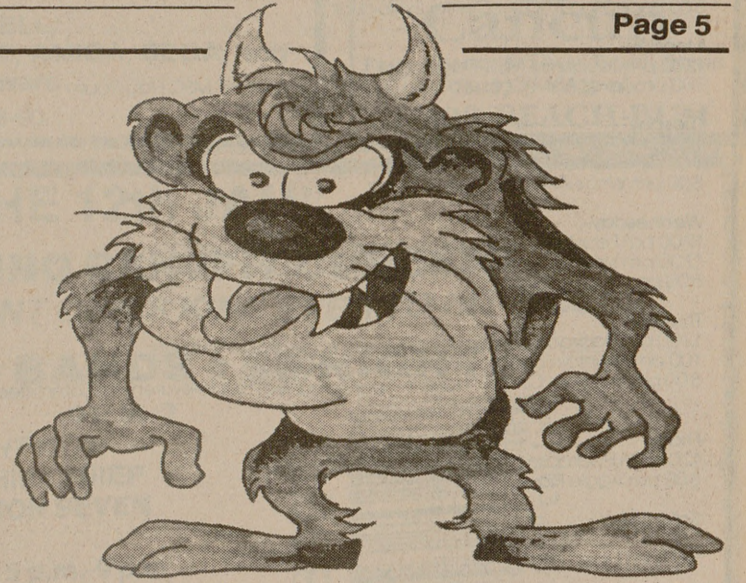


Jim Stevens, Skin Deep's graphic artist, works on a custom tattoo design.



'Tattoo virgin' gathers courage, braves the needle

At a tattoo parlor, art is carried to its extreme. Here, the tattoo design is an art form for exhibitionists and non conformists who revel in the chance to express their individuality through color, pain and intrigue. This intrigue and self-expression is something everyone considers indulging in, but few are willing to act upon the impulse. Questions abound: What design would I want? How much would it hurt? Would a tattoo change how I appear to myself and others?

Monday night I answered these questions by tasting the pain firsthand at the Skin Deep tattoo shop in Bryan. I already knew the design I wanted: four staggered black rectangles that in the early '80s hardcore scene symbolized the ideal rules of "black and white" (no gray areas).

I was also sure I wanted the tattoo placed where it could be concealed, and I chose a position just below my front left shoulder.

With the decision made and stencil outline drawn, I had only to wait. With my burst of courage (and I had no idea how long it would last), the waiting was the most difficult part.

Unfortunately, I had no choice. A shark with sunglasses (sketched on a very delicate canvas) and a pair of Greek drama masks laced with snakes and arrows were before me. Pent with anxiety, I took the opportunity to quiz Skin Deep owner Bill Nelson about tattoos and tattoo shops.

Foremost on my mind was safety and the sterility of the process.

Too many times I'd heard of parlors that used the same needle time and time again, playing a version of Russian roulette with each customer. But an unopened package of needles, an autoclave sterilization machine and a hot cleanser apparatus for needles in use largely appeased my concerns.

After being assured that the engraving was uncomfortable at worst, and that about a quarter of Bill's clients were Texas A&M sorority members (which buoyed my resolve), I climbed into the chair. By this time I was as tight as a board, and I suffered a speech regression of about 15 years.

When you sit in a dentist's chair, you know the drill will hurt, but you can always rationalize the situation by telling yourself that it's beneficial to correct the cavity. In that case, there is a method to the madness.

For some reason, that same rationale didn't wash in this chair.

For one, Bill wasn't my family dentist. Bill was a recovering drug addict who fit my image of a tattoo artist perfectly.

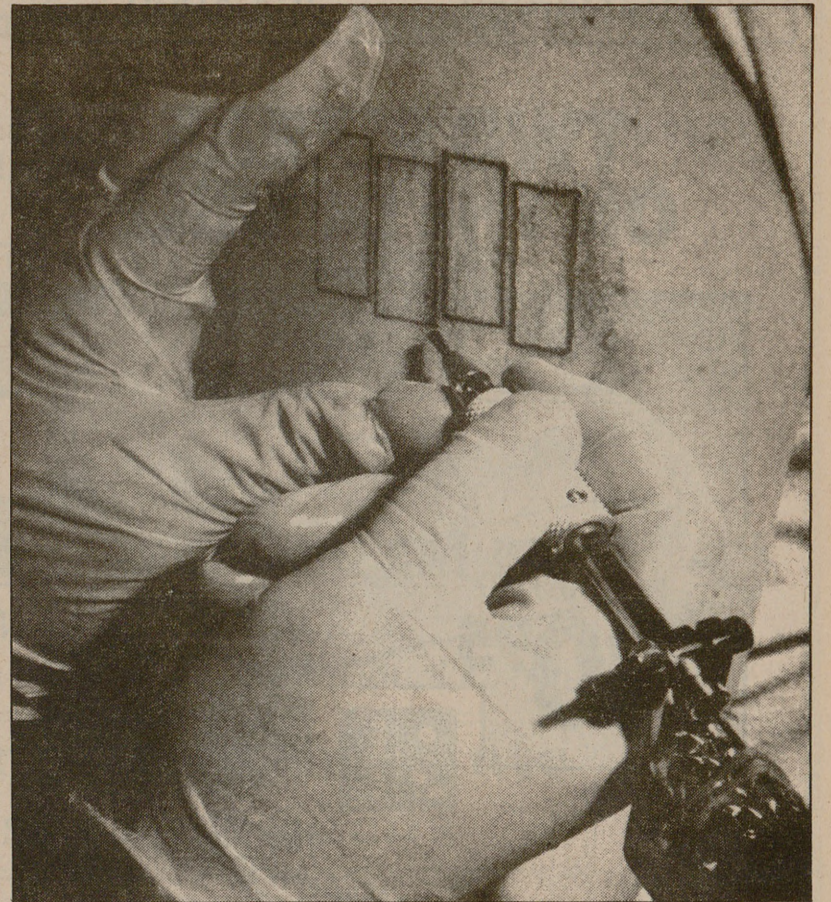
I once drove by a tattoo parlor that doubled as a motorcycle repair shop and thought that a strange duality. Bill, however, with his full

beard, large frame and Harley Davidson T-shirt, made that same duality appear particularly apt.

I was just as uncomfortable with the large group of onlookers interested in Bill's handiwork and my reaction to his needle. Though I enjoyed the locker-room language and tattoo jokes, I was nervous about the fact that I had no idea what my reaction would be like.

Pride was definitely at stake here (Bill warned me that it is not uncommon to pass out from the anxiety and discomfort).

But by that point, I just wanted to get started. Even extreme pain would



Battalion entertainment writer John Righter goes under the needle for his first tattoo, a symbol for the rules of "black and white."

be a welcomed improvement over the incredible anxiety I was feeling.

With the first cut, engraving the outline, I finally knew what I was dealing with. Instead of a painful affliction, the needle was more of a bothersome itch that prickled up and down my arm. It wasn't an enjoyable feeling, but it also wasn't the piercing sting that I had psyched myself to expect.

Getting my tattoo was not without a few difficulties. Bill had warned me about the possibility that my skin might not absorb the ink well, which would cause some irritation and lengthen my time in the chair.

That's exactly what happened. And although the pain was less than I expected, the blood more than satisfied the local tattoo junkies who were eager to see this "tattoo virgin" violated. Quite frankly, I bled all over the place.

There was also a problem with laughing or flinching while Bill was engraving. I passed the flinching part with flying colors, but had difficulty not laughing at a Remote Control episode on MTV. My punishment is a barely noticeable slip, thanks to a Keith Richards look-alike skit.

Overall, my "devirginization" was the definitive "once in a lifetime" experience. I enjoyed the banter among the clients, workers and regulars in Bill's shop, and I think I benefited from this unique view of life.

And quite honestly, I really get a kick out of my tattoo.



STORY by JOHN RIGHTER