

Tool Hounds

// BY KEVIN IRETON



Excellence? It's in the Bag

When Darryl Thurner swung a hammer for a living in the late 1970s, the only companies making leather tool bags were all competing to see who could make them the cheapest. “The bags were woefully inadequate,” Thurner says. They didn’t hold enough nails. They were fixed on the belt, so you couldn’t adjust their position. And most carpenters wore them backward to keep nails from spilling when they bent over.

Desperate for efficiency, some of the stick-framing pieceworkers in southern California went to shoe-repair shops to have bags specially made. When Thurner first saw a set of custom leather tool bags, he was filled with envy. It was a moment that changed his life.

Thurner started making leather tool bags as a hobby. He persuaded a local saddle maker in northern California to produce

designs for himself and for the guys he worked with. But when more and more carpenters wanted bags, the saddle maker bowed out, forcing Thurner to learn how to sew leather. Thirty-five years and four recessions later, Darryl Thurner is still making tool belts.

These days he has lots of help. Thurner’s company, Occidental Leather, now employs more than 40 people. They make all of their products—belts, bags, vests, and accessories—at their facility in Sonoma County, Calif., using materials that are meticulously sourced from inside the United States.

Among the biggest challenges is finding good leather in a country that now outsources 98% of its shoe manufacturing. Thurner visits every tannery he works with to specify exactly what characteristics he wants in the leather. “My goal is pretty simple,” he says. “I just want to make the best tool bags that I possibly can.”

Asked to recall a favorite story from a customer, Thurner declined at first, saying he wasn’t very good at storytelling. But then he recalled a carpenter who had fallen off a roof while wearing a set of Occidental tool bags. One of the nail pouches got hooked on a rafter tail, and the guy hung there until his buddies could get him down. “Those bags saved his life,” Thurner said. “I guess that’s a pretty good story.”

To learn more about Occidental Leather, go to bestbelt.com.

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