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serve as inspiration for
custom designs.



RAZ HAS BEEN
fitting people for
custom boots at
Leddy's for nearly
two decades.

The Perfect Pair

Famed Texas bootmaker M.L. Leddy's is fixin' to celebrate 100 years of custom-made excellence

By Clayton Maxwell

If you want to feel like Texas royalty, get fitted for custom boots at M.L. Leddy's. Like a king or queen on a throne, you kick back in an engraved leather chair in the back of the Fort Worth shop while Raz—he prefers his first name only—focuses on your feet. In his cowboy hat and well-oiled ostrich-skin boots, the 18-year veteran of the shop's Stockyards location wraps measuring tape around the instep, the heel, and the ball of the foot with steadied precision.

"One of the first things I try to get people to do is come in and look around," Raz explains against a backdrop of shelves stacked with hundreds of boots—all varied in color, stitching, and design—that serve as imagination prompts. "It's like you tell your husband you want to buy a brand-new white Camaro with a red interior. He says, 'OK, I have one right here you can look at.' And then you say, 'Oh, maybe that red is a little much.' You have to see boots

up close to know what you really want.”

As Raz measures my feet, a wall-mounted bison head gazes down on this sacred Texas ritual. When Raz traces a person’s feet two times in one of Leddy’s red leather-bound ledgers—once while standing and once while sitting—something momentous is happening. Not only is the customer on their way to boots that fit perfectly from day one, but their feet are also now a part of Texas history.

“Leddy’s are widely known as being the Rolls Royce of boots,” says Rodney Hawkins of Graham, who works in cattle, oil, and gas, and owns two pairs. “When you pull them on, they just kind of pop on your foot. It’s a cool sound they make.”

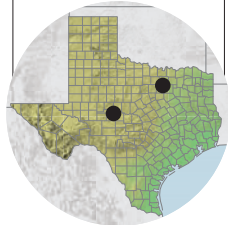
The fourth-generation family business, today employing two of Martin Luther Leddy’s great-grandchildren, will celebrate its centennial in 2022. M.L. started the operation four years after he left his family’s cotton farm in 1918. He bought the boot and saddle shop where he’d been employed in Brady and set out to make it his own. Measuring the feet of 1920s cowboys who paid about \$25 a pair, M.L. developed a ledger system in which notes on arches, tracings, and measurements were faithfully recorded in a 17-by-11-inch leather-bound book.

When Leddy’s outgrew its Brady location, M.L. moved the shop in 1936 to San Angelo, the eastern edge of the Permian Basin’s booming oil economy. Comfortable custom-made boots were a necessity for cowboys who were on their feet all day. In 1941, M.L. opened a second shop in the Stockyards. Today, M.L.’s grandson, Wilson Franklin, reviews every entry recorded in the ledgers, just as M.L. did a century ago.

“Mr. Leddy was a wise man to determine that these measurements are something to be recorded for history,” says Mark Dunlap, the general manager of the Fort Worth Leddy’s and an old friend of Franklin’s. In San Angelo, where all their custom boots are still made today, ledgers from the ‘20s contain the traced feet of many long-departed hard-working West Texas cowboys. In the Fort Worth store, the wall of the fitting room is lined with ledgers that date to 1941. Raz plucks out a

M.L. LEDDY’S
2455 N. Main St.,
Fort Worth.
817-624-3149;

222 S. Oakes St.,
San Angelo.
325-653-3397
leddys.com



random ledger from ‘43, revealing names of customers from across North Texas: Mineral Wells, Sulphur Springs, Denton.

The ledgers are road maps for Leddy’s bootmakers, who refer to them for years to come when a client needs adjustments or a new pair. They are documents of arcane trivia, too: The smallest boot recorded is a size 2; the largest, a size 22. The treasured records are also meaningful for customers.

“It’s really special when you see an 18-year-old kid coming in with his granddad or even a great-granddad and they dust off his ledger and look at that old footprint from 60 years ago,” Dunlap says. “To think about who they were back then and who they are today—I mean, the experience really can change people.”

Generations of family stories are held in these ledgers, and so are some famous feet. Leddy’s, honoring its origins as a working man’s boot, downplays the fame factor and, respecting its customers’ privacy, won’t drop names. But the staff admits you can find the measurements of kings, presidents, and sports and movie stars within its pages. While I respect the discretion, a little searching on the internet suggests Paul Newman, Nolan Ryan, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Sam Shepard are among the VIPs who’ve walked in their own pair of Leddy’s.

The ledgers also contain fragments of U.S. history. There are several entries in the ‘40s from GIs who, having just



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THE LEDGERS AT
 Leddy's contain outlines of feet belonging to cowboys, politicians, athletes, and celebrities.

disembarked in Fort Worth from overseas, came to the Stockyards for a steak and a visit to Leddy's.

"We'll have those guys, World War II veterans, occasionally walk back into our shop," Dunlap says. "And you'll look up their boot measure for them, and it's an emotional moment for them and for us."

Moments like these don't happen when people buy boots over the internet. Nothing beats shopping in person at Leddy's, especially after a year of pandemic-induced online shopping. The smell of the leather. The gravelly voiced jokes of an old-timer who stepped inside the store to find a present for his wife. The sound of the staff's boots thudding neatly on the worn hardwood floors.

There's Andrew Douglas, proprietor of the \$10 in-house boot-polishing service, who works with a visible smile even though he's wearing a mask. There's John Ripps, who oversees a menswear section including a Leddy label. There's Kimberly Davenport in womenswear, who hands me a flashy Vera Vasiley Western shirt to try on. "Vera is a Fort Worth icon," Davenport relays. "She started with Loretta Lynn back in the day, and she's all about stage presence with a vintage style." Tucked away on the third floor, there are

saddle makers cutting, sewing, and hand-tooling custom saddles ideal for fancy gifts. (When he was president, George W. Bush presented one to Prince Charles).

And of course there's Raz, coaching me on how to best put on a pair of boots. "Stand up, and push and pull all in one motion," he says, helping me find the sweet spot where the boot slips smoothly over my heel.

In the front room of the Fort Worth shop, a quote attributed to M.L. is painted over the belt section: "The bitterness of poor quality is remembered long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten." I wince as I think about the cheap ropers I bought online last Christmas and how they hurt my feet.

"So many people don't wear boots, and the reason why is they've never had something that fits well," Raz says. "Once you get a boot that really fits you well, it will be your go-to footwear for everything."

After the time and care Raz put into measuring my feet, not only do I feel like a queen, but I also realize why boots that last, boots made especially for me, are worth the steep cost. And I'm pleased that my feet will now be part of Leddy's nearly 100-year history alongside thousands of others in the red leather-bound ledger. **L**



Made to Fit

M.L. Leddy's custom boots start at about \$1,400 for a pair of calfskin boots (best for riding and ranching), and customers can expect a one-year wait. A pair of shiny full-quill ostrich starts at \$2,795. For a more affordable but still comfortable boot, the Leddy's Vaquero brand starts at \$400.

They may not be made-to-measure, but the cowboys like them. For a fitting, here's what to expect:

Step One: Choose your toe box: round, pointed, or French toe (a combination of the first two).

Step Two: Pick your heel height and shape.

Step Three: Select among four scallop designs (the design of the top of the boot).

Step Four: Decide on an arch. Try on sample pairs to see which feel the best.

Step Five: Get measured. Relax and let Raz or one of his colleagues do the work.

Step Six: Playtime. Check out the many samples of leather (ostrich, alligator, cow, etc.), stitch patterns, colors, and inlays, all on display in the Leddy's custom boots room.



RABBI ANDREW
Bloom at the Will
Rogers Coliseum
in Fort Worth.

Shalom on the Range

The cowboy spirit is a way of life for these Texas Jews

By Dina Gachman

I'm out at Charles B. "Chuck, the Wrangler" Hart's 36-acre property in Temple, where he leads me to the barn to show off his old riding saddle and the worn leather chaps his mom sewed for him over 50 years ago. After he's finished showing off some of his prized possessions, he opens a beautiful wooden cabinet hanging on the wall of his living room to reveal a 100-year-old Torah. "Most people think it's a gun cabinet," says Janet Hart, Chuck's wife.

Chuck is part of a small but mighty segment of Texas Jews who grew up riding horses, and in some cases wrangling and rodeoing, too. Chuck used to ride ponies after Sunday school on Main Street in Houston in the 1940s for 10 cents a pop. "It was 25 cents to ride the bigger ponies," Chuck says. His lifelong love of riding led him to the rodeo team at the University of Houston, where he competed in bareback riding and became president of the University of Houston Rodeo Association. "I've still got my spurs," he says. After a stint in the Army, Chuck got a job teaching horseback riding at Echo Hill Ranch camp in Medina. He loved instilling a passion for riding in city kids who had never been on horses before. He introduced those kids to the cowboy spirit—a love of adventure and a healthy dose of rebellion. That job at Echo Hill is where he got his nickname, and where he met Jan.

I was led to Chuck by Hollace Ava Weiner, a Texas-based Jewish historian and editor of the book *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas*. I wanted to know more about Jewish "cowboys" in the broadest sense of the word. If vaqueros drove livestock north of the Rio Grande in the early 1700s, and cowboy culture in Texas soon followed, how did Jewish immigrants—and my ancestors—fit into that history? I hadn't heard about many Jewish cowboys—the existence of cowboy churches hints at just how synonymous cowboying is with Christianity. Even so, I figured Jewish cowboys were out there, whether rodeo cowboys, ranchers, or country folks. It's just that none of the history books I was taught as a kid included anything about how Jews



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bareback rider Chuck Hart; musician Joe Buchanan; bull rider Jonathan Hochman.

got to Texas and whether they embraced its mythic culture. But Weiner helped turn the page by connecting me with others like Chuck.

My own family came to Texas the same way so many other Jews did, by fleeing religious persecution in Russia in the early 1900s and emigrating on ships headed to faraway places like Galveston. My great-grandfather, a Russian blacksmith who was shipped to Siberia to break wild horses, made his way to Fort Worth via Galveston and Texarkana. His son, my grandfather, was born in Texarkana and later played a cowboy in an episode of the 1960s TV show *Rawhide*, with Clint Eastwood. My dad in turn grew up dreaming of being a “real” cowboy, riding his horse, Easter, around rangeland in Fort Worth, across wide-open spaces that later became Hulen Mall, Loop 820, and Bryant Irvin Road.

Today, out of roughly 30 million people in Texas, there are about 176,000 Jews, up from 15,000 in 1899, according to the *American Jewish Year Book*. Prior to 1821, Spanish authorities required every resident to practice Catholicism, but that doesn’t mean Jews weren’t here; allegedly, some Jews fought at the Alamo. The myths about early Jews in Texas don’t loom nearly as large as the mythology of cowboys in general, but they’re out there. As for Jewish cowboys, most people probably think of musician and 2006 Texas gubernatorial candidate Kinky Friedman, who named his band The Texas Jewboys and released an album called *Last of the Jewish Cowboys: The Best of Kinky Friedman*. “There’s something great about wanting to be a cowboy,” Friedman says, “especially now that the world is so sanitized and trivialized.”

The desire to be a cowboy was part of

what drew Asleep at the Wheel frontman Ray Benson to the state. Benson, who grew up in Pennsylvania, says he was “fascinated by the history of Jewish people in Texas.” As a 6-foot-7-inch redhead, he has more than once heard, “Funny, you don’t look Jewish.” Benson moved to Austin from San Francisco in the early 1970s “to become a Texan,” which is evident in his customary cowboy hats and devotion to Bob Wills, the king of Western swing. His plan worked because in 2011 he was named “Texan of the Year” by the Texas Legislative Conference, and he has a plot reserved in the Texas State Cemetery. Benson and Friedman might not be out there roping cattle, but they embody a certain spirit of the cowboy myth—a myth that, over time, has expanded to include not just ranchers and ropers, but musicians, artists, chefs, and CEOs.

“I don’t see a Jewish cowboy as being something strange,” says Rabbi Andrew Bloom of Fort Worth’s Congregation Ahavath Sholom. “I see it as a natural flow of culture, faith, religion, and where you live.” Bloom founded the Cowtown Clergy, which brings a multifaith perspective to current affairs, from Winter Storm Uri to the George Floyd protests to the wisdom of Willie Nelson. Bloom also officiated what he claims is the only Jewish wedding to have been held on the floor of the Fort Worth Rodeo. “I’m not thinking of a person on a horse,” Bloom says of the cowboy stereotype. “I’m thinking of a way of life.”

That can take on many forms. There’s the Luskey family, inducted into the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2018 for their Luskey’s Western wear stores. There’s Frances Rosenthal Kallison, a National Cowgirl Museum Hall of Famer who helped run a cattle ranch near San Antonio. The “Kallison Cowboy,” a statue that stood atop Kallison’s Western Wear store, became a local San Antonio landmark, though it is temporarily down for restoration. There’s also Jonathan Hochman, a retired bull rider who lives on 10 acres in the “postage-stamp-size town” of McDade, with his wife, stepdaughter (who is a professional barrel racer), 15 horses, three dogs, five cats, and two goats. Like Benson, Hochman grew up in Pennsylvania, but instead of gravitating toward country music, his passion was extreme sports.

“I was never very good at bull riding, but I loved it,” Hochman says. “When I started out, I hid my Jewishness under the nom de guerre Johnny Lee.” Hochman was often the first Jewish person people had ever met in bull riding, but eventually he embraced his name and his heritage. Hochman says the best thing about bull riding was the people and places he encountered traveling around the state. “I went from Sweetwater to Lubbock, into the dust storms of the plains and the mesas of Big Bend,” he says. One thing he learned after he stopped trying to separate his Jewishness from his life as a rodeo rider: “The differences aren’t as

“I don’t see a Jewish cowboy as being something strange,” says Rabbi Andrew Bloom of Fort Worth’s Congregation Ahavath Sholom. “I see it as a natural flow of culture, faith, religion, and where you live.”

great as some people think.”

I’m no bull rider, but I understand Hochman’s impulse to hide his Jewishness. I grew up saying the Lord’s Prayer before middle school volleyball games. Someone actually drew a swastika on my notebook in school once, and experiences like that can make you guarded. For several years, I felt different and tended to keep my Jewishness to myself. A few of the people I talked with for this story had similar experiences, but most of them said that more often than not, mutual respect defined their experiences. A cowboy is a cowboy, whether they light a menorah or not.

Joe Buchanan, a musician who plays “country with a Jewish soul,” spent much of his Christian childhood on a ranch near the border in South Texas. He went to church as a kid but never felt like he fit in. “I had never met a Jewish person growing up,” he says. Eventually he fell in love with a Jewish woman, got married, and 13 years later told his wife he wanted to convert to Judaism. The transition shaped his music, with lyrics like “I’ve never been to Israel, but I’ve floated the Frio River.”

On the road, Buchanan has visited Jewish communities from El Paso to McAllen to Houston, where he lives. A few years ago in Austin, when he was playing a show during SXSW, he “busted out a *shalom aleichem* onstage.” A guy came up to Buchanan after the set and quietly, nervously asked him if he’d just heard Hebrew at a country show. “I said, ‘Yeah, you did,’” Buchanan says. “And then I told him he didn’t have to whisper.”



For more information please visit northeasttexasrail.org

Blazing Saddles

Oliver Saddle Shop makes all the tack a cowboy could dream of

By Christian Wallace

Mornings at the Oliver Saddle Shop in Amarillo are rarely quiet. The workshop is filled with the clinking of hammers tapping in nails, the scraping and cutting of leather, and the whirring of machines dating to the 1910s stitching together thick pieces of hide or cutting a strap just so. On cold days, you might find a few cowhands sipping coffee and swapping yarns next to the wood-burning stove. But the noise doesn't mean the scene isn't peaceful. To step into the rich smell of leather and hear Richard Oliver and his crew working on their handmade masterpieces is to know instant cowboy Zen.

This Panhandle institution is the oldest family-owned saddlery in the state. Richard's granddad, C.W. Oliver, started the business in Vernon back in 1917. Richard's father, Bill, relocated the shop to Amarillo in 1960, and Richard joined the family trade a decade later. Like other tack shops, Oliver makes an assortment of goods: bridles, cinches, medicine bags, spur straps, chaps, and breast collars. Today, Richard works alongside his two sons, Zeb and Bryan Oliver, and a fourth saddle maker, Colt Vernon. "We don't do any assembly line," Richard says. "Each guy takes the saddle start to finish, so each one is custom-made. We build about 75 a year, but we're a little over a year behind now."

Tack shops were once common all over the state, their wares in high demand with cowboys who needed to replace worn-out gear. But today, with fewer ranchers working their cattle by horseback and most goods made abroad, few shops like Oliver remain. Though the Olivers are well known, their clientele isn't famous—at least not to those outside of the ranching world. "Our main customer is the ranch cowboy," Richard says. "Our clientele is the best. We haven't had a hot check in years." *3016 Plains Blvd., Amarillo. 806-372-7562; oliversaddle.com.* 🐾





Horsepower

Wild mustangs helped shape the state's cowboy culture

By Asher Elbein



Texas used to be horse country. In the 19th century, a vast swath of South Texas was known as the Wild Horse Desert, an unforgiving landscape of chaparral and scrub patrolled by herds of mustangs. These bucking broncos and faithful mares became a central part of Texan folklore. “Of all the monuments which the Spaniard has left to glorify his reign in America, there will be none more worthy than his horse,” said Frederic Remington, a Western frontier painter, in an 1888 *Century Magazine* interview.

The first record of Spanish-imported mustangs in Texas dates to 1542. They likely got their name from the Spanish word *mesteño*, or “belonging to the stockmen.” The Spanish mustang spread rapidly throughout the continent, and its agility, toughness, and endurance made it the favored horse of the ranch hand and frontiersman. Wild horses in the U.S. likely numbered in the hundreds of thousands at their peak. But with the enclosure of the open range, wild herd numbers dwindled due to habitat loss, competition with domestic horses, and efforts to round up and domesticate them. By the late 1800s, mustangs had disappeared even from Texas’ Mustang Island, named for the abundance of the breed.

Though there aren’t any truly wild mustangs left in Texas, a small number continue to roam public lands in Western states. And since they gave rise to many modern breeds, like quarter horses, their lineage remains in other horses today: a symbol of a vanished, fondly remembered frontier.

Colonial Spanish



Giddyup

The **American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame & Museum** in Amarillo tells the history of the breed, which originated in part from Colonial Spanish mustangs and wild horses. It also contains the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame with portraits of famous horses and riders.

aqha.com

The **King Ranch Museum** in Kingsville memorializes the history of the South Texas rangeland that overlapped with the Wild Horse Desert, and it currently has an exhibition on the history of the ranch’s quarter horses. The ranch also offers nature tours.

king-ranch.com/museum

4.6 feet

Height of an average Colonial Spanish mustang at the shoulder

1 million

Estimated number of wild horses that once roamed Texas

2,000

Estimated number of purebred Colonial Spanish mustangs left in the world



Bred to Be Wild

Once, the Colonial Spanish mustang ranged from California to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. But in the 1900s, ranchers began turning domesticated horses loose onto public lands, where they bred with Colonial Spanish mustangs. This led to the wild blend of American mustangs living on Bureau of Land Management land nationwide today. As a result, purebred Colonial Spanish mustangs are extremely rare.

Concerted Spanish mustang breeding efforts began in the 1950s, as enthusiasts worked to preserve the breed using careful lineage registries. With around 65 horses, the 150-acre Karma Farms in Marshall is one of the largest breeders of Colonial Spanish horses in the state. Vickie Ives, owner of Karma Farms and vice president of the Horse of the Americas registry, has bred them since 1973, when she rode a friend's Colonial Spanish mare during long-distance trail-riding competitions. She got herself a Colonial Spanish stallion and eventually started breeding her own. "Because the breed's so rare, you may have to search all over the U.S. to find a horse," she says.

Why keep these horses around? Not only are they handsome, Ives says, but they're fine horses and important to America's heritage. "They come from a time when horses were real transportation," Ives says. "They ran the Pony Express; they drove the Longhorns to market. Most people don't recognize them because they don't look like modern horses."

Hold Your Horses

Colonial Spanish. Bred originally from the mixture of Iberian and Arabian horses in Spain, this elegant, multicolored breed thrived in the Americas. All modern Western horses are descended—at least in part—from this breed.

Quarter Horse. Formally registered in 1941, the breed was originally known as a "quarter-mile running horse," as it is one of the fastest horses for the task. Their heavy hips and heavy shoulders bear fast-twitch muscles that "fire like a cannon," says Vickie Ives, owner of Karma Farms and vice president of the Horse of the Americas registry.

Thoroughbred. One of the oldest modern horse breeds, the thoroughbred is traditionally used for jumping, riding, and racing. Originally from England, the breed is relatively tall and lanky and is a mix between Arabian and native British horses.

American Paint. A white base coat and large blotches of darker color across the body forms the common "pinto" pattern of this breed. These are among the most popular American horses.