



IT'S IN THE BAG

Fall River leather manufacturer adding a new women's brand

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FALL RIVER — The fifth floor of Tower Mill on Quarry Street is populated by alligators, pythons and French bulls, or, more specifically, their hides.

Fall River native Frank Clegg — with the assistance of sons Andrew and Ian and a full-time staff of 15 employees — utilizes the animal skins to create a high-end line of duffle bags, briefcases, handbags, backpacks and accessories such as belts and wallets.

Prices at Frank Clegg Leatherworks start at \$40 for a bullhide fountain pen sheath. An American alligator holdall bag, on the other hand, sells for a cool \$16,000.

Most of the stitched, cut and finished products, however, are fashioned from bullhide.

And although the company has a women's line consisting of close to 30 products, as much as 90% of revenue in recent years has been generated by sales of men's leather goods,



Above: Frank Clegg, founder and president of Frank Clegg Leatherworks in Fall River, is seen here with sons Andrew, left, and Ian along with Tanner the Australian Shepherd. Top: Frank Clegg Leatherworks in Fall River makes handmade bags in a variety of leathers and colors.

according to Frank Clegg.

He and the rest of the Clegg clan are now intent on altering that equation.

Ian Clegg, who handles business operations for his

father, said they intend to launch an entirely separate brand for women that will replace the current women's line.

"It will feature new

"They're taking their hard-earned money and spending it on something they know is quality."

— Ian Clegg, who handles business operations for his father, Frank Clegg

designer colors and be more fashion-focused," he said.

Ian, 27, said he hopes the as yet unnamed brand will be rolled out before the end of the year.

His brother Andrew, 30, will continue duties as production manager and overseer of the company's website and various social media platforms.

Frank Clegg, who began designing, making and selling his own brand of functional, leather goods in the 1970s, says he recently took delivery of an Italian-made \$150,000 computer

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numerical control, or CNC, cutting machine.

What is now the company's second of two CNC cutters, he said, was specifically purchased in anticipation of the new line of products.

Clegg, 69, said he's confident he can compete with such high-end, French heavyweights as Hermès and Moynat.

"Women want something that looks and feels expensive at a reasonable price," he said.

Ian Clegg said if all goes according to plan they'll eventually hire another five workers.

Frank Clegg Leatherworks moved into Tower Mill — formerly called Tower Place and initially known as Barnard Mills when built in the late 1800s — in 2016, when it relocated from a former mill building on Ace Street in the city's North End.

The high-end leather manufacturer occupies all 33,000 square feet of the converted mill building's fifth floor, with 18,000 square feet now being used for production.

Another 10,000 square feet recently became available when a martial arts school vacated the premises. The Cleggs say they'll utilize the space as a combination showroom, photo studio, shipping area and offices.

Frank Clegg said one of the more interesting tenants that preceded him was a company

that manufactured parachutes.

Since moving in five years ago, he says he's installed an air conditioning system for the benefit of his employees.

Other independent clothing manufacturers in the five-story building include Hertling, a trouser manufacturer that recently relocated from Brooklyn, and New England Shirt Company.

Tower Mill also has a mixture of retail businesses and at least one non-profit in the form of South Coast Autism Center.

Online revenue

Ian Clegg says 90% of Frank Clegg Leatherworks' revenue is generated online, with 10% of those sales going to high-end retail stores.

The company now has a roster of more than 30 retailers in locations ranging from Manhattan, Hong Kong and Beijing to Stockholm, Helsinki and London. The closest is LoRossa Shoe in South Weymouth.

Ian Clegg says the remaining 10% of revenue comes from private label clothing companies.

"There are people with good taste all over the world," Frank Clegg said.

Clegg said when he began his career in the 1970s, while earning an MBA degree from Babson College, he was designing, making and selling mostly women's handbags to independent shops in New England and beyond.

"But my competition wasn't making men's (products)," he said. "I always liked briefcases. There were a lot of companies



HERALD NEWS PHOTO | CHARLES WINDKORR

An employee of Frank Clegg Leatherworks in Fall River uses a sewing machine to stitch a piece of material for a leather bag.

that just made briefcases, but I could make both."

Clegg at one time had as many as eight salesmen across the country. He says he did particularly well in Texas.

By the late 1980s, however, he said the retail landscape was changing. Independent leather stores, Clegg said, were "closing up like crazy."

He says he shifted his business model around that time to include more private label sales after meeting one of the owners of Cole Haan, the American footwear and accessories company.

"He was very professional and knowledgeable," Clegg said of the late George Denney. "We did very well with them."

But he says he eventually severed relations with Cole Haan shortly after Nike Inc. stepped in and acquired the company.

French bull

Clegg says he's always favored French bullhide because of its durability and quality.

"The French don't use barbed wire or branding, and there are no ticks," he said, adding that "the hide is a little

heavier."

Clegg said bullhide from Brazil, in contrast, is known for visual tick marks and thicker hair.

French bullhide, Ian Clegg said, is "very clean — even the hair follicles are smaller because of the cold weather."

The tanning process, he said, is done in tanneries in European countries including Germany, Italy and France.

Clegg said those facilities adhere to what's come to be known in the industry as an "ethical" tanning process that avoids the exclusive use of

toxic chemicals.

The hides are then shipped to Fall River, he said, in the form of rolls.

A customer named Obama

Frank Clegg says not all his customers are middle-aged business men and women: "I think a lot of kids want what their grandparents had," he said of his younger clientele.

"They're taking their hard-earned money and spending it on something they know is quality," Ian added.

Frank Clegg says he's not in the habit of dropping names, but he doesn't mind revealing that former President Barack Obama, after taking office, not only purchased an \$1,100 black briefcase for himself, but subsequently bought another one as a gift.

Clegg said his father was once a supervisor for the former Globe Manufacturing in Fall River. His mother, he said, used to work as a seamstress and sample maker for local businesses.

And he says one of his grandmothers worked for Fall River's Korber Hats company.

Clegg always enjoyed working and creating with his hands but says he got interested specifically in leather goods back in 1970, when his girlfriend and future wife gave him a leather tool set for Christmas.

As a young man Clegg initially ran his business out of his parents' multi-family house, not only with their approval but with their assistance.

"I employed them for 25 years," he said.