

Gunleather: Carving and Tooling Your Holster

by Will Ghormley



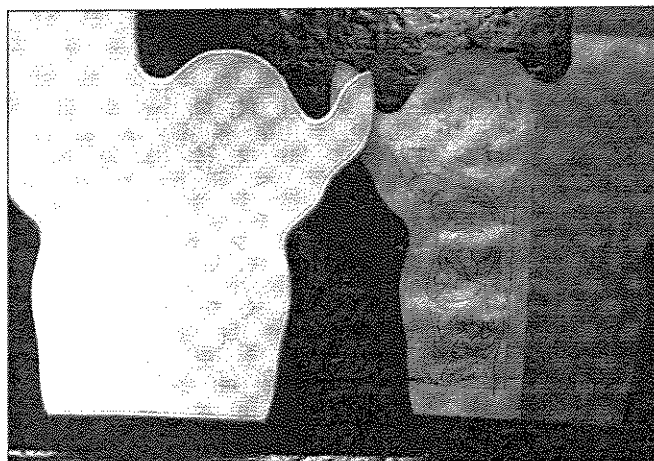
Well, enough of you have asked about the fancy stuff, so's I've got to sit down now and show you how I do it. The holster and design I'll be demonstrating with are from a double gun rig I made for John Taffin, Field Editor for *American Handgunner*. (He will be writing a book about Western Action Shooting due out next year, so you might want to be looking for it.) The folks over at Norm and Cindy Rollins' place got a chance to look at the finished rig September 27th when I was out shooting with the Nebraska Territorial Rangers. I had a great time on their range but I need to get out and shoot more often!

Anyway, enough of the front porch talk, this paper costs you money and I had best just tell you what I've got to say.

Once you have the design the way you want it, turn the pattern over.

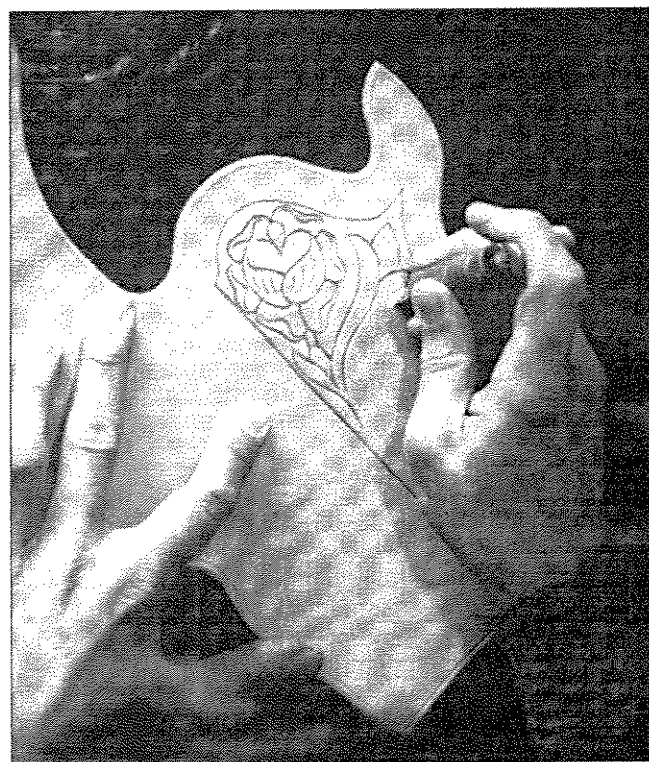
With a soft lead pencil, or charcoal, scribble all over the back where the design is. Place the pattern on your leather and line up the edges. Lay a weight on the pattern to hold it in place. Now trace over your design. The lead on the back of the pattern will transfer to the leather.

Wet the leather using a clean disposable foam brush. Apply water until leather is evenly wet and water is beginning to stand on the surface. Go and pour yourself a cup of coffee, check the mail, run to the outhouse, or any other activity that will take about five to ten minutes. This allows the water to soak in evenly so the surface isn't too wet to work. You will have to re-wet the surface periodically throughout the tooling as needed.

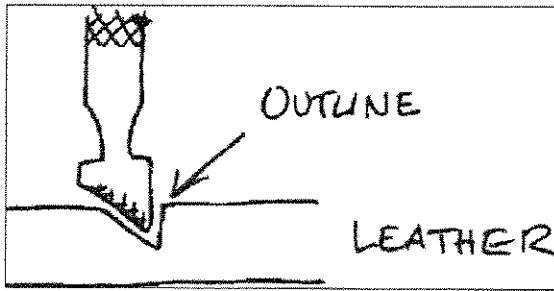


To lay out the design for your holster you need to make a paper pattern the way I showed you when I started this series. I get most of my design ideas from *Packing Iron*, so I have a historical reference and a time frame for the design. Taffin's holster is a Cheyenne style but the idea for the decoration came from a different holster on page 132.

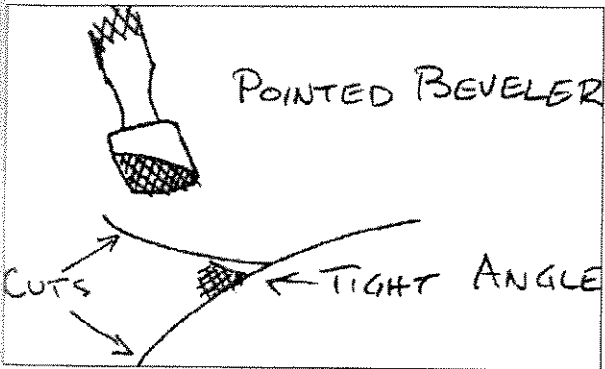
I generally draw a line "in" from the fold in the pouch pattern. I don't like to tool over a fold if I can help it. The leather is weakened and you don't get the full visual effect of the design. Next, if you have an adjustable edge gouge, you can set it for about 5/8". Holding the gouge straight up and down so the gouge doesn't dig into your pattern, draw it along the mainstem and throat of the pattern. It will leave a slight mark on the pattern that you can darken with your pencil. That is a quick way to get an even border across the toe, up the main stem and around the throat of the holster. Now the border for the decoration has been established and you can sketch out your design.



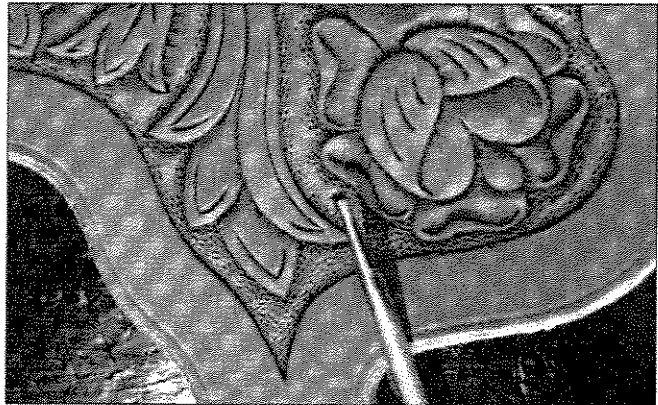
With your swivel knife begin cutting the lines of the designs. Beginners have a tendency to cut too light, but better light than too deep. Deep cuts weaken the holster. Cut all the lines.



Next, select the beveler tool. Tapping firmly with the rawhide mallet, compress the leather inside the outline all the way around. Take a look at my drawing if it isn't clear to you.

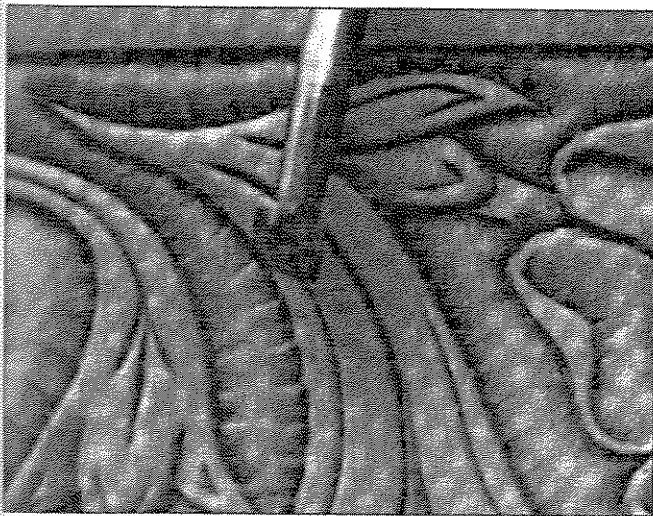


When you have beveled the entire border, find your pointed beveler, if you have one. Find all the tight angles in your design. Bevel the angles with this tool.



Now you are ready to texture the background of the design. Backgrounders come in a variety of textures and shapes. You can use shaders, backgrounders, seeders, anything that makes an irregular impression, for the background texture. I like using a seeder that leaves a small sun-burst design.

I lightly tap the seeder, overlapping the rays of the sun-burst. For this holster I used a backgrounder that leaves tiny diamond hash-marks. It is important not to over compress the background. When you smash the leather down too much it misshapes the holster. Tap the backgrounder around all the edges first, fairly firmly. Then lightly fill in the rest, rotating the tool so you don't create a distracting pattern in the background.



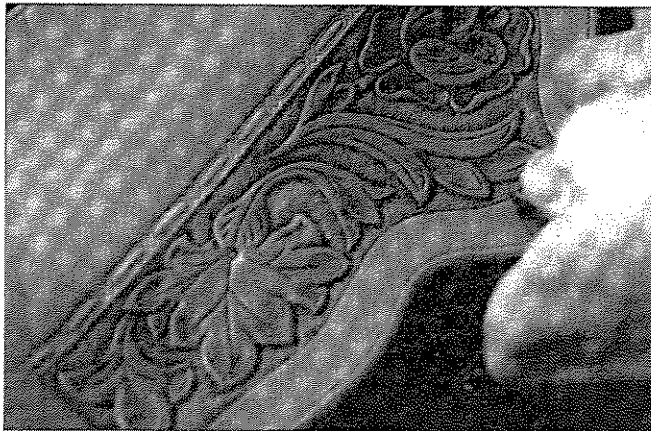
Switching back to the beveler tool, bevel all around the outside edge of your design, compressing the background. Now, decide what portions of your design should overlap lesser elements of the design. For instance; Where the stem joins the flower, the flower should overlap the stem, so you lightly bevel the stem. Use this process throughout your design.



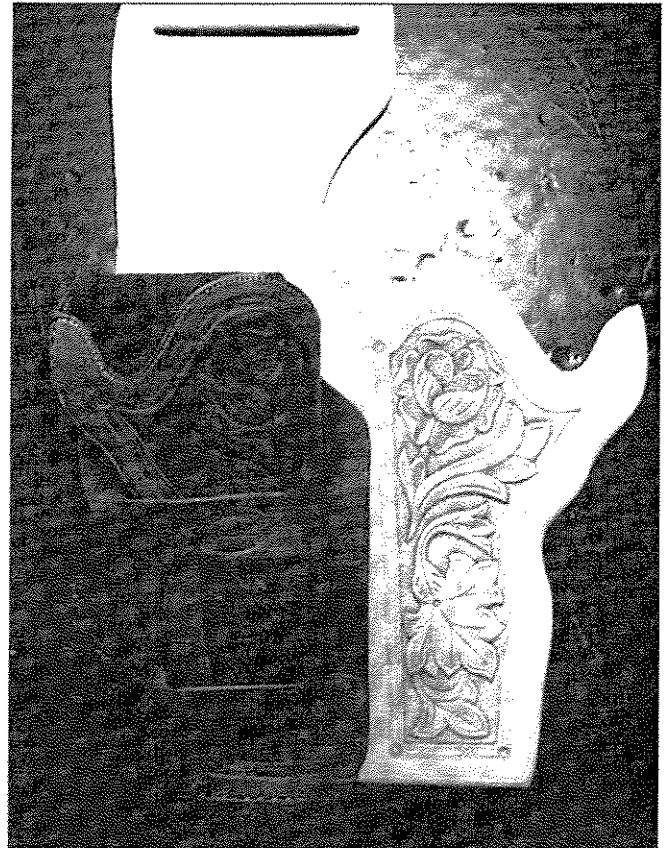
With the background finished, take your pear shader and lightly compress the insides of petals, leaves, anything that needs a little contour to make it look more dimensional. Don't overdo it though.



On this holster I took the seeder I mentioned and textured the interior of the blossom. This was similar to how it was done on the original design I saw.



You will probably want to tool some sort of border around your carving. Since I was matching a border tooling I had used on a previous holster, I edge rolled a design around the main element. In the corners where the rolled designs met, I used a large seeder to cover it up.



The finished right hand holster with a three-color dye combination and red suede lining is shown next to the left handed holster just tooled.

If you didn't want to edge roll a pattern on your holster, or you didn't have an edge roller, you can use any variety of tools to stamp an edge design. Next time I'll talk about different border designs you can make, as well as basket weave stamping. If you have any questions about anything I've covered, let me know and I'll answer your questions in the next article I write. Until then, see you on the range!

