

The Story of Fred: Dressing Up Some Old Bones

By Richard "Ric" Harber

Fred was an old steer down Mexico-way, minding his own business and just wandering around. Not sure what happened to him; don't know if he got in the way of one of the cartels, if he got caught up in one of those caravans we hear about, or if he just fell victim to the meat packing industry. Fred ended up losing his hide, his body, and most of his bones. Most, that is, except for his head, which found its way one day to my doorstep (via El Paso Saddleblanket).

Fred was a forlorn-looking steer when he arrived at my shop (**Photo 1**). He asked if I could brighten up his countenance and give him back a bit of his hide. Of course, I told him it wouldn't be a problem. After a long conversation about what he wanted and what he liked, we decided on roses as the decoration for Fred's new "clothes".

There was a fair amount of work to get from bare-



Photo 1



Photo 2

boned Fred to the start of his new hide. First up was giving Fred a good cleaning and using Liquid Nails® to tighten up his dentures – they rattled terribly – and to knit some of the bones together (**Photo 2**). I also gave the horns a good scrub with emery cloth and a light coating of

tung oil. The rest of Fred also received some tung oil to remove some of his pallor. After that dried, the horns got a spray coating of polyurethane. I let all that dry thoroughly before moving on.

The next step was to get a general pattern for the leather and layout. I'm

sure there are a variety of ways to do this, but I took a combination of simplicity and brute force. I laid a large piece of heavy paper (the reddish paper found in the paint section from Home Depot) over the skull and worked the paper down over it, starting at the noll (the top of the head between the horns) and wrapping the paper down the back. I then made a cutout for each horn and worked the paper down and around the eye sockets. I used my finger and a knife to punch through the paper and cut it so it could be folded inside the sockets. I kept this up until I had the paper surrounding the skull snugly (**Photo 3**). I also made sure to create creases in the areas where the paper changed planes (from the top of the skull to the sides or the sides to the bottom). I trimmed away the excess paper, leaving some paper to go under the skull at the bottom and inside the eye sockets.

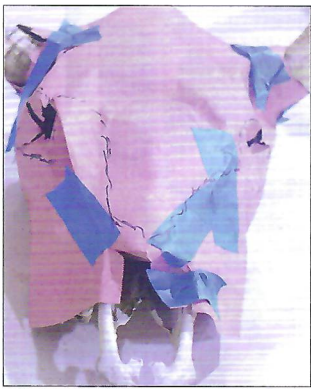


Photo 3



Photo 4

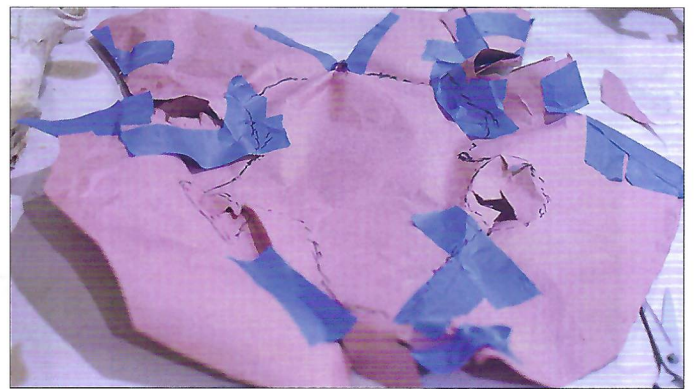


Photo 5

With a pencil, I marked the top and side planes along the cheeks. **Photo 4** shows the rough outline for the top plane. This outline would become the outline for the main area for tooling and/or stamping design.

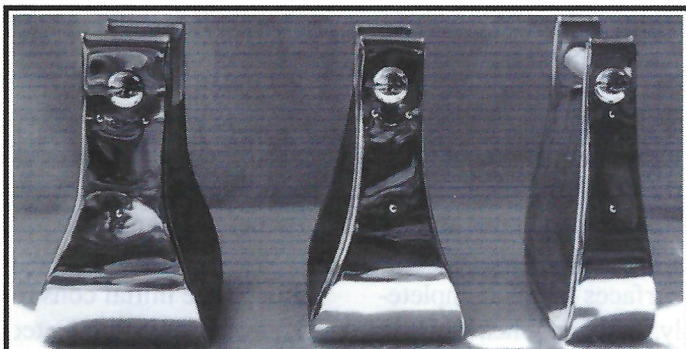
I removed the paper from

the skull and smoothed it out a bit, being sure to maintain the creases for the hard edges (or marking them on the paper) (**Photo 5**). I could now use this paper to identify the size of the piece of leather Fred would need to cover his skull. Since the leather would

be wet-formed, I used 4/5 oz. veg-tan so that it wouldn't be too hard to work.

It was time to decorate Fred's clothes. Since my conversation with Fred had established that he wanted roses, I pulled out the *Al and Ann Stohl-*

man Personal Patterns Portfolio, Vol. I (Oak Leaves, Flowers, Roses and Scrolls, edited by Peter Main), and selected rose patterns that fit within the tooling area and formed a pleasing (at least to me) picture. I placed a piece of tracing film on top of my chosen



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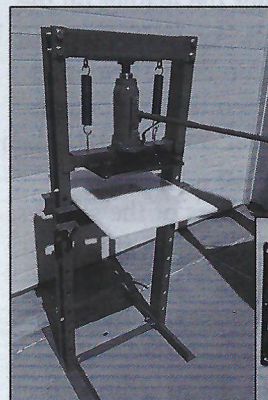
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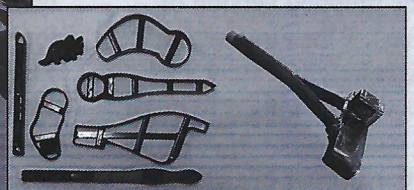
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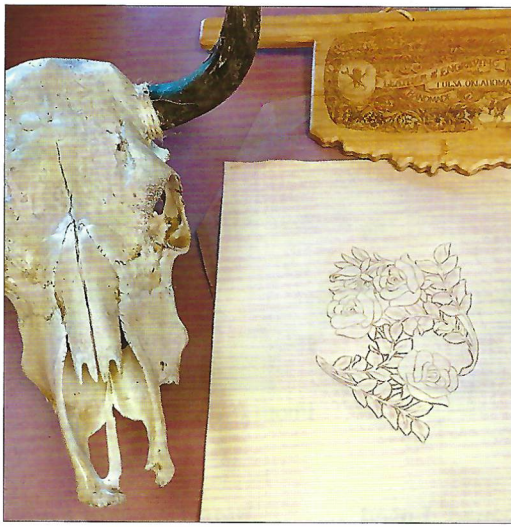


Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8

patterns and transferred the outlines and main boundaries to the film. I could then fill in my tooling or stamping pattern within the established boundaries, adding them to the tracing film. I then transferred the pattern, along with a light copy of the top plane outline, to the leather (cut oversized, based on the paper pattern).

Photo 6 shows the start of the tooling, along with the prepped version of Fred. When tooling on lightweight leather such as this, it is good to place a sturdy piece of cardboard (I use bag stiffener) between your stone and the leather. This allows for more depth in tooling without punching through the leather. Of course, this is in addition to your preferred method (tape, shelf paper, x-ray film, etc.) of preventing leather stretch.

After a bit more leather pounding, the initial

phase of preparing Fred's new outfit was done and it was time to try it on! For the fitting, I dampened the carved leather and worked it into shape over the skull. This is where it is handy to have the outline of the top plane lightly on the leather since it helps center the leather on the skull. Again, I started at the top of the head and pressed the dampened leather over the noll, then worked my way down both sides of the skull, forming the leather to it. This took patience and several passes to get a good fit. I used a pair of shears or a knife to remove excess leather, ensuring a good fit. I then worked the leather into the interior of the eye sockets, both to help hold the leather in place and to make for a cleaner effect. To get a smooth fit it is necessary to cut pleats in the leather, going inside the sockets and sometimes other curves and holes.

Once the leather was worked into place and formed, I let it sit and dry some to take on the general shape. While there was still some moisture left in the leather, I removed it from the skull and prepared to glue the leather to the skull. (Use a good quality contact cement such as Barge or Weldwood.) I applied a light coat of cement to the skull and the flesh side of the leather and allowed the glue on both surfaces to dry completely. A second, heavier coat followed the first, but only to the flesh side of the leather; a second, lighter coat of cement was applied to roughly the top 25% of the skull.

When the second coats of cement had become tacky, it was time to press the leather onto the skull. Having the cement still tacky meant I could work the leather into position and start the process of adhering the leather only to the top of the skull,

using my hands. Once the top part of the skull was in place, I applied a second, light coat of contact cement to the next section of the skull, waited for it to become tacky, pressed the next section of leather down, and repeated the process until the entire piece of leather was glued to the skull. I then left Fred alone to allow the contact cement cure. Fortunately, it was a perfect fit (**Photo 7**)!

During the initial consultation, Fred had indicated that he wanted to accessorize his new outfit with some wraps for his horns, including laced edges. It was time to start working on them. (For these, you can either use the same lightweight leather as for the skull wrap or a bit heavier leather.)

Since the horns tapered in diameter, this presented another case for creating a pattern for a cone (see Harber, "How to Make a Pattern for



Photo 9

horns at the point where I wanted the decorative wraps to end. (Follow the instructions in the referenced article to create the pattern.) I cut out my leather and marked and punched the holes for the edge lacing (and to lace the ends of the wraps together). Finally, I added the tooling/stamping as desired. Fred again wanted flowers, so flowers he got!

Fred wanted his new outfit to be colorful to brighten his pale look – red roses, green leaves, and a mahogany background. The flowers and leaves were dyed using Fiebing's dyes with various reductions to

try to get some shading (**Photo 8**). Background color was next. Since I wanted to cover all the leather while minimizing the chances of dying the skull itself, I used painter's tape to the skull as a resist and then applied Fiebing's mahogany dye to the leather.

Once all the dyes had dried, Neatsfoot oil was applied lightly to help rehydrate the hide and left to absorb overnight. **Photo 9** shows Fred after his "spa treatment." The next morning, a resist (Bee Natural RTC) was applied and left to dry before applying some mahogany antique. After that dried, a coat

of Fiebing's Tan Kote followed, and finally, a spray of Fiebing's Leather Sheen. Once everything dried, I removed the tape.

The horn wraps received a similar treatment but without the painter's tape. After sealing, the edges were laced (double loop lacing) with kangaroo lace, and the ends were laced together to complete the wraps.

Now, Fred looks pretty decent for an old steer. I think he likes it as well, since he seems to be smiling! He has moved on to a new home in all his colorful splendor! ↑

a Cone", *LCSJ*, Nov/Dec 2019, Vol. 29, No. 6, pp. 61-64). I measured around the base of the horns (including the leather extending out over the horns) and then measured around the

Letters to the Editor

I read the "From the Editor" section of the July/August edition. I was really moved by it and decided to subscribe for a year. Up until now I had only purchased issues for specific articles that I felt I needed for a specific project.

As a Chicano-Cahuilla leathercrafter it was good for me to read your words and hear things mentioned that do not get stated often in leather groups that I'm in. There are times where I wonder if it matters that I am a Chicano leathercrafter. Sometimes I reflect on if there is anything I could be doing with the leather work that is more community oriented. I greatly appreciate your message about inclusiveness in people and styles of work! Hopefully we do that and continue to grow this great community.

Sincerely,
Enrique Cardiel
Albuquerque, NM

RE: Jul/Aug 2020 Cover

I am on the front lines of COVID as a surgical nurse and this portrait of work really speaks to me and I would like to share it with others in my operating rooms area with other staff and would cherish it as a memory for 2020 and how the whole community came together to fight this COVID.

I don't know if you have any to sell or are planning to but I am one who would love to have something like this to inspire my medical family at home and at work.

Derek Hawkins
Danville, KY

