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## 4-H Handicraft Guide: Leather Craft

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# Leather Craft

## COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

South Dakota State College  
Brookings, South Dakota  
Extension Circular 584



Leathercraft is both fascinating and functional. There are three primary ways to decorate leather—tooling, carving, and stamping.

### SELECTION OF ARTICLE, LEATHER, AND DESIGN

Beginners should select a simple project to learn the techniques without investing a great amount in leather or equipment. The design should be free from complicated lines; yet it should be appropriate for the article being tooled. (Refer to the circular on "Design.") Many leather companies have designs made especially for a particular article. Calfskin (3 to 4 ounces) and tooling sheepskin are the best leathers for tooling. Cowhide (4 to 8 ounces) can be used for carving and stamping.

### PREPARING LEATHER

Leather will not hold a good impression unless it has been made pliable by moistening. All leathers differ as to the amount of water necessary to prepare them for working.

With a clean sponge and cold water, moisten the leather on the flesh side (unfinished side) using a patting motion. As soon as the finished side of the leather darkens, the proper moisture content has been reached. Soak heavy leathers in water for a few minutes, then wrap in a towel for several hours. Even if only a small portion of the leather is to be tooled, moisten the entire piece. This will prevent possible water spotting, and the leather will expand and shrink more uniformly.

### TRANSFER OF DESIGN

Place the prepared dampened leather on a flat surface such as marble, plate glass, or hard wood. Care must be taken after the leather is dampened since it will now take any impression. Fingernails, rings, or bracelets may leave marks.

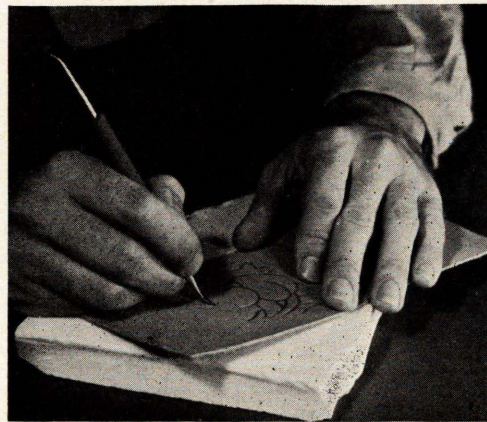
Lay the pattern (traced or drawn on transparent tracing paper) with the design face-side up on the finished side of the leather. The design may be fastened to the leather with paper clips but make certain they are not tightly clamped to cause a marking on the leather. Masking tape may be used or just fold edge of paper pattern under leather.

Trace the design with a sharp wooden skewer or modeling tool, holding it as you would a pencil. Use firm pressure throughout. Raise a corner occasionally to determine what kind of an impression you are making and if you are tracing all lines in the design.

### TOOLING

After the design has been transferred to the leather, use the modeling tool to go over all the lines of the design as they

By **Ima Crisman**, assistant State Club Leader, and  
**Frank Heitland**, State Club agent



Tooling the design with spoon end of modeler.

appear on the damp leather. This is a complete form of decoration in itself. Hold the modeler as you would a pencil. Go over the design several times, increasing the pressure each time, until the outline of the design is very clear and the lines are depressed uniformly. Use a straight edge to tool all straight lines. Work lines from outer edge to center of piece as this will tend to eliminate stretching the leather.

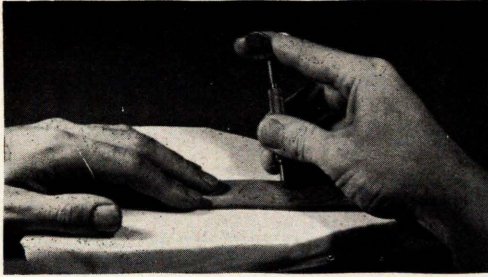
By stippling the backgrounds of designs, the designs are accentuated and at the same time they are made to appear more beautiful. Stippling means working the background by designing it with various tools.

Beveling is another method of bringing out the design. After a design has been creased into leather, use a spoon-shaped modeling tool and place the tip on the background of the leather so that the tip of the tool rests against the edge of the design and the curved back of the spoon rests on the background. The handle of the tool should be held at an angle of about 45 degrees to the leather and should be at right angle to the edge of the design. Move the tool sidewise so that the back of the tool presses down the leather of the background where it immediately touches on the design. This will make the design stand out.

### LEATHER CARVING

Carving is the process of cutting into the leather. It is possibly the most decorative way of working leather. No leather is cut away or removed in the carving process. Leather for carving must be vegetable tanned and unglazed. Beginners should start on 6 oz. to 8 oz. weight leather.

1. The **swivel knife** is the first tool used after the design is traced. Hold it as shown in the illustration. Pull it toward



Note position of swivel knife for carving.

you along the outline, cutting to a depth of one-half the thickness of the leather. As the knife is pulled along, the direction of the blade may be changed by rotating the barrel between the thumb and second finger. Finish each cut by lifting the knife from the leather, producing a shallow cut at the end. Make all cuts at right angles to the surface of the leather. The cuts should never cross another cut. The border lines are cut first. The parts of the design which are to be beveled are cut next. This will be flowers or figures. The leaves and stems are cut next. It is always a good idea to practice on scrap leather first. Be sure to cut straight down into the leather. Tilting the knife to either side will tend to only skive off the top layer of leather and it will be difficult to bevel and make the design stand out.

2. **Camouflage** (sunburst tool). The camouflage is used primarily to give stems, flower petals, leaves, and fern swirls a ruffled appearance representing folds and small veins. It may also be used to form flower centers and end fern swirls. Begin at the base of leaves and flower petals. Work toward tips. Space the impressions uniformly. Use less striking force as you progress toward tips.

3. **Shader**. The pear shader is used to make the dishaped impressions in flower petals, leaves, and down the length of fern swirls. The "dishing" is gradually lightened as it approaches the camouflaged area. Caution: The depressions should be tapered out. A definite outline of the shape of the pear shader should not be visible.

4. **Tap Beveler**. This tool comes in several sizes. The working end is almost flat, with the surface slightly rounded and slanted. All swivel cuts are beveled on one side only. The beveled side of the design appears to drop behind and add third dimensional relief to the surface of the leather. The longer part of the tool is placed in the knife cut. Strike and move tool about one-sixteenth inch toward you. Practice until you can literally walk the tool along the cut and make

a smooth edge. Determine which part of the design should lay on top, or stand out, then bevel around it.

5. **The Veiner**. This tool, like the camouflage, is used to decorate plain surfaces on leaves, stems, and flower petals. The veins are formed in the leaves by starting at the stem end and working toward the tip. The length of the vein is controlled by tilting the tool, using only a portion of the crescent to form the desired impression. Place the end of the tool in the center cut of the leaf with the open side of the crescent toward the stem and extending away at about a 45 degree angle.

6. **The Seeder**. The end of the seed tool has a concave surface which leaves a dome-shaped impression in the leather. It is used to make the center of flowers. The impression should touch but not overlap.

7. **The Background**. The bar and cluster are the most commonly used background tools. Either tool should be held straight up and down, joining the indentations but not overlapping. The background area should be smooth and of a uniform depth.

8. **Ornamental Cuts**. When your design is stamped you may want to add a few decorative cuts with the swivel knife. They should follow the curvature of the design and start deep and taper or fade out. Be careful not to over do this part.

#### SET STAMPING

Set stamping is a very simple and easy way to decorate leather. In set stamping the stamping tools are used without first cutting the leather with a swivel knife. Children in the lower grades can use this method. Simple or very complicated designs may be developed. Craft catalogs list many stamps suitable for this type of decoration.

The stamping tool is held upright at the desired spot and hit with a wooden mallet. Hitting too hard will cut the leather and damage the surface. Too light a blow will not give a clear design. A good stamped design is carefully and evenly placed and stamped with an even amount of force. It is best to practice stamping and working out the pattern on a scrap leather piece. The real fun of stamping is the almost unbelievable variety possible with a few tools and a little practice.

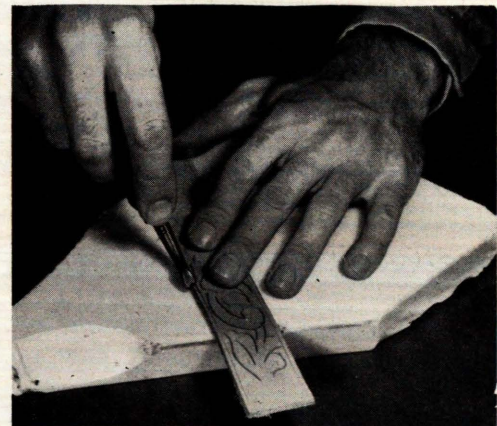
#### EDGING

Line the edge of the project with the edge creaser. Edges of rather thick leather (such as for belts) that are not to be laced can be made more attractive with a decorative design by using

Beveling the carved design—note position of tool.



Edging a belt—note position of tool.



the "edge creaser." Projects that are laced can be edged and this line used as a guide for punching holes.

Place the dampened piece of leather on a hardwood or marble slab and perch the tool along the edge of the leather. The best type of edge creaser is a metal one, either single or double.

### SKIVING

It is necessary to thin the edges of leather which will be laced or sewed. This operation is called skiving.

If a good job is to be done, a sharp knife or skiver is very essential in order not to have ragged edges. First practice on a piece of scrap leather before attempting to skive the good article. Place the edge of the grain side of the leather on the edge of a marble or bench and take a slice two inches long three-fourths inch in from the edge and one-fourth the thickness of the leather. The amount of leather to be skived off depends upon the number of pieces to be fastened together. The assembled skived edges should equal the original thickness of the leather.

Be careful not to cut through the leather when skiving.

### SNAPS

If your articles requires snaps, they can be put in before you assemble the finished article.

The tools for applying snap buttons come in standard sets. There are two sections to the bottom and two to the top part of each fastener. The two sections of the bottom are the spring and post. To fix these two sections, punch a small hole in the leather with a punch. Push the narrow neck of the lower section up from the wrong side of the leather. Then put the top section on the neck as it sticks up through the leather. Place the work on the anvil with a little pointed pivot. Lay the small opening of the snap-setting over the top section of the snap. Hold it in position and strike the "setter" with a hammer, giving it a quick blow.

The two sections of the top part of the fastener are the cap and eyelet. Punch a hole in the layer of leather, using a larger punch, insert the eyelet through the hole. Place the work on the anvil with the small cylindrical top. Put on the top cap, place the concave section of the setter over the cap. Hit it firmly.

### LACING

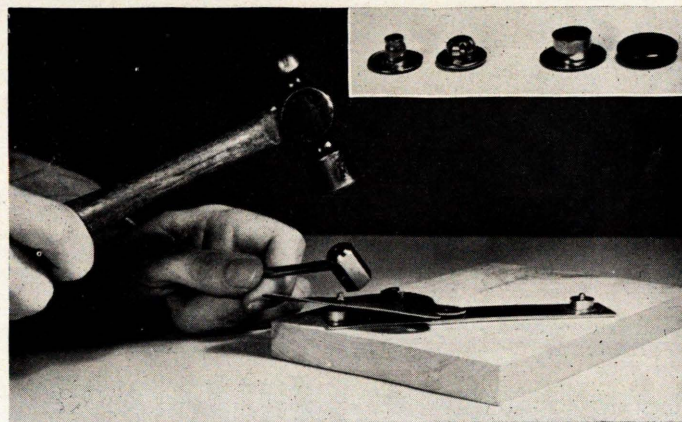
**Making and punching holes for leather lacing.** When the project is ready to assemble and lace, line all cut parts accurately and cement the edges to prevent slipping. Use rubber cement.

The line made by the edge creaser may serve as a guide line for punching. Follow along this line with a small punch making the holes about three-sixteenths inches apart. If a spacing wheel is available, it can be easily run along the marked line for guide marks for punching.

If a slitter or thonging tool is used, just follow the line made by edge creaser. Hold the tool in a vertical position and tap with wooden mallet. Be sure the leather project is placed on a soft board for this operation. Now you are ready to lace, so here is what you do.

Lacing a leather project not only is necessary for the proper construction, but if done correctly adds to the beauty of the article. It is generally recommended that a leather craft project should be laced with the same color or same shade. However, very pleasing contrasts in color can be accomplished.

The most widely used type of lacing is three thirty-seconds



Apply snaps to belt—note four parts of snap shown in insert

of an inch wide made of goatskin. It comes properly beveled at the edges and gives a neat appearance.

The following chart will help determine the amount of lacing needed. This is the approximate amount of times the distance to be laced. For example: a billfold 9 inches x 3½ inches—total length to be laced 25 inches. The double overlap takes 7 times the total of 25 inches times 7 or 175 inches which is about 5 yards of lace.

Before learning how to lace, learn how to splice lacing. It is not advisable to use too long a lace for it will stretch out and it is harder to handle. The two ends to be joined must be skived back about three-fourths inch from the ends before they are cemented together (one on the flesh side and the other on the grain side.) Enough leather must be skived away so the splice will be no thicker than the original thickness of the lace. Apply a thin coat of leather cement and press ends firmly together.

Next you'll learn to make a needle to lace with. Cut a piece of pliable tin from 1 inch to 1½ inches long and about three-sixteenths inch wide. Cut this with tin snips. Fold this piece of tin in the middle and at the same time fold the end of the lacing in it. Use a pair of pliers for folding the tin. After the tin is folded, cut it at an angle to make a point.

You can buy lacing needles at a craft store if you prefer.

Now for lacing—there are over 15 styles of lacing. We will discuss the three most generally used:

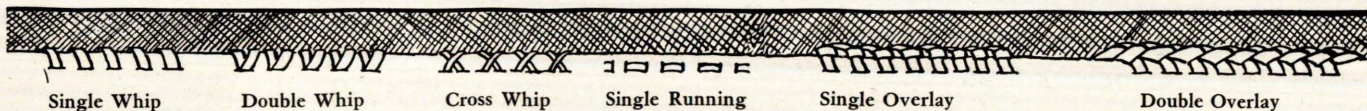
**Whip Stitch.** Cement one end of the lace between the lining and the cover. If only one thickness of leather is to be laced, the end may be cemented to the back or threaded several stitches back at the end of the lacing.

To start, bring the lace over and insert it in the first slit or hole. Hold the finished side of the leather away from you and work from left to right. Be sure the grain side of the lacing is the outside on top of finished lacing. Pull the lace back over the edge and continue the over and over stitch. If the lacing runs short before completed, it will be necessary to splice. In rounding corners, go through one or more of the holes keeping the same slant and tension to the lacing.

**Cross Stitch.** A double whip stitch will give a cross stitch lace.

**Single Overlay.** Take a yard of lacing and start in the middle of one end if you are doing a billfold. Work from left to right.

Hold the project in the left hand with the finished or decorated side away from you. Insert the needle and lace and pull through. Be sure the grain side of lacing is toward you. Hold the lacing end with first finger and insert needle in next



hole and tighten. Now insert needle under one strand of lacing on edge of project and tighten. Proceed in next hole over and then under the lacing until you have finished your project. An alternate method is shown in the illustration of looping the lace around the lacing end and continuing to next hole.

In turning corners two stitches may be taken in one or more holes.

When you arrive at the starting point, open the second loop of the first stitch and draw the lace through. Pull the lace tight. Then insert lace through hole and take to inside of the project. Leave one inch end and cement down.

**Double Overlay.** This stitch is started the same as the single overlay. However, instead of going under the one strand lacing, pick up or go under two strands each time.

The ending is different when you complete the lacing. When one hole remains unlaced you pull out or remove the starting sitch or stitches so that you have a free loop as shown

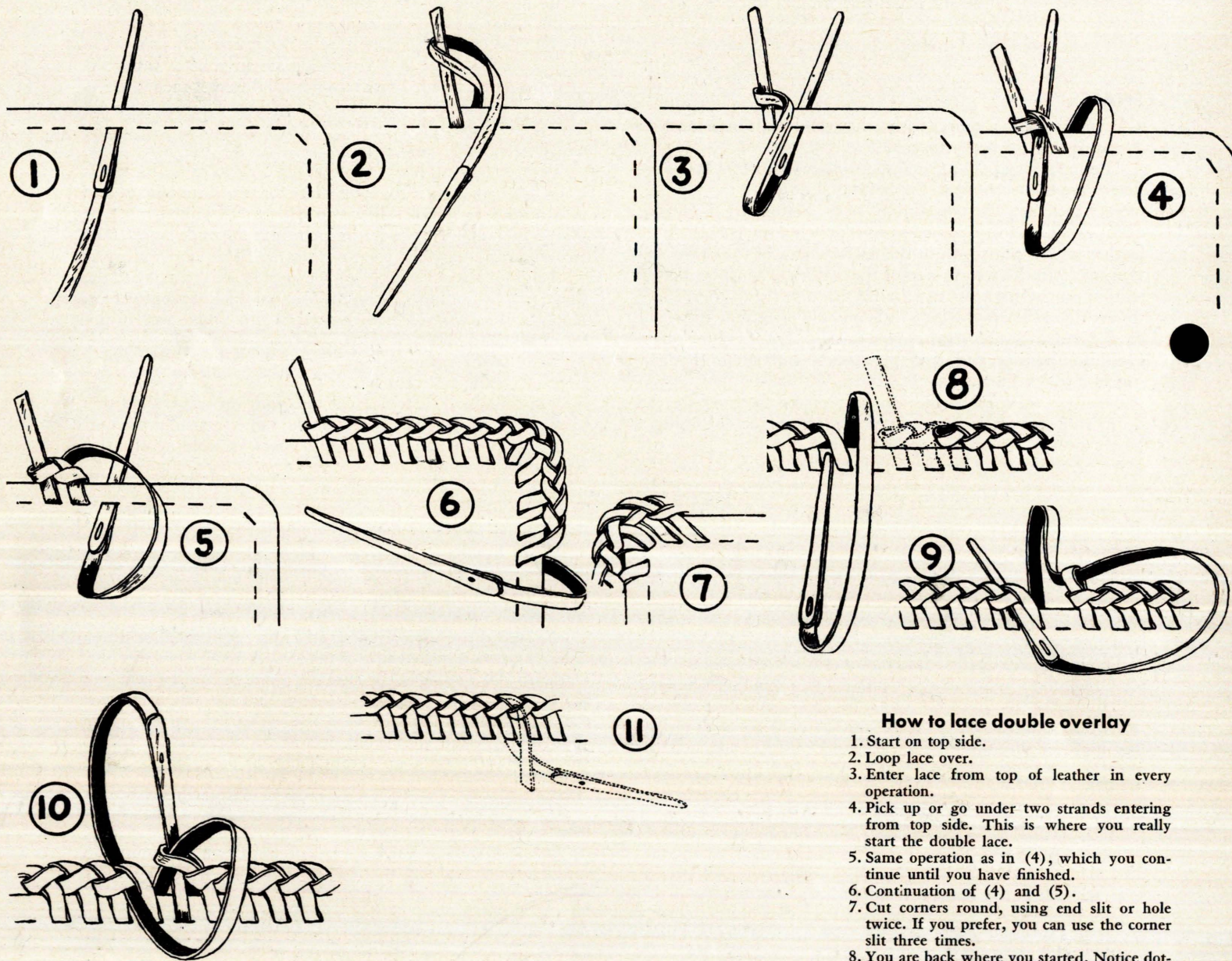
in figure. Before you pick up the two strands (with only one unlaced stich) insert lacing up through the (starting) loop and tighten. Next go down through the same loop and into the remaining hole in project. Tighten lacing. Cut ends and cement down.

You are ready now, to finish the leather project.

1. The laced edge is placed on a hard smooth surface and tapped very lightly with a mallet or hammer. This tapping will smooth out the lacing and make it uniform.

2. Take a damp cloth and fold it to make a small pad. Use it to apply a small amount of saddle soap to the leather. Let it dry a few minutes and polish with a soft cloth on the palm of your hand.

3. Liquid wax or leather dressing may also be applied to the finished project. There are many practical projects a club member can make. Start with a simple one and learn a new technique with each project.



#### How to lace double overlay

1. Start on top side.
2. Loop lace over.
3. Enter lace from top of leather in every operation.
4. Pick up or go under two strands entering from top side. This is where you really start the double lace.
5. Same operation as in (4), which you continue until you have finished.
6. Continuation of (4) and (5).
7. Cut corners round, using end slit or hole twice. If you prefer, you can use the corner slit three times.
8. You are back where you started. Notice dotted line lacing. This is removed so your starting point will look like (9).
9. Notice that only one hole remains unlaced.
10. Tie in is completed.
11. Cut off each lace close against the project.