

THE BELT

by Fred Hobbs

The late comedian Jonathan Winters claimed that he flunked clay class in elementary school because he never could learn to “make a bunny.”

The confession was probably legitimate and not just a funny line. It rang true to me because I had a similar experience in learning concerned not with a bunny, but a belt. And this was in high school!

Not handy with tools and with minimal skills in artistic endeavors, shop classes in school proved to be a steep learning curve that I couldn't even pretend to reach. In my view, learning to create a table lamp in woodshop or a belt in leather craft class required specific in-born talents I clearly did not have. In junior high, classes in both those skills were required. I attempted to make wooden bookends with a burned-in design, but I glued the pieces together backwards and the design was inside where the books were and not visible on the ends.

In junior high leather class, I created a series of lanyards to give to my mother and my siblings. They were fashioned from two different colored strands of so-called pyro lace that was some sort of plastic. Surely, even a kindergartner could have learned that skill and probably many of them did.

But the real test came in high school. I was a senior with more than enough credits to graduate. I decided to sign up for a “free period” in which I could do homework or perhaps play tic-tac-toe with a seatmate.

My counselor, Mr. Diner, an otherwise nice guy, good teacher and assistant football coach, insisted I must take a non-academic class instead. I suggested another semester of honing my typing skills, but that was a pretty lame gambit since I had learned that ability in seventh grade and had been typing some of my assignments ever since. Mr. Diner's best faculty buddy was Mr. Wright, the leather craft teacher, so Diner proclaimed “leather it is.” “But Mr. Diner,” I pleaded, “I don't like leather class, I'm not good at making stuff, I hate it.”

“Oh, you can learn how,” he responded. So, I enrolled in “Leather 101.”

I decided to make a belt. Just a strip of leather with a buckle on it, I thought.

Not so. It seemed that all the students in the class but me had no trouble preparing the leather through a softening process. Then, they used the tooling or carving implements, a mallet and appropriate dyes to create images of beautiful flowers, geometric designs, stamped alphabet letters and other impressions.

All of this while I was still struggling with a hunk of leather that began to curl up on the workbench. When I tried to copy a design onto the belt, the tool slipped in my hand and made weird looking marks. When I tried to carve with a knife, the cuts were often too deep. I never got to the point of using dyes, although personally I was slowly “dying.” Mr. Wright was less than sympathetic to my plight. He gave me a “D” on the project and even held up the limp

piece of leather and proclaimed to the entire class, "Look at this. It's the worst attempt at making a belt I have ever seen." Honestly, I couldn't disagree.

I turned my attention to learning to make wallets and managed to eke out a couple of B grades. No more belts for me. But, briefly, I did think, for causing me such embarrassment, I should give that teacher another kind of belt!