

Classic Custom Leather

Yesterday's legends are born again—and again!

By Rob Garrett

The phrase "What's old is new again" has never been more true when it comes to holsters. I have long been a student of holsters and had the privilege to meet and interview Chic Gaylord shortly before his death. Gaylord is considered to be the father of modern concealment holsters with many of his designs living on today. From his shop, located at 312 West 47th Street in New York City, he filled orders that came from heads of state, members of the military and intelligence community down to the local beat cop. His influence is still apparent in many of today's holsters. He also authored the book, *Handgunner's Guide*, in 1960. Chapters covered such topics as the combat mindset, terminal ballistics, caliber and holster selection. It's a book that was years ahead of its time.

Gaylord was not alone. Seventrees was another New York shop that had left an impact on the leather industry. Run by Paris Theodore, Seventrees catered to some of the same clients as Gaylord and also filled contracts to both U.S. agencies and foreign governments. In addition to holsters, Seventrees had a back room operation that was called Armament Systems & Procedures, which became legendary for their production of the ASP pistol, a highly modified Smith & Wesson Model 39. When Seventrees & ASP closed their doors, the businesses went their separate ways. Renowned holster maker Ken Null purchased the rights to Seventrees and opened Seventrees Systems Ltd. in



Gaylord and Seventrees set the standard for modern concealment holsters. Two early Seventrees paddle holsters reflect the design of the day. Note the cut of the 1911 holster (right) is similar to many of the current holsters.



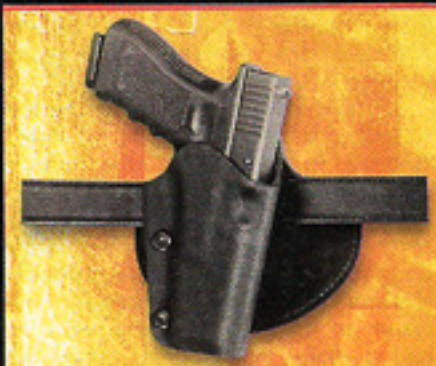
A trio of Alessi DOJ scabbards. From left to right, a standard DOJ for a GLOCK 26, a Heinie DOJ for a 1911, and a DOJ for a Kahr K-9.

Hanover, PA, where he filled Theodore's back orders and continued to produce the Seventrees line of holsters under his own name of K.L. Null Holsters Ltd.

Ken Null

Having owned and used Null's leather over the years, I have a real appreciation for both the history and the quality of his work. While working a beat in the early eighties, I invested in a Null ANK, an ankle rig for my Chiefs Special. I had been unhappy with another brand after the thumb-break snap failed during a struggle with a suspect. I felt something strike me in the foot and looked down to see my nicked Model 36 sliding across the asphalt! This was not a good sign! Null's was the first ankle holster I had worn which utilized the cylinder recess and tension to retain the revolver. During the next 10-plus years, I carried the ANK on a daily basis, both on- and off-duty, and had more than my share of foot pursuits and fights. It never failed me. I also found that the dense felt backing was far

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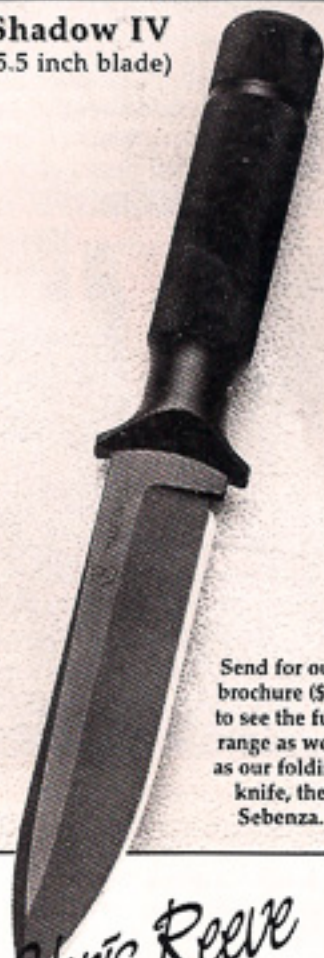


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cooler and more comfortable than the traditional fleece backing used by many manufacturers of the day. I still have the ANK and it's as serviceable today as the first day I put it on.

In 1990, Ken got tired of the cold weather and moved to my home state of Georgia. To have Null and his history as a neighbor has been a great experience. When I visited him, we stayed up into the early morning discussing holster history and experiences. He has always been a one-man shop. While he has never taken on an apprentice, his work has had a major influence on others who

have entered the business. Null continues to work to meet the needs of the discriminating professional with a variety of premium concealment rigs. Indeed, Null holsters are the choice of professionals and remain "unseen in the best places."

Bruce Nelson/Milt Sparks

Another custom maker who had a lasting influence on modern holster designs was Bruce Nelson. Nelson was a California law enforcement officer who got into the holster business because he couldn't find anything that met his needs. One of his most lasting designs is his #1 Professional. It incorporated a flared edge at the rear of the holster which, combined with the tunnel loop, pulled the butt of the weapon close to the body for enhanced concealment of large frame



For the purist, it doesn't come any better than this set of holsters from Sparks. The 55BN (left) is a modified version of Bruce Nelson's classic #1 Professional. The 1AT (right) a favorite during the early years of practical pistol competition.



No other shoulder holster has generated more interest than Galco's Miami Classic. Shown with a GLOCK 17, the Miami Classic suspends the pistol and magazines from a harness which distributes weight and enhances comfort.

autoloaders. Demand for the Professional exceeded Nelson's production capability and he licensed Milt Sparks to produce it as the 55BN, BN standing for Bruce Nelson. Sparks always gave design credit to Nelson in the catalog and the two remained friends until Bruce's untimely death.

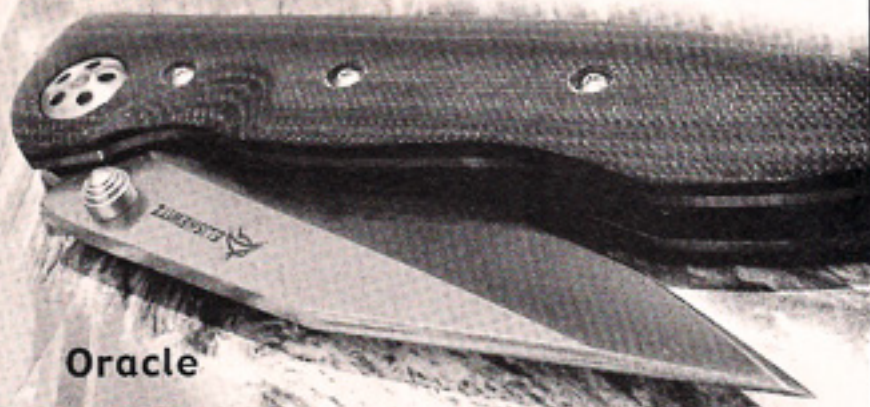
The #1 Professional/55BN is quite possibly the most copied concealment holster of the past 30 years. Whoever said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery must have had the 55BN in mind. Nearly every major holster maker, as well as most custom shops manufacture their own version. It is frequently referred to as an Askins design although, as far as I can determine, Charles Askins was not involved in the design or production. Today, Tony Kanaley carries on the fine work and tradition started by Sparks.

In preparation for this article, I requested a 55BN for a 1911 Government Model. I have never owned a Nelson rig but felt it was only proper to have the closest thing to the original for this article. "Often imitated but never duplicated" comes to mind when I compare the Sparks 55BN to other similar rigs. While the external lines may be similar, there are distinct features of the original that set it apart. The first item of note is the reinforced mouth of the holster. Most other manufacturers sew an additional strip of leather to stiffen the mouth of the holster and provide the appearance of the Sparks design. The true purpose of the leather is to secure a "U" shaped metal band in place that will prevent the holster from collapsing under almost any condition. This was an addition made by Milt and not a feature on the original #1 Professional. Remember, form follows function. The second item I noted was the sewn-in leather sight rails that protect the front sight and allow for a clean presentation. I now wear the 55BN as often as possible. When combined with the Sparks 1.75-inch belt, a full-size 1911 is comfortable for those long 18-hour days.

A second rig I requested for pure nostalgia was the 1AT. This is a slightly modified version of the original Gold Label that was introduced around 1971 and was a favorite of Jeff Cooper. The 1AT is a durable rig that was a favorite for daily carry as well as tactical competition. It features a sewn-in sight rail and was one of the first rigs to feature an adjustable tension welt. The flared edges on the belt loop ensures that the rig will remain secure and stable even under the most extreme conditions. While not as concealable as the 55BN, the 1AT can be worn under vests and jackets with little trouble. Just putting the 1AT on tends to carry me back to the golden days of yesteryear. The 1AT is very labor intensive and is not currently listed in the Sparks' catalog. Kanaley advises that it will remain available on a limited basis. For

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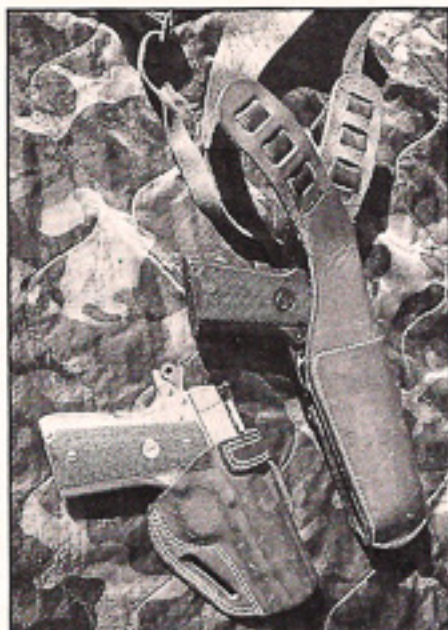
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Milt Sparks Holsters, "Being second best is not an option!"

Lou Alessi

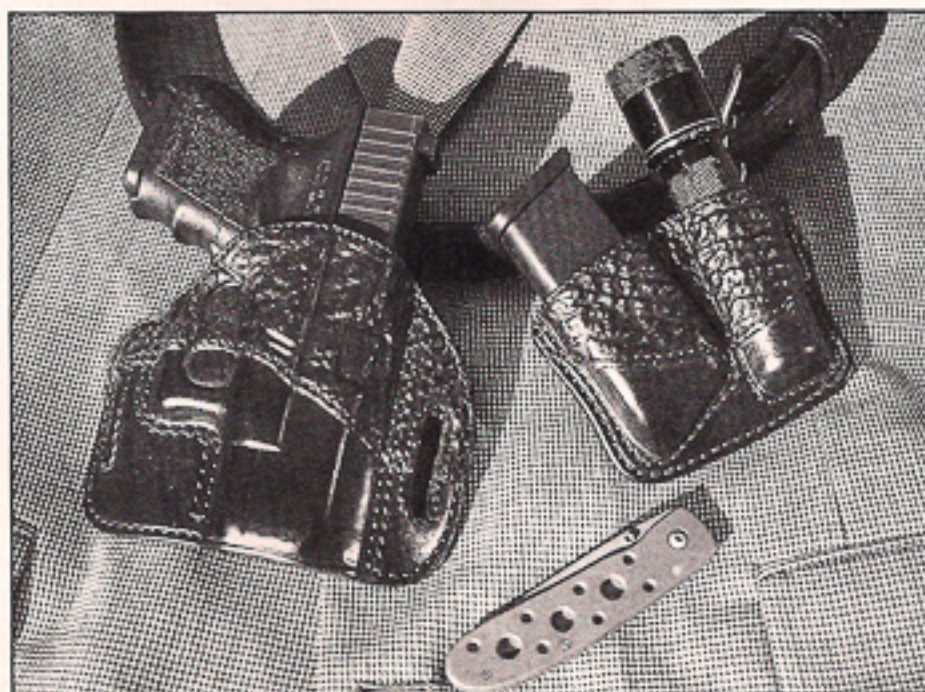
One custom shop whose name is known and respected is Lou Alessi. Like Sparks, Alessi had a personal and professional relationship with Bruce Nelson. In the early eighties, the California Department of Justice placed an order with Nelson for 400 holsters, which were slightly modified 55BNs. Nelson contacted Alessi and asked if he could fill the order and the Alessi DOJ was born. Today, Alessi continues to produce the DOJ and, as with Sparks, gives design credit to Nelson. Alessi has continued to run a small shop and he hand-fits every holster that leaves the shop. These days, when I carry a 1911 under dress cloths, my holster of choice is the DOJ. If the DOJ was the second generation of 55BN, then the Heinie DOJ is the third. This version is manufactured by Alessi under an exclusive agreement with custom pistolsmith Richard Heinie. The leading edge of the holster has been cut down to aid in the presentation of full size pistols such as the 1911. Recently, Alessi/Heinie has introduced a DOJ with a thumb-break to meet the requirement of the FBI. This holster is now approved for use by FBI SWAT operators who are issued a custom Springfield 1911.

Alessi also makes an ankle rig very similar to Null's ANK. The pistol I live with the most is a GLOCK 26 that has



Bianchi Askins Avenger (left) and X-15 shoulder holster became synonymous with their name.

been carried on a daily basis for over six years in an Alessi ankle rig. Like Null's ANK, the design and function of the holster provides the proper retention without relying on thumb-breaks or straps. Even after this extensive use, a little boot polish and the rig looks like new. Alessi fills orders ranging from single rigs for custom pistols to multiple rigs for organizations within the U.S. government as well as foreign organizations. The fact that his rigs have been to Bosnia, Somalia, Berlin, and other ports of call speaks of the respect he's earned. While Alessi does not have a catalog or a web site, he has a loyal following and continues to produce superb holsters for pro-



Josh Bulman THR is ideal for compact autos. The double belt slots anchor the holster to gunbelt. His TRH and mag pouch are trimmed in black sharkskin.

professionals the world over.

If the 55BN is the most copied design, then the Yaqui slide is a close second. The Yaqui Slide was the original belt slide that was popularized by Jeff Cooper during the sixties and seventies. When "the American Shooter" profiled Cooper earlier this year, he was wearing a Yaqui Slide during the taping. According to Tony Kanaley, the original Y.S. was designed by Eduardo Chahin, an El Salvadorian, who had ties to Jeff Cooper. Through Cooper, Milt Sparks worked out an agreement with Chahin to produce the holster for the domestic market. The actual name Yaqui Slide was coined by Cooper and first used by Sparks. The original Y.S. was fitted and constructed to make it resistant for having the pistol snatched from the rear. It also featured a cutout in the back flap to allow the rig to straddle a belt loop for proper placement and additional stability.

Galco International/Bianchi

The Yaqui Slide is a time-proven design that remains extremely popular with many shooters. This is evident by the number of holster makers who still offer it as a catalog item. While not a "custom shop," Galco International produces some of the finest hand-boned production leather available today. Their quality and attention to detail rivals many hand-made holsters. They have taken the Yaqui Slide and revised the design to include two tension screws on the rear of the holster. This allows the user to adjust the retention level for the individual pistol and as the holster becomes broken in. Galco's Yaqui Slide version carries on the tradition by offering custom quality, that's available at affordable prices.

While I have mentioned several classic belt rigs, I am aware that the shoulder holsters remain popular in many areas of the country. Two of the classics are the Bianchi X-15 and Galco's Miami Classic. The X-15 follows the traditional shoulder holster design and carries the pistol in a vertical, muzzle-down position. A U-shaped spring, supplemented by a safety strap, provides retention for the weapon. A wide leather harness supports the holster under the arm while an elastic strap crosses the back and loops around the opposite arm. The X-15 found favor with many military operatives during Vietnam as well as establishing a reputation with the law enforcement community. In my assortment of leather, I have a medium X-15 that dates back to the late seventies. I found it especially useful when deer hunting in south Georgia. The X-15 continues to be produced by Bianchi and provides both comfort and security for those needing a traditional shoulder rig.

Perhaps no other shoulder holster has received more publicity than the Miami Classic. First produced by Jackass

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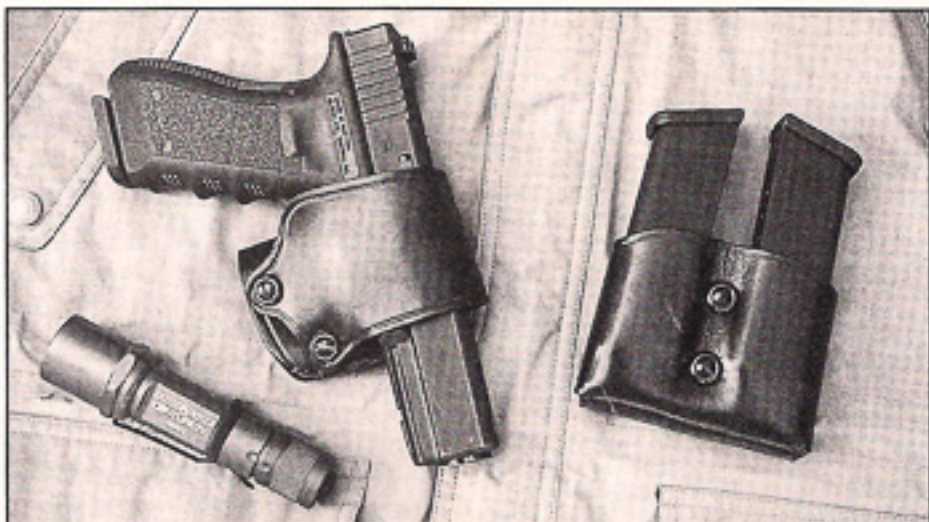
Leather which later became Galco, the rig was made famous by Don Johnson in his role as Sonny Crocket in the "Miami Vice" television show. Week after week, Crocket chased a variety of dopers through the South Florida's streets and swamps using his Bren Ten and later a S&W 645. Galco could not have asked for a better ad campaign. The Miami Classic carries the pistol in a horizontal position that is mounted to a figure-eight harness. A double magazine pouch on the opposite side balances the rig and makes it one of the most comfortable shoulder rigs available today. This design allows for extended carry of even full-size autos in relative comfort and concealment. During the late seventies and early eighties, I carried a slightly modified Colt LW Commander in an original Jackass rig while off-duty and on special details, and found it was a perfect combination.

Bulman

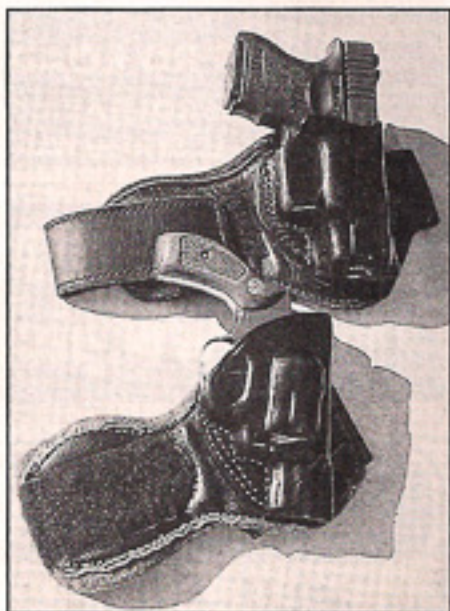
A new custom maker who caught my attention was Josh Bulman, of Bulman Gunleather. The opening page of Bulman's site shows an ASP 9mm in an IWB holster. It seems he is an ASP collector and is interested in the history of this custom pistol. In looking at his on-line catalog, I also noticed that he gives credit to Bruce Nelson's 55BN design when describing the Straight Drop Scabbard (SBS). Bulman sent me a matching holster and mag pouch made from premium cowhide and trimmed in black sharkskin. The results are stunning.

The holster is his THR high ride. It is a pancake style, open-top rig that is designed to ride somewhat higher than normal belt scabbards. Due to this feature, it's a specialty rig that's not suited for full-size autos such as the 1911 Gov't Model but is ideal for the GLOCK 26, Colt Officers Model and the Kahr series of pistols. The muzzle of the weapon rides less than 1.75 inches below the belt and enables one to conceal his weapon using a mid-length jacket or sweater. The top third of the holster is trimmed in black sharkskin and the entire rig is detail molded to the pistol. While the presentation requires a higher draw stroke, the THR provides a higher level of concealment not found in lower riding holsters.

Accompanying the holster was a matching pouch for a single G26 magazine and a SureFire 6P flashlight. The pouch also features sharkskin trim on the top third. Unlike some, Bulman's mag pouch for the G26 does not swallow



Galco has long been known for improving on classic designs. Their version of the Yaqui Slide features two tension screws at the rear of the holster.



The Null ANK, shown here with a S&W Chiefs Special, was carried for close to ten years on a daily basis and is still more than serviceable. The GLOCK 26 rig is from Lou Alessi. Both utilize a backing of dense felt which is cool and comfortable.

the abbreviated magazine. The magazine sits at a forward tilt that allows for a larger space between the magazine and light. The belt loops have "Pull The Dot" snaps on the bottom to allow the pouch to be mounted or removed without having to take the pants belt off.

The Urban Gun Belt completes the set. It's cut in a curved pattern to fit the body. The UGB-S is made from two layers of cowhide with a molded and shaped polymer lining that provides both support and durability. Unlike some gun belts, the UGB-S is indistinguishable from a dress belt. This is due in part to the small, close stitching and the thinness of the layers. Bulman trims the end of the belt and the keeper loop in black sharkskin to complement the trim on the holster and mag pouch.

Final Notes

The shooter who is looking for quality leather has never had more choices than today. From one-man custom shops to larger semi-custom manufacturers, there is something available for everyone. It does make me feel good to know that the history and tradition of the fifties and sixties is being kept alive today. One of the great things about technology is the web's ability to make information available at our desk. Take time to note the web sites for these companies and pay them a visit. The next time you are in the market for a quality holster, consider one of these.

For additional information contact:

Alessi Holsters, 2465 Niagara Falls Blvd., Dept CH, Amherst, NY 14228; 716-691-5615

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