



## Kangaroos and alligators

**L**isa Sorrell makes probably the most striking cowboy boots that money can buy, yet this came about purely by chance. Raised in a highly conservative religious community in Missouri, her mother began teaching her to sew at the age of twelve and, by the time she

was fifteen, she was making dresses for other women in the community. Married at 20, she moved with her husband to Oklahoma, leaving the sewing behind her. However, she soon found that she missed it and so answered an advertisement in the local paper looking for someone to

stitch cowboy boot tops (uppers).

"I had no idea what that was but it sounded like sewing. The boot maker who'd placed the ad was a grumpy old alcoholic with a salty vocabulary and I'd never been around anyone who drank or swore. I immediately fell in love with the craft of boot making. I

was hired and began to learn how to create and stitch the intricate designs that decorate cowboy boots.”

She left after 18 months, bought a sewing machine and began to stitch tops independently for boot makers across the US. The use of outworkers in general was an unfamiliar concept but, as most boot makers do not like stitching tops, they were happy to contract it out to someone else. People began to notice her work and ask their boot makers to have her produce the tops for their own boots.

Still not satisfied, she wanted to learn how to produce complete boots. This proved more difficult but she finally found someone willing to teach her, paid for two months of training and then spent a year and a half as an apprentice. “I paid my way by stitching all his tops. Since we don’t typically have those divisions of labour in the US I had to learn how to make boots throughout and customise lasts in order to be able to start my own business which I did in 1996 with Sorrell Custom Boots.”

Lisa has since become renowned for her very intricate and imaginative designs and has found kangaroo leather to be the best material to use as it is thin but strong and skives easily. This enables highly complex inlay and overlay effects to be achieved with the minimum of bulk. Both tops and vamps are lined with 2.0-2.5mm cow orthopaedic lining leather which gives the finished boot body and strength.

She mostly uses American alligator for the foot and prefers a matt finish as it is softer and a little heavier than when glazed. Vamps are crimped and also lasted wet which removes most of the glaze in any case, so starting out with a matt finish and adding the shine once the boot is complete makes sense. American alligator is in fact her favourite leather. “It looks good, crimps well and goes onto the last beautifully. Since the vamp is normally just one big piece of leather, stretch and strength are especially important qualities.”

American alligator is apparently easy to source, whereas finding kangaroo in a wide range of colours is a constant challenge. “Most leather companies here in the US only want to carry basic colours such as black and brown. Because I work alone and all my boots are very intricate, I only make about 15 pairs a year. This means my quantities are not large enough to buy direct from tanneries so I have to shop around and am constantly on the lookout for anything I think I could use. I have in fact built up quite a stock over the years but, then again, I never know what colour combinations a client may want. I’ve recently started a second business supplying leather and materials to other boot makers and am looking for sources for kangaroo leather to sell through this second business.”

The construction of a cowboy boot is unusual as only the forepart is welted with the sole attached through the waist and around the seat by pegging where fine wooden pegs are driven through the sole and insole. Lisa uses two rows at a spacing of six per inch to create a really strong and stiff shank area. Cowboy boots normally have 1.75in (3.80cm) heels so a strong steel shank is also used. This in turn is covered by a thick leather cover skived thin at the sides but left full thickness in the middle to create the distinctive rounded waist profile associated with these boots.

Lasts are bought in standard sizes and customised for



*Each colour in a design is a separate piece of leather cut by hand, layered and then stitched.*



*A covered steel shank and wooden pegging creates the traditional rounded cowboy waist profile.*



*Examples of Lisa Sorrell's highly original and extremely complex designs.*

each client as fit is all important both for comfort and for holding the boot firmly on the foot. She also likes to use old lasts from the 1940s, particularly those made by Western Last Company and Krentler Brothers as she considers them to be the best and most attractive. "I have many pairs from those two companies and had them copied so that I can continue to use those last models. I'm not trained or certified to

do any corrective work so I don't cater for problem feet. The primary fitting issues I see are large calves, narrow feet and high insteps. All of these are perfectly normal and common conditions but they do mean that buying factory-made boots is not an option."

Needless to say, with the incredible amount of work and detail involved, Lisa's boots are very expensive. Then

again, they are also works of art in their own right with no two ever the same and, as with other truly bespoke products, exclusivity still commands a premium even today. There is also no shortage of customers from around the world prepared to pay whatever it takes to own a pair of Sorrell boots, as in the case of the client who flew in from Australia to be measured for a pair of boots—in kangaroo and alligator. 🐾