

Gunleather: Gun Belts and Cartridge Belts

by Will Ghormley

Pistols have long been worn about the waist. Broad sashes wrapped several times around the mid-section would conceal and secure knives, flintlock pistols and tomahawks. At least one old timer carried his peacemaker shoved into his waist band with the loading gate opened so it wouldn't slide down his pant leg.

During the 1830s leather-smiths began making simple pouches with a waist belt loop to carry pocket and pepperbox pistols. The weapons were smaller and relatively light. A common waist belt of about an inch to an inch and a half were all that was required to secure the holstered weapon.

By the early 1850s however, pilgrims pressing the western frontier, had taken to carrying the larger, heavier revolvers on their belts. These heavy pistols had been carried on the horse in pommel holsters.

the belt. On the other style the buckle end of the belt was cut off square the same width as the rest of the belt. A narrower buckle chape was then folded through the buckle and sewn and/or riveted to the face of the belt. The tongue end of the belt was tapered to form the billet to pass through the buckle.

The gun belt with both ends tapered was common from the 1850s through the 1870s and has never completely faded from use. The gun belt with attached buckle chape and tapered tongue billet seems to have seen wide spread use by the 1870s and continues to be manufactured.

The development of brass cartridge pistols changed the face of gun belts, literally and figuratively. Reloading supplies: percussion caps, power flasks, round balls and bullet lube, had all been carried in shoulder slung pouches or belt

mounted pouches or boxes. Initially, brass cartridge ammunition was dumped

into the now empty ball pouch. Some old timers never saw a need for anything better.

It wasn't long though before someone came up with the idea of carrying the brass cartridges in loops sewn to

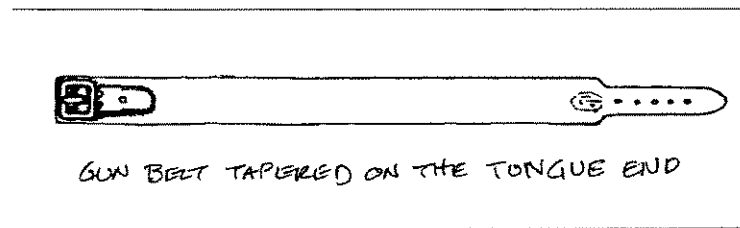
you went to chamber them and they didn't make so damn much noise when you were bouncing around in the saddle!

By the mid 1860s the cartridge belt was firmly established and rapidly gaining popularity. There was a drawback however and the military was the first to solve the problem. The brass cartridges would have a chemical reaction to the leather when left in the loops for a long period of time, especially in humid weather. It would appear in the form of a waxy green coating on the casings called verdigris. The word is taken from the Latin *Verde*, meaning: green; and *Gris*, meaning: that nasty stuff that fouls up the weapon when you're trying to load; and weakens the casings causing weapons malfunctions. (Those Latin gents sure knew how to turn a phrase huh?)

The military solved the problem by making their cartridge belts from woven cotton webbing. The cotton military "Mills" and "Prairie" cartridge belts even found extensive use among civilians. Civilian leather-smiths ignored the "green stuff" problem and kept making leather cartridge belts.

An old timer once told me that Oak Tanned leather kept the problem of verdigris to a minimum. It's true. I leave cartridges in my belts, sometimes for a year at a time without any verdigris. Other belts I've made show only a slight verdigris problem. If you have one of my belts, you can expect a minimal amount of verdigris because I use Oak Tanned leather. A chemical reaction can be compounded by the leather treatment you use and how you store the leather. If I were you I would stay on the safe side and remove the cartridges between infrequent usage.

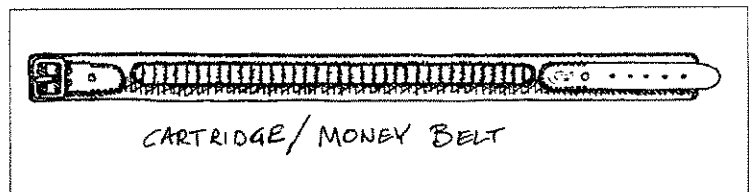
The larger weapons required a heavier leather and wider belt.



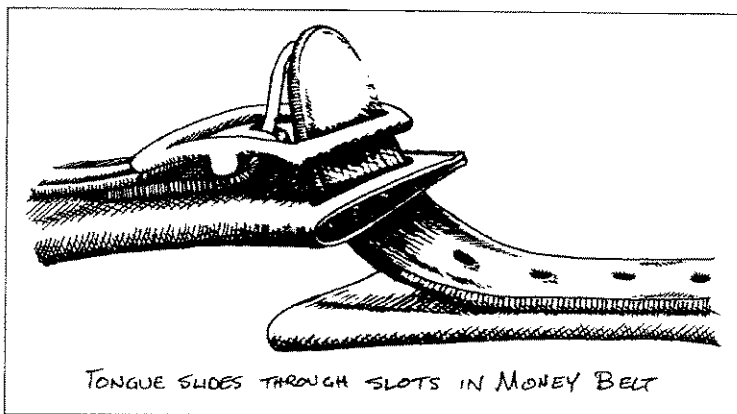
While the width of the belt had increased to two or three inches as a norm, buckles didn't usually accept more than a one and three quarters inch billet. This required the billet to be cut down, or tapered, to pass through the buckle.

Tapered gun belts took on two different styles. One was tapered on both ends. The buckle chape folded through the buckle, attaching it directly to the end of

the gun belt. This method offered several advantages. The cartridges were easy to access, always pointing the right direction when



My favorite and most comfortable



TONGUE SLIDES THROUGH SLOTS IN MONEY BELT

on riding the trail, you had to find a saloon. When you got to the bar, you had to pay for your refreshment. To pay, you had to get your money out of your belt. To get it out, you had

the cartridge/money belt was a leather tube, the tongue billet and buckle chape both had to be sewn and/or riveted to the surface of the belt. This created a distinctive look. There are many examples of regular cartridge belts from this same time period that share the same fastening arrangement. They are often referred to as "ranger" belts. It's not clear whether they were in imitation of the money belt or just coincidental similarities. At any rate, a cartridge belt design with sewn/riveted tongue billet and buckle chape was also popular during this time and continues to be till this day.

cartridge belt is the cartridge/money belt. The money belt has seen use since the days of the Fortyniners and probably before. It is a soft pliable belt made of 4/5 oz leather. The belt is cut just over twice as wide as the finished belt is supposed to be. It is folded in half at the bottom and sewn together up the tongue end and across the top. A slot is cut through both layers underneath the buckle. Gold dust, coins, folding money, mining deeds, or important documents are then inserted into the tube of folded leather. The tongue is passed through the slots in the belt and through the buckle. When secured, anything stuffed inside can't get out until the belt is unbuckled and the tongue withdrawn from the slots. In this manner, a miner could carry his saving around his waist with both hands free to defend himself.

Around 1880 some entrepreneur began sewing cartridge loops onto money belts. The popularity of the cartridge/money belt was immediate. Not only did the pliable leather make the belt comfortable to wear, but you could carry your gold and silver coins inside, your ammunition outside,

to take your belt off and shake your money out on the counter or the floor. Your holster would slide off, your knife would slip out of its sheath and who knows where that last silver dollar rolled off to. You were still thirsty.

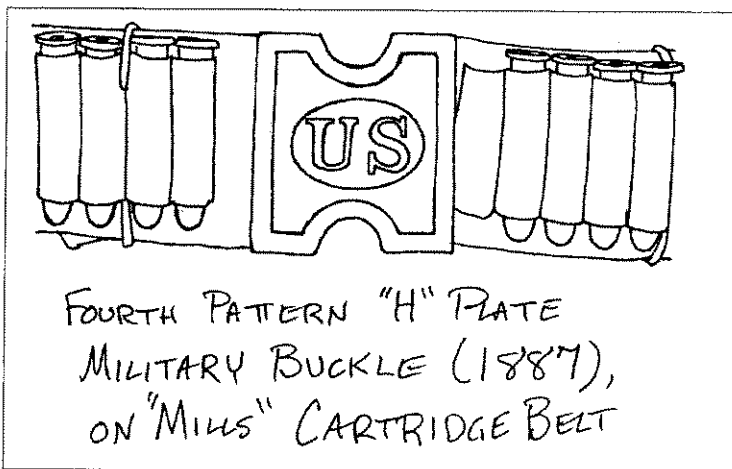
Some old timers got around this inconvenience by cutting a crescent moon slit inside the belt at the tongue end. Coins could then be worked around to the slit and pulled out through the crescent moon.

In old black and white movies you may have seen a cowboy reaching under his gun belt and retrieving a coin from his watch pocket. He'd slap it on the counter and toss back the drink. More than likely he was pulling the coin out of the crescent moon in his money belt and not from his watch pocket. Look for it the next time you watch an old western.

Because

Now for buckles. Many different styles were represented in the old west and it is difficult to pin any specific buckle to any particular era. There were the military and civilian plate buckles.

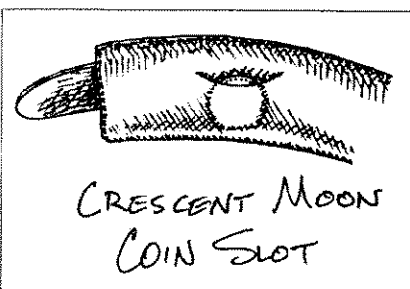
A "garrison" buckle is a double frame



FOURTH PATTERN "H" PLATE MILITARY BUCKLE (1887), ON "MILLS" CARTRIDGE BELT

buckle taller than it is wide. A "Sam Brown" buckle is a double frame military buckle with two prongs for a 2 1/4" billet.

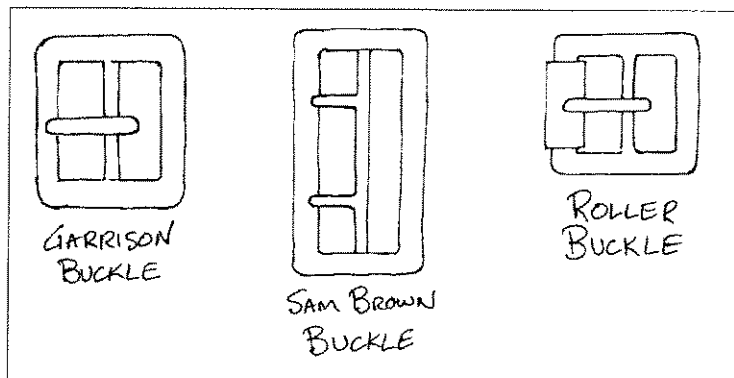
"California" buckles come in a variety of styles and are popular among cowboy shooters. The California buckle is wider



CRESCENT MOON COIN SLOT

hang your holster off of it and hold your pants up all at the same time.

A drawback to the cartridge/money belt was thirst. If you strapped a big thirst

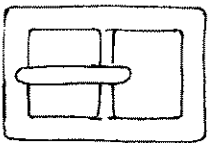


GARRISON BUCKLE

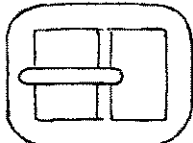
SAM BROWN BUCKLE

ROLLER BUCKLE

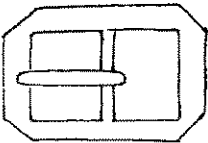
CALIFORNIA BUCKLES



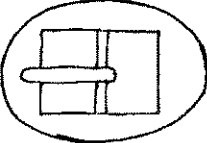
SQUARED CORNER



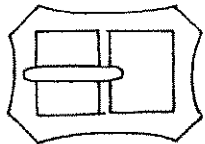
ROUNDED CORNER



CLIPPED CORNER



OVAL



SCALLOPED EDGES

than it is tall. It can come with square corners, rounded corners, clipped corners, as an oval, with scalloped edges and probably a few ways I haven't remembered. Here were roller buckles, single frame buckles and odds-and-ends

buckles. There are even a few rare examples of belts that used two smaller harness buckles in the place of a larger belt buckle.

I know this hasn't been the most riveting reading you've encountered but I hope it'll help someone find the right look for that special period in history they want to relive.

I'd like to thank all of you who stopped by my work bench during the National Shoot. Your kind and encouraging words are the reason I keep plugging away at this leather business. Next year I hope at least to have an awning so you can be more comfortable while we visit.

As many of you learned at the Showdown on the Prairie, I've moved back to Iowa. I'm driftin' but you can still, as always, order my leather goods through JLM Shooter's Supply in Wauke, Iowa. Maybe one of these days I'll take to the hobbles and settle down, but until then, I'll see you on the range.

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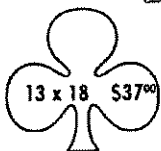
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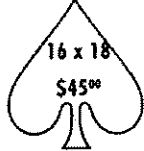
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