

Gunleather: The Mexican Loop

by Will Ghormley

Like a dust devil a new style of pistol scabbard blew up from the south west and across the plains. In the early 1870s it began to reach across the west. Within ten years it had spread from Texas to Canada, from the Pacific to the Mississippi.

Driven by new technologies and immigrants hopeful of a better life, the western frontier was blown wide open. Gunleather of the west kept pace. The "Mexican Loop" holster rode that wild wind sweeping the frontier. A new style of holster had evolved.

From the late 1860s cartridge belts became more popular among frontiersmen. The California style holster didn't adapt well to these wider, bulkier belts. A holster with a wider, fuller belt loop was necessary. It is easy for me to believe this new holster design originated in Mexico. Practicality and simplicity have developed into an art south of the border. The Mexican Loop is both simple and practical.

Cut from one piece of leather it is folded twice. The first fold is vertical. By sewing the side and bottom edges of this vertical fold a pouch is formed for the pistol. The second fold is horizontal just above the pouch that has been formed. It folds back behind the pouch to create a skirt. In the skirt a series of slots is cut to form one or more loops that the toe of the pouch passes through. Once the pouch is secured through the loops in the skirt, the fold has created a loop for the cartridge belt to pass through.

This is a very practical way to form a loop large enough for the bulky cartridge belt to pass through. It is a

style adaptable to many belt widths and holster applications.

More than any other style of western gunleather the Mexican Loop can be identified by adaptations along a time-line and by geographical stylizations. This is helpful for the reenact or who wants to isolate a specific time or geography for his character. I'll throw out some general guidelines for time and location of Mexican Loop styles.

As you read my generalizations don't get your chaps all in a wad if you disagree with me. Remember, the western frontier was a free-flowing population. Cowboys

were trailing herds from Mexico to Canada. Farmers were moving from homestead to homestead when the thin soil was depleted, or when their feet itched rather than rooting. I'm just trying to help those who are searching for a particular look for their character. There are exceptions to nearly every thing I will say.

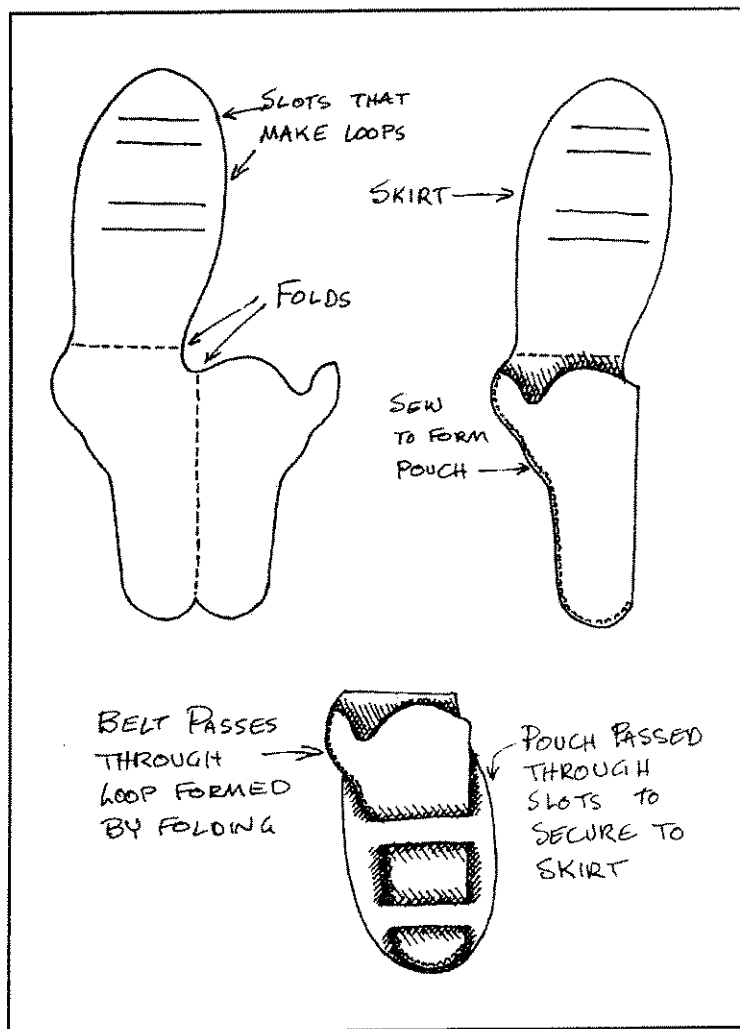
You could break geographical stylizations into northern and southern spheres of influence, Texas being the center of southern stylization, and Wyoming serving as the dominant northern influence. I'll begin with Texas since it was closer to where it all started.

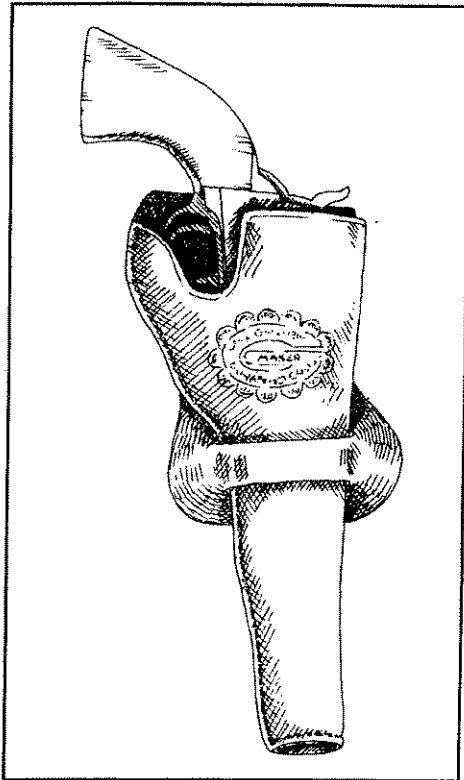
In Texas, as in the north, the California style holster influenced the development of the Mexican Loop. The slim close contours of the California were present in the early Mexican Loops of the late 1870s and early 1880s. Most also had the sewn toe plug that was common to the California during that time.

Early Mexican Loops in Texas often had a uniquely abrupt recurve to the throat of the pouch where it dipped down to expose the trigger. Half skirts were also prevalent. A single stamped rosette on the upper portion of the pouch was often the dominant decoration.

During the late 1880s and into the 1890s more holsters in Texas began to be sewn through the toe rather than having a toe plug sewn in. The pouches became roomier to accommodate various makes of pistols. Shorter barreled pistols were becoming more popular so more short holsters were produced.

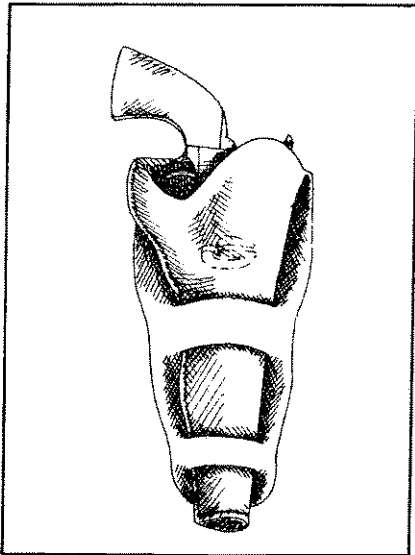
In Texas a peculiar





Early Texas Mexican Loop -- 1870s.

Mexican Loop style developed during the mid 1890s and continued in popularity through the turn of the century. The "Texas jock Strap" had a single wide "T"-shaped loop sewn or riveted to the skirt. The bottom of the "T" wrapped



Early 1870s Northern Cheyenne with pouch swell between loops and tear-drop toe plug.

around the bottom of the toe of the pouch and was fastened to the skirt.

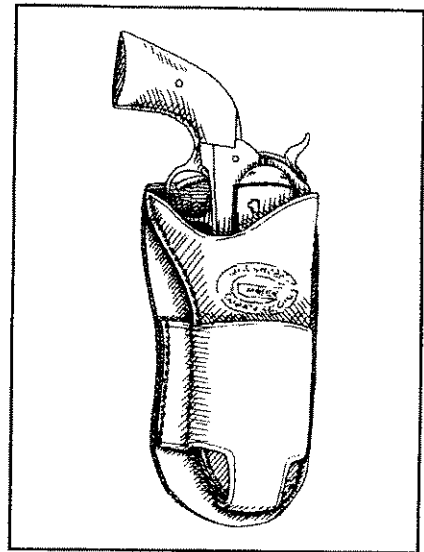
In the northern plains the California influence was noticeable in the slim contours of the pouch and sewn toe plugs of the early holsters. The recurve of the pouch tended to be less severe than its southern counterpart. The skirts tended to be longer.

By the 1880s a distinct style known as the "Cheyenne" had developed. This holster style was the defining difference between northern and southern styles. The pouch of the Cheyenne had a swell in the main stem between the loops to keep it from sliding up as the pistol was being drawn. It also incorporated a tear drop-shaped toe plug to keep snow and debris from entering the barrel when the wearer sat down.

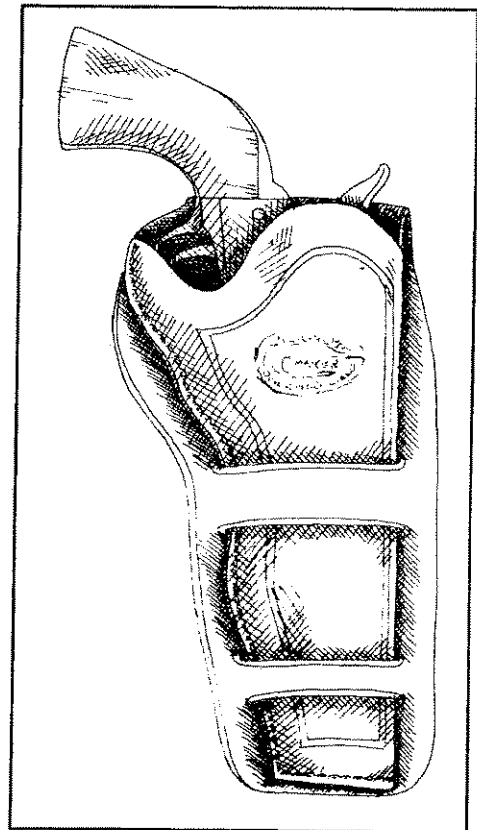
By the mid-1880s fully carved and stamped Cheyennes were easy to find throughout Wyoming and Montana. Toward the end of the 1880s and throughout the 1890s pouches became roomier just as they did in the south.

These styles were copied in both the north and south as well as across the plains to the Mississippi. While the styles were not exclusive to any region, this is where they originated. Makers in Montana and Texas were more apt than leathersmiths in other regions to rivet loops to the skirts rather than cut slots.

The Mexican Loop remained the dominant holster into the twentieth century. When Hollywood started making Westerns the Mexican Loop was the holster most often worn by the stars. Because of its prevalent use in movies it is the holster most often associated with Cowboys and the Old West. History teaches us otherwise. The Mexican Loop was just another adaptation to gunleather in the winning of the West. As it was, the Mexican Loop just happened to be around when the rough was rode off the frontier and it was considered tamed.



Late 1890s Texas Jock Strap. Notice the low-cut pouch that became popular in Texas at the end of the century.



Late 1890s Cheyenne