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Letter to the Editor

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

My article about alligator-skin bindings in the Florida State Archives appeared in the fall 1988 issue of *Provenance*. [Editor's Note: See Hal Hubener, "Sunshine State Showpieces: Alligator-Skin Bindings in the Florida Archives," *Provenance* VI (Fall 1988): 43-49.] Regrettably I must inform you that I believe I have misidentified the leather on these books. I believe these inlays have been tooled or stamped to create the illusion of alligator skin. I am writing to you, therefore, to explain the circumstances of the error.

What prompted my re-evaluation was a discovery made several months ago in a book club meeting at which I had shown club members a book I owned. It was published in the late nineteenth century and was bound in what appeared to be alligator skin. One club member said that in his opinion the leather was not alligator. He added that the practice of using tools or stamps to create the scaled appearance was not uncommon during the late nineteenth century. He also noted the fragility of the leather, which made him think the binding was sheepskin.

I immediately thought of the similarity of this book to the record books in the State Archives and returned to the Archives a few weeks later. While there I showed my book to several leather tanners and one book dealer. They all thought it was bound in alligator skin.

One of the tanners did suggest a search for hair follicles, so I examined several of the Archives volumes under magnification and found many tiny holes. If the holes do represent follicles, then the leather obviously must have come from a mammal, not

a reptile. Under magnification one can also see that the scales on these inlays are not well defined. Some are squarish, some oval and others triangular. Inside the scales are lines that look as though they have been drawn by means of a tool. These lines are only a couple of millimeters in length and under magnification look exactly like the lines that define the circumference of the scales. The similarity would indicate that the scale patterns are not genuine.

One approach to identifying the skin is chemical analysis. This procedure is not recommended since it would involve removing a portion of the inlay. Even if analysis were possible, it would yield results only for that individual binding. Discussions with several zoologists and the chief of the State of Florida Crime Lab revealed that this approach is not recommended anyway, since the strong lyes with which the leather was tanned could render chemical or serological analysis invalid. DNA analysis might be possible, according to one biologist, but the cost would probably be high and again the process would require damage to the binding. As with chemical analysis, the results would be valid only for that one book.

The most practical way to determine the origin of the skin is to observe the hair follicle patterns, since the patterns vary from mammal to mammal. It is likely that the volumes in the Archives are bound in calf, goat or sheepskin, since those skins are most commonly used in leather-bound books. One anthropologist at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, may be able to identify the leather, but the Florida State Archives will not allow the volumes to be removed and the anthropologist's high consultant's fee rules out his traveling to Tallahassee. The individual has agreed, however, to examine photocopies or photographs.

Despite the misidentification, the intrinsic values of these books still hold. The artistic use of the skin, the gold tooling, the marbled-pattern paper, age and exhibit value remain, and there is added interest in the fact that there was a practice of using

tools or stamps to create the illusion of a reptile's skin. There is also the fascinating question of why binderies would use tools to create the impression of alligator leather when the "real thing" was in such abundance. One rare books librarian suggested that the leather may not be flexible enough for use as a binding and that given the popularity of the skin as expressed in handbags, shoes and suitcases, the imitation may be nothing more than a reflection of that taste.

I shall keep *Provenance* informed of the efforts of the University of Florida anthropologist to shed more light on the leather, and I welcome suggestions from readers concerning a definitive method of identifying the animal from which the leather came.

Hal Hubener
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