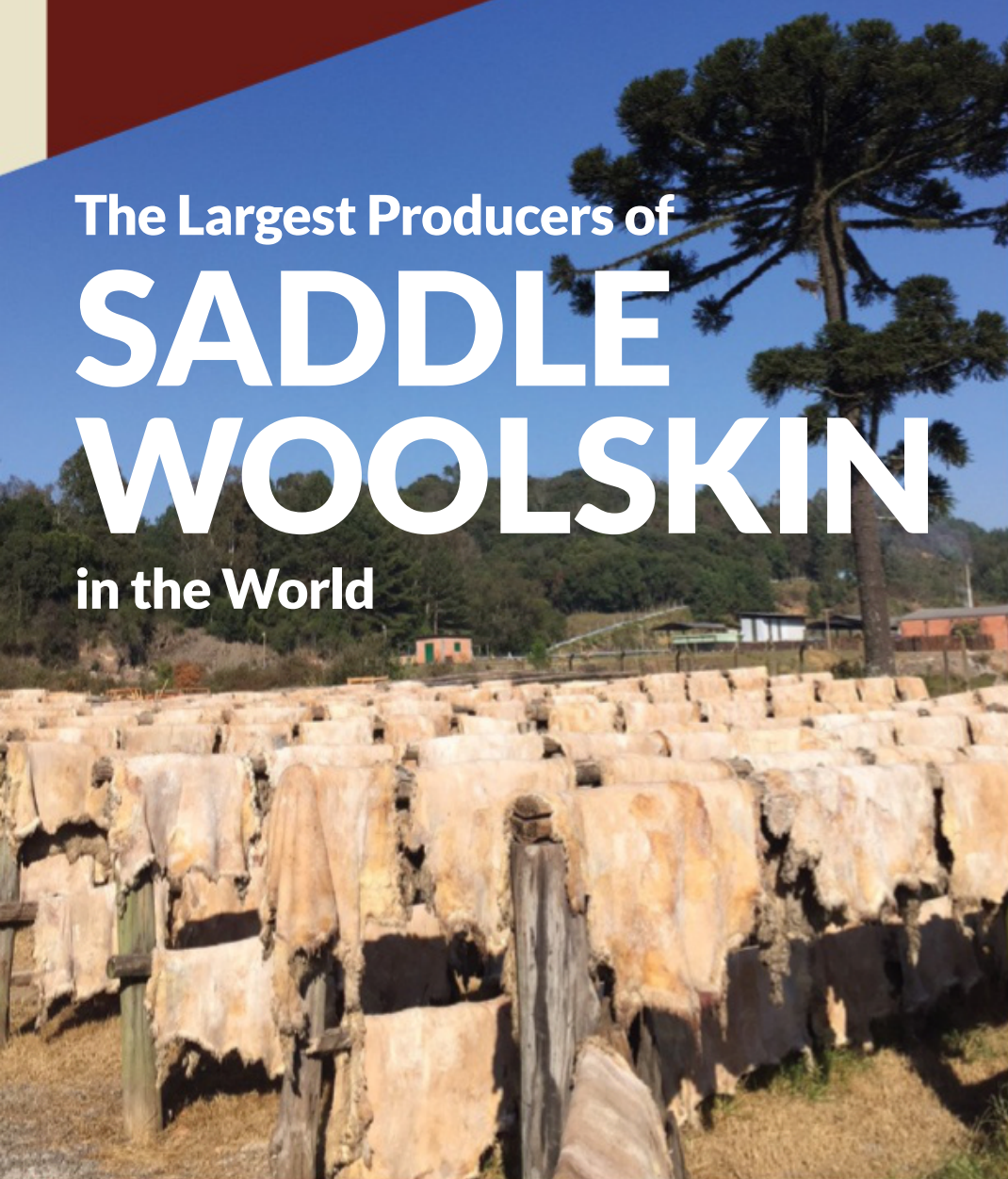
When Seth and Jasmin started their retail outpost with its onsite leather workshop, Stidham Outfitters and Custom Leather in 2014, Seth sold a roping horse to provide startup funds. The store caught on, necessitating a move to its current, enlarged quarters just off Johnson City's courthouse square and on US 290. A step inside the welcoming space shows why. Decor includes a 1950s Levi's banner and other historic artifacts from Seth's family's dry goods store. In a deft, fine-art-style branding touch, Jasmin stenciled the shop logo onto a vintage sheet of weathered metal.

The distinctive array of men's and women's western wear and accessories she selects for the shop goes well beyond the usual pearl snap shirts and bandanas. Stidham's also carries an uncommon mix of home goods, jewelry (especially Southwestern), antiques and gifts. And Seth provides a choice stock of pre-built wallets, belts and other leather items.





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It's the custom leatherwork that really fascinates shoppers. "Most people just don't see the process of handmade crafts anymore," explains Jasmin. "They often think floral patterns are rolled out with a stamp. So when they actually see the meticulous attention to detail, it gives them a stronger appreciation."

When Stidham Outfitters visitors see that meticulousness in Seth's hands, they're seeing a genuine, traditional version. "I don't go in for painted stuff and new fads," he explains. "I like to keep it pretty traditional, and fortunately, I can pick what I want to work on. I'll get maybe 10 requests for custom work a day and I'll usually do about three of them."

In addition to the hands-on education he received at Martin Saddlery, Seth also counts leather artist Wayne Decker of Round Rock, Texas, as a mentor. "He pretty much taught me

“Most people just don’t see the process of handmade crafts anymore. They often think floral patterns are rolled out with a stamp. So when they actually see the meticulous attention to detail, it gives them a stronger appreciation.”

— Jasmin Arpin

everything I know about leather,” Stidham allows. “That’s where I really went from hobbyist to true craftsman.”

Which is not to say that Seth believes he knows it all. Like any true artist in any medium, he strives to learn something every day and wants each piece to be better than the last one. On occasion, he says, he’s even bought belts and other items back from a customer if he doesn’t feel they were well made. “The only thing he’s made me is a belt, and I can’t wear it,” adds Jasmin with a knowing smile, “because he doesn’t think it’s one of his best.”

Seth Stidham is currently applying that drive for perfection to a new project...saddlemaking. “After the first of the year,” he told me in early December, right before he headed out for roping competitions in Arizona and Las Vegas, “I’m going to start ordering some trees. Wayne Decker has offered to help me. My goal is to build the best saddles I can and someday win first place at the Wichita Falls Boot and Saddlemakers Trade Show. And of course, everyone aims to find a place in the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association.”

Stidham will be sourcing his saddle skirting leather from Panhandle Leather

in Amarillo. He uses tooling leather from Hermann Oak and obtains other hides from Horween. “I’ve toured the Horween tannery in Chicago and I hope to visit Hermann Oak one of these days.”

Visitors to Stidham Outfitters and Custom Leather will find a not-so-crazy quilt of delightful surprises with a Western edge. “I think the West was won,” Jasmin posted on the shop’s Facebook page, “on a fabulous sense of style.”

“I agree!” responded Round Rock leather artist Wayne Decker. “And you and Seth are doing a great job of keeping the ‘Western Spirit’ alive!”

stidhamoutfitters.com/

*

In both leatherwork and roping, Seth enjoys “paying it forward.” Stidham Outfitters has held leatherwork classes for youngsters. “Most every guy over 50 had a leathercraft session at some point in their lives,” he explains, “but younger folks, not so much.” You can see Seth in action teaching roping to kiddos at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmUzenNPFLA>. ♦

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SCOTT SLUSHER, AKA THE COWBOYS' COWBOY PHOTOGRAPHER



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SCOTT SLUSHER, AKA THE COWBOYS' COWBOY PHOTOGRAPHER



PHOTOS ABOVE: Seth Stidham prefers traditional Sheridan style tooling, and these handmade pieces indicate the advanced level of his skills; **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Seth Stidham takes custom orders, but he also creates pre-made inventory for the popular shop that also carries men's and women's apparel, handpicked home goods, and antiques.

How to do a Hidden Stitch

By Chezney Lindsey of Burns Saddlery

Photographs by Clark Knight

Using a stitch groover, groove a line $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the edge along both edges of leather you want stitched together.

Note: Be sure to stitch groove the side of leather that will be hidden.



Using a #5 stitch marker, mark the stitch grooves being sure to start each stitch mark straight across from each other.



Using a slim awl blade, stab through the first stitch mark at an angle to 1/16" from the outside edge. Continue for both sides.



Measure the length of the section you need to stitch and multiply it by four to ensure you have enough thread. Starting from the top, pull the thread through with a hook awl leaving the same amount of thread on either side.

Note: You may use a needle and thread for this step. In this demonstration Chezney uses a hook awl needle.



With the hook awl, from right to left, poke the awl through the right stab hole into the adjacent left stab hole and create a loop to hook and pull through.

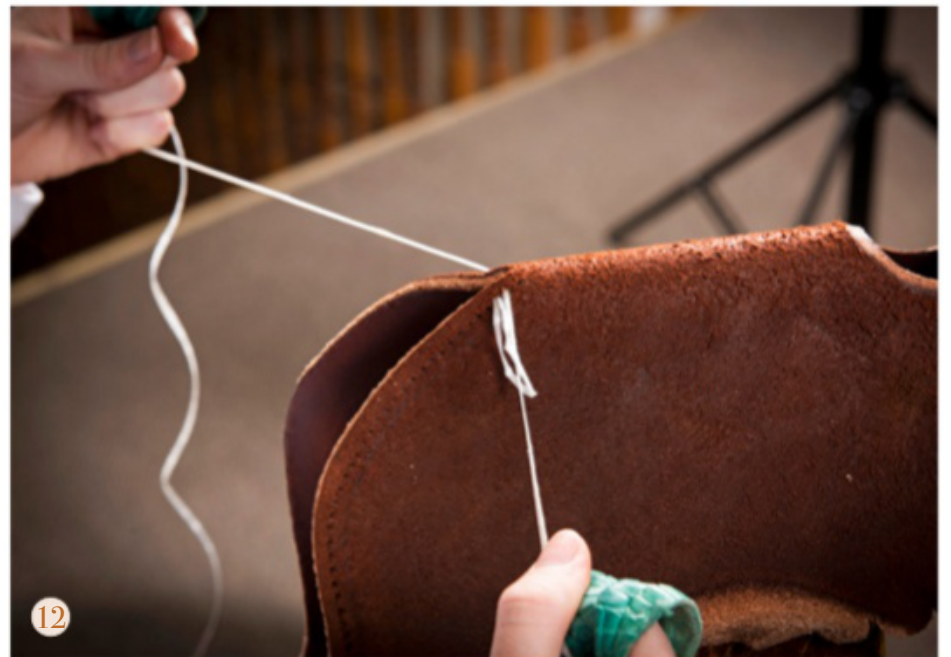


Run the end of the thread on the right side through the loop as shown.



Take the left thread and pull until the thread lock is in the middle of the joint.

Note: This requires some effort to get tight.



Continue this stitch until the last hole and tie a knot.

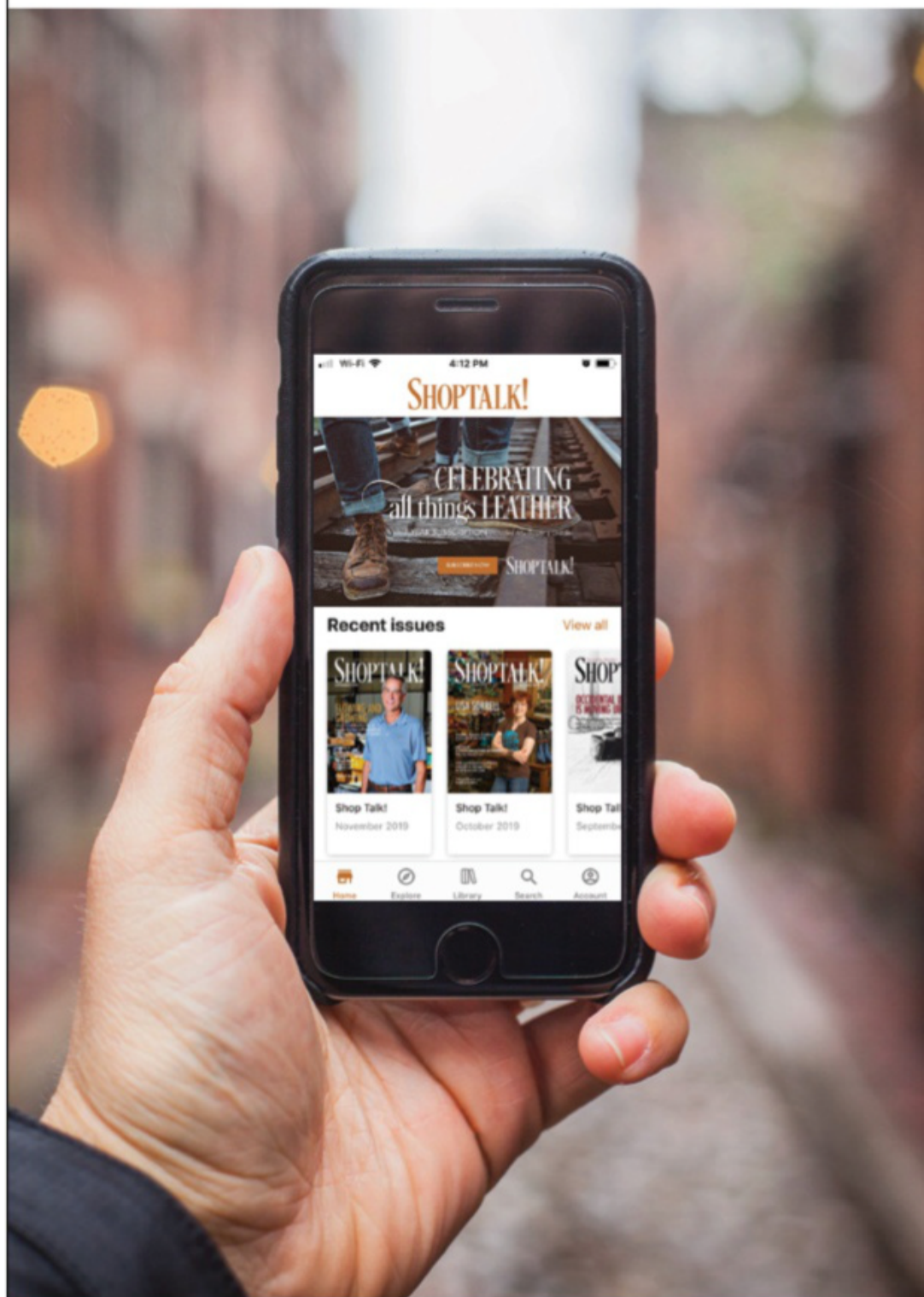


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Teach Your Leaders to Be Great Communicators

We have allowed the bulleted slide deck to become a perfectly acceptable crutch—and a substitute for communication skill. The solution lies in understanding that communication can only ever be about the audience's brain.

By Tim Pollard, Founder and CEO, Oratium

It is no coincidence that Steve Jobs is remembered not only as a legendary business leader, but also as an exceptionally effective communicator. These two skills are closely intertwined.

Yet even amid the recent trend in which organizations—especially larger ones—are taking leadership development far more seriously, there is little if any focus on helping leaders improve their communication skills.

Everyone agrees that exceptional communication is critical to help leaders perform at their highest possible level. With the impending retirement of today's senior leadership generation and the ascent of a new generation of professionals into those leadership roles, organizations have been stepping up to the plate to offer in-house leadership academies and other forms of training on topics ranging

from managing disruptive change and managing in a global environment to operating with a diverse workforce designed to ensure that the next generation of leaders is properly prepared.

Why, then, has so little attention been paid to helping leaders learn to communicate effectively? Communication drives executive effectiveness; it is vital to nearly every aspect of a business' success. Without effective communication skills, a leader's message does not stick and will not fulfill his or her fundamental mission of driving results by compelling people into action. Leaders who communicate poorly or at a mediocre level—which sadly has become accepted as the norm—fail to secure the support they need from their superiors. They fail to secure confidence and trust from their teams, to acquire financial backing for

key projects and initiatives, and to build relationships with key constituencies and communities in which they operate.

SLIDE DECKS ARE A SUBSTITUTE FOR SKILL

In fact, communication skills appear to be on the decline. We have allowed the bulleted slide deck to become a perfectly acceptable crutch—and a substitute for skill. Given how time-oppressed most executives are, its convenience is seductive. Slowly but surely, this has steadily driven down the quality of our executive communication. When I ask people how effective they find the typical presentations they sit through, only around 15 percent rate them as "good" or in a category higher than "good." A full 65 percent say the presentations are mediocre or worse, and a full 20 percent are rated as "extremely poor."



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To bring this to life, I recently witnessed the CEO of a leading consulting firm address an audience of 3,000 to 4,000 people. During this address, his communication, comprising a thick deck of overly detailed slides coupled with a wandering narrative and a lack of connection between his material and his audience, meant that within just a few minutes, the disconnection of his audience had become both palpable and troubling. More so because our research shows that when a leader presents poorly, more than 70 percent of the audience correlates that poor communication with that leader's overall leadership ability.

Clearly the slide deck just doesn't cut it. But the problem runs much deeper, and the answer is a lot more interesting than ditching PowerPoint: It lies in understanding that communication can only ever be about the audience's brain.

The brain wants and needs to consume information in a particular way. When aligned with this, communication is incredibly effective—regardless of a presenter's delivery skills. When misaligned, failure continues to be guaranteed.

Science shows that the brain is wired to process ideas. Biologically, it is reductionist, boiling information down to ideas it can grab hold of. This is what the brain retains. It does not, however, traffic well at the level of facts and data, especially in large quantities. Thus, great communicators operate at the level of ideas, thereby feeding the brain the exact currency in which it traffics.

THE HALLMARKS OF GREAT COMMUNICATION

Executives can be taught to communicate effectively. When given the right tools and process for message design, they can master the hallmarks of great communication, which:

- Pivots on a small number of big ideas.
- Is clean, crisp, and simple, remaining within the bandwidth of what the brain can absorb.
- Is grounded in the needs, wants, concerns, and fears of the audience rather than in an executive's personal priorities and preferences.
- Has a logical narrative flow. Story is key both to human cognition and retention.

- Leads to a logical call to action.

The refreshing truth is that when executives are trained in the right principles governing message architecture, these outcomes become the norm. Sadly, traditional presentation skills training can never achieve this—the focus on “eye contact and body language” is largely irrelevant to the real problem and generally yields no actionable results for either the communicator or the audience.

As you think about executive training, don't forget communication. Focus on message architecture and brain alignment. You'll find that other leadership solutions will fall into place more naturally—and with better results.

Tim Pollard, author of “The Compelling Communicator: Mastering the Art and Science of Exceptional Presentation Design” (Conder House Press, 2016), is the founder and CEO of Oratium, a communications firm helping organizations from Fortune 500 companies to law offices hone their presentation and messaging skills.

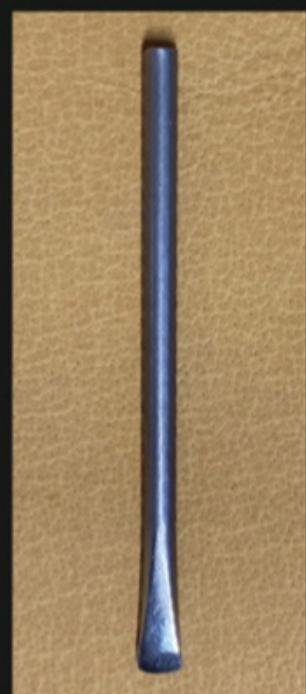
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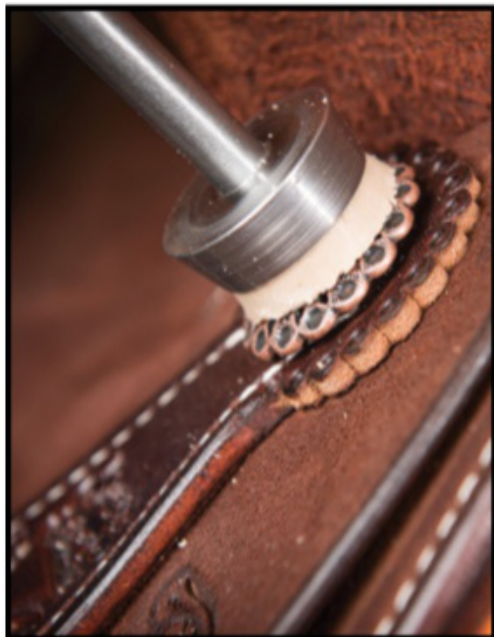
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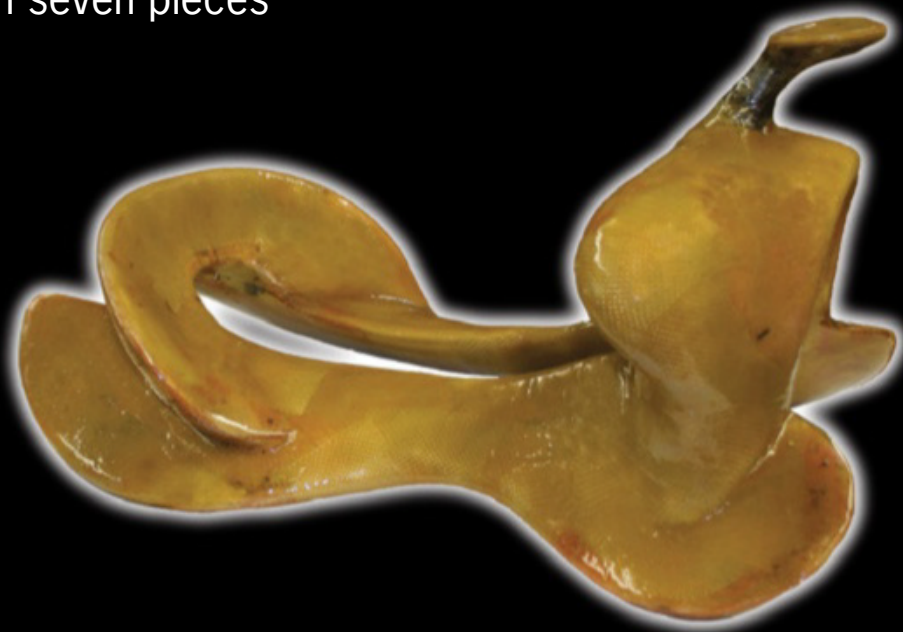
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