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Working with LEATHER



EXTENSION WORK IN "AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS AND SUBJECTS RELATING THERETO,"
THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
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Working with Leather

By Jane Speece
Extension Specialist (Clothing)

Leather garments are elegant and long lasting. Although leather is no more difficult to sew than fabrics of similar weight, some hints on procedures should help you succeed.

Choosing a Pattern

Some patterns are especially designed for use with leather. Patterns designed for heavier weight fabrics can also be used. Select garment styles with simple lines. Avoid pleats, gathers and intricate details. A pattern with more pieces can be laid out on the skins to greater advantage than can one with few pieces. Yokes, two part fronts and backs, or two-piece sleeves are features to look for in the garment design. If you choose a design that has large pattern pieces, consider areas where you may be able to piece the pattern before you lay it on the leather.

Making a Test Garment

Since stitching will leave holes in leather, no fitting or altering can be done once the garment is finished. Make a test garment in fabric from the pattern before you purchase the skins. Felt or a heavy muslin react in a similar manner as leather in construction and serve well in test garments.

Particularly check the amount of ease over the sleeve cap. You may need to remove some of this ease from the pattern. Transfer any needed alterations from the test garment to the pattern. Take the pattern with you when you buy the skins to check your layout. Leather is expensive. You want enough for the garment, but no extra.

Purchasing the Skins

Leather is sold as individual skins which correspond to the size of the animal. The appearance and feel will depend upon the tanning process. Because leather is a natural product, it varies in weight, thickness and quality. Select skins that are as nearly alike as possible. Also, check for cuts or holes. Purchase all the pieces you will need at one time to have uniform coloring throughout the garment.

Leather is sold by the square foot. You may have to convert the amount of fabric suggested on the pattern to square feet. You can estimate the number of square feet by the following formula:

- . multiply the yards of 36" fabric needed by 9.
- . multiply the yards of 45" fabric needed by 11.
- . multiply the yards of 54" fabric needed by 13.

Add 15 per cent to the figure you get to take care of the loss allowance from imperfections or the irregular shape of the leather.

Leather has a grain which runs along the backbone of the animal. This grain has to be considered, as does the lengthwise grain of a fabric. The major pattern pieces should be laid to follow this lengthwise grain. (Figure 1)

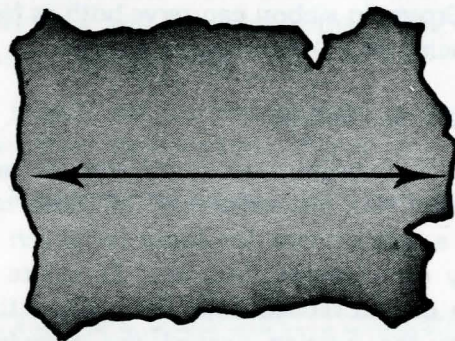


Fig. 1

Many kinds of skins are available in suede or smooth finishes. Common leathers are lambskin, goatskin, calfskin, cowhide, pigskin or buckskin from deer. The skins from the smaller animals often range from six to nine square feet and are sold whole. The larger hides may average up to 25 square feet, but are often sold in smaller sections. "Sides" are a half-section of a hide. "Splits" are smaller sections of a hide, averaging about seven square feet.

Extra Supplies Needed

A few supplies not always found with the usual sewing aids are needed to obtain a professional look with leather.

- . rubber cement or a fabric glue is necessary to hold down seam allowances, hems and darts.
- . wedge-shaped needles for machine and hand sewing. These usually come in assorted sizes for various weights of leather. If these are not available, use a sharp, new needle.
- . mallet or padded hammer to flatten seams or hems after they are cemented. A jar could also be used.

Interfacings and Linings

Lightweight interfacings, either woven or non-woven, will help keep front facing edges from stretching. Fused interfacings should not be used.

Linings are selected and installed in the same way as for medium or heavyweight fabrics. Because leather is difficult to hand sew, the lining is more easily put in by machine than by hand.

Facings are often eliminated to reduce bulk. Linings can be extended to the edge of the garment. Grosgrain ribbon can serve both as facing and interfacing on a skirt or pant waistline.

Layout, Cutting, Marking

Before you begin, cut duplicates of some pattern pieces. Cut the other half of those to be placed on a fold or two for those for which you usually lay on a double thickness. Eliminate any seams you can to reduce bulk. Trim extra tissue away from the cutting line of the pattern to increase your accuracy. You may want to decrease seam allowances to 3/8 inch (1 cm) to save leather.

As a general rule, lay the pattern on the wrong side of the skin. Mark any imperfections or variations in thickness with chalk or a ball point pen. You can then lay the pattern so these areas can be avoided or placed in an inconspicuous spot.

Lay the pattern pieces on a single thickness of a skin. Place the tops of your major pattern pieces at the top or neck of the skin. You will want to wear the leather the same direction as the animal wore it for best results. Keep the backbone or grainline parallel to your own backbone (Figure 2).

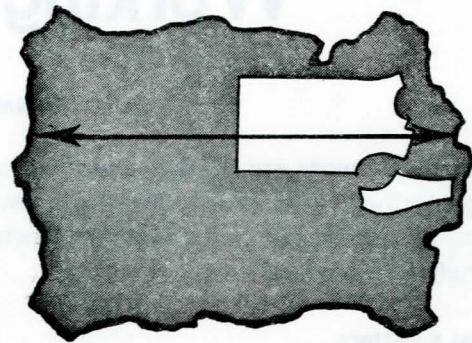


Fig. 2

Take time to plan the best way to lay out the pattern and to note if any piecing must be done. A napped layout is necessary for suede. Smooth leathers usually benefit from a napped layout, but this is not always essential. Look at any adjustments in position of pattern which must be made because of irregular thickness or imperfection marked on the leather.

Use weights or a tape, such as masking, transparent or basting tape, to hold the pattern. Pins leave holes in leather, and if used at all, should be placed only within the seam allowance.

Mark construction details on the wrong side with chalk or a ball point pen. Notches can be marked with snips into the seam allowance or cut outward. Use a ruler to be sure that foldlines or buttonholes are marked in a straight line.

Shears used for cutting should be sharp. If the leather is heavy, a razor blade may be necessary. Cut corners slightly rounded rather than square.

Make a Test Sample

Make a test sample from scraps to check your needle size, thread and stitch length. You may also need to change the tension and pressure of the machine. Begin with the following suggestions for your test:

- . For lightweight leathers, try a size 11 needle and 10 to 12 stitches per inch.
- . For mediumweight leathers, try a size 14 needle and 8 to 10 stitches per inch.
- . For heavyweight leathers, try a size 16 needle and 6 to 8 stitches per inch.

Seams and Darts

Various seams are functional and attractive for leather garments. The usual plain seam works well. Also consider such seams as the welt, flat felled, topstitched or lapped seams. (Figure 3)

Usually a heavy duty polyester core thread is satisfactory. A heavy duty mercerized cotton thread or silk thread can also be used for good results.

If you plan to topstitch, try a sample at this time. Use a longer stitch than for the garment. You also will want to use a thread intended for topstitching.

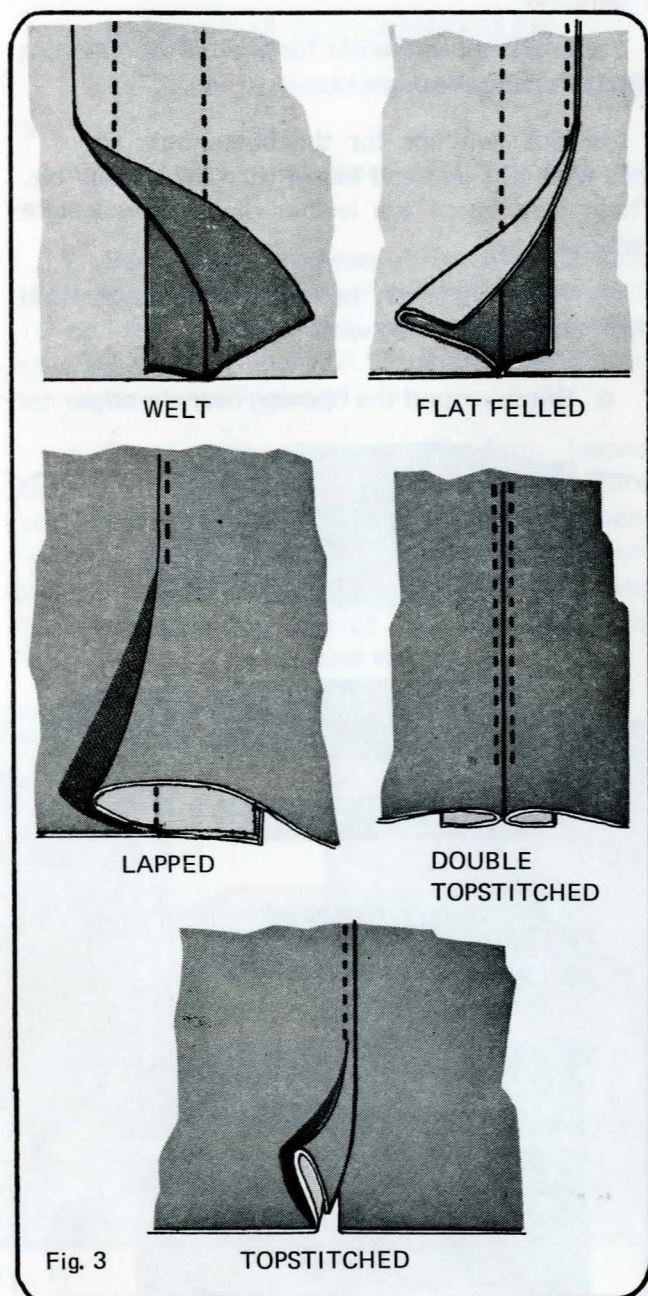
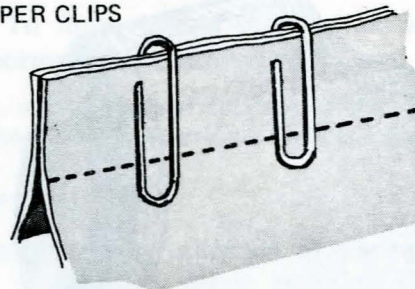


Fig. 3

Seams can be held at intervals with tape or paper clips while stitching (Figure 4). Be sure to remove the clips as the needle approaches them.

PAPER CLIPS



TAPE

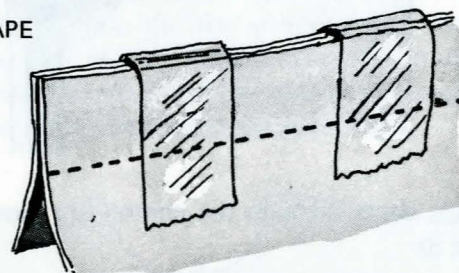


Fig. 4

Stitch seams from the top down to avoid stretching the leather. Place tissue or lightweight paper between the leather and the feed dogs to keep the leather from becoming scuffed. Often a roller foot will help the leather move more easily through the feed dogs.

Round off corners slightly as you stitch to make them easier to turn. (Figure 5)

Notch curved edges to eliminate bulk. (Figure 6)

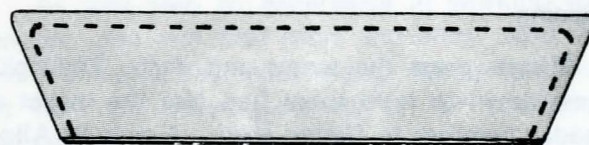


Fig. 5

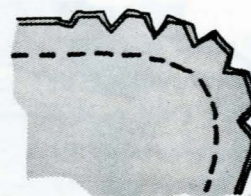


Fig. 6

Sew twill or seam tape into shoulder, necklines and armseyes to prevent stretching as the leather garment is worn. (Figure 7)

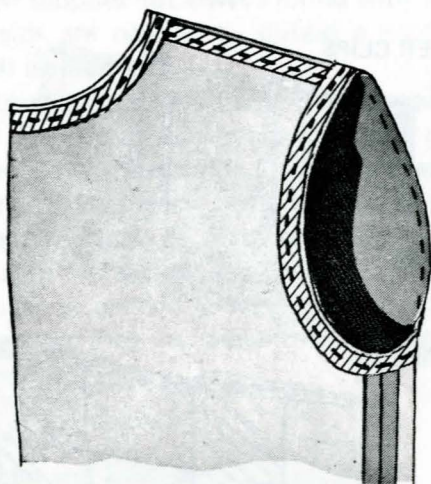


Fig. 7

Slash darts through the center to reduce bulk. (Figure 8)

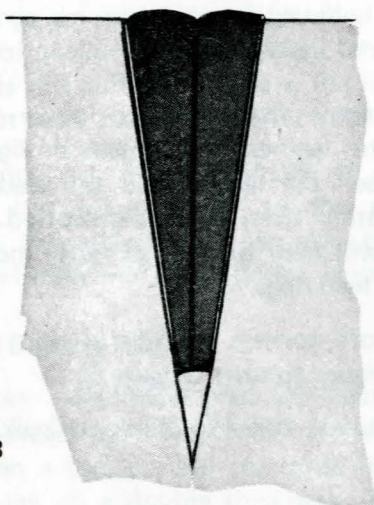


Fig. 8

Pressing

Finger press the seams and darts. Then glue them down to hold them flat. Use the mallet or padded hammer to flatten them. (Figure 9) Allow the glue to set before handling that section again.

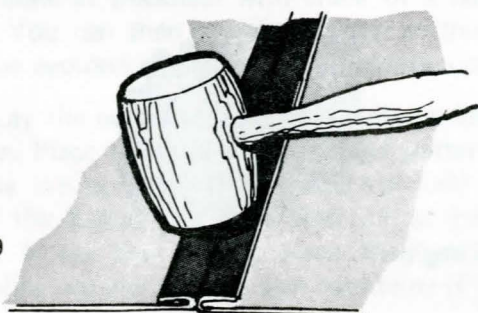


Fig. 9

Hems

The hem should be marked with chalk rather than pins. Usually hems do not run more than one or two inches (2.5 or 5 cm) wide. Turn up the hem, finger press and glue to the garment. Again, use the mallet to flatten it.

Buttonholes

Either bound buttonholes or machine-made buttonholes can be used. Shutter or windowpane buttonholes are examples of bound buttonholes used in leather.

One method often used with leather is in Figure 10:

- Mark the rectangle for the buttonhole. Cut it out, leaving the edges raw.
- Cut two lips for the buttonhole about 1 inch wide (2.5 cm) and longer than the buttonhole. These may be of the leather or a lighter weight fabric.
- Fold and insert behind the rectangle. Hold them on the underside with tape.
- Stitch around the opening near the edge.

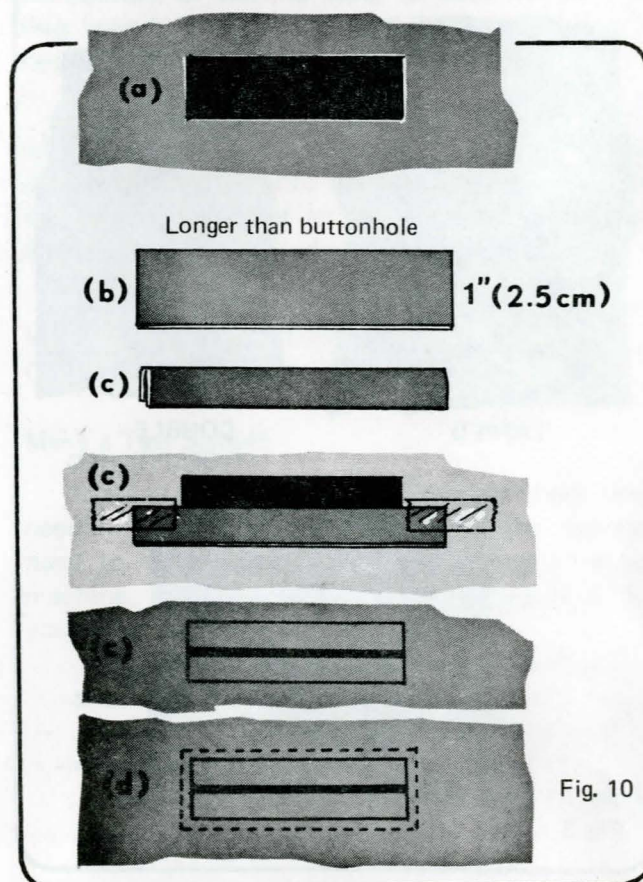


Fig. 10

Zippers*

. For *lightweight leather and suede*, use centered, lapped or invisible zipper application.

SPECIAL HINTS

. Do not machine baste seam closed; hand baste or use tape.

. For invisible zipper application, after installation glue down seam allowance to flatten zipper area.

. For *heavyweight leather and suede*, lapped seams are used to eliminate bulk.

PROCEDURE IN A LAPPED SEAM

. The zipper is installed before the seam is sewn.

1. Mark bottom of zipper opening but do not stitch seam.

2. **Back seam allowance**—Trim off 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) of seam allowance the length of zipper. To position zipper, place cut edge of back seam allowance along zipper coil. Stitch from bottom to top next to coil. (Figure 11)

3. **Front seam allowance**—To form lapped seam, trim 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) along entire front seam allowance. Edgestitch length of zipper opening only. On wrong side of fabric, mark front seam allowance 3/4 inch (2 cm) from cut edge. Lap over back, matching raw edge of back seam allowance

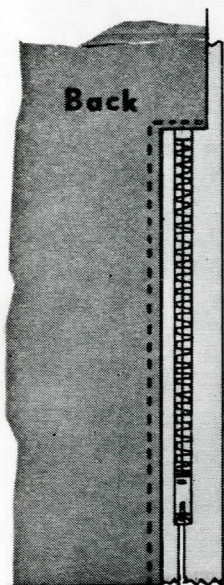


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

to marking on front. Tape on inside to secure. Stitch 3/8 inch (1 cm) from edge beginning at top of zipper and ending at hem. (Figure 12)

4. To finish lapped seam, stitch edge of lap from bottom of zipper opening to hem.

*Zipper installation used courtesy of the Consumer and Educational Affairs Department, Coats and Clark, Inc.

Sleeves

Use the "shirt" method of sewing in sleeves rather than set-in sleeve techniques. This will reduce the stress on the armhole and help in stitching into the armhole before the underarm seams are stitched. Then the bodice and underarm seams are sewn at one time. (Figure 13)

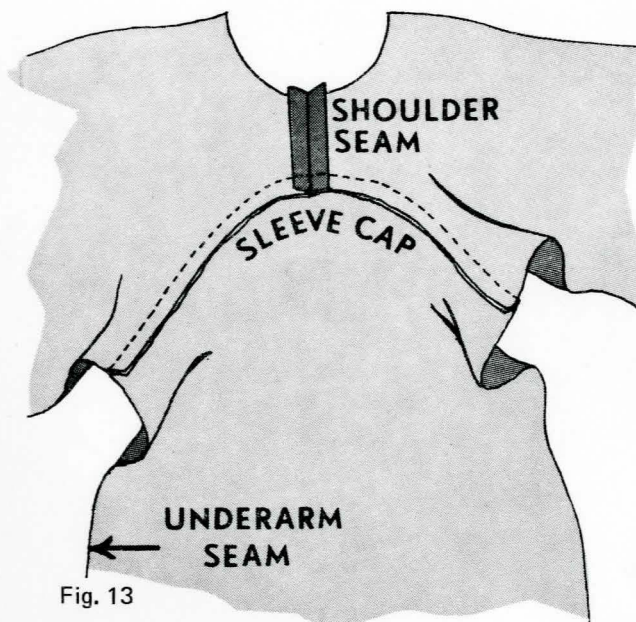


Fig. 13

As you gain in experience in working with leather, you will find more and more items you want to make. Save your scraps. You can use them as trim on other garments or for patchwork garments.

For greater detail see:

Coats and Clark's Sewing Book. Western Publishing Co., 1975.

National Porkettes. **Winning Ways With Pigskin.**

Penny, Patricia (ed.). **Everything About Sewing Leather and Leather-Like Fabrics.** New York: Butterick Fashion Marketing Co., 1971.

Schwebke, Phyllis W. and Krohn, Margaret B. **How to Sew Leather, Suede, Fur.** New York: Bruce Publishing Co., 1970.

Sewing Today's Leather. Tandy Leather Co., 1971.