



Master Craftsman

A master leathersmith continues nearly four decades of service to the livestock industry.

Story & photos by Lynsey Meharg, intern

► **Above:** George Benjamin Jr. worked to earn his leather-making badge as a Boy Scout before turning the artform into a career spanning nearly four decades.

Lucky are those who discover their calling at a young age, living a life fulfilled by working in a field they truly love. George Benjamin Jr. is one of the lucky ones.

He began leather carving as a Boy Scout, earning his leather-making badge. That little badge would turn out to have a huge impact on Benjamin, who would eventually pursue the trade as a career.

“If you’re doing what you like, it’s fun. The harder the challenge, the more I enjoy it,” Benjamin says, standing in the AgriBuckle booth at the 2013 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Kansas City, Mo., July 5-11.

Benjamin took his calling seriously and trained under the best to hone his skills.

Entering into master carving school, Benjamin studied the trade for nine years, graduating to join 48 other master carvers worldwide in this highly technical trade. Of the 48, just three, including Benjamin, are still practicing the art. Studying under the No. 1 carver in the world, Al Stolman, for 90 days, Benjamin was impressed with the skill of this man who could maintain eye contact with students and continue to tool the piece he was working on.

It took three years to craft the inventory to begin his business; however, after opening a small shop outside Disney World in 1977, Benjamin’s business grew to include two mall stores. Though originally Benjamin was carving only leather products, people visiting the shop began requesting custom belt buckles because they were unhappy with the quality of the buckles they had purchased elsewhere.

“I realized I could make them better than I could buy them,” Benjamin says of his decision to begin making his own buckles in 1980.

Soon the business was growing again, this time by the addition of another marketing avenue. Benjamin credits his wife for suggesting he attend shows to remedy the boredom he had been feeling in the store. Soon enough the couple closed their stores and went on the road three months a year.

“You have to plan six months ahead of time,” Benjamin says, referring to his inventory. He uses the nine months they are not on the road to craft his wares and create new products.

Quality keeps the customers

Creativity and quality are huge factors when it comes to AgriBuckle.

“You have to listen to what the kids and

mothers want!” Benjamin says, chuckling. “You have to have your ears open all the time.” Benjamin listens to what his customers talk about, whether that is another animal or design to add to his already long list of available motifs or a totally new product.

“Most of the things I invent are out of necessity,” Benjamin states as he points out a large key fob carved with a goat motif. Benjamin originally created the key fob after experiencing the difficulty of retrieving keys from his pocket while wearing leather gloves during hay season. When the intricately detailed silver fob is attached to a set of keys, it dangles from a person’s pocket while the keys remain safely inside, allowing for easier accessibility.

“If I sell people a quality product, they will come back; if I sell them a cheap product, they won’t,” Benjamin says.

Most belts bought from other retailers are bonded leather stamped with a design, says Benjamin. His leather products are created from one piece of saddle leather and carved with intricate designs by hand. This makes his product extremely strong and durable, as well as beautiful. Adding that people who bought products from him as a child are now purchasing his products for their own children, Benjamin says that he gets satisfaction from people enjoying his products.

“If you buy a belt from me and wear it, I’ll have you for a customer for life,” Benjamin says, adding that the belts he makes aren’t just magically created. Each belt must be

tooled, edged, burnished, dyed and antiqued, which takes a total of about two days per belt when drying times are added into the equation.

The pride and confidence Benjamin holds in his products is evident from the moment a potential customer steps into the AgriBuckle booth. Benjamin, who carves the molds for several large trophy-buckle companies, is always looking to expand the selection of items he creates.

After realizing many people needed a tough, yet good-looking buckle for everyday work, Benjamin crafted what he calls the chore buckle from a mixture of titanium and



► “Sometimes I make 12 of something and then I get bored,” says Benjamin. “When that happens, I make something different.”



► Benjamin says that the most rewarding thing anyone could say about his products is that they can’t wear them out.

jeweler’s brass. AgriBuckle personally guarantees each buckle for 10 years.

“The only reason it’s 10 is because I’m retiring in 10 years,” Benjamin says. “Otherwise, it would be 20.”

Though not quite as tough as its rough-and-tumble counterpart, trophy buckles crafted by AgriBuckle are true works of art. Using high-quality metals and other

materials, Benjamin crafts a collection of buckles ranging from those with sterling silver overlays to a blended-metal buckle containing titanium, rhodium, copper, German silver and a dab of platinum.

In addition to his belts and buckles, Benjamin began crafting jewelry out



► Taking up to 90 days each to complete, special projects crafted by Benjamin for breed associations are popular awards.

of glass, porcelain and metal 27 years ago, before adding wallets, key fobs, metal picture frames and many other handmade items to his offering.

Items on display in the glass cases during the NJAS included the champion rings for the National Junior Shorthorn Show, which took 90 days a piece to carve. An array of motifs carved into buckles, pendants, key fobs, buckles, conchos and other items were also carefully displayed within the cases. Each individual animal motif can take as long as two days, two hours and 20 minutes to carve, he says.

“I love to carve farm animals,” Benjamin says. “Nobody carves all the animals in conchos but me.” Benjamin carves a multitude of species, including cattle, hogs, sheep, boer goats, dairy goats, llamas, alpacas, chickens, rabbits, and even different breeds like Highland and Piedmontese cattle. Conchos, used on leather items as well as jewelry, can be produced at a rate of 12 per week without animal motifs, or five per week including an animal motif. Benjamin’s ability to craft unique pieces for his clients has made him a preferred craftsman for several breed organizations looking to present unique and breed-accurate trophy items.

“This job is always different. I’m always busy,” Benjamin says. The activity keeps the craftsman constantly striving to offer more creative products and options. Benjamin, who married wife Rosa nearly 40 years ago, appreciates that his wife enjoys his craft just as he does.

“I lucked out and married a Georgia girl,” he says. Benjamin, who taught Rosa his craft early on so the trade would continue to be passed along, works alongside her every day as they continue to craft extraordinary leather and metal pieces.

Now on his second generation of service to agricultural families, Benjamin acknowledges that his clientele consists of the small number of Americans who are involved in agriculture, yet, his clients continue to come back for more.

“Only 1% of people are farmers,” he says. “My market is 1%.”