

# FAMILY TANNERY PRESERVES ANCIENT TRADITIONS

By Jeannette Beranger & Jesse Meyer

I've always been fascinated with fine leather and the undeniable feel of good craftsmanship. Once common in the United States, most tanneries have now closed or moved on to other countries. It's a rare find to stumble across an artisanal tannery that produces high-quality work using traditional vegetable-based tanning methods that were used for centuries around the globe.

My colleague, Cindra Kerscher, and I recently visited Pergamena Tannery. Owner Jesse Meyer kindly gave us a tour of his family's facility, teaching us about the processes, and sharing his family traditions with the craft.

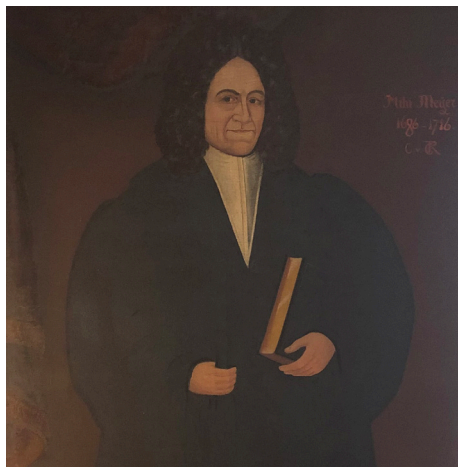
## FAMILY ROOTS

"We have a portrait of one of our ancestors hanging on the wall of the current Meyer family home," Jesse said. Mihi Meyer was a protestant minister from 1686 to 1712 and is pictured in austere black dress, tight dark curls piled high on his forehead and parted in the middle, not unlike the style of the day, head slightly to the side but with eyes trained on the viewer.

"The painting was slightly unnerving to me as a small child growing up in this home, complete with a nightmare involving a terrible destructive nighttime thunderstorm in which the house is destroyed, save for the wall on which the portrait is hung. As the lightning illuminated the night sky, through the driving rain, the portrait would be seen, eyes still fixed on the terrified viewer."

This is said to be a copy of a painting hanging in a church somewhere in Germany. During the Meyer family's occupational journey to the New World, this copy was commissioned and made its way to the United States. It hangs in Jesse's home a few miles from the current location of the Meyer Family Tannery. It is just one example of the historical materials associated with the business that has survived because of the family's close relationship to its craft and company.

Records indicate that Pergamena Tannery has operated continuously under the same family for more than 470



(Top) The Meyer family began tanning and leather work in 1550 in Germany. Wilhelm Meyer later moved the family business to the New World in 1830. His grandson eventually took over and incorporated the business under the name Richard E. Meyer & Sons. Above, Walter and Richard Meyer are at work in their tanning workshop in New Jersey. Photo courtesy of Jesse Meyer. (Left) An unnerving portrait of Mihi Meyer, a protestant minister in Germany. Photo courtesy of Jesse Meyer. (Right) A parchment stretching as part of the sustainable tanning process. Photo by Jeannette Beranger.

years. While known for their parchment and leather, their greatest product at the moment is the heritage preserved in their company legacy. It is no small miracle that the tannery is still in existence today. Adaptation, thoughtful choices, and a great deal of perseverance helped the company survive. In this way, Pergamena is not unlike The Livestock Conservancy in recognizing the value of hard work and heritage.

## THE TANNERY

Today, the small tannery is based in Montgomery, in the New York Hudson Valley. They specialize in tanning cowhide, calfskin, goat, and deerskin to make leather.

Conveniently located within 60 miles of one of the largest cultural, fashion, and design hubs in the world, their proximity to New York City is helpful when welcoming in-person visitors. Their



(Left) Jesse Meyer shows off a dyed veg-tan parchment. (Right) Pouch examples made of parchment by Pergamena. Jesse Meyer expanded the family business in 1999 to produce hand-made parchment. Photos by Jeannette Beranger.

location allows many people to satisfy their curiosity and witness a process that not too long ago was a huge industry here in the United States.

A steady flow of foot traffic led to interest in local manufacturing using local raw materials, such as hides from animals raised in the Hudson Valley. As word spreads about the operation, Pergamena receives many inquiries from farms across the country looking to take advantage of the tannery service and soliciting the use of their hides.

Most businesses and farms look for opportunities to offer value-added products. Farming, and related industries like meat and dairy production, have gone through huge changes, making it more and more challenging to maintain profitability. Whether consolidation in the meat industry, price controls in the dairy industry, or changes in consumer habits and demand, the hurdles are daunting for small businesses.

Prices for co-products have also fluctuated significantly in the last few years. For example, animal hides and offal, collectively referred to as the "Fifth Quarter," collected from slaughterhouses by hide buyers and processors used to be a source of income. However with industry consolidation it is no longer profitable for large buyers to collect hides from smaller slaughterhouses. As a result, hides have become a waste product that must be disposed of with costs passed along to the farmer.

What is a farmer to do when a money-making co-product has become an expense? Pergamena's solution is to turn this traceable material into a locally available raw material for finished leather goods and retail products. In the age of growing concern about where our consumer goods and products come from provenance is becoming increasingly important. To be able to know where your leathers come from, how the animals were raised, and how and where the leathers were produced, can offer tremendous value and cachet.

Jesse and his crew are already providing this service for several farms and are always looking to add more.

#### USING SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS

Sustainability and traceability are just some of the ways Pergamena is filling niches and differentiating themselves from other tanneries. Leather is a very malleable and plastic material, which can yield vastly different end products depending on how it is tanned and for what purpose. Garment leather, leather goods, shoes, both uppers and soles, upholstery, gloves, belts, and bookbinding are just a few leather uses.

As you might expect, not all tanning processes are the same and not all leathers are good for all applications. In a nod to their more than 470 year history of leather tanning, Pergamena has returned to the basics in terms of tanning chemistry. The company uses

a very traditional process referred to as vegetable tanning or "veg-tan" for short. All plant matter has "tannin" or astringent polyphenol which binds to and precipitates proteins. Animal hides are mainly a collection of different proteins, such as collagen, elastin, gelatin, and keratin. Commercial veg-tan extracts derive mainly from Oak, Sumac, European Chestnut, Tara, Quebracho, and Mimosa. They can come from different parts of the tree and impart different colors and characteristics to a hide when exposed for a length of time.

Leather has been produced using this veg-tan method for thousands of years. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, advances in chemistry created new methods for tanning using mainly chrome metal extracts. Currently veg-tan leather constitutes only about 10 percent of leather production throughout the world.

Advantages gained in versatility and speed of leather production through modern methods is offset by potential harmful effects on tannery workers and environmental pollution in the form of hazardous heavy metals contamination of groundwater. To avoid this issue and to increase the beneficial environmental footprint, Pergamena now produces leathers solely using a veg-tan process.

Veg-tan leather is often heavier and more substantial than chrome tanned leather, with a tan/brown base color. It can be wet formed and is much more

water absorbent. It wears well and will burnish and develop a beautiful patina with use, giving each hide unique character. It is excellent for leather goods, shoes, book leathers, as well as some furniture and gloves. Add this trait to the unique origin, which often comes with a heritage breed hide, and you've created a truly remarkable leather resource.

### TIMING AND PROCESS

The actual hide tanning process is labor-intensive and can take several weeks. Hides arrive preserved in salt, or fresh, which requires salting by the tannery, until a suitable number are stockpiled to begin processing. Hides are soaked and washed, flesh is removed via a mechanical process, and hair or wool is removed using a chemical process. This water-intensive process is done in large rotating vats, or drums, to help properly mix hides and chemicals.

Once everything but the hide material is removed, the thoroughly degreased and washed hide is put in a bath of acid and salt to pickle. In this acidic environment, the hide is ready to accept and absorb the tannins, which are added incrementally over many hours, and sometimes days. During this process, the thick hides are kept in motion to help the tannins penetrate all the way through. Once this process is complete, greases and oils are added to lubricate and soften the hide.

When the wet work is completed, hides are taken out and dried flat on screens or frames. When dry, the stiff hides are mechanically pulled and stretched to make the leather pliable again. At this point, the leather is technically tanned, but still in a very crude state.

From here, the hides are essentially "blank slates." They are shaved and thinned, go back into the drum and dyed a chosen color, re-stretched and dried, then mechanically softened again. They can be spray-dyed to exact shades, plated with any number of patterns, and sealed with waxes or urethane sprays.

All of the fine-tuning together constitutes the "finishing" process. This is where the tannery labor ends and the hides are either sent back to the farmer or to a customer who will use it to produce consumer ready retail goods.

### LOOKING AHEAD

Within the last few years, interest in rare heritage breeds has overlapped with the scientific community's interest in the genetic information that may remain within a hide to help locate the animal's point of origin as well as the effect of animal husbandry on the qualities of the end-product leather. This has involved private clients of Pergamena as well as academic and governmental institutions.

New projects such as these keep the work interesting. Jesse believes the work done by rare breed livestock farmers can only be enhanced by increasing the value of the co-products, such as leathers from these animals.

From one rare breed to another, Pergamena looks forward to exploring parchment and leather projects that can be created with rare breeds.

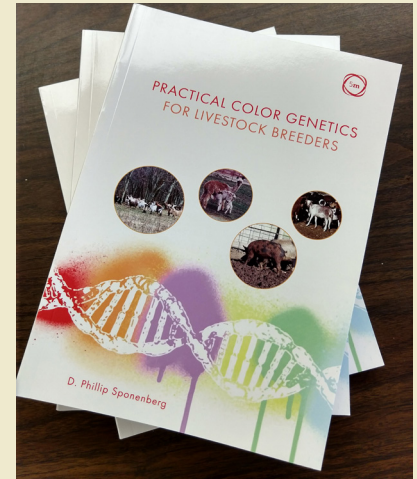
Cindra and I had quite an education and now see tanning from an entirely different perspective. The result is a work of art. The beauty of Jesse's products were undeniable and it's no wonder interior decorators searching for unique products flock to his business for their customer's needs.

To learn more about Pergamena, visit their website [www.pergamena.net](http://www.pergamena.net).

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*Jesse Meyer continues his family's tannery traditions as CEO of Pergamena. The company produces veg-tan quality leather and parchment for dozens of niche industries. With a background in sculpture and an eye for design, Jesse approaches materials with a creative lens, recognizing the inherent artistry of the craft. Jesse is proud of the Meyer family's history and has seen the tanning industry undergo tectonic changes in just a few years. The long history of the family business provides a blueprint for Pergamena to navigate and thrive for another 470 years.*

*Jeannette Beranger, Senior Program Manager at The Livestock Conservancy, has more than 30 years of experience working as an animal professional in zoological and non-profit institutions. She is an active lecturer, writer, and photographer. At home she practices what she preaches, maintaining a heritage breed farm with a focus on Crèvecoeur chickens.*



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**Carol J. Collins**  
Gibsonia, PA

**Matthew Hunker**  
Graham, NC

**Lucien (Bud) Wood**  
Webster City, IA

To become a Life Member, contact Karen Elliott at 806-570-0874 or [kelliott@livestockconservancy.org](mailto:kelliott@livestockconservancy.org)