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24 April 2017

My Handcrafted Tennessee Summer

“You did what with your Summer?!”

A true story involving leather more beautiful than the skin of a Brazilian supermodel, enough coffee to hype up members of Congress, and my sore, battered hands. Who knew making a leather duffle bag completely from hand would be so intense? I sure didn't—but thank God I stuck with it. Read on to find out what happened, plus a mini starter guide for those wanting to get started in leather crafting.

New Year, New Opportunities

At about 10 in the morning on Saturday, January 14th, 2016, I arrived back on East Tennessee State University's campus, eager for my fourth semester of college. I had just changed my major to English at the end of my previous semester. I made the hour and forty-five-minute drive up Interstates 40E, 81N, and James H Quillen Parkway (Interstate 26) from Knoxville to Johnson City. Snow was in the forecast.

Four days earlier, I found out that my roommate, who was with me since the beginning of freshman year (Fall 2014), flunked out, meaning I would have Davis 210 A all to myself.

“Hey man.” He said in an unexpected text message. “I just wanted to let you know that I won't be moving back in this weekend. My grades were really low last semester and my parents aren't helping me pay tuition anymore. Best of luck.”

I felt bad for my former roommate, but on the other hand this meant more room for my leather work. I made several wallets, a notebook cover, and a leather clutch during my brief two weeks of invaluable solitude.



A slim card wallet and clutch I made during this two-week period in January 2016.

At the end of these two weeks, I was introduced to my (inevitable) new roommate. He had just graduated high school in December 2015. He was, well, inconsiderate and immature to say the least.

“Yeah I’m majoring in Business. I want to start my own business like my dad did.” He explained after I asked him what his major was. And after telling him that I was an English major he even stated how “pointless” and “useless” that is. Oh well, I get that a lot.

In his defense, he was only 17-years-old, so some immaturity is commonplace at that age. His room activities included: constant video chatting, strangely sexual video games, switching iPhone cases every day, and inviting disgusting people over to *our* room (whom of which decided it was totally okay to sit on and even sleep in my bed when I was out of the room).

Inside Davis 210 A was two Full XL beds, two musty (slightly broken) rollable wardrobes, two alright desks, two different uncomfortable desk chairs, a white full-size fridge from the nineties, a stainless-steel sink, a decent private bathroom with a toilet, shower, and sink, and zero natural light (depressing fluorescent lighting instead). The room was 18’ 8” by 10’ 4”.

All things considered, I don't like it when others touch my stuff, but I'm too nice to say anything. I didn't spend much time in Davis 210 A that semester. I essentially moved into my girlfriend's nearby dorm (she had a private bedroom) and stayed with her the rest of the semester. Because of this change, the majority of my leather projects were put on hold.

The Request

In the last weeks of April 2016, my spring semester of sophomore year was winding down. It was my first semester of all literature classes (minus my French class). I remember learning how to juggle all the reading and writing assignments, which would turn out beneficial for my even more demanding Fall 2016 semester.

But during these final weeks of school, I got a surprising request. My good friend, Blake, texted me while I was sitting at the Einstein's in the Sherrod Library on ETSU's main campus, eating a bagel and reviewing an article for my Women's Studies class. The text from Blake asked if I would be interested in making him a leather duffle bag.

"Hey brother, I hope you're doing well these days." Began Blake's text message. "I was interested in talking to you about ordering a custom leather duffle bag from you. I know you do beautiful work. Is this something you'd be interested in?"

I quickly replied. “Yeah man I’d be honored to make you a duffle! Are you for sure on wanting to order one? It will be pricey, just letting you know right away. It would be made completely by hand. Just let me know and we can get started with your specifications.”

I vividly remember getting a knot in my stomach from the nervousness and anxiety of making Blake a duffle bag. I mean, that’s a big project. I’m glad I didn’t think too hard about it (like I normally do) or I probably would have declined his request. I was certainly stepping out of my comfort zone both in terms of my leather working abilities up to that point and in the level of general responsibility it requires for such a project.

Blake knew I had been doing leather for about a year at that point. He saw some of my posts on my Facebook page, which was called Scout & Crown, and he was impressed with the product that he saw. It helps that I know how to work a camera since taking good photos of products is helpful for potential customers, such as Blake. Sure enough, he had a need (for a leather duffle bag) and he wanted me to fulfill it. After confirming with him the final price, overall look, dimensions, and function of the bag, I got to work ordering the materials—which ended up being about a two-week process.

How to Get Started Making Your Own Leather Goods

Before I tell the story about making Blake’s bag, I’m going to explain a little about leather crafting and how you can get started making your own products. It is fairly easy to get started in the leather crafting world. Here is a basic list, highlighting what I have found is necessary to get started (although I started with less, as I was clueless). An online search of “maverick leather

company” will help you find the distributor I have used and have always been happy with. For your starting tool kit (all of which can be found online), consider the items in the list below and to your left.

The Basic Leather Crafting Tool Guide

For Measuring:
Standard 12in Ruler
Yardstick
Angle Ruler

For Cutting:
Round Knife (\$30-\$150)
X-ACTO Knife
Rubber or Stone Cutting Surface (\$10-\$20)

For Punching:
Scratch Awl (\$6)
Diamond Awl (\$10-\$60)
Rotary Punch (\$15-\$60)

For Stitching:
Stitching Needles (\$5)
Small Scissors (\$10)
Lighter (\$5)

For Finishing:
Edge Beveler (\$10)
Gum Tragacanth (\$10)
Wood Slicker (\$10)
Beeswax Block (\$4)

Keep in mind that leather crafting becomes incredibly individualized, as your tools and materials will evolve with your skill level and what specific products you enjoy making the most. I, like most other leather crafters that I have met or know about, started out making small leather goods such as wallets and notebook covers. I eventually transitioned into making tote bags, along with larger and more complicated wallets. The fun thing about leather crafting for me is learning something new every time I do it. As a maker, you figure out more efficient processes, discover your favorite tools and materials, learn about design and function, and get to interact with customers. And, thanks to social media and the rapid spread of information, you might even be able to make a little money from it as well. Now back to the story about Blake’s bag...

Sourcing the Materials

The journey to find the leather took about a week. I conversed with Blake mainly through text, as we were both in school and our differing schedules made it difficult for long phone calls. I looked at about five different leathers from several distributors (companies that distribute various

leathers from U.S. and foreign tanneries). He finally ended up choosing a leather side (a ‘side’ is one half of a full ‘hide’) from a distributor named Maverick Leather Company, based out of Bend, Oregon. It was a beautiful dark brown with a luminous orang-ish pull-up (‘pull-up’ shows on leathers with high oil/wax content, appearing when the leather is bent, twisted, cut, and used) tanned by one of the remaining two domestic tanneries left in America, Horween Leather Company.

After securing the leather itself, we moved on to the fabric lining—completely uncharted territory for me. I scoured the web, inspecting hundreds of linings. I swear I tried to change Blake’s mind, because I was running out of options and could not find exactly what he wanted. And yet, I ended up finding the perfect one. It was a navy blue and white, thick-striped canvas. I ordered it right after he approved it. So now we had the leather and the lining on order. Arrival in 7-10 business days.

Sometimes **the smallest parts of a project are the most difficult to anchor down**. This was the case with the thread and hardware options for Blake’s duffle bag. We wouldn’t decide on thread color until late June. Luckily I already had most of the thread I needed. The hardware on the other hand was tricky, mainly because of how the supplier goes about shipping costs. Nevertheless, I decided to order the hardware from Buckle Guy, based in Boston, Massachusetts.

The hardware was top quality—raw solid brass. Solid brass is a great hardware option for leather bags because of the anti-corrosion properties, durability, and how it stands the test of time. The

hardware for Blake's bag cost a total of \$117.56. Yes, for a single bag. You definitely get what you pay for in this case.

Making Blake's Duffle Bag

By the end of May 2016, all of my materials arrived. The leather was pristine, the lining was exactly what I hoped for, and the hardware was solid. I couldn't wait to get started. Too bad I wouldn't start until about a month later, on July 1st 2016. I ended up having to spend the month in Texas, where my grandmother was after a nearly fatal fall. Blake set my deadline at July 25, the day before he was scheduled to leave for a two-week trip.

With this new deadline set, and the summer month of July underway, I got to work. Most of the large leather parts of the bag were already cut out of the side of leather, as I had done this not long after receiving the leather. I hadn't touched the lining yet. I would find out that was an entirely separate project. With the large leather pieces cut out, I began marking the pieces with where I would punch the holes, and prayed all my measurements were accurate. With leather, once a cut is made, there are no redoes—only restarts. Something I didn't have time for.



The top and ends of the bag. I had just finished punching these holes. Next, stitching.

I spent most of July 1 marking the leather, and then **I began punching holes. The next day, I punched more holes. The day after that, I punched more holes.** My hands felt the pressure,

because I developed a bruise in the palm of my right hand where I had held my machined steel C.S. Osborne (New Jersey-based manufacturer of leather, industrial, and upholstery tools) rotary punch. A bruise in the first few days of work? Probably not the best thing to happen. Still, I love that punch.

A few days into the project, I started to get into my groove. Since I was working in the basement at my house, I converted it into a temporary workshop solely because I needed the room. I situated my Bluetooth stereo where I could hear my music clearly, and regularly jammed to some Mumford and Sons, The Lumineers, Ed Sheeran, Foster the People, and plenty of other folky alternative artists. In addition to my music, I constantly had French press coffee keeping me energized and aware. Mental stamina played a huge role in pulling off this bag. There were many moments when I became frustrated and was forced to stop and rethink how to put together certain sections of the bag. This reality rang especially true when it came time to construct the lining.



One side of the interior lining. I constructed the pockets and attached the brass key hook.

The lining (among other things) pushed the limits of my abilities. I ended up having to double-layer the striped lining that you can see when you open the bag, with an extra white canvas that I happened to have in order to ensure the level of durability I was happy with. I had to use my grandmother's 1951 Singer 15-91 sewing machine (which was a joy to use simply because of the

sheer mechanical-ness of it) in order to attach the two fabrics before hand sewing the lining to the leather.

By the time the lining was finished, it was July 13th. The time to attach the main two-way zipper arrived. I truly dreaded it. I knew it was going to be a challenging part of the project, but I had no idea how much effort, determination, patience, and blood it would require. Since I was tasked with stitching through the canvas lining, I had to use glover's needles, which functions the same way as regular blunt-tip needles except they feature a sharp tip to help slice through materials such as fabrics. I had about 200 stitches to complete in order to attach the zipper. I only stabbed myself three three times. Four days later, I have an attached zipper.



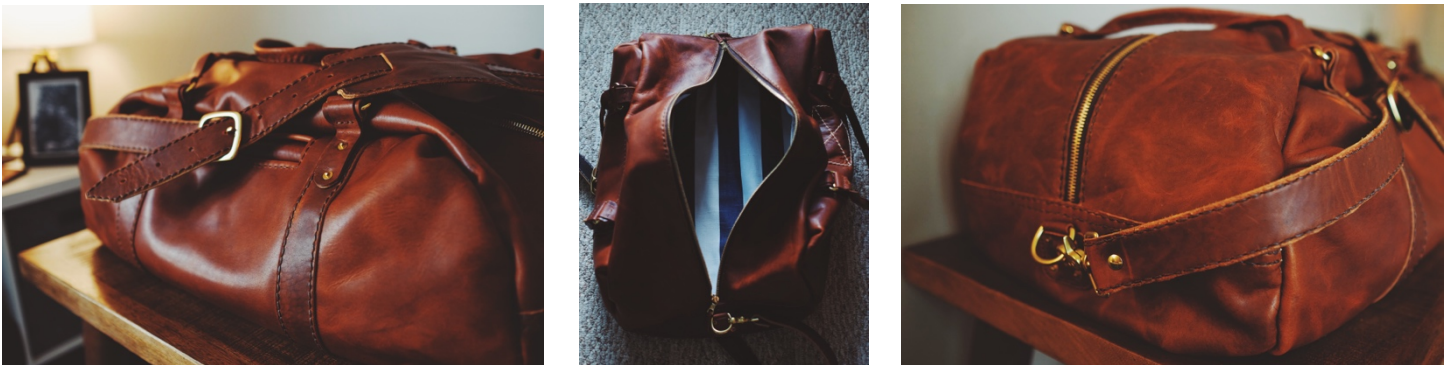
Right before stitching the brass zipper in, seen here. This is the top of the bag.

At this point in the project, **my lack of sleep was catching up to me. But it was about to get worse** with my deadline fast approaching and plenty left to do, such as: make the shoulder strap, make the shoulder pad, stitch the sides and bottom of bag, attach the handles, hammer in dozens of rivets, and still do a good job. Somehow I forced myself to push through and pull two all-nighters in order to finish the bag on time to get it to Blake for his trip.

I cannot express how sore my hands were from the cutting, stitching, pulling, burnishing (rubbing the raw edges of the leather to seal and smooth them), and hammering involved with Blake's bag. At around 6 on the morning of July 24th, I finally reached the end. I had just made a

leather duffle bag completely by hand. Was it perfect? No. But it was damn well made and I was (and still are) proud of my work. I am confident Blake will carry that bag for the rest of his life. The combination of high quality materials and high quality construction, such as the case with his bag, is priceless. Blake ended up paying a total of \$750.00 for his custom duffle bag, and I regret not charging more for the amount of work that was involved.

Later that day, on the 24th of July, my girlfriend, Kendall, and I met Blake in downtown Knoxville for dinner at Babalu, a Spanish-inspired restaurant featuring fresh tacos and tableside guacamole made right in front of you. It was a delicious meal, plus it was rewarding to catch up with Blake and then be able to hand-deliver his bag. He was blown away. I'd say he gave me a minute-long hug (Blake is a hugger anyways).



Blake's finished leather duffle bag. The color (and smell) of that leather is still one of my favorites. The lining looks great too.

The next day I received a text message from Blake. "Hey bro! I just wanted to say thanks again for my bag. I still can't believe it's mine. It's perfect. I just fit two-weeks worth of clothes in it! Take care bud."

What I Learned

If someone had told me in early April 2016 that I would make a leather duffle bag in a few months, I wouldn't have believed them. But that's the beauty of fulfillment involved with stepping out of comfort zones. I stepped out of mine in order to make Blake his bag, and now he will carry the bag I made him for the rest of his life. I learned perseverance. I learned a little about pain. I learned about design. I learned about fabric linings. There is always more to learn.

My hope is that this story has inspired someone to step out and try something they never thought they could do. Even if you fail, you probably learn something. It has taken me tons of practice to get my current level of expertise in the world of leather crafting, and I still have a lot to learn.

Cheers to being able to live and learn.



About the Author:

Adam Swift was born and raised in Knoxville, TN. He is currently pursuing a BA in English with a Minor in Technical Writing. He plans to pursue a Master's Degree in English after graduating in Spring 2018. He enjoys hiking, exploring, writing, and learning traditional hand crafts.