

# When the skin is 'a piece of canvas'

Although he needs a quick cigarette beforehand, Craig Ihrig is relatively calm as tattoo artist Gary Steyer prepares his arm for the reception of an ominous — not to mention permanent — skull.

Perhaps Ihrig, 25, is not nervous because he has let Steyer work on his hide many times before; warriors, castles, planets and more adorn Ihrig's arms. An eagle swoops down his right forearm.

Ihrig describes the sensation of the needle. "It feels like he's printing on a sunburn."

Even though tattooing is not particularly painful, infection is a threat when the needles and other equipment are not sterilized properly, Steyer says. He says he uses the same type of sterilizing equipment that surgeons use.

Steyer and his wife, Patty, are the

proprietors of Eugene's only tattoo parlor, Pacific Tattoo, 128 E. 11th, which opened during the summer. The Steyers came to Eugene in search of opportunity and a slower-paced lifestyle. "There was a demand for a tattoo parlor here. So far there's been a real good market," says Steyer.

Patty Steyer worked in a tattoo parlor in Portland, where she met her husband-to-be. The two were married in Portland a little more than a year ago, on Halloween night — in a tattoo parlor.

Drawings that depict mythical monsters, roses, jungle beasts, insects, spaceships, cartoon characters, Harley-Davidsons and buxom beauties cover the walls in the shop's front room. Most of these are Steyer's originals.

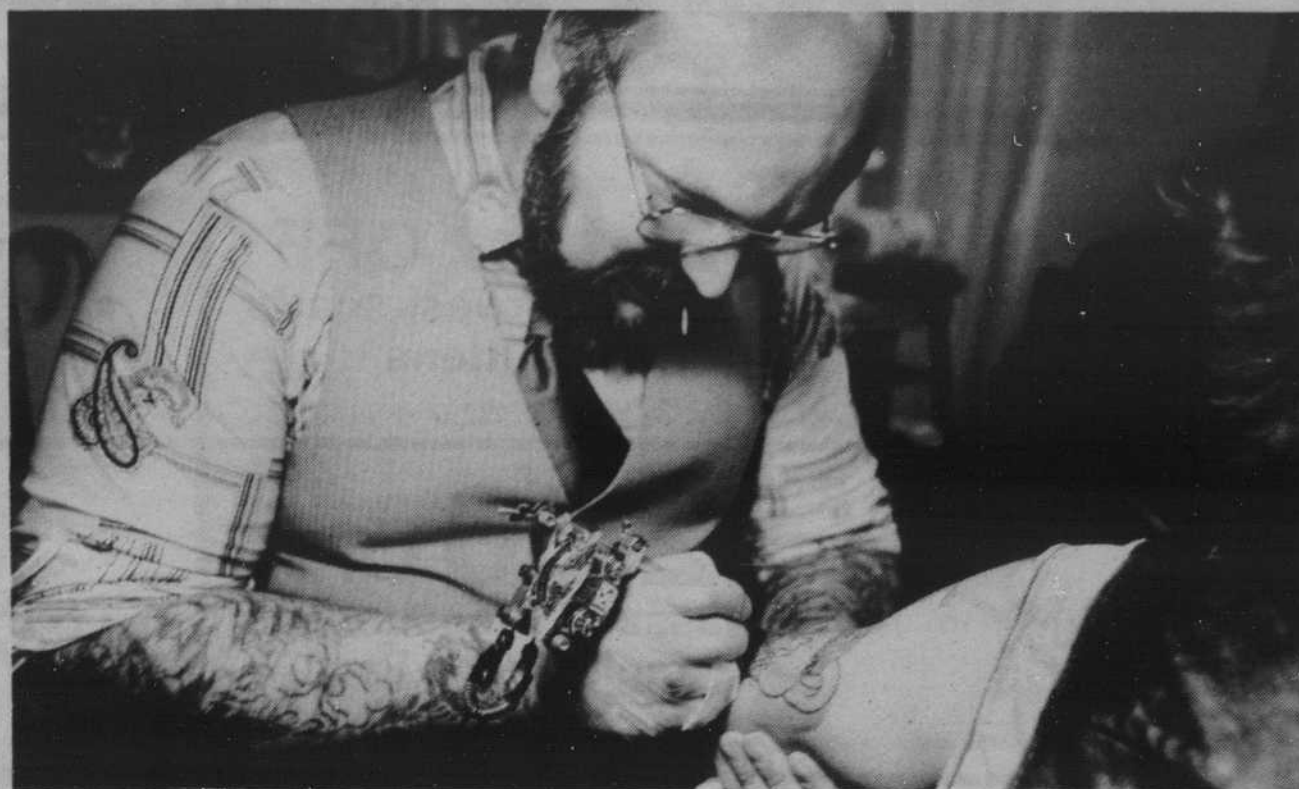
As he looks at the sketches, he replicates them, usually freehand but sometimes using stencils, onto the customer's skin. His tattoos run from \$15 to several hundred dollars, depending on the size and detail of the design.

Steyer has spent more than half of his life in the tattoo business, starting out in Washington, D.C. and moving on to make his marks in Daytona Beach, Fla. and in Portland, before opening the store in Eugene.

"I used to skip school and go to a tattoo parlor in Washington, D.C., and I started picking up different things," he says of his training.

When he was 13, Steyer received his first tattoo, on his upper left arm (a name with a heart and a rose). He says he decided to get a tattoo " 'cause everybody else had one."

Steyer, known as "Spider" to his friends, is a big man, bearded and balding. At 32, he has more tattoos



Gary Steyer, 32, says he has spent more than half his life in adds a new tattoo to Craig Ihrig's collection.

than he does years.

Though tattooing may not be considered an art form to everyone, Steyer sees it as one.

"I use the skin as a piece of canvas. I can't erase. I can't afford to make a mistake," he says.

"People that don't like tattoos have a closed mind to it," he adds.

Tattooing is far from an American motorcycle-gang invention.

After invading Great Britain in 54 B.C., Julius Caesar reported that the natives there had tattoos. In fact, records of Egyptians marked with tattoos date back earlier than 1300 B.C., according to Encyclopedia Americana.

"Tattooing and prostitution are the two oldest art forms," Steyer says, putting it into perspective.

In addition, Steyer says his art may be uncovered beneath the shirt sleeves of many. He says his clients range from doctors and lawyers to ex-convicts.

One thing to remember, however, is that tattoos are permanent and can only be removed surgically, Steyer says.

The dyes, which are applied just below the skin with a tattoo gun, are

made from purely natural substances and are available in most colors except metallic ones, Steyer says.

Much of Steyer's work in Eugene involves repairing others' mistakes, and the slogan on his business card invites such work. "If your tattoo is not becoming to you, then you haven't been coming to us," it reads.

Steyer says many of these unwanted tattoos are done in prisons or in kids' homes, using a needle, thread and writing ink.

In fact, Ihrig found Steyer in search of repairs on one such unprofessional job. Ihrig had tattooed his fiancée's name on his arm on a cold, lonely night in Alaska. Wandering into Steyer's shop one day, Ihrig asked Steyer to cover the name up with a new tattoo. He liked Steyer's work and has since been back for more.

"I won't go to anyone else," Ihrig says, confident that "Spider" is the best.

Story by Eric Apalategui  
Photos by Steven Wall



Tattoo artist Gary Steyer works with precision on Craig Ihrig's new tattoo — a skull. Says Ihrig of the sensation, "It feels like he's printing on a sunburn."

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