



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association

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Monthly News & Updates

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March 2022 Newsletter



Billy Dias in his leatherworking shop.

Local Talent: *William (Billy) Dias* *An elder statesman of leathercrafting just keeps on re-inventing.*

Article by Denning Powell
and Ruth Bennett,
.PMKCA Members
(Photos by Denning)

Something about the Hāmākua Coast attracts creativity. That's the working hypothesis, anyway. And here's yet one more example: Billy Dias started off early in his artistry by decorating seashells, then morphed into leather worker, and now he wraps up that loving journey with spinoffs in both leather and wood. A Renaissance man, right here in our midst.

Many of us in the Pa'auilo and Kalopa communities know Billy Dias from the days when he could be found at Leslie Correa's "Alfalfa Hay and Cubes" feed store in Pa'auilo (now owned by Manny Souza). Billy was a fixture there, working on his leather products and repairing the tack and gear of the ranchers. On certain Friday evenings at Leslie's potluck gatherings, Billy would bring his 12-string guitar and western band to entertain the local community. We were all invited to meet, share food, talk story, and hear good music. Billy was someone everyone knew: a multi-talented artist, craftsman, musician, a beloved member of the community.

He started off as a third-generation plantation worker and trainer of the family ranch horses, growing up well before the internet, and even before (gasp) much TV. That generation – plantation workers, paniolos – all were typically very good with their hands, and inventive, and adaptive. Where they saw a need, they created a solution. In our present time, Billy isn't going to be training any more horses, but he's still plenty spry, and he's carried that inventiveness and creativity on into a modern-day business: crafting objects of beauty and utility from both leather and wood.

His leather-working inspiration came from saddle-makers Manuel Miranda and the Rodrigues brothers, along with Willie Meyer from Laupahoehoe. So he learned early about

saddle-making and all the leatherworking surrounding that process. But, interestingly, Billy's streak of creativity originated even earlier. "I think I was in my early twenties when my artistic ideas started to take shape," he says. "I picked up a native cowrie shell and wondered what I could do with it. So I carved into the shell and noted its natural colors, then polished it. I tried a lot of things, and they worked. Wasn't a big money-maker, but it was a lot of fun. Got me truly hooked on making art with my hands."



Evolution of a shell into an object of art, a line of interest that Billy still maintains.

"Once that creative bug bites you, it's hard to say which way it's gonna go. For me, it was shells to leather to wood. I love 'em all. Still work with 'em all. And that's sort of the spirit of it, yeah?" he reflects. "So what if I haven't done it before... let's give it a shot and see what happens."

And therein, probably, lies one secret of his success over the years as a leatherworker. His handmade products cover a wide range of paniolo needs. He doesn't do saddles much anymore, but still makes a wide range of other leatherware and rawhide products: stirrup covers, bridles, lariats, and... bullwhips??? Yes, bullwhips.

Hmmm... we asked if he happened to make that bullwhip Indiana Jones used in those movies. "A missed marketing opportunity," he agrees, laughing. Then he goes into some of the intricate details of processing leather into woven rawhide products like ropes and whips, how he forms leather pieces into precise thicknesses. He shows us a video of machinery he hand-made, as it slices those pieces into appropriately-sized rawhide strips.

Billy's descriptions are both detailed and fascinating, running from properly curing leather to dyeing it properly. It turns out that weaving the strips – the last step, which takes one really long day for a lariat or whip – depends on the quality of each of the steps before it. And therein, probably is another secret of this artisan's success. "Just pure persistence," Billy agrees when we ask, "every step of a process, you gotta keep honing it until you get it right. Sure, you start with what everybody taught you, but you keep refining, making it better. All the time."



Some of Billy's leatherworks.

That thinking obviously applies to all the products Billy makes. These days, one of his major markets is knife sheaths. He sells to a distributor who is ecstatic about the quality of the sheaths, and who serves a constant buyer demand for them. Some background here... paniolos carry knives on their belts, use them all the time. When you do that, you need a sharpener right beside them. So, Billy makes sheaths with an extra little sleeve for a sharpening file, called a *kila* (Hawaiian for "sharpening steel"). And then he also provides the file. And of course, the file needs a handle on it, so he makes those too; a sideways slant into his woodworking persona. In a corporate world, this sort of product development strategy would be called vertical integration.

"There's a lot of variation in demand for sheaths," he notes. "Some customers like clips or flaps to hold the tools securely, some just count on the friction to hold them." And it turns out there's a pretty strong demand for custom work, too.

What does the modern paniolo need, for example? Well, a knife and a file for sure, but – these days – how about a cell phone? Especially one that's secured in a pocket at your belt rather than tucked in your hip pocket where your uppity bronco can buck it out. And a sheath that secures all three? With your initials on it? "A nice steady demand for sheaths like this," Billy admits as he smiles at us, "and on request I even make the occasional custom holster for a pistol."



Custom work for the modern cowboy.

To round out our interview tour, Billy takes us out to his woodworking shop in the rear of the house. He was inspired by his uncle Dan of Dan De Luz Woods, and that level of professional talent shows when he puts a file with a raw wood block handle into a lathe

and carves the handle into the exact proper rounded and beveled shape, going just by his eyeball. That takes a bit over three minutes, and the handle is ready to be oiled; the end result is a very nice, finished file.

Then, on the floor of the workshop, we spot two creations totally unrelated to the leather business. The first is ranch worker-related; a simple stand with a fold-down flap. You jam the heel of your boot into the tapered slot in the flap and simply pull your foot out of the boot. No sitting down, no lifting and crossing of tired legs, no scrabbling in the mud on your boot for your fingers to get a grip to pull. Off with one boot, off with the other, leave them on the floor by the stand and walk away in your socks. Simple and easy. Sure, you can find something unattractive but practical to get that muddy boot off, but this... it's a showpiece!

The second creation is more generic; a fine-furniture piece that's a dispenser for toilet paper, with a caddy cabinet underneath for extra rolls. But it has a horse's curb bit holding the roll in place, thus cutely maintaining the paniolo theme. This is clearly a wild card among Billy's many inventive products, but it serves as a nice underline to his inventive mindset of "I see a need for something, so I make it".



Woodworking skills, and the results!

Years and years of accumulated knowledge and experience. Most of it hands-on and hard-won from trial and error. And persistence. So where does it all go, post-Billy? Fortunately, his granddaughter Jaclyn is learning the business. So nice to see Billy's talents and skills and attitude passing down through the generations, continuing those products and the love that went into making them.

Someday soon, after Covid, hopefully we'll find ways to gather again like we did way back then at the Pa'auilo feed store... to admire the skills and talents that abound among artists and artisans of our communities, share good food and old memories, listen to great music, and celebrate life on the Hāmākua Coast... with Billy Dias!

But in the meantime... if you should

develop a need for a bullwhip (maybe as an artistic wall hanging, or for an exciting cobweb clearance project, or for actual paniolo use)... or if you have a vision of something you would love to have created in leather or wood or both... Billy says feel free to talk story with him at 808-776-1672 (h) or 808-339-4535 (c).

Billy Dias with granddaughter, colleague, co-worker, Jackie Jordan.



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## **Coming PMKCA Meetings**

We continue to work at the Board and committee level on behalf of our communities. If you have any interests or concerns, we encourage you to email any Board member.

### ***PMKCA Board of Directors Meeting (via ZOOM) Thursday, April 8, 2022, 7pm***

If you would like to attend, any Board member can give you details on joining the online meeting.

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JOIN PMKCA or RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP for 2022!!

Membership in PMKCA is on a calendar year basis; so, with the arrival of 2022, we are beginning a new membership drive. New members are particularly welcomed. Current members are encouraged to renew your membership in 2022.

Dues are only \$20 per year - and help support so many great community activities. Click the "Visit our website" link below and choose Membership/Dues). We offer a PayPal option, or mail a check made out to PMKCA to PO Box 408, Pa'aulo, HI 96776.

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