

# Gunleather: Cowboy Cuffs

by Will Ghormley

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After thirty years of making leather goods for mountain man rendezvous and western action shooting, I had quite a stack of authentic patterns. My patterns are based on historical examples and hold true to the styles of their time. Within the sport of western action shooting, truly authentic leather products are at a premium. Over the years I've thought about putting these patterns into pattern packs for leather crafting hobbyists and professionals who share my interest in the old west. That opportunity came in the spring of 2003 when *The Leather Factory* and *Tandy Leather Company* agreed to carry my Old West Collection patterns.

Eight patterns are currently available in the Old West Collection pattern line. The first of the saddle patterns and instruction books should be out this summer. These pattern packs are intended for intermediate to advanced leather workers and do not contain step-by-step instructions. For this reason, I thought a step-by-step article about an item from the pattern pack would be helpful. I will work through a pattern from the *Cowboy Cuffs* pattern pack and show how the pattern can be used and adapted.

Cowboy Cuffs were worn at least since the end of the Civil War. From what I've seen, they didn't gain widespread use until after the era of the big cattle drives, the end of the 1880s. As homesteads and large tracts of ranchman were fenced off, the cowboy's life changed. No longer did he take to the trail for most of the year, covering a thousand miles, more or less, on horseback without seeing home. From trail work, he shifted to ranch work, and it was during this period cuffs saw more use. I chalk it up to barbed wire. A ranch hand only had so many shirts and couldn't afford to have the cuffs and sleeves all tore up from gettin' snagged while fencing. It was despised work for any cowboy, but I reckon most everyone did their share at one time or another. I know I sure did. Now granted, by theory is probably based more on my personal experience as a young cowboy, but it makes as much sense to me as anything else I've heard.

I've selected the "Tejano" pattern for this article. Each cuff pattern is laid out with three different methods of securing the cuff around the wrist. I've chosen to illustrate the laced-through buckle method. There are also two methods for styling the wrist edge of the cuff. One is to cut a simple arc, as illustrated in figure 1 of the "Tejano". The other method has a sweeping contour that helps the cuff stay aligned on the arm. This is more important when a decorative element is centered on the cuff, as on the "Tejano". The patterns "Ridin' Tall" and "Buffalo Hump" are both illustrated in the pattern pack with the sweeping contour added as a dotted line. To add this sweeping contour to the "Tejano", lay a section of tracing film over the "Tejano" pattern, and trace what is shown in figure 2.

Compare the tracing in figure 2 with the picture of the pattern in figure 1. Notice the wrist arc isn't traced because the sweeping contour will be traced from the "Ridin' Tall" pattern. Notice also the snap tab and the holes for the snaps aren't traced because we are making the laced-through method of fastening the cuff. I also left off the guide lines for the serpentine stamp because this cuff will have basket weave stamping instead. The markers for the spots aren't traced either, because this cuff will be made without spots.

Align the corners of the wrist end of the tracing with the corners of the wrist end of the "Ridin' Tall" pattern. Trace the dotted sweeping contour line. The tracing will look like figure 3. Next, trace the buckle strap marked "b" from the pattern pack and it should look like figure 4. If you don't yet have the **Old West Collection Cowboy Cuffs** pattern pack, the full size pattern adapted for this article is provided in the foldout pattern section of the magazine. All the parts for this style of cuff can be cut the same for both right and left hand cuffs. If the snap type fastening method had been chosen, the tracing would be transferred to the leather. The tracing pattern would then be reversed to transfer the second cuff to the leather. This would produce right and left hand cuffs.

I recommend the use of 9-10 oz. leather for most cuffs. To transfer the tracing pattern to the leather, dampen the surface of the leather. Don't soak the leather through; just get enough moisture on the surface to allow the impression of the tracing stylus. Lay the tracing over the leather. I use a smooth iron plate to hold down the portion of the pattern I'm not tracing. Keep the iron off the damp leather because the iron will turn the leather black where they touch. Figure 5 illustrates how the iron plate holds the tracing pattern in place while the other portion is transferred. When the pattern is traced to the first portion of the leather, gently lift the tracing pattern to insure everything was traced. Hold the tracing pattern to the leather with one hand while removing the plate from the other portion. Without allowing the tracing pattern to shift, gently lay the plate on the portion that has already been transferred. Trace the second portion of the pattern to the leather. When completed, trace the second cuff in the same manner.

With a round knife, cut out the outline of the cuff. A straight edge and utility knife can be used to cut the straight edges of the cuffs. With a 1/2" oblong punch, punch out the laced-through buckle slots in the wrist end of the cuffs. With the #5 punch on a rotary punch, punch out the lacing holes along the sides of the cuffs. If basket weaving isn't desired on the cuffs, disregard the next several steps and any following steps pertaining to basket weave stamping.

With a stylus, make a mark 3/8" above the outline of the Texas Star and 3/8" below the outline of the star, as seen in figure 6. From the inside edge of the lace holes along the sides of the cuffs, again make a mark 3/8" in as show in

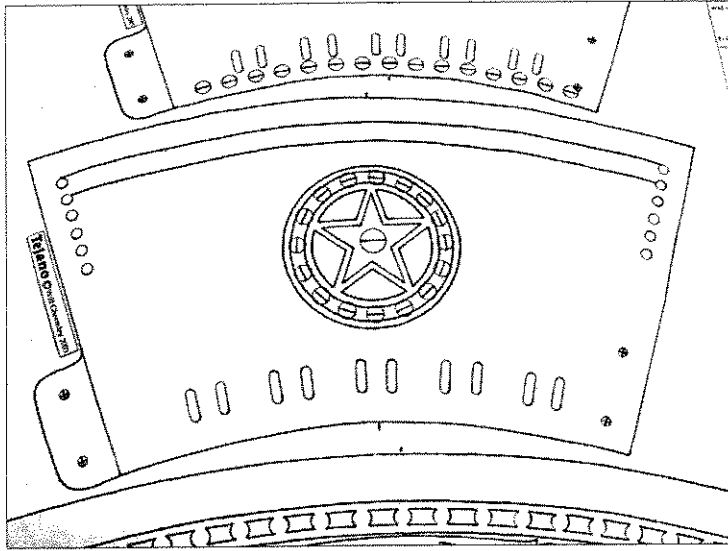


Figure 1

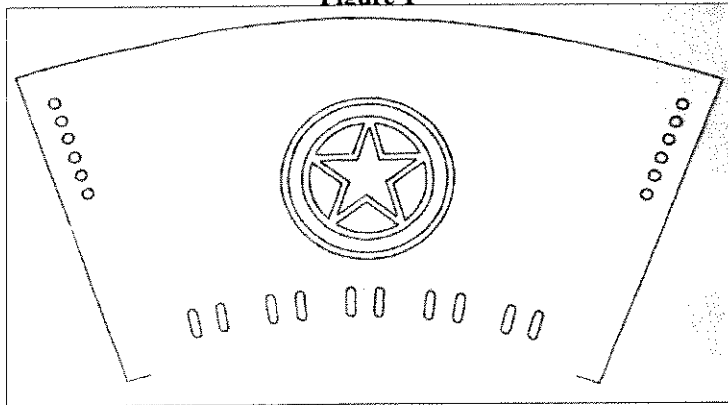


Figure 2

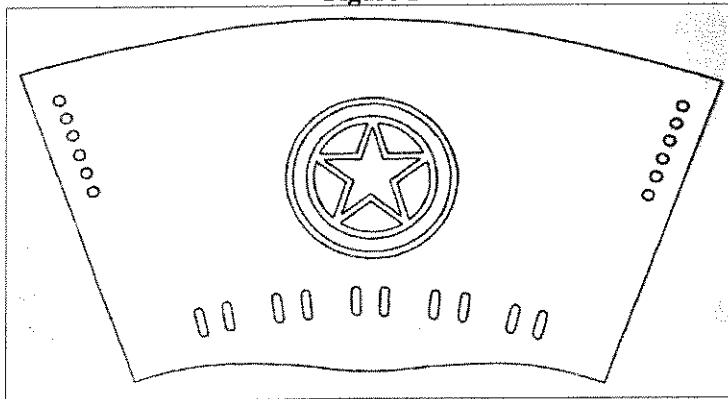


Figure 3

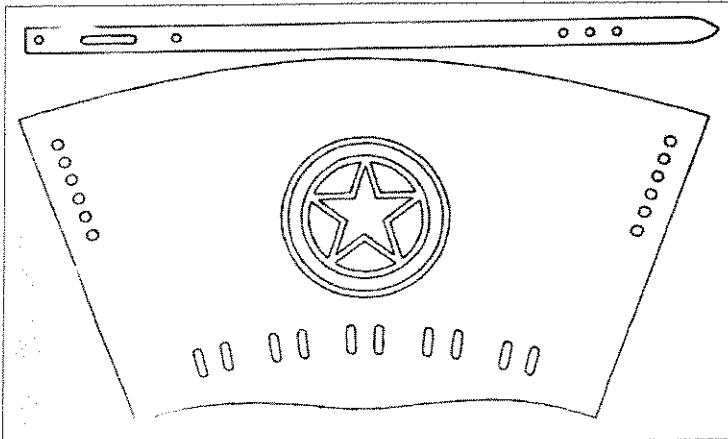


Figure 4

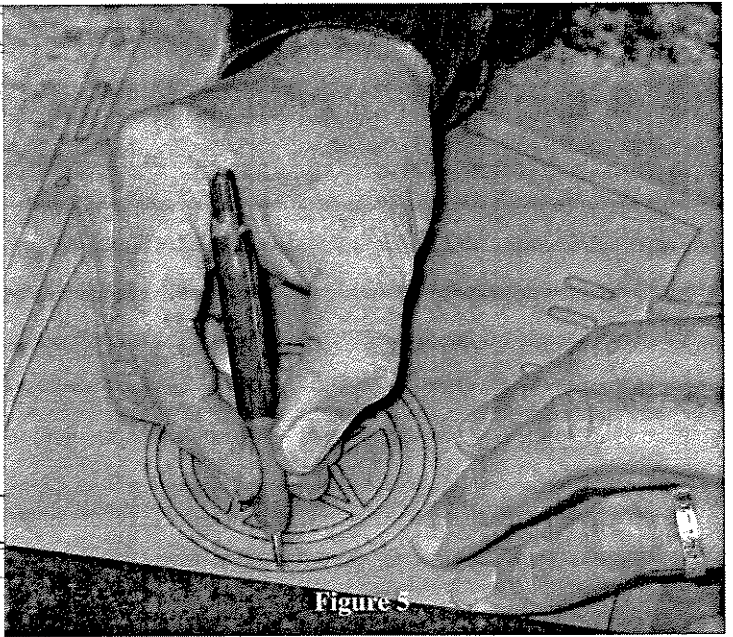


Figure 5

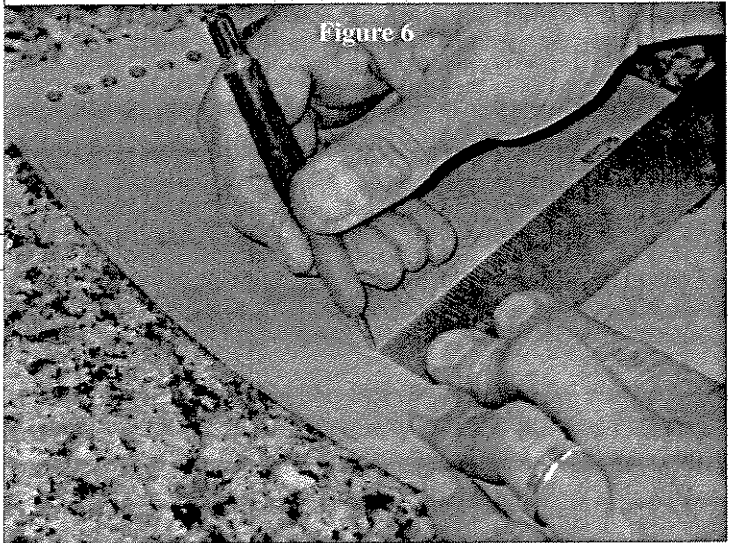


Figure 6

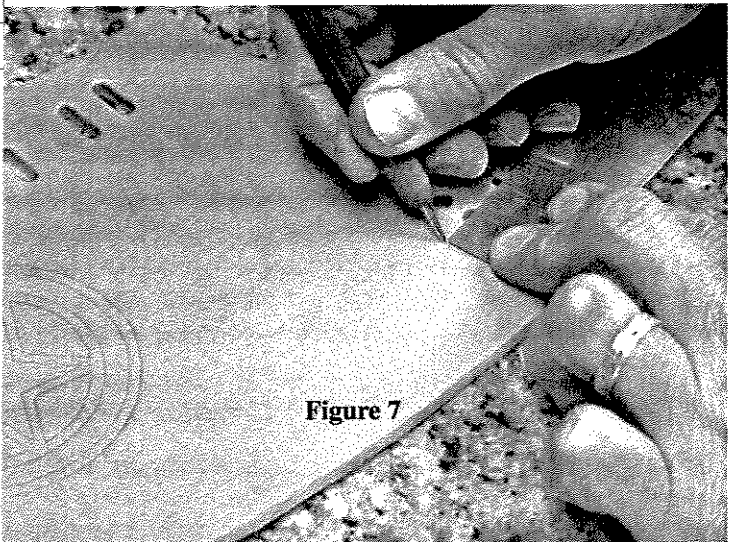


Figure 7

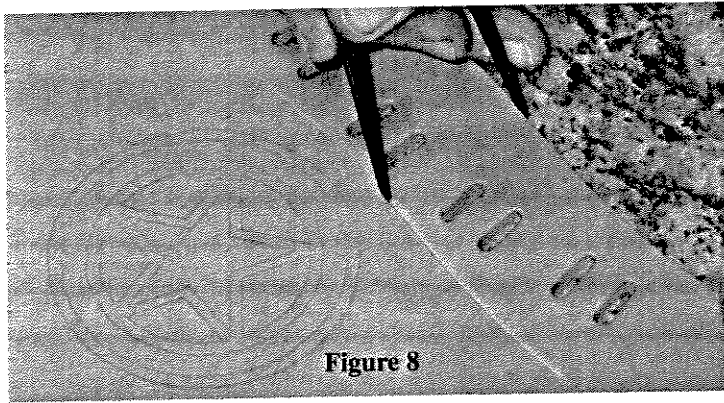


Figure 8



Figure 11

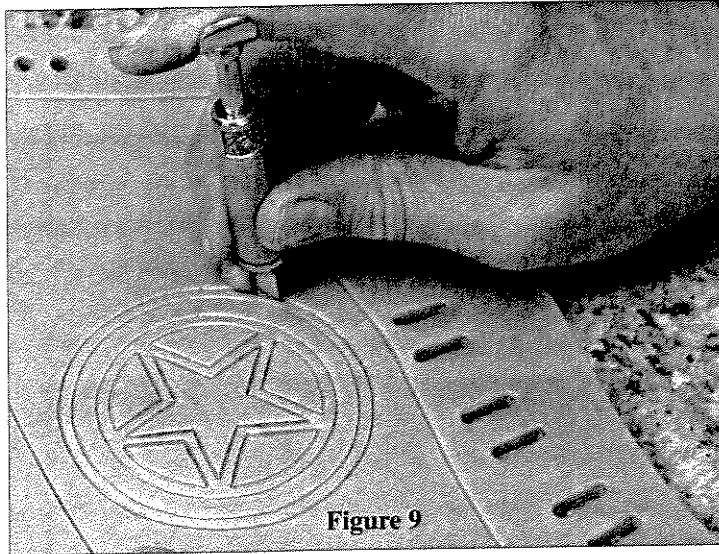


Figure 9

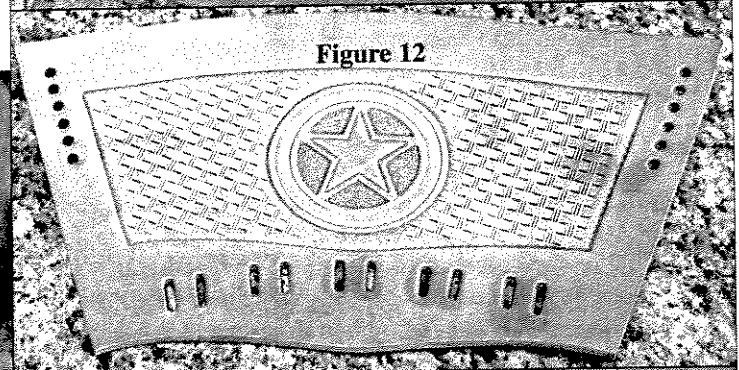


Figure 12

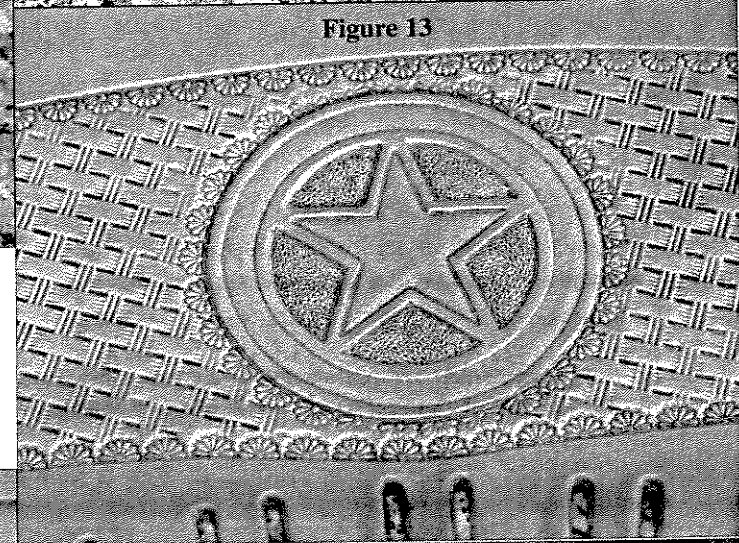


Figure 13

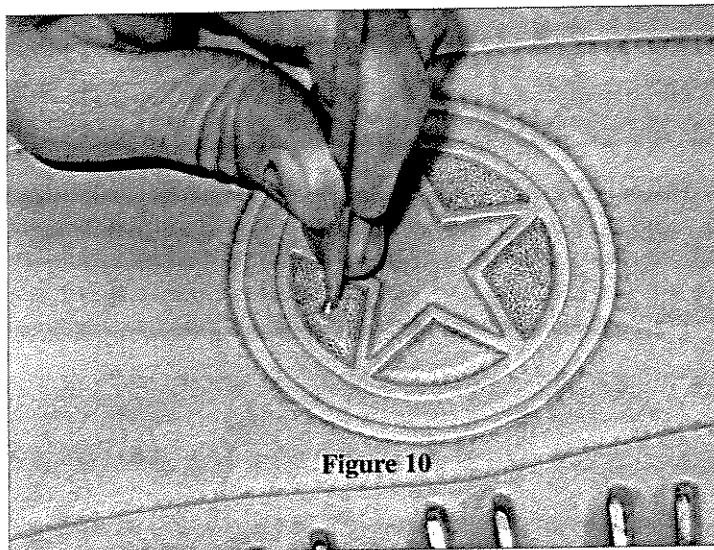


Figure 10

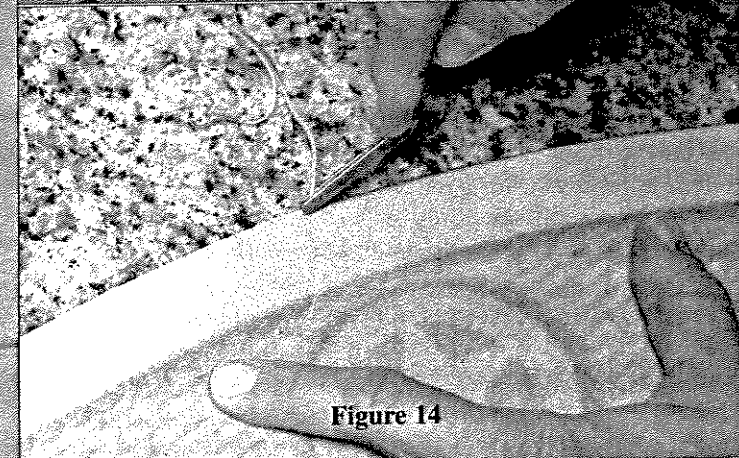


Figure 14



figure 7. With an adjustable wing divider, set the divider's points to the distance from the mark below the star to the edge of the cuff. Use the divider to scribe a line along the wrist edge of the cuff as in figure 8. Stay well in from the edges so you don't end up with unwanted lines. Connect the corners after scribing all four edges. Next, adjust the divider from the mark above the star to the upper edge of the cuff. Scribe a line as before. Now, adjust the divider to the mark to the inside of the lace holes. Scribe lines down both sides. If the corners don't connect, either eyeball it, or re-adjust the divider to each dimension and connect the corners.

Completely dampen the leather and let set until the surface appears dry, but is still cool and damp to the touch. With a sharp swivel knife, cut all the lines made on the cuffs as in figure 9. With the Craftool B701 beveler, bevel the inside of the outline. This can be done quicker with a larger beveler if one is available. It doesn't have to be perfect because it will be covered with basket weaving and an edge tooling. Do the same with the outside border of the Texas Star. Inside the inner circle, between the arms of the star, use the same treatment. Look at figure 10 for clarification. The inside of the inline of the star and the inline of the circle must be nicely beveled. This is the finished beveling that will be seen. After the beveling is completed, use the Craftool A-889 to mat the area inside of the circle between the arms of the star as seen in figure 10. Rotate the tool so a pattern doesn't develop.

To fill in the outline with basket weaving, use a stylus and straight edge to mark a guide line from the opposite corners as seen in figure 11. Do not make the line across the Texas Star. Make the guide line from the opposite corners on the second cuff. Without experience using a basket stamping tool, a scrap piece of leather should be used to practice on. The basket weave stamp could be left out altogether and a border stamp used inside the outline and around the Texas Star. The Craftool X 511 was used for the basket weave on these cuffs. Each half of the cuff can be stamped without worry about matching up with the other half of the cuff. The space above and below the star will be filled with the edge tool. The basket weaving doesn't connect as seen in figure 12. Edge tool around the basket weaving with Craftool G 603. When completed it will look similar to figure 13. Use a #2 round edger to round off all edges of the cuffs as seen in figure 14.

While leather is still damp from tooling, turn the cuff over on a smooth clean surface. With a #4 French edger run the edger around the insides of the lace-through buckle slots as in figure 15. Be careful not to cut deeper than halfway through the leather. Practice on scrap leather if needed. Make sure the edger remains sharp. Then, thin the leather along the whole length of the slots as in figure 16. This works best if leather is still damp. If necessary, dampen leather for this procedure.

Cut a scrap of 9-10 oz. leather 1/2" wide and 15" long. Use the #2 round edger to round off all the sides. Cut one end to a taper so it can be threaded through the lace-through buckle slots more easily. Run it through the slots flesh side up as seen in figure 17. Press down firmly with your thumbs on

both sides of the lace loops. With a smooth faced hammer, tap the scrap lace between the lace loops. DO NOT tap on the cuff itself, only on the scrap lace running between the lace loops. Remove the scrap lace and the cuff should look like figure 19. This allows the buckle strap to lie comfortably around the wrist without pinching or binding. Allow the cuffs to dry.

While cuffs are drying, cut two cuff laces 3/16" by at least 20" long and two buckle straps marked "b" from the foldout pattern section. These should be cut from 4-5 oz. leather for best results. Thicker leather won't work well with the 1/2" double heeled buckles used to fasten the cuffs. Punch out the buckle slot with a 1" oblong punch. Punch out the rivet holes and the buckle holes with the #3 punch on a rotary punch. Moisten the edges and burnish with a three-in-one bone folder-creaser-slicker as seen in figure 20.

For this article I am adding cuff rolls to the wrist end and forearm end of the cuffs. This gives them a more finished look and many people find it more comfortable. If the cuff roll is desired, cut four 1 1/2"x15" strips of leather. I prefer 2-3 oz. for the cuff roll, but 4-5 oz., deer hide, or sued will also work. Run a stitching groove along one side of the flesh side of the strips as seen in figure 21. Dampen the flesh side of the leather. Run a seven hole per inch overstitch spacer down the stitching groove as in figure 22. Press hard because the marks are harder to see on the flesh side of the hide. Allow the strips to dry.

If the cuffs are to be dyed, now is the time to do it. I prefer most of my products natural oiled. Whenever you have dyed leather, sweat and clothing, you eventually have trouble. No matter how well the leather is sealed after dyeing, eventually there is a breach in the finish and the dye ends up on clothing, usually white clothing. If you choose to dye your cuffs I would recommend a two-tone color scheme. Dye the body of the cuffs on the outside only! Do not dye the flesh side. Leave the buckle strap, cuff lace and cuff rolls natural oiled to minimize the chance dye will work its way onto clothing. For instructions on dyeing leather, I recommend Tony Laier's handy little workbench book, *Leather Crafting*. He goes step-by-step through the dyeing process and gives good instructions for basic hand sewing. The book also has the best step-by-step instructions, with figures, for modern leather carving I have found. In fact, I'm so impressed with the quality and simplicity of the book; I recommend it as a resource in the pattern packs.

The next step is sewing on the cuff rolls. Align the edge of the cuff roll with the wrist edge of the cuff. The hide surfaces of the two pieces should be together as seen in figure 23. Allow the cuff roll to hang off both ends of the cuff as excess. This will be trimmed off after all the sewing is done. Because of the contours of the cuff, the two pieces will only line-up for a short distance. Sew this short span. Unclamp the stitching horse and align another short distance. Sew this together and continue to work your way down the cuff in this manner. When sewing is completed, dampen the cuff roll on both sides and allow a few minutes for the moisture to work its way through the thin leather. When it has become moldable, work the cuff roll around the wrist edge of the cuff to the inside. Press the cuff roll firmly to insure an even and smooth roll around the edge of the cuff. Apply contact cement

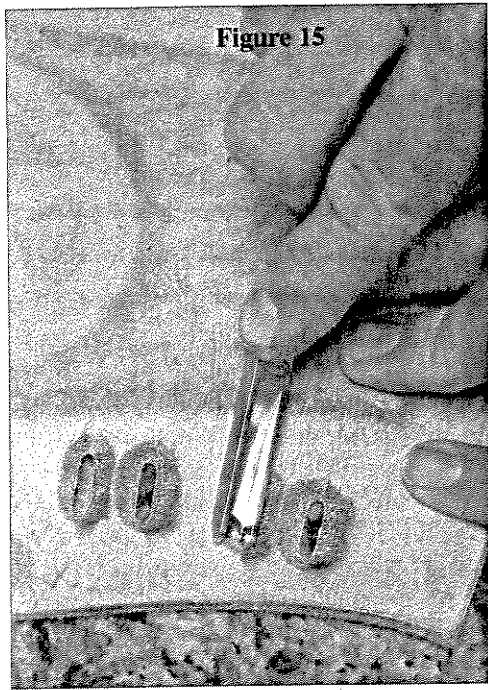


Figure 15



Figure 18

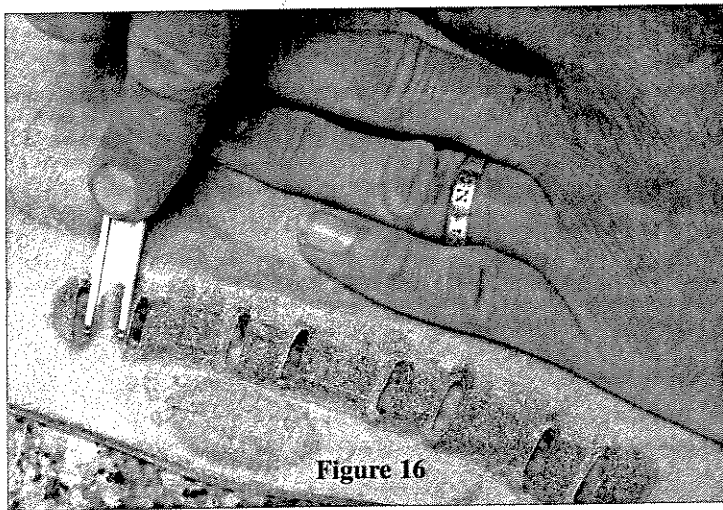


Figure 16

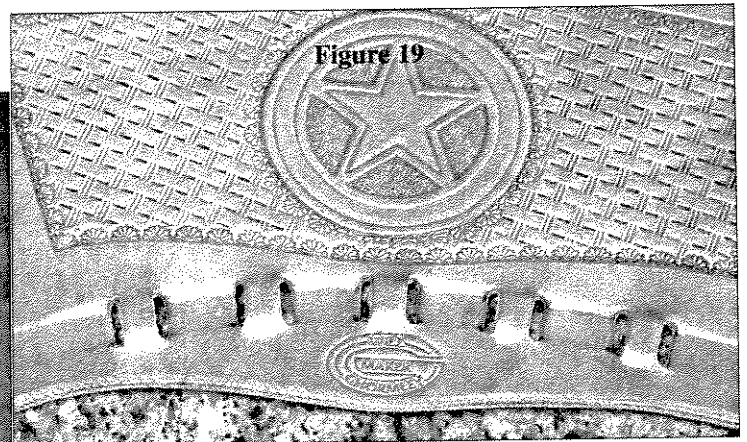


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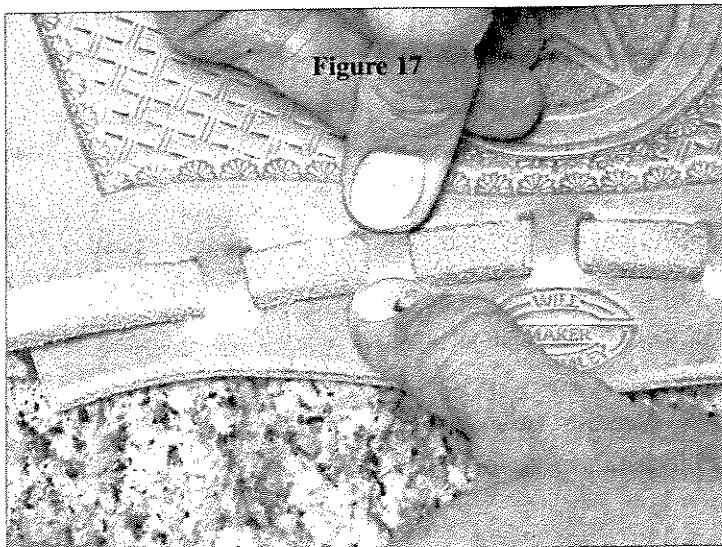


Figure 17

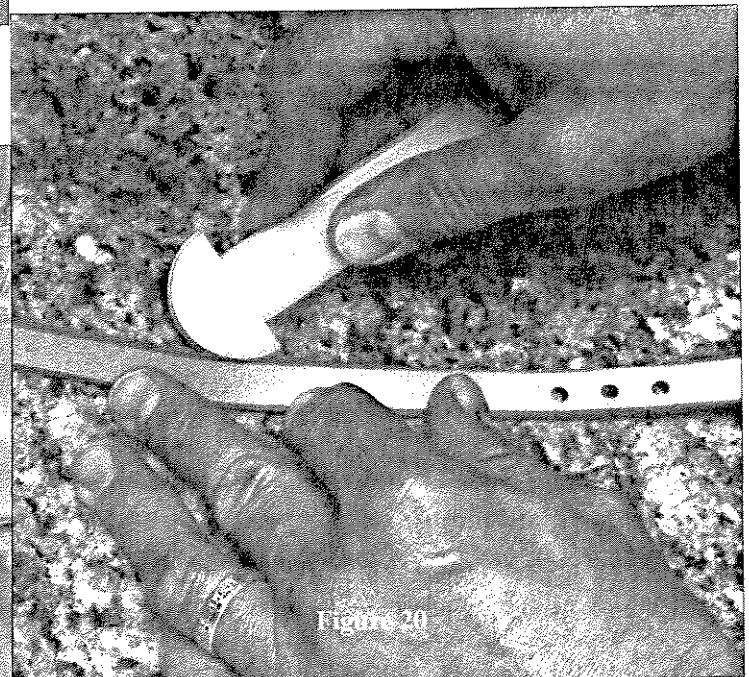


Figure 20



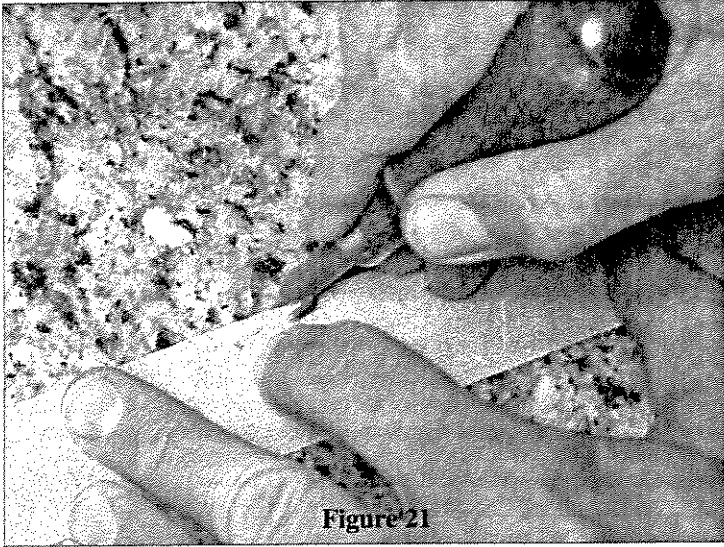


Figure 21

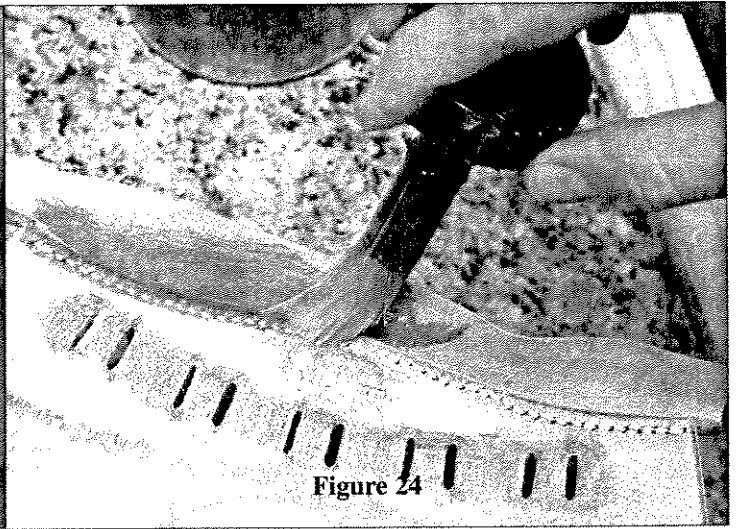


Figure 24

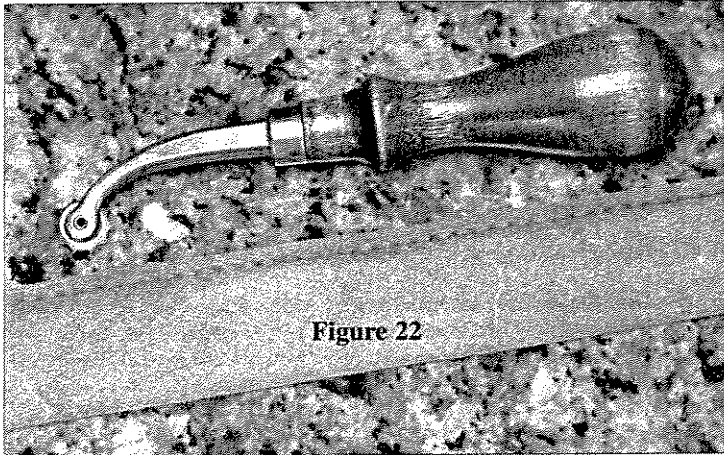


Figure 22

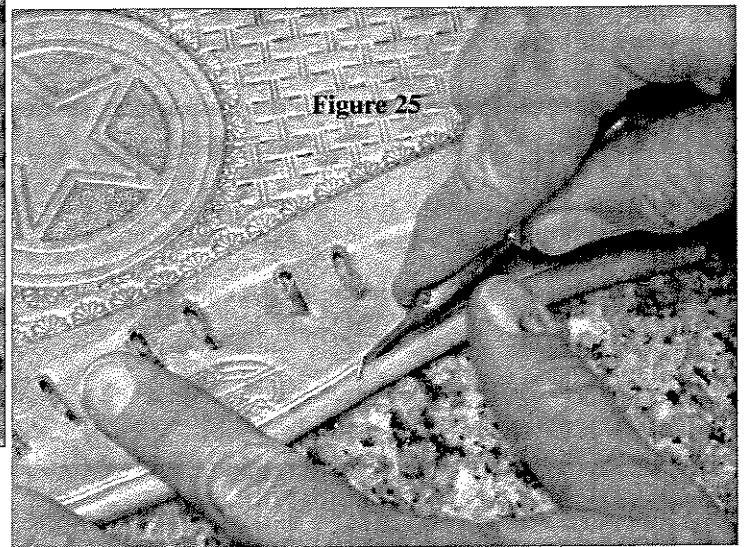


Figure 25

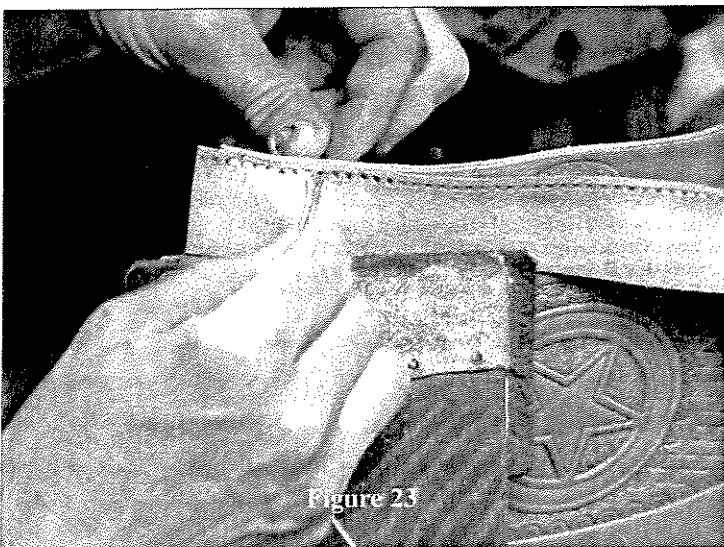


Figure 23

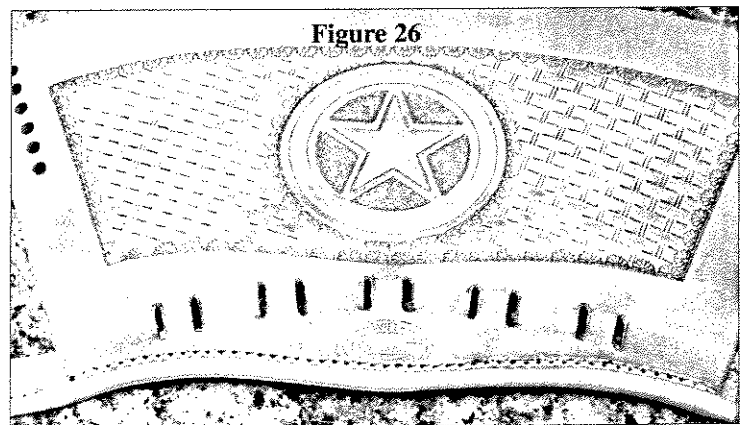


Figure 26

to the flesh side of the cuff roll and over the stitches on the inside of the cuff as shown in figure 24. Don't go much over the stitches with the contact cement because it shouldn't be visible when the cuff roll is trimmed off after sewing.

Allow the contact cement to set according to the instructions on the container before working the cuff roll over. Roll it over the end of the cuff in short distances for more control. Press firmly to secure the cuff roll to the inside of the cuff. Keep wrinkles from developing in the cuff roll as work proceeds. When the cuff roll is secured to the inside of the cuff, turn the cuff over to work on the outside of the cuff. Using a straight stitch groover, cut a deep stitching groove next to the cuff roll using the cuff roll as a guide as in figure 25. Lightly dampen the stitching groove before running overstitch spacer along the groove. This helps to make good deep-seated stitches that are even. Stitch through the cuff securing the back edge of the cuff roll inside the cuff. When stitching is completed it will look like figure 26. Turn the cuff over and trim the extra cuff roll off as in figure 27. Then, turn the cuff over again so the outside is facing up. Use a sharp round knife along the edge of the cuff to trim off the excess cuff roll as in figure 28. The same steps are repeated to sew the cuff roll to the other end of the cuff.

When the sewing is done it's time to oil the leather. This should happen whether-or-not the cuffs have been dyed. I prefer the old-time method of using extra virgin olive oil on my products. I apply the oil with a foam brush as seen in figure 29. Apply oil evenly to both sides of cuffs, laces and buckle straps. Within 24 hours the oil will have settled. To burnish the edges I use Drake's Gum Tragacanth, applied with a foam brush. Burnish the sides of the cuffs, the sides of the lace and the sides and back of the buckle strap. Rivet the 1/2" double healed buckle to the buckle strap with a 1/4" post double cap rivet. Lace the buckle strap through the lace loops as shown in figure 30.

It's time to lace the cuff together at the forearm end. Use any method you like, but I'll show you the Mexican basket weave method illustrated from my pattern pack. Figure 31 is the diagram from the pattern pack. This is about as best an explanation as I can make of it. Figure 32 shows the actual lacing up to hole 9. The finished lacing is shown in figure 33.

With a pair of old west cowboy cuffs in place, it's time to mend fence or yank iron, depending on your disposition!

See ya' on the range,  
Will

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#### Materials List:

Leather: 9-10 oz. tooling leather for cuffs, 2 - 15"x9" pieces per pair.  
4-5 oz. leather for buckle straps and lace, 20"x4" per pair.  
2-3 oz. leather for cuff rolls, 15"x6" per pair.  
Buckles: 2 - 1/2" double healed buckles per pair.  
Rivets: Double Cap Rivets, 1/4" post.  
Finish Materials: My cuffs were finished with extra virgin olive oil and edges were burnished with Drake's Gum Tragacanth.

Miscellaneous: Tracing film, hand sewing thread, beeswax, Tanners Bond Contact Cement.

#### Production Tools:

Tracing Stylus, Straight Edge, Utility Knife, Round Knife, Scissors, 1" Oblong Punch, Adjustable Stitching Groover, Straight Stitching Groover, Stitching Awl, Stitching Needles, 7 Holes/Inch Overstitch Spacer, Rapid Rivet Setter, Hammer, Rotary Punch with #3 and #5 punches, Adjustable Wing Divider.

#### Decorative Tools:

Tracing Stylus, Swivel Knife with 1/4" blade, Crafttools: A889, B701, G603, X511.

#### BIOGRAPHY:

Will Ghormley began making leather products in the early 1970s as a teen interested in black powder firearms and mountain man rendezvous. In the early 1980s, Will worked on several ranches in southwest Colorado, made his own cowboy equipment and learned to make saddles by repairing the tack on the ranches where he worked. Will began **Old West Cowboy Leather** in 1994, providing authentic leather goods for Western Action Shooters and re-enactors. He began carving pictures out of leather in 1995. He's done considerable work for the *Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum* and *Happy Trails Children's Foundation*. His carved leather paintings belong in the collections of such notables as: President George W. Bush, Radio Commentator Paul Harvey, Actor Charlton Heston, Country Singer/Entertainer Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr. and the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum. Three of his authentic 1830s Texas saddles were used in filming Disney's 2003 film, *Alamo*.



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# Cowboy Cuffs -- The Rest of the Story

As alert readers have noticed, some glitch or other (let's blame the computer) "lost" the last few photos in Will Ghornley's how-to article on cowboy cuffs. Here they are, and we'll re-print the last part of the text that refers to them.

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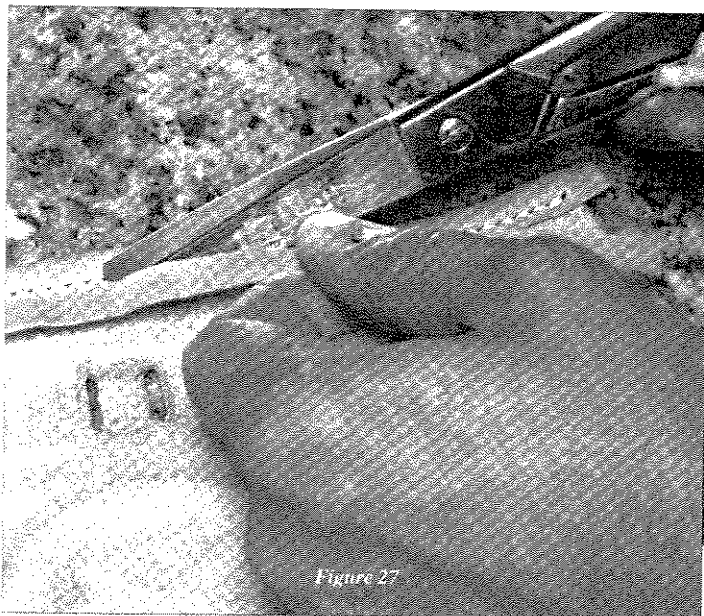


Figure 27

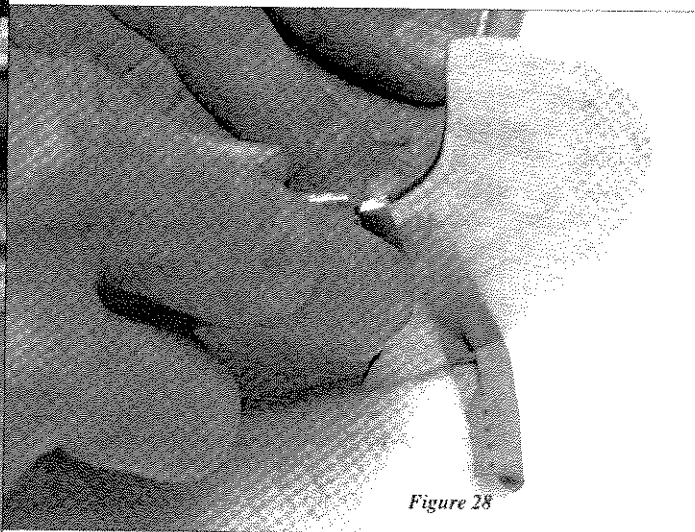


Figure 28

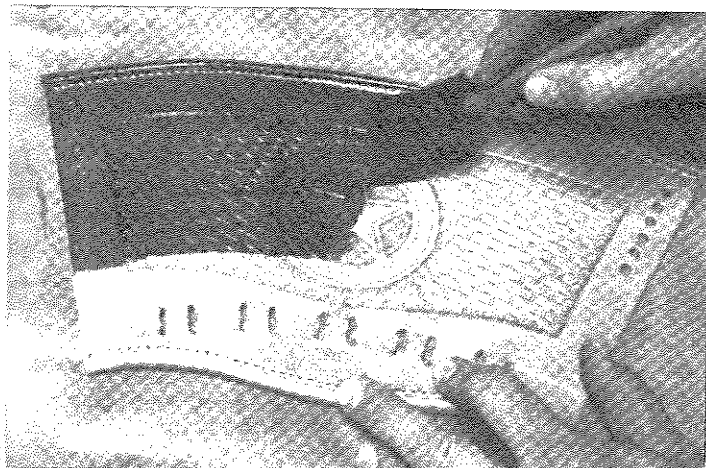


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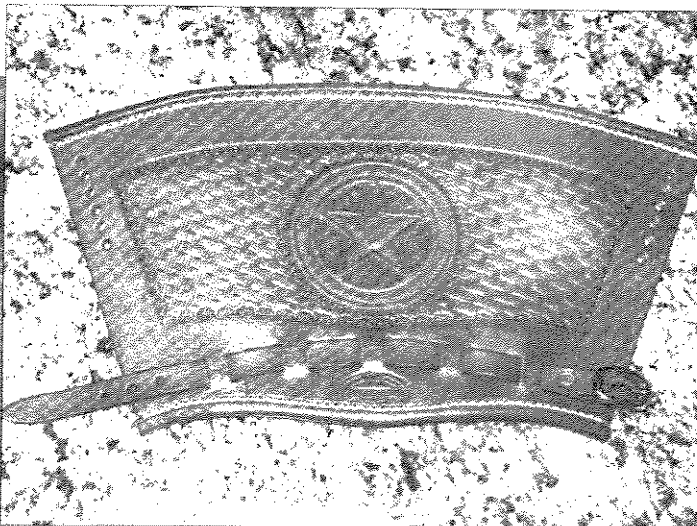


Figure 30



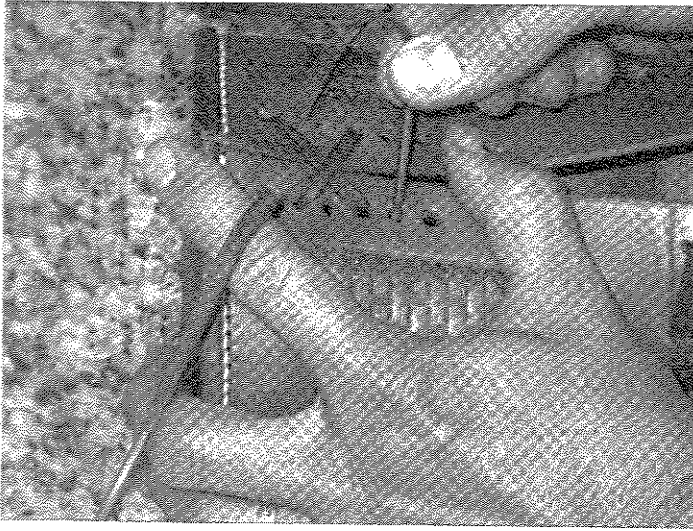


Figure 31

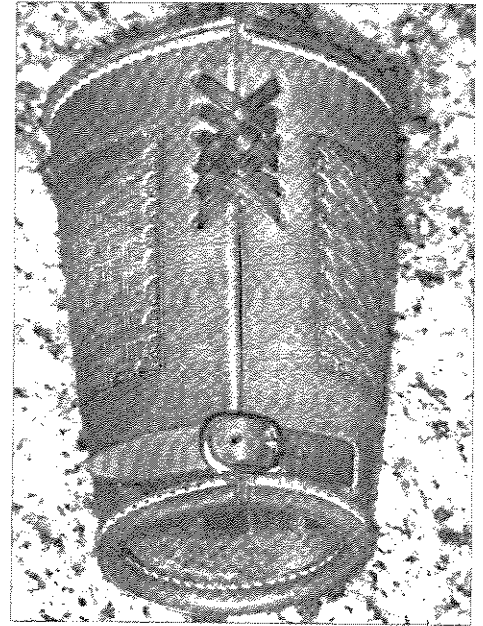


Figure 32

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