

Gunleather: Making a Cartridge Gun Belt

by Will Ghormley



With your belt length determined, it's time to cut your belt blank. If you are

When I sat down to write this column, I couldn't believe I haven't written since last February. I'm sorry, friends should visit more often than that. I've seen many of you at various shoots, but for those of you who I haven't gotten to meet yet, I apologize.

I went out to the Nebraska Territorial Rangers' two day shoot in September. It was great weather and the best bunch of American Citizens you would ever want to meet. I'm so proud of NCOWS members. Oh sure, there are a few rough old cobs in the crib, but the best this nation has to offer is sampled in our meetings. (Pardon me for a moment, I've got to run outside and give Old Glory a misty-eyed salute.) But that isn't why I brought up the shoot. Jim Wobschall showed me a holster he made following my articles. It made it all worth doing. Now I have to write this piece so he can hold his pants up with his own belt.

The first consideration in any belt is the correct length for you. For most men, your gun belt size will be four inches longer than your pants size. Women are harder to fit because they come in such delightfully curved and individual shapes. To get a rock solid length for either men or women, the process is the same. With a cloth tape, circle the hips or waist where the belt will be worn. Don't pull the tape tight, just enough so it won't slip down. This will be your belt size to the middle hole. For this article we are only dealing with a belt that has five holes, one inch apart. This gives you two inches of adjustment each way. If you want more, modify my patterns to suit yourself.

My first illustration will show how that measurement lays out on the belt. (Plate 1)

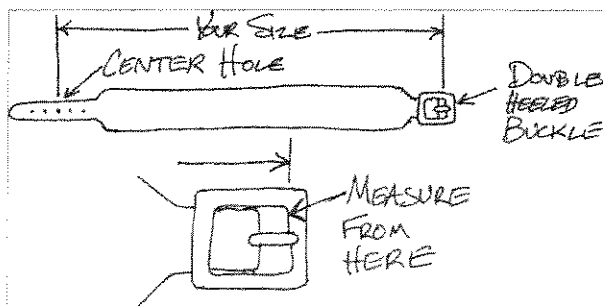


Plate 1

This is the only accurate measurement for a belt. I'll give you dimensions from my own patterns so you can make either a regular Cartridge Belt, or a Ranger Cartridge Belt. (Plate 2) My patterns will be for a belt two and a half inches wide, with an inch and a half billet and chape and a double heeled buckle.

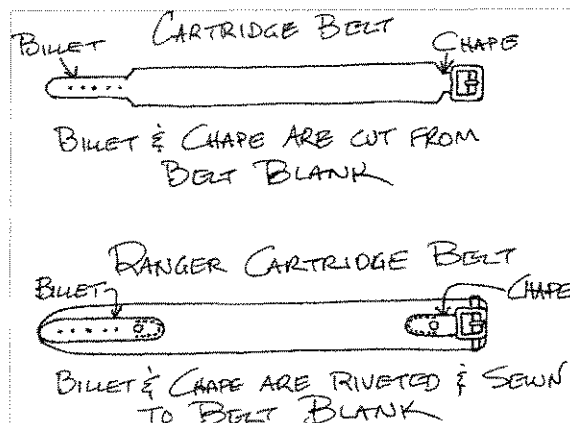


Plate 2

making a regular Cartridge Belt; take the length plus eight inches; for a Ranger Cartridge Belt take the length plus six inches. Don't short yourself on these measurements. It's better to cut them a little too long and waste a little leather. Set the gauge on your strap cutter to two and a half inches. The best part of the hide for a belt is along the back. If you are working with an uncut side, lay a straight edge along the back and mark out a straight line. Measure off the length needed for the belt blank and mark it so you don't over-shoot the length you need. With the strap cutter, carefully draw it along the straight edge of the leather until you have cut a blank the length you need. (Plate 3) Back the strap cutter off

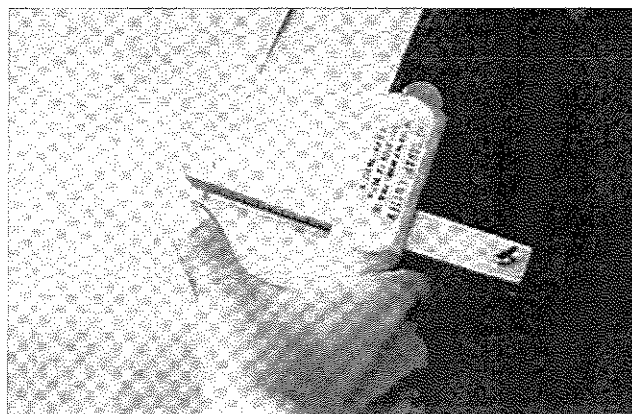


Plate 3

the belt blank. Cut the end of the belt blank loose from the side. Make sure you're not cutting short of your needed length.

To make the regular Cartridge belt, follow the dimensions given in Plate 4. Cut the chape end first. Punch the buckle tongue slot with an inch and a half bag punch, or punch two round holes an inch and a half apart and cut out

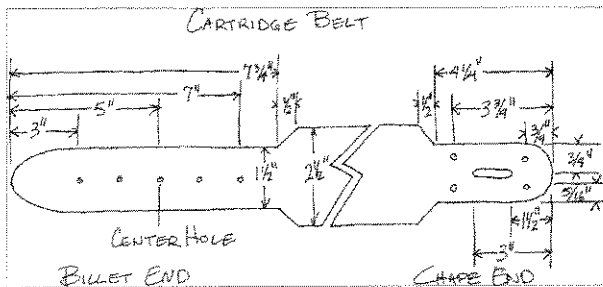


Plate 4

the leather in between. Punch the four rivet holes. Dampen the leather front and back across the middle of the buckle tongue slot. Fold the chape over and line the rivet holes up. Make a crease in the damp leather at the fold. Now take the buckle you will be using on this belt and put it on temporarily, so you can take a measurement. Looking at the first illustration, note where the measurement needs to start on the buckle. From there, lay out the length to the center hole and make a faint mark. Use this mark as your reference point for laying out and cutting the billet end of the belt.

If you are making a Ranger Cartridge Belt, you will need to cut a billet and chape from a section of your leather. (Plate 5) The keeper can be cut from almost anywhere. If you are

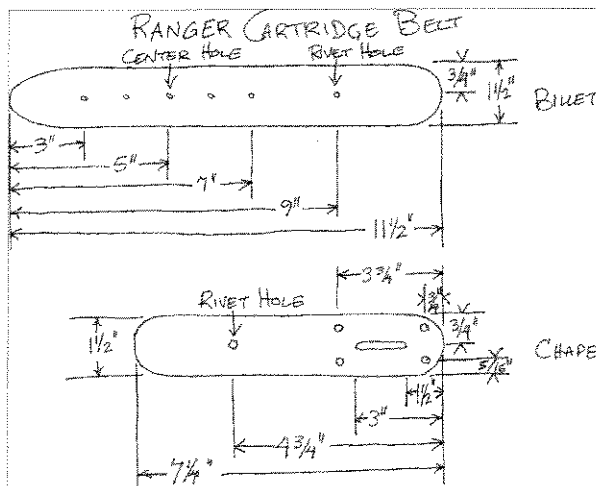


Plate 5

working with a whole side you probably have enough length along the straight edge on your leather to cut these out with the strap cutter. Look at the illustration for the dimensions for the Ranger Cartridge Belt. Lay the billet and chape out on the length of strap you have cut. When the chape is cut out, dampen it and fold it as explained before. Slide the buckle on

temporarily so you can take your measurements. With the buckle on the chape, lay it at one end of the belt blank. (Plate 6) Mark the outside end of the buckle; this will be where you

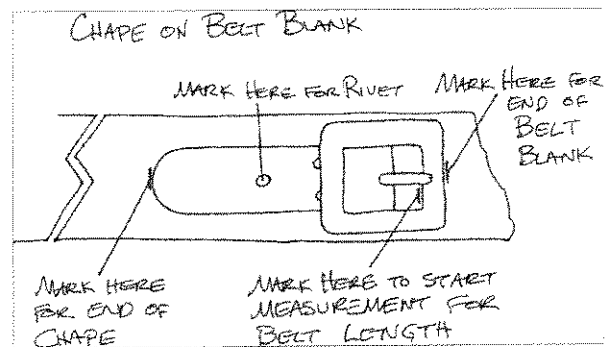


Plate 6

cut the end of the belt blank. Mark the inside of the buckle; this will be where your belt length measurement starts. Mark the rivet whole where you will punch a hole in the belt blank for the rivet. Mark the end of the billet so you know where your bullet loops will have to stop. Lift the chape off and set it aside. Measure out your dimension to the center hole from the mark you made for this length. Make a light mark on the leather. Lay the billet on the belt blank where you can see this mark through the center hole of the billet. Mark the rivet hole and both ends of the billet.

Punch out the rivet holes after you have measured to make sure they are in the center of the belt blank. Don't accidentally punch a hole on the mark where the end of the billet and chape are. I've done that and it pretty much ruins your day.

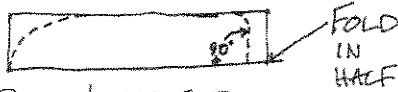
You can make a paper pattern to trim off both ends of the belt blank. (Plate 7) After that is trimmed, lay out and punch the keeper rivet holes in the chape end of the belt blank.

I just realized I haven't talked about rivets in any previous articles. For riveting the buckle to the chape and the chape and billet to the belt blank, I use 1/2" #9 copper rivets. (Plate 8) You will need a copper rivet setter (to do it pretty), and a ball-peen hammer. To rivet the keeper to the belt blank, I use medium double-headed rivets. You can use a rivet setter, or just smash them flat with a hammer like I do. If you need 'em, call Byron Thorpe at The Leather Factory, on NE 14th Street in Des Moines. The number is, (515) 2656521.

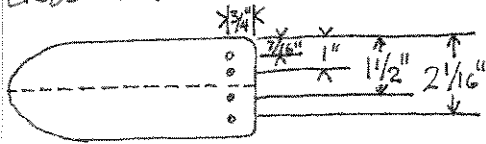
With your belt blank, billet, chape and keeper (if you are making a Ranger Cartridge Belt) cut out, you can finish the edges. In previous articles I've covered edge decorations and burnishing on holsters. The same techniques apply here. You might want to review some of the previous articles dealing with these topics. In the next article I'll talk about laying out your cartridge loops. I'll cover sewn loops and woven loops, though probably separately.

At Nationals this summer, Marlan Ingram was one of several people who asked me about saddle making. He was particularly interested in the Hope Saddle. I happen to think the Hope Saddle is the perfect starter saddle for anyone interested in making 1800s saddles. It is the foundation for

PAPER PATTERN FOR ENDS OF BELT BLANK



DRAW LINES FOR ENDS OF BELT BLANK



MARK KEEPER RIVET HOLES

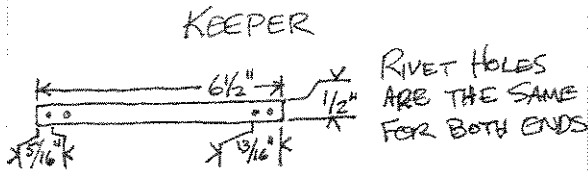


Plate 7

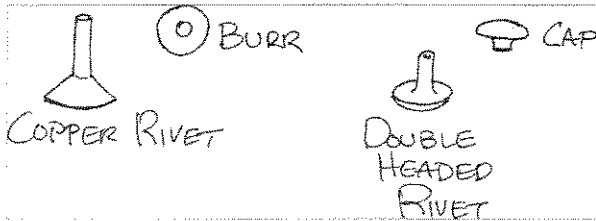


Plate 8

the Western Stock Saddle. I'm toying with the idea of doing a series on making the Hope Saddle. The particular tree I would recommend is made by Superior Saddle Tree Company, out of Grand Junction, Colorado. It's made with a bleached raw-hide cover and bleached raw-hide lacing. They only make them periodically because they have to bring in specialists for the job. When they get enough ordered they make 'em. They run about \$300.00 each, plus shipping and handling, so you have to plan ahead. If you have any interest in this, let me know (write in care of *The Shootist*). See you on the range.



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Gunleather: Making a Cartridge Gunbelt, Continued

by Will Ghormley



In the last article, I covered procedure and dimensions for making the gun belt. In this section, I'm going to show you how to make the cartridge loops. There are two basic ways to put loops on your belt. One is to sew them on, the other is to weave the leather ribbon through slots in the belt making a cartridge loop. There are plenty of examples of both methods in original rigs. Choosing which method is a matter of personal preference. I'll start by showing how I sew on loops.

I make my standard loops one inch wide. For small caliber shells you might want to consider going with a narrower width. The leather cartridge loop ribbon is cut out of 4-5 oz. weight leather. It makes a nice heavy loops and is still pliable enough to work with. Cut it to width with your strap cutter. I'll give you dimensions for .44 -.45 caliber loops and for .38 -.357 caliber loops. All .44s and .45s are close enough in diameter that when you sew the loops you use the same measurements. The same with .38 -.357. However, when you are lacing the loops on, you need to use different measurements. I'll cover that when I get to laced loops.

I've made paper and cardboard patterns to lay my cartridge loops out with. You can make your own easily enough. Get a strip of heavy brown craft paper or light cardboard. My patterns are about 1 1/2" wide by 40" long. (See Figure 1). You will end up with two sets of marks. One, on one side of the paper, for the distance between loops on the belt, and the other longer set of marks, on the other side of the paper, will be the length of each loop. The measurements I'm going to give you are for use with the 4-5 oz. leather I have recommended. If you use a heavier or lighter leather the measurements will fluctuate. There will be a little variation as it is, because leather isn't perfectly uniform. But the measurements I'll give you are based on years of working with 4-5 oz. weight leather and will be close enough to stretch to the cartridges. Here they are: .44 -.45 calibers: distance between loops on belt 5/8"; length of loop 1 3/8"; .38 -.357 calibers: distance between loops on belt 9/16"; length of loop 1 3/16".

These measurements can be laid out on your paper pattern until you have the number of loops you want to make, use up all available space on your belt, or until you run out of paper. I number mine so at a glance I can tell how many loops will fit on a belt. Once you have your pattern made you can figure out approximately how long your cartridge ribbon will have to be. Make sure your 4-5 oz. leather is long enough to accommodate the number of loops you want on your belt. If you need to splice your ribbon together, it will take more planning.

Lay your paper pattern along the center of your belt. Figure out how many loops will fit. Leave yourself an extra inch on the belt at each end of the cartridge loops. Dampen the leather and lay your pattern on it again. When you have it where you want it, mark each loop. (See Figure 2) You need to decide where you want your loops to ride on your belt. Some folks like them near the top, others like them centered. I like mine an eighth of an inch above center. When you know where you want yours, make marks at each end of your loop marks. Look at the diagram for my measurements on loops. (See Figure 3) When this is measured and marked, lay the belt blank along a straight edge to make sure it's straight. Then line the straight edge up along the marks you just made and make two straight lines. These horizontal lines mark the top and bottom of the cartridge loops.

Line the belt blank up along the straight edge again. With a 90° square against the straight edge, begin making perpendicular markings between the top and bottom horizontal lines. (See Figure 4) Run the perpendicular line a little above and below the horizontal lines so you can see them when the cartridge ribbon is lined up and laid over it. Make sure your cartridge ribbon is long enough for the number of spaces you have laid out on your belt. Lay your paper pattern along the cartridge ribbon. If the ribbon isn't long enough you'll have to splice it. If it is long enough, wet the cartridge ribbon and with the paper pattern, lay out the correct number of loops. (See Figure 5) Allow an extra inch at each end of the loop markings. Lay the ribbon along your straight edge. With your 90° square, make perpendicular marks indicating the length of the cartridge loops. (See Figure 6) When you've laid out all the loops you can, make a mark 1/8" past the last mark. This will be the end of this section and will be cut off straight. The next set of loops need to start off with 1/8" before the first loop mark. This will allow you to overlap the ribbon 1/8" when it is sewn to the belt. To finish off each end of the cartridge ribbon, I cut a semicircle. This makes a flap that can be sewn down to reinforce the ends of the cartridge loops.

Run an edge groove around the edges of the cartridge ribbon like you did with the holster in previous articles. Use a #1 edge beveller to round the edges of the ribbon, again, as explained in earlier articles. Wet the edges and burnish with canvas. This can be done by pulling the ribbon through the folded canvas held in one hand. You can do both edges at

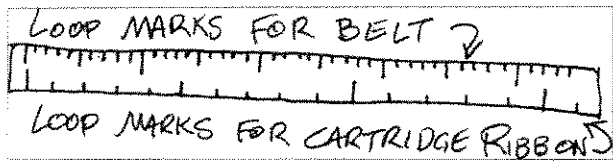


Figure 1

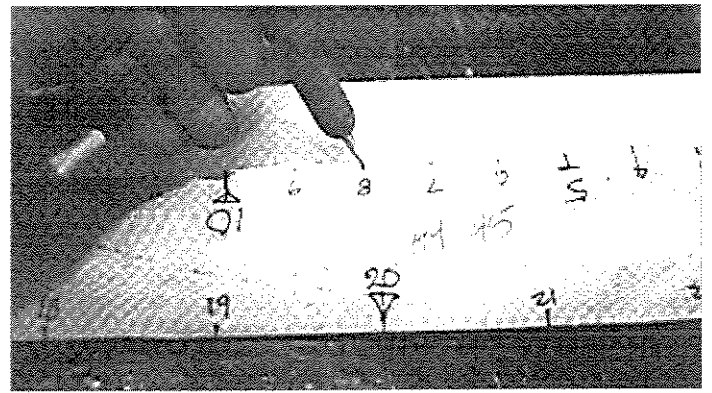


Figure 2

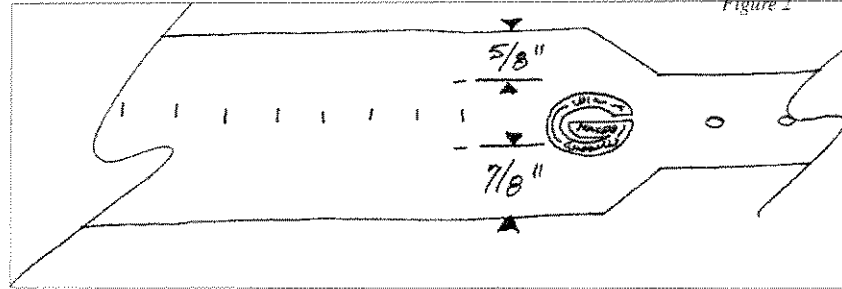


Figure 3.

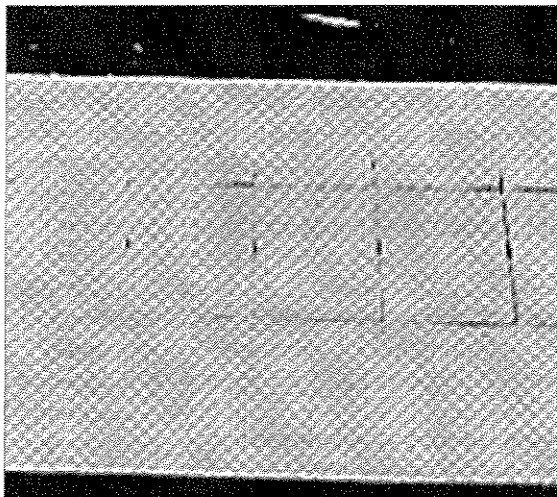


Figure 4.

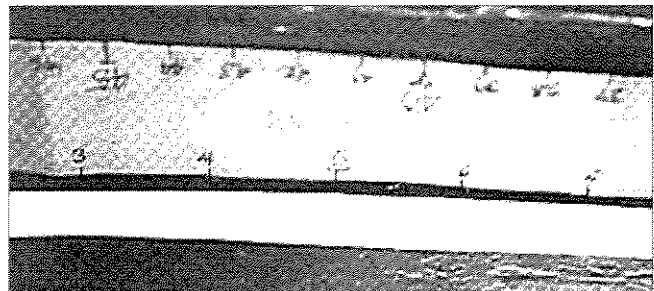


Figure 5

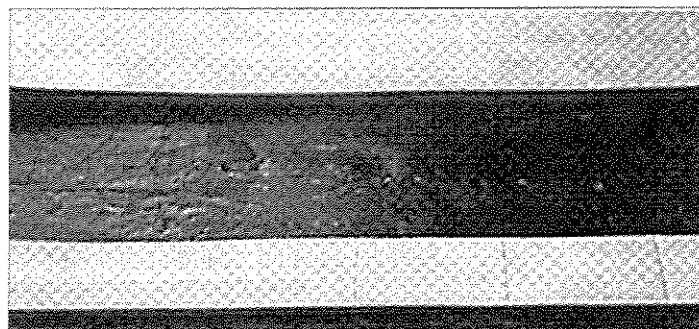


Figure 6.

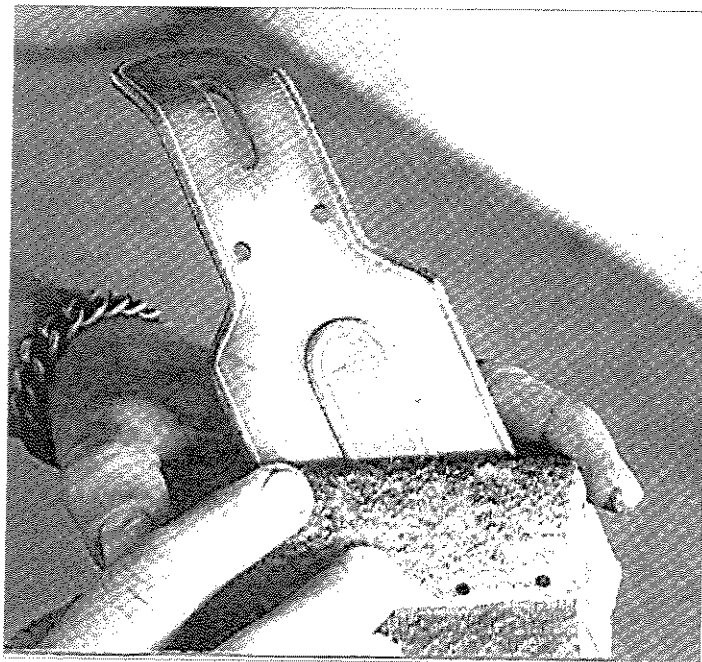


Figure 7.

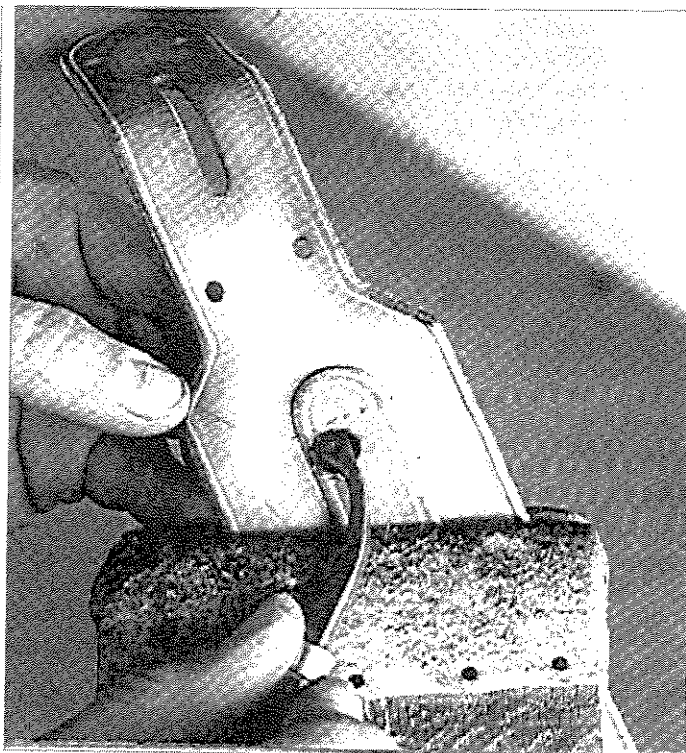


Figure 8.

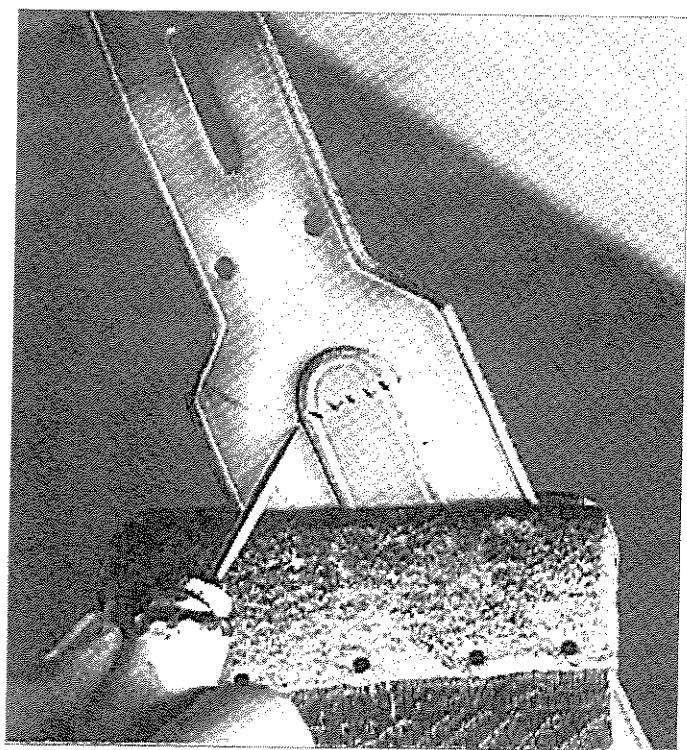


Figure 9

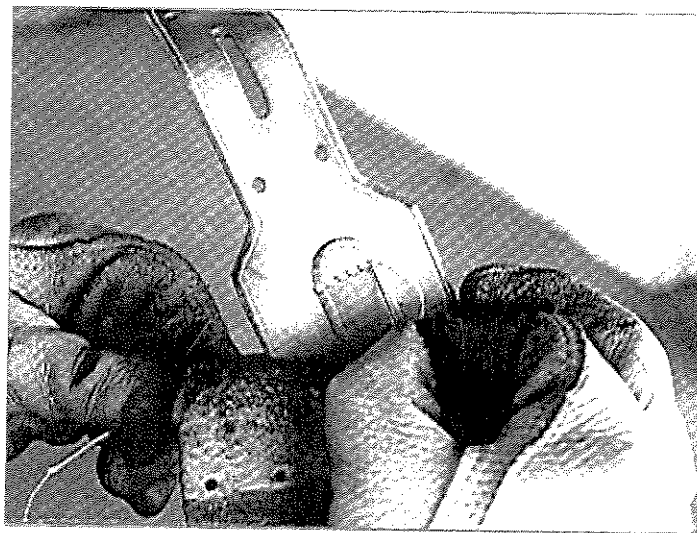


Figure 10.

once. Be careful not to get a friction burn on your palm. When everything is dry it can be dyed, then oiled, this also was covered in previous articles.

Now you are ready to sew the loops to the belt. In the next photo I show the first line on the cartridge ribbon on top of, and lined up with, the first line on the belt. (See Figure 7) Notice how the marks on the belt stick out from under the cartridge ribbon so you can see them to line them up. Use your stitch spacing wheel to mark the stitches for this first line of stitches. (See Figure 8) Use your awl to poke your first set of stitching holes. (See Figure 9) Make sure to poke a hole in the belt above and below the cartridge ribbon. Using the hand stitching method explained in earlier articles, run your needle and thread through the bottom hole in the belt. The next stitch should go through the first hole that goes through both the cartridge ribbon and the belt. This holds the edges of the cartridge ribbon down tight to the belt. Stitch all the way up the ribbon and through the top hole that is just in the belt. Now, back stitch back through the hole, through the cartridge ribbon and the belt. (See Figure 10) Run the stitching wheel around the semicircle to space your stitches. With your awl poke the holes and continue stitching around the semicircle till you stitch through the first hole in the cartridge ribbon and the belt. Now stitch through the hole you started with that is just in the belt. (See Figure 11) With this end of the cartridge ribbon secured, it's time to poke holes for the rest of the stitching.

Unclamp the belt and fold the ribbon back out of the way. Clamp the belt back in the stitching pony. Along the line where you just finished sewing, poke a hole halfway between the mark for the next cartridge loop. Then poke another hole on the mark for the next cartridge loop. (See Figure 12) Flop the cartridge ribbon back over and line the next mark on the ribbon up with the next mark on the belt. This first loop is hard to hold in place, but while keeping the marks lined up, poke three holes through the ribbon and the belt, one in the center, and one on each side of it halfway to the edge of the ribbon. (See Figure 13) If you held everything steady while you were poking the holes, the three holes in the ribbon should line up with the three holes in the belt. Flip the ribbon back out of the way and poke one more hole in the belt where the loop mark intersects with the line marking the top of the cartridge loop. Poke a hole half way between the next loop mark and on the next loop mark. (See Figure 14) These holes between the loops should be on the opposite line as the last holes between the loops.

Flip the ribbon back over and line the next mark on the ribbon up with the next mark on the belt. This one will be easier to hold. Poke three holes in it like the last time. Flip the ribbon out of the way and poke a hole at the intersection of the loop mark and the line that marks the bottom of the cartridge loops. Again, poke a hole halfway between the loop marks, and one at the intersection of the next loop mark. (See Figure 15) By now a pattern should be emerging. The holes poked between the loop marks must alternate between top and bottom. If they don't you'll have to back-stitch through one loop stitching to be able to sew all the loops without stopping. It's much easier to make sure they alternate! Poke the holes in this fashion until you get to the last mark on the ribbon

and the belt. With the stitching wheel mark your stitches for this last loop. Poke the holes making sure to poke one above and below the ribbon in the belt only. (See Figure 16)

Going back to the end that you stitched down, take two stitches through the next to holes in the belt so your strings are at the bottom of the next loop mark. Now flip the ribbon over and line up the first set of loop holes. Stitch the ribbon and the belt together up to the top, securing the first loop. Pull your stitches snugly but not too tight. It's easy to pull the string through the loop leather. Stitch through the next two holes in the belt so you are at the top of the second loop mark. (See Figure 18) These stitches should be pulled snug also and should keep the first loop from loosening the stitches. Line up the holes for the second loop and stitch down through that loop. Stitch across the belt to the next loop. Line up the holes for the third loop and stitch it up. Keep this up until you get to the last loop. If you have more than twelve .45 cal. loops, you will probably run out of string before you get to the end. When you are almost out of string, one string will be coming out the backside of the belt, the other will be coming out the face of the belt. Take the string that is coming out of the face of the belt and backstitch one hole so both strings are coming out on the backside of the belt. Unhook the needles from the remaining string. Wax a fresh section of string and thread the needles. Starting three stitches back, re-stitch the last three holes of the last string. This should keep the splice secure so the loops don't loosen. Snip off the loose strings. Continue sewing until you stitch up the last loop.

If you have to splice the cartridge ribbon, when you get to the end of the first ribbon section, line up the last loop mark at the beginning of the next section, with the last loop mark of the first section, and the loop mark on the belt. Poke holes in all three layers. When you have sewn to the end of the first section of cartridge ribbon, overlap it with the next section. Sew them up together. One loop may be a little tight, the other a little loose, but they should both work.

After you have sewn up the last loop, mark the stitches around the semicircle with the stitching wheel, like you did on the opposite end. Poke holes and sew around the semicircle till you have sewn into the stitch of the last loop. Back stitch two or three holes around the semicircle leaving both ends of the string on the backside of the belt. Cut the strings off almost flush with the back of the leather. The stitches on the back of the belt should look like this last photo. (See Figure 19) With this done, you deserve a break, whew!

In the next installment, I'll show you how to weave a lace loop through slots in the belt to make the cartridge loops. Until then, I hope the start of the new year finds you excited about your future. I'll see many of you at the convention in February. Until then,

See you on the range.

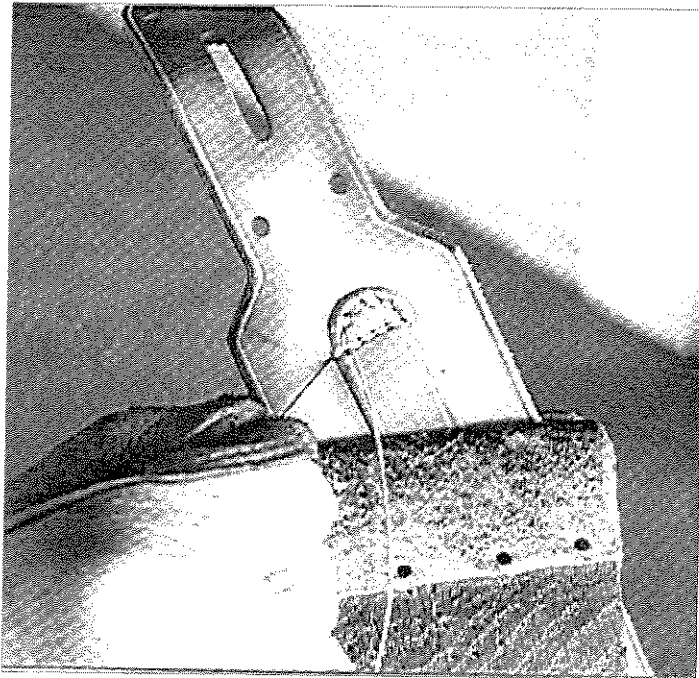


Figure 11

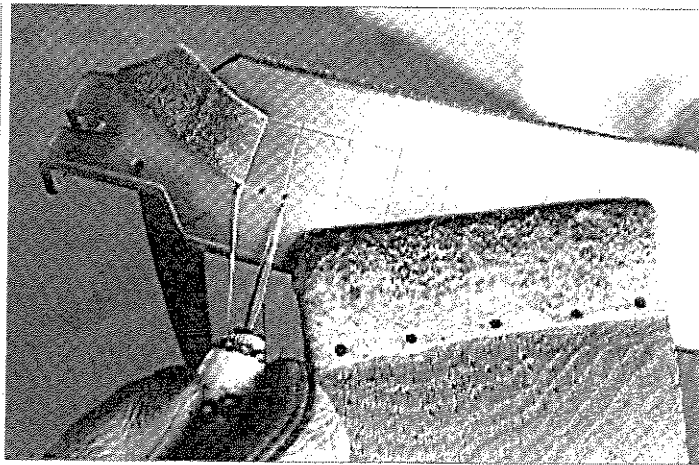


Figure 12.

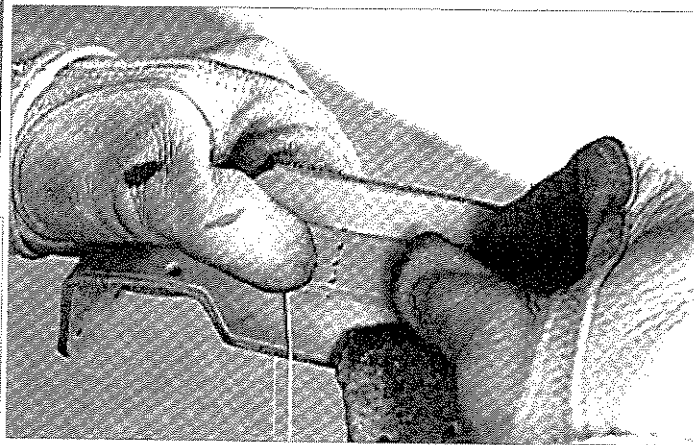


Figure 13.

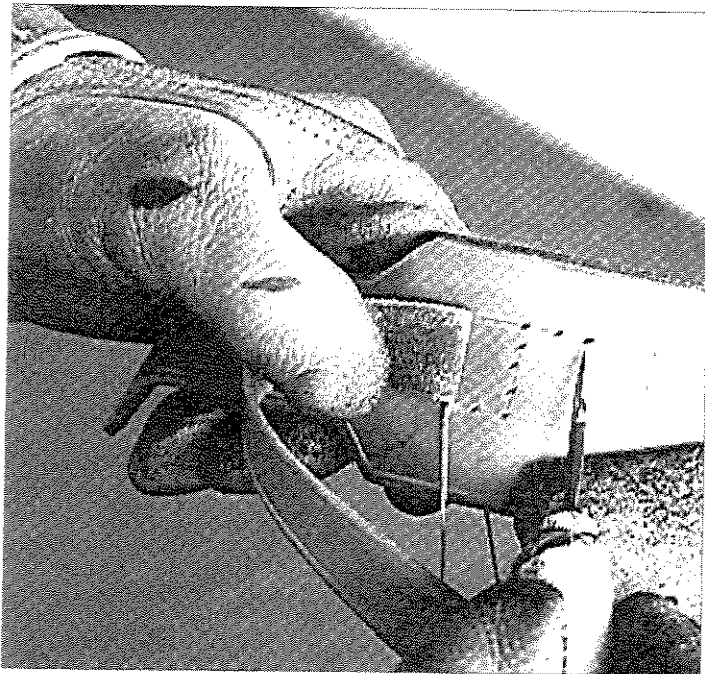


Figure 14.

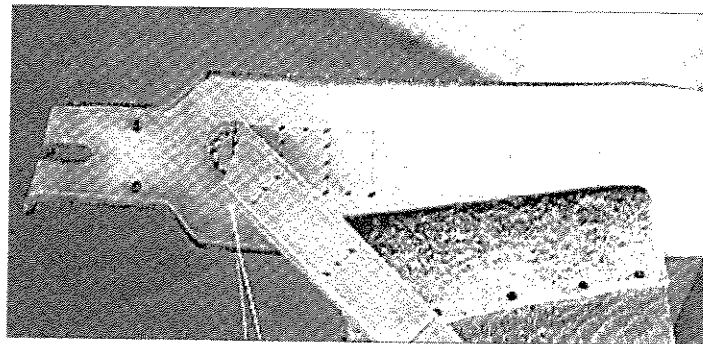


Figure 15.

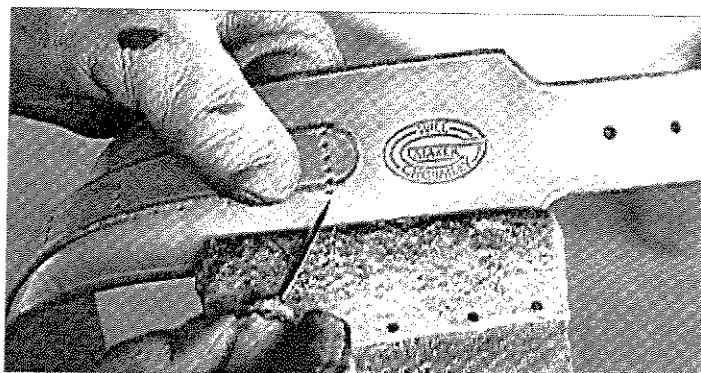


Figure 16