



Using time-honored techniques of the master hatter's trade, Butch Dorer continues to strive for perfection in his New Mexico hat shop.

# High-End Hatter

Custom hat maker Butch Dorer has been called egocentric, an industry rebel and a recluse. He's also been called the best cowboy hat maker in America.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DARRELL DODDS**

**W**ATCHING BUTCH DORER SHAPE one of his pure beaver cowboy hats must be a bit like it was watching Michelangelo apply the last dabs of paint to the Sistine Chapel. After years of research, hard work and trial-and-error experimentation, the New Mexico hat maker approaches the final stages of his craft by slowly manipulating the steam-warmed felt with deft fingers that move with a memory of their own.

For more than a quarter century, Butch Dorer has been focused on—some would say obsessed with—making the finest pure beaver hat that money can buy. His first attempts at resurrecting the long lost art were, by his own admission, rather crude. Today, his crowning achievement is The Silver Beaver, a limited-edition, special-order hat that fetches a premium price of \$10,000. Diamond-inlaid platinum buckle sets, use of the rarest furs and a custom-made hatbox can double that.



Once the headquarters of the Gould Ranch, this two-room log cabin, built in 1919, is Mecca for cowboys and movie stars in search of the finest pure beaver hats.



For Butch and Phoebe Dorer, family has always come first. "Being able to keep the family here on the ranch and working together is our greatest achievement," says Butch. From left: Travis Dalzell, Shama (Dorer) Dalzell, and Sandon, Shera, Phoebe, Butch and Shaaf Dorer.

This is astonishing when you consider that his first pure beaver hat sold for \$100.

Today, Dorer's client list includes ranchers, horse trainers, day-wage cowboys, bankers and movie stars. A short list of luminaries that sport Dorer-made hats includes Wilford Brimley, Larry Hagman, Tommy Lee Jones, Christi Brinkley, J.D. Yates, Cookie Banuelos, Dr. Glen Blodgett and Clinton Anderson.

While Dorer is proud that his hats have attained almost cult status with people who can afford them, he is equally proud of the fact that many of his hats are purchased by working cowboys who might have to save up for a year or more to own one. On occasion, Butch has been known to take a horse or even a cow in trade to help out a good customer.

While he makes the Bar 50, a blend of beaver and Australian hare, to meet the needs of that customer, it is his pure beaver hat that has become the gold standard of the cowboy hat-making industry.

"I learned a long time ago that it's easier and more profitable satisfying people who want the very best than marketing to the masses," says Dorer. "It doesn't matter whether you're making saddles, boots, hats or selling horses, people who want the best demand quality, and you'll either rise to the occasion or you won't."

"Early on, we chose to pursue the high-end customer, and we've never looked back."

### Humble Beginnings

As Butch tells it, his obsession with hats began early.

"I was born in Michigan, but my parents moved to Houston, Texas, when I was little," he says. "I don't remember when I got my first cowboy hat, but I was probably 4 or 5. I'm still not sure why, but I was fascinated with hats . . . perhaps it was all the Western movies I watched."

"We didn't have horses, so I guess that was as close as I could get to being a cowboy. When I got a little older, I started

cleaning hats for pocket change, but I never had a clue that someday I'd be in the trade."

When he was in his early 20s, Butch met his future wife, Phoebe, and kids and careers took center stage.

"When we got married, we knew two things," says Dorer. "First, we wanted to have a family, and second, we wanted to work for ourselves. But since neither of us really had a career path in mind, we weren't sure how we were going to make a living."

As often happens, a chance encounter opened the door to opportunity.

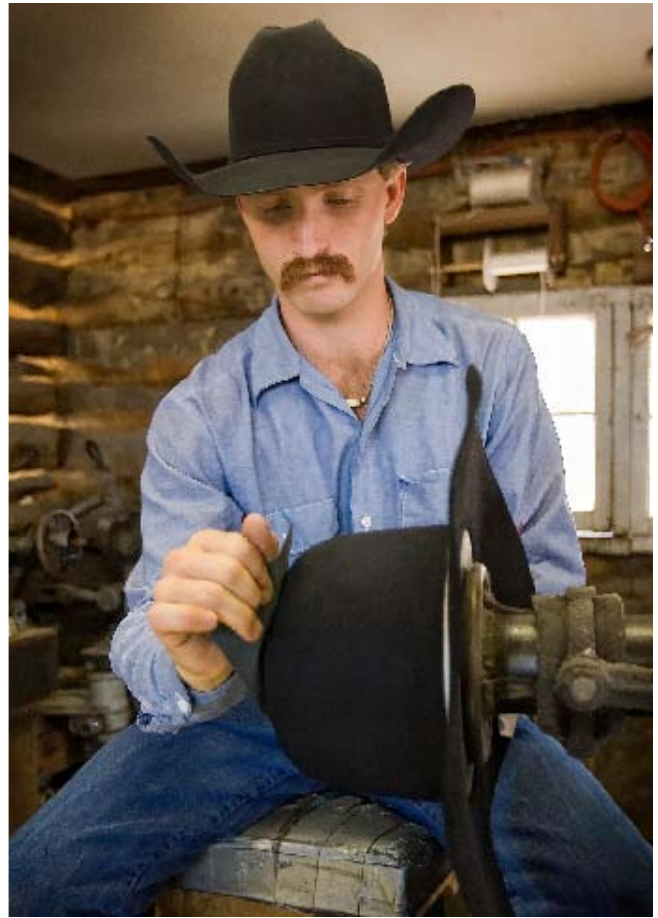
"I took a German Shepherd to a kennel for obedience training," says Dorer. "I'd always liked working with dogs, and after a couple weeks, the kennel's owner offered me a job. I worked for him for a year or so, training guard dogs and dogs with obedience issues. Eventually, Phoebe and I decided to go on our own and began raising and training dogs for the security business."



Clockwise from top left: Butch's first pure beaver hat has been retired but remains in a place of honor in the family's living room. The Bar 50, a blend of beaver and Australian hare, is the only non-pure beaver hat Butch makes. The Silver Beaver, available by special order, is made from the rarest beaver belly fur. Custom three-piece buckle sets, made either from 24-karat gold or platinum, can be ordered with nine inlaid 3-point diamonds. The pure beaver hat of today bears little resemblance to the first beaver hats Butch made more than 25 years ago.



Everyone in the shop can perform multiple jobs but each has a specialty. Here, Shama uses heat transfer to stamp the owner's name on a sweatband with 23-karat gold foil.



Shaaf, the youngest of the Dorer family, smoothes the spinning felt to a silken finish by applying light pressure from "pouncing" paper.

"Houston was growing like crazy at the time and had a reputation for having one of the highest crime rates per capita of any city in the country. At our peak, we were leasing out more than a hundred guard dogs to businesses who wanted security and individuals who wanted protection. We had a reputation for having dogs that were pretty aggressive, and eventually that caught up with us when one of our dogs bit a guy who sued us and won."

It was about that time that Phoebe became pregnant and the stress of living in the city became too much for the couple. They packed up and moved to the country.

"Even though we were grossing about \$30,000 a month—not bad for a young couple—we figured it was time to do something else," says Butch. "Exactly what, we weren't sure."

While running the guard dog business, Dorer became acquainted with a lady who owned Lone Star Hatters in Austin. He'd

shared with her his interest in hats and desire to learn the business, and one Saturday she called and said she was trying to sell the store to one of her employees but the financing had fallen through, and she was looking for other options.

"Phoebe and I met with her over the weekend, and by Monday the business was ours," says Dorer. "We paid her \$100,000, but soon discovered we also owed that much in outstanding debt.

"Initially, the owner was going to stay on and teach us the trade, but that didn't happen. All of a sudden, we had a business and little preparation to run it. Although it was a 120-mile round-trip to the store, we made the trip six days a week, often working 16-hour days until we turned things around."

Fortunately, Lone Star Hatters had a decent inventory, much of it purchased from a variety of manufacturers, and was in a good location with a steady stream of customers, both local and out-of-towners.

They also had all the equipment necessary to make and finish their own hats.

Although that equipment was ancient by today's hat-making standards, everything worked and Butch and Phoebe took a crash course not only in the manufacturing process, but also sourcing quality hat-making materials.

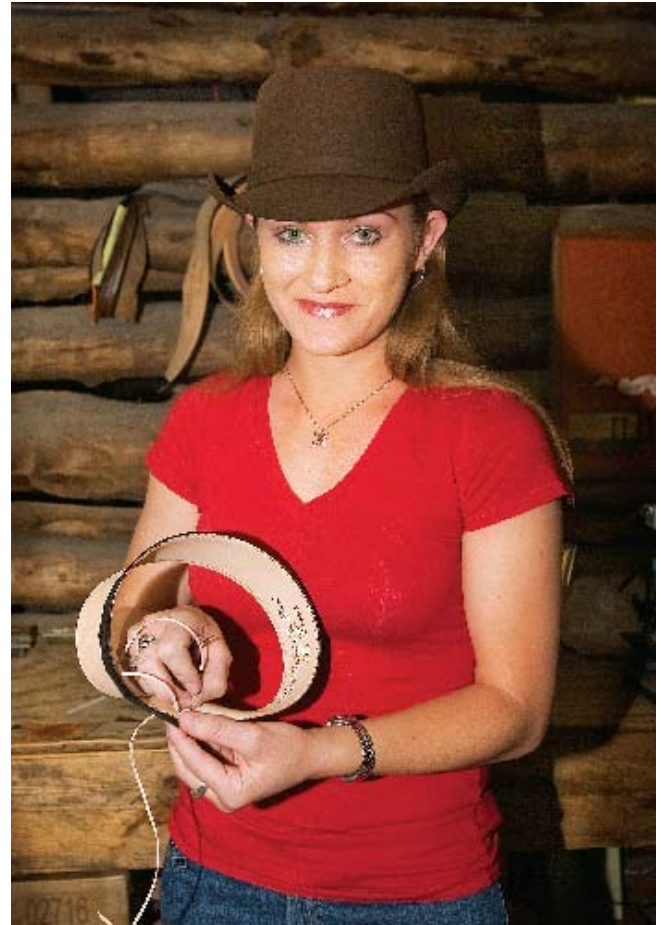
### Learning the Trade

"Shortly after taking over the business, I knew we were going to have a tough time making it if we didn't come up with a unique product," says Butch. "This was during the *Urban Cowboy* movie craze, and everyone had jumped on the cowboy costume bandwagon. I knew there wasn't going to be a future in chasing fads."

As his experience in the business grew, Butch became aware of how little people knew about hats—even the ones they were wearing. On weekends, it wouldn't be unusual to sell and shape several dozen felt hats, and with the shaping came conversation. People didn't know one felt



Travis Dalzell is in charge of hat “rehabilitation.” Besides making new hats, the shop restores several hundred hats per month.



Shera not only does most of the sewing and stitching of liners and sweatbands, she also manages the business Web site.

from another, and the whole X-rating system used by manufacturers was so subjective that it couldn't be relied on to determine quality.

Butch decided he needed to educate his customers if he was going to be able to sell them a better hat and justify the price.

“People assumed that the higher percentage of beaver fur in a hat body, the better the hat was, so I decided to order a pure beaver hat body to see the difference for myself,” says Dorer. “The next time I ordered hat bodies, I asked our supplier if he could make us a pure beaver hat body and was surprised when he said, no, he couldn't, because there would be so much waste it wouldn't be profitable.”

Out of stubbornness, Butch contacted the Smithsonian Institution to request information about the pure beaver hat industry that thrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As it turned out, they had quite a bit of documentation on how pure

beaver fur was processed. Unfortunately, the process at that time involved “car-roting,” or using a solution of “nitrate of mercury” to roughen the individual hairs, which, in turn, increased the fur's matting ability. This solution and the vapors it produced when heated were highly toxic, causing the United States Public Health Service to ban the use of mercury in the felt industry in December 1941.

Once nitrate of mercury was banned, other compounds were used to accomplish the same goals, but in the meantime felt hats had fallen out of fashion and the pure beaver felting industry had fallen along with it.

In spite of the challenges he knew he faced, Butch ordered three pure beaver bodies and agreed to pay for the waste if necessary.

“It took awhile, but I eventually got three hat bodies,” says Dorer. “They weren't that pretty, but they were the first pure beaver cowboy hat bodies I'd ever

seen, so they looked good to me. They were kind of a taupe color, the natural blending of gray and brown fur.”

Excited to see how they would handle processing, Butch went to work on them immediately. He made one hat for his wife, one for himself and one to display in the store, where it stayed until he got a call from Wade Butler, the manager of Stelzig's in Houston. At that time, Stelzig's was the cornerstone of Houston's high-end Western tack and apparel market.

“Mr. Butler said a customer had told him about the hat in my store, and he asked me to show it to him the next time I was in Houston,” recalls Dorer. “Well, we jumped in the car and headed to Houston, but when we got there it was pouring. We were drenched when we entered the store, but I just shook the water off the beaver hat and handed it to Wade. He couldn't believe how it shed water and asked his hat manager to take a look. After examining it carefully, he said he thought it was the finest hat he'd ever seen.



Neighbor Larry Leist is not only a professional bull rider, but is also the foreman of the Red Cone Ranch and a regular customer of Dorer's.

"Right on the spot, Wade said he'd buy every pure beaver hat I could make.

"Well, that really changed the nature of our business. I finally had a guarantee and could afford to invest in more hat bodies and take the time to perfect the finishing process."

Although Butler had high hopes for the pure beaver hat—they even featured it in one of Stelzig's special anniversary catalogs—they didn't sell more than half a dozen.

"At the time, that really baffled me because I thought that Stelzig's well-heeled clientele wouldn't balk at paying a premium price for a pure beaver hat," says Dorer. "Over time, I came to realize that there is a certain kind of customer for a pure beaver hat and how much money they've got in their pocket isn't the determining factor.

"First, they have to appreciate the quality, and second, they really have to wear hats day in and day out, not just to the Houston Rodeo once a year."

### The Big Break

On the heels of that disappointment, Butch got a call from Wilson Franklin, the owner of M.L. Leddy's in Fort Worth, who asked to see the hat that was generating a lot of buzz but not much business.

"I drove to the Stockyards in Fort Worth to see him," remembers Dorer. "I showed him what I thought was the best hat I'd ever made, and he took out a newly released Resistol Black Gold and held them side-by-side. My heart sank. At the time, I knew how to make a good hat, but I didn't know how to make a really pretty hat, and that Resistol was absolutely beautiful. But Wilson thought he had a market for a pure beaver hat and ordered a half a dozen.

"On the drive home, I swore I'd find a way to make the finest pure beaver hat in the business."

It was about a month later that Dorer called Wilson to see if any of the three

natural or three black hats Wilson had ordered had sold. He hadn't sold one.

"I asked if he'd been wearing the one I'd made for him, and he said he hadn't," says Dorer. "As a favor, I asked him to wear it to work for the next month and see if that might help. I told him if they didn't sell, I'd buy them back, but at the time that was the last thing in the world I wanted to do.

"A month later, Wilson called to order more hats and that was the beginning of a long and very rewarding relationship. If that deal hadn't worked, I doubt that my family would be in the hat business today."

Within a few months, Leddy's was selling a dozen pure beaver hats a month, then that number doubled, then tripled. At \$600 apiece, a price many thought outrageous at the time, the hat that carried both Butch Dorer's and M.L. Leddy's logo in the sweatband quickly became the favorite of Fort Worth's Western-wearing elite.

### A Fundamental Shift

Along with that success came opportunity, and in 1989, Butch decided to close the Austin retail store and move his growing family and manufacturing business to a rural area in western New Mexico.

As word got out about Butch's hats, other retail stores began showing interest in carrying them. In the mid-1990s, the list of stores carrying Butch Dorer-made hats grew exponentially as he concentrated on perfecting the manufacturing process. Now with four kids in tow, Butch and Phoebe would visit their retailers around the country, but what he discovered wasn't always encouraging.

"While some of the stores that carried our hats were doing a good job selling them, others weren't," says Butch. "In order to sell a high-end hat, the sales staff has to be knowledgeable about the product. In a lot of cases, they didn't know any more than the customer did about hats or how they were made. In these situations, people tend to go for the cheapest option.

"We soon realized that we needed to be more restrictive and slowly began changing our focus from strictly selling wholesale to selling direct.

"As our kids got older and got more involved with the business, and with the advent of the Internet, we slowly eliminated all but a handful of dealers," continues Dorer, "those that have been with us a long time and have been committed to our product."

Ironically, Leddy's, the store that helped put Butch's name on the hat-making map, no longer stocks his hats, although they do accept special orders. Store manager Mark Dunlap readily acknowledges the quality of Dorer's hats but says Leddy's reputation has been built on featuring a very select line of high-quality products and prefers their suppliers to be exclusive to their store.

Today, Kendall's Western Hats of Pavo, Georgia, is Butch's largest retailer. Although not a brick-and-mortar store, they are well-known commercial exhibitors at the largest Quarter Horse shows

in the Midwest and Southeast. At the Quarter Horse Congress, for example, Kendall's owner, Brook Parrish, says the black pure beaver is their number one seller.

"We've been in business for 18 years and have handled Butch's hats for nearly that long," he says. "It is the best pure beaver hat there is as far as I'm concerned, and at the Congress, they nearly sell themselves. Most people have never heard of Butch Dorer, but when they try on several different hats, they feel the difference in quality. Most of our customers live in hats, and they don't mind spending the money to get a hat that will fit right, look good and last a lifetime."

### Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch

Far away from the glitter and glamour of the big shows and the big city, Butch and his family continue to evolve as a business. Every member of the family works side-by-side, literally, in the log cabin

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that served as headquarters for the Gould Ranch, once one of the largest outfits in western New Mexico. The cabin, built in 1919, consists of two rooms, one for manufacturing and renovations, and the other for stitching in liners and hatbands. Other than electrical wiring running along the ceiling, little has been done in the way of adding modern conveniences.

Although each person has a specific job, all are experts in all phases of the business. Oldest son Sandon serves as shop foreman and designs custom silver buckle sets. His younger brother Shaaf smooths, trims, hardens and shapes the lifeless felt into hat form. Sisters Shama and Shera apply the finishing touches and handle shipping and invoicing. Phoebe helps out where needed and is the undeniable queen of quality control, a role she's played from the very beginning. Butch spends most of his time dealing with suppliers and sourcing the highest quality pelts directly from Canadian and American trappers as well as domestic producers.

"Traditionally, the highest quality furs have been sold to the garment industry and the lesser quality beaver pelts have been sold to hatters," says Butch. "But we've created relationships with the best fur suppliers in the business and can get anything we are willing to pay for. There are 25 subspecies of beaver in North America and having access to the best requires a lot of dealmaking. You can get

enough fur from a beaver to make 10 or 12 hats but for our silver beaver hat, we'll use just a narrow strip of belly fur from maybe eight or nine pelts."

Being in the middle of New Mexico's cow country, it isn't unusual for local hands to swing by and spend a few hours telling tales or evaluating the product line. Over the years, many local cowboys, such as Larry Leist, foreman of neighboring Red Cone Ranch, have become Butch's personal research and development department, often to his chagrin and amusement.

"I don't claim to be a cowboy," says Dorer, "but we do go to a lot of brandings around here at the invitation of our customers. It never ceases to amaze me when I see a cowboy take off a thousand-dollar hat and use it to block the wind while starting the fire.

"One of the benefits of using pure beaver felt is durability, but even a pure beaver hat isn't indestructible. We've had cowboys bring their hats in for cleaning and have removed everything from blood to mud. So far, the only thing we haven't found a way to remove easily is bull snot, although we're working on it.

"Our hats are good, but they're not perfect." 🐾

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*Darrell Dodds is the publisher of Western Horseman. Send comments on this story to [edit@westernhorseman.com](mailto:edit@westernhorseman.com).*



At the end of a one-mile, one-lane driveway, a simple wood plank sign announces that you've arrived at Butch Dorer's ranch and hat shop.