

HISTORY OF LEATHER

By: Raymond Cherry

In Ancient Times

No one actually knows when primitive peoples first made leather nor just what method was used. Earliest authentic historical records go back nearly 5000 years. From carved stone tablets left by the Egyptians of that time, we learn that they knew about leather and valued it as much as gold and ivory.

They even considered it worthy of tribute to their kings and gods. Perfectly preserved leather articles have been found in Egyptian tombs known to be over 3000 years old.

There are numerous references to leather in the Bible. The legends and tales of ancient Greeks and Roman contain frequent references to leather. At one time among the ancient Romans, leather was used as the basis of their money. From the Latin word "Pecus" meaning "hide," we get our English word "pecuniary" meaning "pertaining to money.

The Early American Leatherworker

It is not necessary for the Europeans to bring the art of leather tanning to America, for the first explorers found that the Indians were quite skillful in this art. It is not known just how or when these Indians gained their knowledge and skill. Tribes used different methods to prepare the leather. They generally piled the skins until decay started. Sometimes wood ashes were mixed with the skins. The decay loosened the hair which was then scraped off by hand as was the flesh from the underside. Then oil and animal brains were pounded into the skins. Following this, the skins were often smoked. The American Indian was especially skillful in making buckskin. This type of leather has never been equaled for its softness or its ability to shed water.

During colonial times, leather goods were extensively used. Articles of clothing, door hinges, fire buckets, tableware, and coach springs were just a few things commonly made of leather during this period. Thousands of years before, the ancient Hebrews had been the first people to develop the oak-bark method of tanning leather. No decided changes in this method of tanning were made until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Then people learned that oak bark was not the only source of tanning materials. They found that bark from hemlock and chestnut trees, as well as various other plant substances, were all satisfactory for tanning leather.

Changes in Processing Methods

Near the end of the nineteenth century, an American chemist discovered that Chromium salts acting upon hides produced leather different from that produced by the bark-tanning method. Other experiments proved that it was necessary for this new type of leather to be treated with soaps and oils. Thus our modern method of chrome tanning was developed and soon became the chief way of producing leather.

About the same time, Americans invented machinery which greatly changed the methods of working with leather. Since a machine can do the work of many hands, output increased. Perhaps the most important machine was one which split leather to any desired thickness, thus making available at least twice the amount of usable leather. Other equipment took care of dehairing, fleshing, and cleaning.

Craft Leathers

A brief description of craft leathers as to weights, uses, and sized of the skins or sides follows. The illustrations show the grain of the various leathers in actual size, unless otherwise indicated.

Tooling and Carving Leathers

Calf comes in many colors as well as natural finish. Weight varies from 1 ½ to 3 ½ ounces and skins range from 9 to 16 square feet.

Steerhide is pebbly or crinkly grained pliable leather which may be used for all projects. It comes in natural or two-toned colors. This leather varies in weight from 2 ½ to 5 ounces, the side measure from 20 to 28 square feet.

Cowhide or strap leather may also be used for all projects. It is natural in color and always has a smooth grain. The weight varies from 2 ½ to 10 ounces and the side run up to 28 square feet.

Sheep, which generally comes only in medium weight, is not as durable as other leathers such as calf. It is available in many colors, and size of skins varies from 7 to 12 square feet.

Morocco goat is used for linings, billfolds, and book bindings. It weighs about 2 ½ ounces and comes in several colors. These skins come in sizes up to 10 square feet.

Pigskin generally comes in natural color. This leather is quite durable. Skins range from 9 to 16 square feet; the weight varies.

Lining Leathers

Chrome Kip cannot be tooled, but it makes an excellent smooth lining. Side range in sizes from 12 to 18 square feet.

Skiver is a very think grain-split sheepskin which comes in several colors. The skins are from 6 to 12 square feet, in size and vary in color.

Suede is a type of finish which is generally made on sheep skins. This leather, which is available in many colors, is popular for garments as well as linings. The skins average from 5 to 9 square feet. Since suede is quite expensive, one may buy less costly leather that is similar in texture.

Miscellaneous Leathers

Embossed cowhide or Steerhide is used for briefcases, notebooks, and other large projects. It is generally black or brown and sides range up to 28 square feet.

Hair calf is calfskin with long or clipped hair still on it. Unborn calf, or slunk, which is used for small projects and garments, has very short hair. Size of hair calfskins very from 6 to 10 square feet.

Leather lacing comes most commonly in 3/32" and 1/8" widths. Calfskin and goatskin lacings are the most popular. Consult a leathercrafter catalog for the many varieties of lace available.

