DISTINCTIVE HARD LEATHER CASES

BRIEF HISTORY AND EXPLORATION OF STYLES & MAKERS

Clamshell case for Hardy 3 3/4" St. George by Holland Brothers, San Francisco, CA. Extremely sturdy case for one of the large Hardy reels favored by California steelhead fishermen on the Northern California "rivers of the lost coast.

Clamshell case by Wild Bill Cleaver, Vashon Island, WA. This highly-finished case by a well-known master leather worker incorporates a sophisticated design motif and finish work. Here a Pflueger Medalist nestles into the thick shearling lining.

Clamshell case by Brauer Brothers Leather, St. Louis, MO. This case is unlined, offering a rather loose fit for a large (3 ½" to 4") fly reel. The snap closure on the rim of the lid is distinctive.

Clamshell Case by Red Head, Chicago. This is another unlined clamshell case for a large fly reel with a similar snap closure. The Red Head company was well known for their line of gun cases, outdoor clothing, and similar items.

Round style cases hold the reel in an upright or vertical position like the Hardy cases, but they are round, usually unlined, and usually offer a looser fit. They emerged in the British and American markets in the later half of the 20th century.

Round style, Holland Sport, for a Hardy Perfect 3 1/8". Holland Sport, also known as Mulholland and Holland Brothers, was a northern California leather house formerly active in sporting leather but now mostly producing fashion leather goods.

Round style, Holland Sport marked to Orvis. Orvis retailed these Holland Sport round cases to fit a variety of reels of similar diameters.

Clamshell case for a Julius Vom Hofe Leonard light salmon reel, Dan Brock, Lowell, Oregon. This case was made specifically for the Leonard reel, and achieves a very close fit.

Clamshell case by James Acord, Wooster, Ohio. In this example, James has made a round clamshell style case provided with a generous shearling lining to cushion the reel. The insect motif is carved and painted on the leather.

Trunk style case, Farlow Lee Wulfe Ultimate Reel. These unmarked cases were provided with the rare Lee Wulfe Ultimate salmon reels sold in the 1960s by Norm Thompson Outfitters, in Portland, Oregon. The cases are lined and are closely fitted to this specific reel. The Farlow Lee Wulfe Ultimate reels were designed by Stanley Bogdan, incorporating engineering details that he used in his later proprietary reels.

Trunk style case, Thomas and Thomas Rod Company, for their Hart "Umpqua" reel, 1980s. This well-made case has the flat bottom and arched lid. It is partially lined and has no supporting block for the reel's grasp.

Contemporary Hardy Style case by Dan Brock, Lowell, Oregon. Dan has been doing fine custom leather work for years, specializing in leathering creels and making reel cases. Dan is also a serious collector and authority on Julius Vom Hofe reels. He uses leather tanned in fir and hemlock bark by the former Muir and McDonald tannery, which was founded in 1884 in Dallas, Oregon.

Variant Hardy style case by James Acord, Wooster, Ohio. James Acord is a nationally-recognized case maker who is known for carving and painting on his leather work. In addition to reel cases, he makes fly boxes, tackle cases, and other fishing items. In this example, he has created a Hardy style case that has the internal shearling lining of a clamshell case instead of the hard fabric or chamois lining of a traditional Hardy style case. He has also modified the top to a polygonal shape instead of the traditional flat shape.

Copyright © 2015 Ward Tonsfeldt. Images may not be reproduced, copied, transmitted or manipulated without the written permission of Ward Tonsfeldt or photographer as noted within.
SOME DISTINCTIVE HARD LEATHER FLY REEL CASES

Fly fishing historian and tackle dealer Martin J. Keane once commented that leather cases delight our senses three ways--with their attractive appearance, their pleasant aroma, and their solid, reassuring feel. We might want to add that they are also practical means of protecting our rods and reels.

Protective cases for fly reels have been available since the last decades of the 19th century. At this time, reel makers in Europe and the United States began making greater numbers of high-quality fly reels. The cases protected the reels from handling and storage accidents. The composite or hard rubber side plates of American reels were subject to breakage from accidental drops. The alloy used by Hardy and other British manufacturers was cast and then machined, and remained somewhat brittle. So, cases made sense for the early reel makers much as aluminum tubes made sense for early bamboo rod makers.

Leather was widely used for protective cases on all kinds of items, so it was a logical choice for reel makers. However, some reel makers chose other materials. Charles F. Orvis, for example, sold their early fly reels with beautifully fitted wooden cases made from walnut.

Most of us are familiar with the two basic 19th century hard leather reel case styles, which were the British Hardy style, holding the reel in a vertical or upright position, and the American Vom Hofe style, holding the reel in a horizontal position.
Both of these designs worked best when the case fit the reel closely. The outer leather was lined with suede or fabric to provide additional cushioning for the reel. If the fit was not tight enough, the case could not offer as much protection. Catalogs from 19th century reel makers and sporting goods houses show these cases available with the reels at extra cost. Cases were also sold by size without any reference to a specific reel. These cases were typically graduated by ½” or ¼” increments. Since reel diameters ranged from under 2” to over 6”, retailers would need to stock cases in a substantial number of sizes. Also, cases that fit a reel with a plain rim might not fit a reel with raised pillars.

Abercrombie and Fitch catalog, 1907, p.304, lists dimensions of generic adjustable cases, graduated in ¼” increments, and then asks for specific dimensions of the reel for Vom Hofe style cases.
As the tackle manufacturers and distributors on both sides of the Atlantic were standardizing leather reel cases for industrial-scale production, another tradition of leather case making was starting west of the Mississippi. Western leather workers operated small shops catering to local needs first for saddles and harnesses, then for gun holsters and belts, and finally for fishing items. These leather workers stamped their work with their individual cartouches. Among their leather products for fishing, the western leathered creels are the best known. Other fishing items included leather fly wallets, rod cases, and reel cases. Since most of the western leather shops did not sell reels, they needed to sell the cases by order if they were going to achieve a good fit to the reel. George Lawrence Leather of Portland, Oregon, for example, made reel cases only by individual order, and apparently made very few of them.

Then, at some point in the 20th century, a breakthrough occurred. Instead of the close-fitting leather lined cases, leather workers discovered that they could line their cases with shearling and accommodate more shapes and sizes of fly reels, while still offering good protection. This made the reel case business much more attractive, since a few standard sizes could fit a good range of reels.

Shearling interior of a contemporary clamshell style case by Arne Mason, Ashland, Oregon.

In the last half of the 20th century, leather artisans made hard leather reel cases in a pleasing variety of designs. Some stuck close to the traditional 19th century shapes, while others tried new ideas. Some reel makers offered their products with proprietary hard leather cases showing excellent craftsmanship. A few leather workers offered cases incorporating figural paintings and carvings on the leather. In more recent years, as older leather workers have reached retirement age, retailers and reel makers are arranging for leather cases to be made off shore.

The cases presented here illustrate the traditional designs and some variations. Some are proprietary cases sold with reels, some are stock cases sold by sporting goods houses, and some are custom cases executed by master leather artisans.
HARDY STYLE CASE

This style of case is associated with Hardy Brothers, beginning during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The case holds the reel in an upright, vertical position. The top is flat and the bottom is round. It is lined with leather or fabric. The handle or grasp is supported by a wooden block integral to the casework. Hardy style cases are made to fit a very narrow range of reel sizes. There is typically a tight fit with little room for movement.

Listing for reel cases graduated in ¼” increments in Hardy’s Anglers’ Guide, 1937 edition.
Note that the familiar serpentine curve on the side of the lid is not shown.

Hardy Brothers case for 2 7/8” Perfect pre-World War II. This case illustrates the classic Hardy style—rounded bottom, lid with serpentine curve, buckle closure, leather covered buckle, excellent quality leather lined with fabric. (courtesy Terry Ow)
Hardy Brothers case for a 2 7/8” Hardy Perfect, post World War II  This Hardy factory case offers a variation in the standard brown Hardy leather color. (courtesy Dana Gray)
Hardy Brothers case for a Davy fly reel, pre-World War II. This Hardy factory case was made with slightly different contour to accommodate this specific reel, the rare 3 ½” Hardy Davy. Similar variations were sold for the Silex reel and the St. George multipliers. (courtesy Dennis Buranek)

Farlow case for a 6” winding-plate salmon reel, pre-World War II. Farlow and other British reel manufacturers provided cases made in the Hardy style and exhibiting excellent craftsmanship. (courtesy Rod Kaiser)
Hardy style variant, sold by Lyons and Coulson, Buffalo, NY  This variation of a Hardy case turns the lid 90 degrees to close on the side. It features a snap closure and molded leather sides. Lyons and Coulson retailed this case, which was made by an unknown manufacturer, in several sizes. (courtesy Terry Ow)

Hardy style variant, marked “Hoff’s Patent, July 12, 1884”  Like the L&C case, this features molded leather sides, but has a buckle closure and sets the lid in its conventional Hardy position. (courtesy Terry Ow)
Hardy style variant, pre-World War II  This variation, maker unknown, has a flat piece of leather for the lid and flaps under it to protect the reel. (courtesy Terry Ow)

Hardy style after-market case, Hardy war-time St. John  This is a durable and commonly-seen case marked “Made in England,” and HOMA on the clasp. The case was made with lower-quality leather and hardware, possibly due to war-time shortages of material. Nevertheless, many of these cases have survived years of use.
Hardy style after-market case, Hardy 2 7/8 Perfect. This British case was probably provided by a retailer with this reel in the 1950s. Leather is not high quality and the case has no supporting block for the handle. Note the repaired strap.

Contemporary Hardy style case by Don Horsfield for a Bogdan 100. Don Horsfield trained as a leather craftsman in England and then immigrated to Terrace, British Columbia. In Canada, he continued making fine leather items for field sports including rod and reel cases, gun cases, cartridge cases, rifle slings, and other goods.
Variant Hardy style case by Ellery Arms, San Francisco, for Hardy Perfect  This appealing case design turned the lid 90 degrees to close on the side. It retained the block securing the reel’s grasp. Cartouche indicates “Ellery Made, S.F.” Ellery Arms was a sporting goods house in San Francisco and an early importer of Hardy products. Note the Ellery Arms name on the reel, clockwise from the Hardy logo. (courtesy David Borgonovo)

Contemporary Hardy style case by Robert Baird, Salt Lake City, Utah  Bob Baird was a well-known leather worker, reel smith, and stained-glass artisan. His leather work included creels and various fishing-related cases. In this example he made a Hardy case with a sterling silver buckle in the Western American style. (courtesy Terry Ow)
Contemporary Hardy Style case by Dan Brock, Lowell, Oregon  
Dan has been doing fine custom leather work for years, specializing in leathering creels and making reel cases. Dan is also a serious collector and authority on Julius Vom Hofe reels. He uses leather tanned in fir and hemlock bark by the former Muir and McDonald tannery, which was founded in 1884 in Dallas, Oregon.
Variant Hardy style case by James Acord, Wooster, Ohio  James Acord is a nationally-recognized case maker who is known for carving and painting on his leather work. In addition to reel cases, he makes fly boxes, tackle cases, and other fishing items. In this example, he has created a Hardy style case that has the internal shearling lining of a clamshell case instead of the hard fabric or chamois lining of a traditional Hardy style case. He has also modified the top to a polygonal shape instead of the traditional flat shape.
VOM HOFE STYLE CASE

This style of case is associated with reels made by Edward Vom Hofe and Julius Vom Hofe beginning in the late 19th century. The reel lies on its side in the case in a horizontal position. The original Vom Hofe style cases had a top strap with a buckle closure. Later examples have other closures. Better quality Vom Hofe style cases had a strap on the back, called a “handle” or “belt loop” in the catalog descriptions. The Vom Hofe cases were lined with fabric or chamois, and the cases fit the reel closely. The size of the reel intended for the case was sometimes marked.

![Image of a Vom Hofe style case handle with the 6/0 reel size stamped on it.](image)

The 6/0 reel size is stamped on the handle of this Vom Hofe style case.

![Image of a tag from a Vom Hofe style case with the case maker's information.](image)

Here, the case maker specified the intended reel on a tag. Smith-Worthington is still in business, making saddles and other equestrian items. (courtesy Gary Siemer)
Edward Vom Hofe catalog, 1896, p. 94. The description mentions “sliding handles,” but the illustration shows a fixed handle characteristic of earlier cases. Cases were ordered by the number of the reel.

Nineteenth century Edward Vom Hofe case for small trout reel This early case for an Edward Vom Hofe reel shows tooling on the top and sides. The second photo shows the full length leather belt loop or handle on the back. (courtesy Dan Brock)
Later Vom Hofe style case sold by Edward Vom Hofe. This case was made for a trout reel probably in the Peerless or Perfection lines. It features the full encircling strap and buckle closure, but no leather loop on the back. Note that the proportions of this case are different from other Vom Hofe cases. (courtesy Dana Gray)
Early Vom Hofe style case for Julius Vom Hofe trout reel. This small case features a half closing strap riveted to the case body. The lid and the sides are tooled, and there is no handle on the back. (courtesy Dan Brock)
Vom Hofe style case for Julius Vom Hofe Wells model fly reel. This case features a buckle closure without a strap, an escutcheon for owner’s initials, and a full loop handle on the back. Like many East coast reel cases, this was marked with the retailer’s name rather than the leather shop. (courtesy Dan Brock)
Depression-era Vom Hofe style case for Edward Vom Hofe 6/0 Restigouche salmon reel  This case, customized with the client’s initials, shows the characteristics of the Vom Hofe case—horizontal orientation of the reel, D shape, strap-and-buckle closure, good leather work. In addition to the cartouche of Abercrombie and Fitch, this case also carried the cartouche of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which was a controversial New Deal program established in 1933 and declared unconstitutional in 1935. This provides a convenient way of dating the case. (courtesy Dana Gray)
Vom Hofe style case for Philbrook and Paine reel, sold by William Mills. This tidy little fly reel case is almost certainly an example of the Mills “Best Quality” case made with heavy leather and lined with chamois. The leather strap handle is visible on the back of the case. Excellent quality hand stitching is evident on all seams. (courtesy Terry Ow)

William Mills & Son catalog, 1922, p. 145. The description emphasizes the brass name plate and the abbreviated sliding handle on the back of the Best Quality cases.
Variant Vom Hofe style case by William Mills. This example shows the alternative snap closure on the full-length closing strap, but there is no handle on the back. This is another Mills “Best Quality” case lined with chamois. (courtesy Dana Gray)
Vom Hofe style case for Leonard Bi-metal reel by William Mills. This attractive William Mills case summarizes the characteristics of the classic Best Quality Vom Hofe style case—buckle closure, chamois or suede lining, escutcheon, and the handle on the back. (courtesy Dan Brock)
Contemporary Vom Hofe style case for Saracione DeLuxe Salmon/Steelhead, Arne Mason. Arne Mason of Ashland, Oregon, is one of the premier reel case makers in the US. His work is widely documented in print and digital media. His leather items for fishing include reel cases, fly cases, rod cases, and all-leather creels. He is one of the few master practitioners of the mitered or “French” leather seam, in which the raw edge of the leather is beveled and concealed within the seam itself. All of Joe Saracione’s DeLuxe bench-made reels were sold with Arne Mason leather cases, marked with the Saracione logo on the top.

Vom Hofe style case for Wes Drain Steelhead reel, by Freeman Mariner, Seattle, WA. Traditional style case for a rare reel bench-made by Wes Drain, one of the great steelhead maestros of the Pacific Northwest. Freeman Mariner is well-known for his creels and holsters. (courtesy Gary Estabrook)
Vom Hofe style case for Thompson 100 reel, George Lawrence Leather, Portland, Oregon

George Lawrence Leather was a major leather house in Portland, Oregon, active from the turn of the century through the 1970s. Lawrence was famous for its saddles, creels, gun cases, cartridge cases and other sporting leather items. This case is one of only four George Lawrence reel cases known to collectors.

Vom Hofe style, Arne Mason, for a Bogdan Standard Trout

This is a custom made case fitted to this specific reel. These cases are marked with Arne’s cartouche on the bottom. Arne makes some standard clamshell cases in convenient sizes, but much of his work is for special orders like this.
ROUND STYLE CASE

Round style cases hold the reel in an upright or vertical position like the Hardy cases, but they are round, usually unlined, and usually offer a looser fit. They emerged in the British and American markets in the later half of the 20th century.

Round style, Holland Sport, for a Hardy Perfect 3 1/8” Holland Sport, also known as Mulholland and Holland Brothers, was a northern California leather house formerly active in sporting leather but now mostly producing fashion leather goods.

Round style, Holland Sport marked to Orvis Orvis retailed these Holland Sport round cases to fit a variety of reels of similar diameters. (courtesy Earl Grant)
Round style, Hardy case for a Marquis Salmon. These cases were introduced by Hardy in the
1970s and have remained in production, complimenting their traditional Hardy style leather
cases.

TRUNK STYLE CASE

This style case has roots dating from the early 20th century. These cases hold the reel in a
vertical position, like the Hardy cases and the round cases, but the bottom is flat, and the case is
often made without lining.

Trunk style, possibly British manufacture, pre-war, unknown reel. This tidy case was probably
made during the 1920s or 1930s. It has no lining within the case or over the block. (courtesy
James Hardman)
Trunk style case, Meek 44 fly reel  This case is associated with a Meek 44 fly reel, and was possibly provided by the maker. The case is fitted with a block to hold the reel’s grasp and is lined with felt. (courtesy Raymond Henken)
Trunk style case, Farlow Lee Wulfe Ultimate Reel These unmarked cases were provided with the rare Lee Wulfe Ultimate salmon reels sold in the 1960s by Norm Thompson Outfitters, in Portland, Oregon. The cases are lined and are closely fitted to this specific reel. The Farlow Lee Wulfe Ultimate reels were designed by Stanley Bogdan, incorporating engineering details that he used in his later proprietary reels.

Trunk style case, Thomas and Thomas Rod Company, for their Hart “Umpqua” reel, 1980s This well-made case has the flat bottom and arched lid. It is partially lined and has no supporting block for the reel’s grasp. (courtesy James Hardman)
Trunk style case by Harry Giron, Anchorage, AK  This trunk style case was made for an unknown 3 ¾” fly reel by a talented Alaska artisan also known for his flies and other fishing items. Giron signed the bottom of this case in his own hand. The case is unlined, but is fitted with leather tabs to hold the reel’s foot and grasp.
CLAMSHELL CASE

Clamshell cases are made to hold the reel in a horizontal position. Unlike the Vom Hofe cases, they are lined with a soft material, usually shearling, so that they can accommodate various reel shapes and sizes. This lining made the clamshell cases somewhat of a breakthrough for case makers since they did not have to build the case to an exact fit. Most makers now produce clamshell cases in several stock sizes.

Clamshell case for a Julius Vom Hofe Leonard light salmon reel, Dan Brock, Lowell, Oregon
This case was made specifically for the Leonard reel, and achieves a very close fit.
Clamshell case for Thomas and Thomas reel  This well-made case was offered by Thomas and Thomas for an unknown reel, probably not the Hart Umpqua series of reels.
Clamshell case for Hardy 3 3/4” St. George by Holland Brothers, San Francisco, CA. Extremely sturdy case for one of the large Hardy reels favored by California steelhead fishermen on the Northern California “rivers of the lost coast.”

Clamshell case by Wild Bill Cleaver, Vashon Island, WA. This highly-finished case by a well-known master leather worker incorporates a sophisticated design motif and finish work. Here a Pflueger Medalist nestles into the thick shearling lining. (courtesy Bill Cleaver)
Clamshell case by James Acord, Wooster, Ohio In this example, James has made a round clamshell style case provided with a generous shearling lining to cushion the reel. The insect motif is carved and painted on the leather.
Clamshell case by A.E. Nelson Leather, Scio, Oregon. This venerable firm has made leather shooting and fishing items for many years, first in Salem, Oregon, and later in Scio, Oregon. Nelson Leather is best known for their superb leathered creels, which they still sell in their shop. Other fishing items include reel cases and fly boxes.
Clamshell case by Brauer Brothers Leather, St. Louis, MO  This case is unlined, offering a rather loose fit for a large (3 ½” to 4”) fly reel. The snap closure on the rim of the lid is distinctive.

Clamshell Case by Red Head, Chicago  This is another unlined clamshell case for a large fly reel with a similar snap closure. The Red Head company was well known for their line of gun cases, outdoor clothing, and similar items.
TELESCOPING STYLE CASE

These unusual cases consist of two parts—a cup-like bottom and a similar top that fits over it. The cases are unlined and could accommodate reels of varying size and design. Abercrombie and Fitch sold telescoping cases in ¼” increments.

Telescoping case, Abercrombie and Fitch, New York. This D-shaped case style does not seem to have been associated with a specific reel. Featuring good-quality leather and a simple design, the case was available from this famous sporting goods house for several years. (courtesy Raymond Hencken)
Telescoping case, the Kosmic Rod Co., New York  This round telescoping case was made for the rare and much-coveted Kosmic reel. The short-lived Kosmic Co. employed some of the best rod-building talent available at the turn of the 19th century. (courtesy James Hardman)