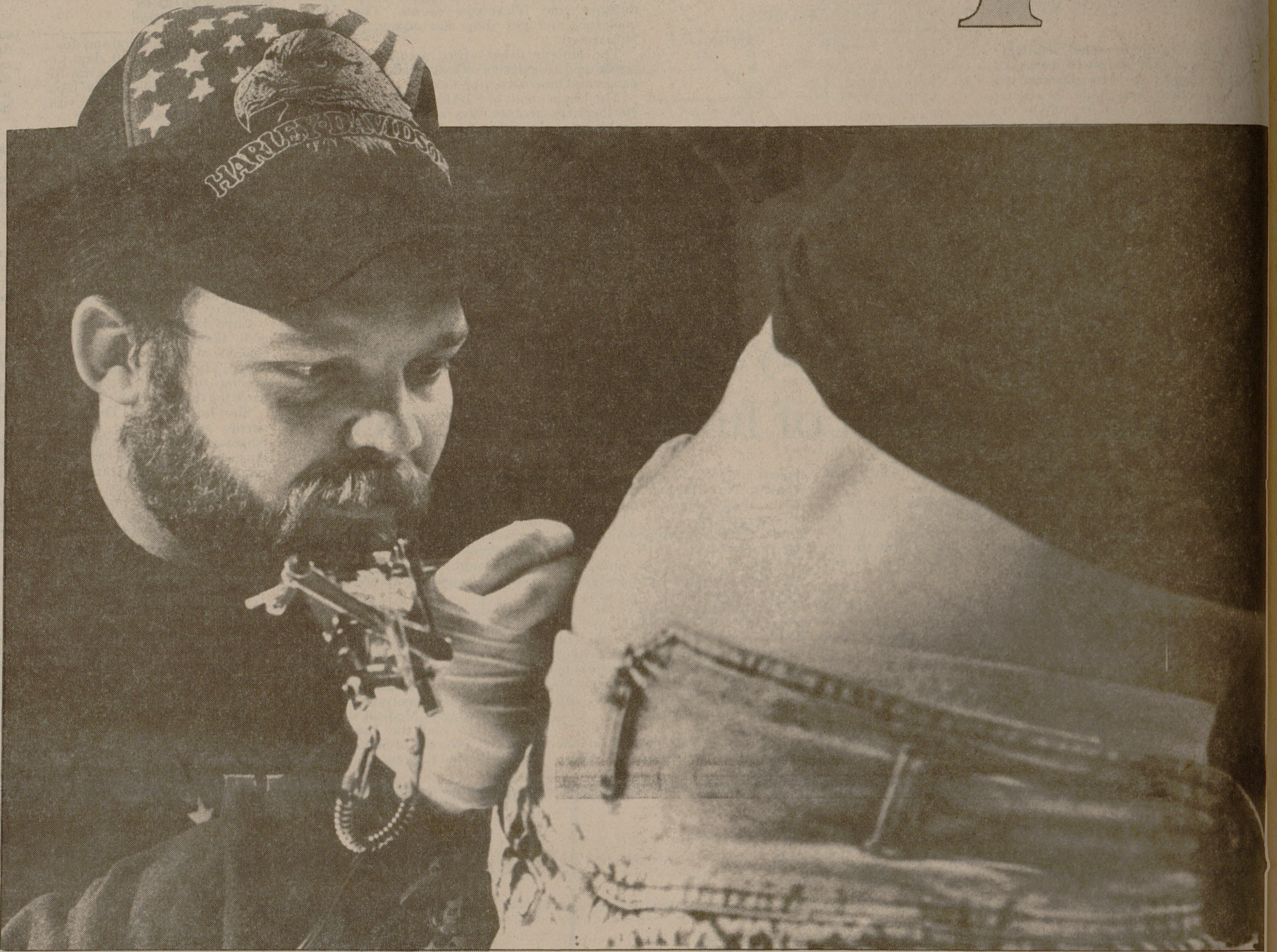


skin deep



Skin Deep tattoo shop owner Bill Nelson concentrates on getting the tattoo just right.

A flashing neon arrow points to one of the few stores open along Texas Ave. at 2:30 in the morning. But it's not an all-night convenience store, it's Bill Nelson's tattoo parlor, kept open for local "vampires" like himself.

"One of the main reasons I opened the shop," Nelson says, "was so that people who didn't have anywhere to go in the middle of the night and are used to being vampires like myself could have a place to hang out without the threat of getting drunk, and could have someone to talk to."

On New Year's Eve 1989, Nelson and his wife, Sherry, opened the Skin Deep tattoo shop at 3519 A. S. Texas Ave. in Bryan. "New Years' Eve — my new beginning," he says.

"I was in a situation where my life really sucked. I split up with my wife, and I was really heavy into drugs and alcohol and I just said, 'The hell with all that. I'm about to die if I keep going like this.'"

Nelson entered a 12-step self-help program for drug and alcohol abuse. What he learned has carried into his business. His employees are all members of the recovery program. A sign on a rear wall lists Skin Deep's house rules: No alcohol, No drugs, No drunks.

After years of roughnecking in the oil fields of south Texas, Nelson decided it was time to start a new life. That opportunity presented itself when a friend in his recovery program had his tattoo equipment stolen. A deal was struck between the two.

"My friend had nothing to make a living with," Nelson says. "So he said, 'If you buy the equipment, I'll teach you how to do it.'"

"So I sold my boat and bought some tattoo equipment. I've been doing it ever since. I love it."

Although Nelson claims he is from a family of artistic talent, he never envisioned that he would take up art as a trade.

"It always seemed boring to me," Nelson says. "I could just never see myself doing it."

His new career changed his mind, however. Nelson takes great pride in having his art exhibited on live canvases.

"It's just like if a painter had paintings," he says, "and people carried them around in the streets and showed them off so that people could see them every day. That's what turns me on. That is why I'm a tattoo artist."

"There's a lot to it. It's not just a bunch of biker guys who got together and decided to get out some needles or anything."

— Bill Nelson, tattoo shop owner

But Nelson feels more comfortable with a needle than with a pen. Graphic artist Jim Stevens sketches the designs that Nelson tattoos.

"I can draw up stuff that people would be satisfied with, but I'm not satisfied with it," Nelson says. "I've got a graphic artist who does great work ... We get original work out that is just beautiful and not just an anchor or a heart with 'Mom' written through it."

Nelson terms anchor and heart designs as "flash" — heavily-copied patterns. His most requested design?

"Basically, Greek letters," Nelson claims. "Because the guys in the fraternities and the girls in the sororities ... they're clones, man. Everybody has got to have them in the same place. They've got to have the same exact size, the same

colors. "The most popular place is the inside ankle where their moms can't see them," he says.

But not everybody wants to hide their tattoos. The arm is still the most popular place, and Nelson's walls are covered with Polaroid shots of patrons showing off their brand-new tattoos. Many of them are Texas A&M students.

"They're about half my business, as a matter of fact," Nelson says. "I couldn't believe it. I didn't think students would get tattoos. But they keep me here until the wee hours of the morning."

Along with the late-night stragglers, Skin Deep's regulars — the "tattoo junkies," stay until all hours watching TV, telling tattoo stories and supporting each other's new-found sobriety. Included in the tales are stories of tattoos gone wrong.

Covering up tattoos is Nelson's specialty. He emphasizes the importance of choosing a clean, reputable shop.

"There are people who don't know what they're doing, who can cause permanent damage," he says. "If you're not careful, you can turn someone's skin into hamburger meat."

"There are a lot of tattoo shops in Texas where tattooing is big business, and they just don't want to take the time to be as sterile as they need to be. Some shops in Houston go through 15 to 20 people without changing needles."

"I claim to be the most sterile shop in the state of Texas."

Although Texas does not require tattoo shops to have special health permits or tattoo licenses, Nelson believes a shop's credibility depends on the responsibility and proficiency of the its owner.

"There's a lot to it," Nelson says. "It's not just a bunch of biker guys who got together and decided to get out some needles or anything."



Pat Beck, an employee of TTI in Bryan, examines his new tattoo. Beck designed the tattoo himself.