

Preserving Leather Collectibles

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It's a known fact that leather tanned in the 1920's and 1930's was processed with caustic and dangerous chemicals. Today we know the associated dangers and health risks when we are exposed or we come in contact with these chemicals. As I collected more era items, I wondered about the chemical residue on these items. And I was concerned about repeated exposure to those chemicals and how it was going to affect the leather items. I know it sounds funny coming from someone who has memories as a child who loved to roll the car window down and smell the gas at the gas station. But now that I know that isn't the best thing for me, I'm pretty sure applying more chemicals to my collectibles isn't going to make them last longer. Although my leather purses and shoes have been exposed and treated with unsafe products in the past, it was time to reverse the damage, slow down the aging and prevent further deterioration. My collections aren't getting any younger, and can use all the help they can get.

We all know why it is important to clean a garment before we hang it back in the closet or pack it, laying it down in a storage box, but what about our leather items? What is the best way to clean, preserve and treat our era leather handbags, shoes and accessories? In the past, I just applied some saddle soap or mink oil. But after learning these products had petroleum added, I decided my collectible items deserved more care than that. I was interested in an "all-natural" product that was safe to touch and wasn't going to stink up the house. It was important to find a product that actually fed and nourished the leather, adding the oils back into the fibers.

I did a little research and found a product that met all my criteria for being safe and clean. I found Chamberlain's Leather Milk products and their promises to make leather look good on the outside and provide what leather needs below the surface to keep it healthy for generations to come. Their products are made in the United States with all natural cosmetic grade ingredients that are not chemical based. Chamberlain's Leather Milk products are available online and at Amazon.com. Now it was time to see how it treated a pair of the shoes in my collection.



I selected a small, pair of black leather shoes with a strap made for a young girl. They had a contrasting button fastener and a matching contrasting leather band woven through the shoes. I chose this pair to address the dirt on the leather soles and a stiff strap that I was sure was going to crack and break off. I gently washed away the mud stuck to the bottom of the shoes with a gentle castile soap. I wiped the shoe bottom dry and wiped off the leather uppers with the damp towel. Looking like a curator at the Smithsonian, I set the shoes out on a white cotton towel to dry.

After a couple days of record heat to ensure the leather was dry, I applied Chamberlain's Leather Milk Formula No. 2 Straight Cleaner just to the leather uppers. This was a mild blend of water and other non-alkaline cleaning ingredients to softly remove leather-damaging substances. Once that dried, I applied several thin coats of Chamberlain's Leather Milk Healing Balm to all the leather on both shoes. I immediately saw an improvement in the condition of the leather straps and soles. You could say I was very excited. All was well and the shoes looked better than when I started. The next day, I gave both shoes another treatment of the Healing Balm. Shortly after that, the straps were no longer stiff and frozen in a downward position. The straps were flexible and I was able to attach the straps to the button fastener on the outside of the shoes. I gently stuffed acid-free tissue paper in each shoe to help it hold its shape and set them aside.

Two months later, I returned to my experiment. The shoes absorbed all of the healing balm. The straps were supple and soft. I gave them one final application of the healing balm before packing them away.



My second experiment was on a tan pair of shoes made for girls. The shoes have contrasting stamped leather inserts and button fasteners. This pair of shoes had specks of staining on the back heels. I applied the Formula No. 2 Cleaner and immediately saw a darkening of the leather. Once the leather dried, the stain was still visible but the color did return to the light tan shade. I tried it again but the stain didn't budge. I applied a coat of Healing Balm, stuffed them with acid-free tissue paper and set them aside.

Two months later, they were soft and felt clean. However, the original staining was still present.





My third experiment was on a pair of shoes for a young lady. These were a pair of black leather shoes with a Cuban heel. The shoes have a contrast stitching over the top and on the outer side. They have a matching overlay attached around the cutout by the strap. After cleaning the leather with the Formula No. 2 Cleaner, I applied the Healing Balm. The leather began to excrete a sticky residue which I can only imagine was a petroleum product from years ago. I cleaned the leather again and again until the leather was clean. Then I applied the Healing Balm and set the shoe aside to rest.

Two months later, I returned to my experiment. The shoes looked good considering the detox they recently experienced. The straps were stiff which I attribute to the double layers because this pair has a decorative feature on the straps. I applied another application of the Healing Balm. There were no adverse reactions. The leather appeared to be absorbing the conditioners. Once the third coat of the conditioner was applied, the straps felt supple and I felt comfortable fastening the buckles. The straps went into the buckles and the shoes transformed into the most beautiful shoes of the three, showing off the silver buckles and the soft leather. I stuffed the shoes with acid-free tissue paper and admired the improvement.

Because this collection of shoes was made for children and young adults, the standard shoe forms or shoe stretchers are too big. I stuffed the shoes with acid free tissue paper. Then I wrapped and packed them loosely in an acid-free box.

I can now count on one hand the number of times I have attempted to clean or handle an era item and it was successful on the first attempt using one line of products.



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