

The Entertainment Weekly, Serving The Mother Lode.

# Sierra Lodest★r

FREE

Fresh  
ink

September 28 - October 4, 2016



# Welcome to Sierra Lodestar

September 28 - October 4, 2016 Vol. 8 No. 31



## Give 'em some skin

It's not really a secret that the popularity of tattoos has increased over recent years. Once considered only the purview of sailors and outlaw bikers, tattoos are today about as common as earrings and bracelets on men. This week we meet a few tattoo artists and learn theirs is an interesting art form.

I went through an "I want a tattoo" phase when I was younger, but I didn't locate an artist I felt could come up with something to permanently scratch onto my skin. I should probably admit that since I use at least four needles a day to treat my diabetes, recreational use of needles goes against my inner voice.

But friends of all ages sport body art in the form of tattoos and I appreciate the thoughts that went into the creation of the ink on their arms, legs and elsewhere on their bodies. I think Maggie Sloan's feature this week, thanks to the trio of artists she introduces us to, indicates probably the important part in the tattoo process is finding the right artist for you. That guy or gal might not be the right artist to tattoo another person.

Exactly what you want inked onto your skin is another decision I think ultimately stalled my desire for a tattoo. Knowing that a particular image, drawn in a particular style, perfectly suits those who desire tattoos, furthers the furor some men and women feel as they settle into chairs to get their tattoos.

Jack London once said, "Show me a man with a tattoo and I'll show you a man with an interesting past." That fits women who get tattoos, too, I think.

Remember Tower Records? Usually the guy or girl with the most tats working there knew the most about all kinds of music, not just rock or punk groups.

Dive in and learn more about this incredible art. Maybe we'll see each other at a shop!

Enjoy!  
Mike Taylor  
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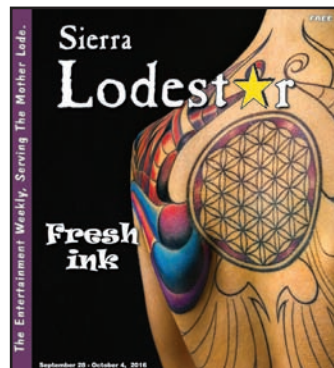
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## On The Cover



Tattoos aren't just for sailors anymore. Learn about the art form inside.

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The Entertainment Weekly

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Sierra Lodestar is published weekly by the Calaveras First Company. More than 15,000 copies are delivered to readers each week through racks located at more than 600 businesses and high-traffic areas throughout the three counties of the Mother Lode and in parts of Alpine and San Joaquin counties. An online edition of Sierra Lodestar is also available for readers at calaverasenterprise.com. To obtain copies of Sierra Lodestar for free distribution at your business or other location, e-mail circulation@sierralodestar.com or call the Calaveras Enterprise at 754-3861. For advertising information, email advertising@sierralodestar.com or call the Advertising Department at the Calaveras Enterprise at 754-3861.

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Sierra Lodestar accepts unsolicited manuscripts and photographs which, at the discretion of the editor, may be used in the magazine. No compensation is offered nor should it be expected except as expressed in writing by the editor. We welcome submissions about people and places in the region, particularly stories about its history, places to visit, sights to see and things to do. All published submissions become the property of Sierra Lodestar. Every effort is made to assure that calendar listings and events are accurately described; however, readers are always encouraged to contact event organizers directly to verify that changes have not occurred after the magazine has gone to print. Please submit editorial contributions, calendar items, press releases and other information to Mike Taylor at mtaylor@sierralodestar.com. Copyright Calaveras First Co. Inc. 2016/2017. All rights reserved.

# Etched in ink



Tattoos are today's fine art

Photos and story by Margaret Sloan

It used to be that tattoos were scandalous. Only bikers, outlaws and sailors sported skulls, hearts, daggers and red, red roses. I never thought about getting a tattoo because, in my mind, it just wasn't done.

But these days, it seems like everyone is getting inked. The Food and Drug Administration reckons that one in five Americans has at least one tattoo, and tattoo shops are among the fastest growing retail segments in the nation. Whole Foods even once considered including tattoo shops at its new 365 by Whole Foods Market stores to attract the 18- to 35-year-old set.

Young folks and tattoos, sure, but when my 55-year-old friend – a children's librarian – started decorating her arms with Celtic knot work, I knew there had been huge sea change. And I didn't understand it.

Although tattoos started to go mainstream in the 1990s, Sean Stewart, owner of Fat Cat Tattoo in Sutter Creek, said when he first started tattooing in Amador County in 2002, "There were a lot less tattoos. You didn't see 19- and 20-year-olds walking around with half-sleeves. It's definitely changed now. You're having 18-year-old girls coming in and getting big side pieces done."

Stewart's shop changed my film noir notion of tattoo shops: cluttered and close with fumes of rum and cigarette smoke spiraling in the airless dark, floors littered with sawdust and empty beer bottles.

At Fat Cat, which opened in 2008, the floors are clean and the only smell was a slight whiff of disinfectant. When Stewart designed the shop, he said, "I definitely wanted it clean and modern feeling."

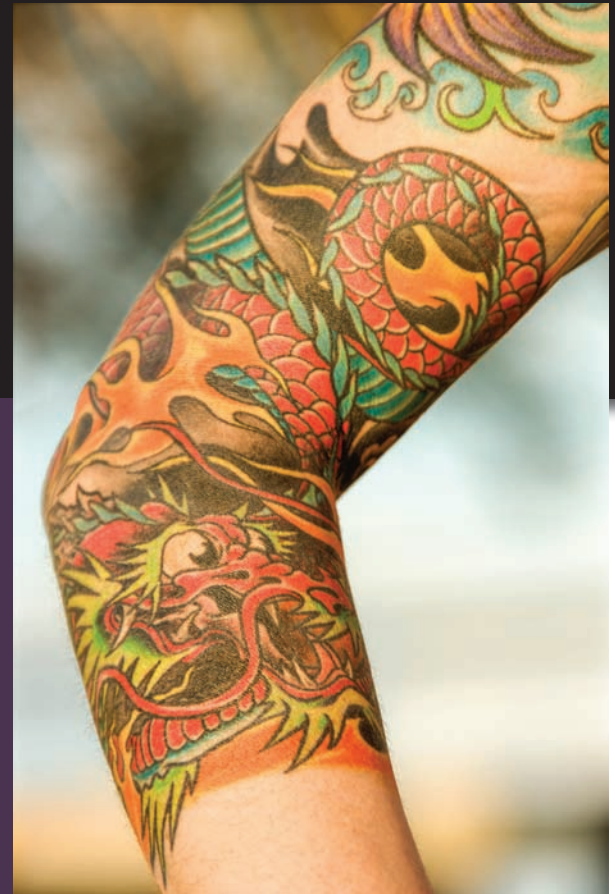
"Traditionally, in the '80s and '90s, a lot of shops were black and red. If you were going to

think about the old drunken sailor, biker-type shop – they call them street shops – you'd think of something like that. I wanted to have something a little more put together."

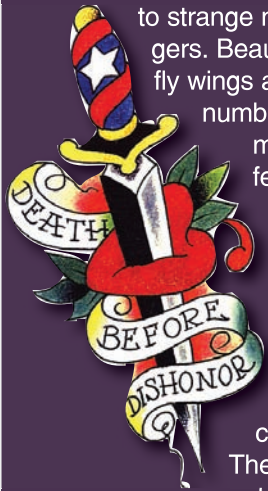
The shop is brightly lit, with forest green walls and granite countertops.

"But it's still put together the way it's supposed to be, traditionally, with all the flash."

Flash is the collection of designs and pictures that are the stuff of tattoo artists' days. At Fat Cat, a grid of black frames filled with flash covers the walls. It's breathtaking; for the first few minutes I could barely inhale, let alone talk as I took in all the art. Drawings of dragons and tigers writhed next



Sean Stewart, owner of Fat Cat Tattoo in Sutter Creek, with his wall of flash.



to strange masks and snakes with daggers. Beautiful women sprouted butterfly wings and pit bulls grinned. Letters, numbers and symbols jostled for my attention alongside spiders, feathers and anchors.

Much of it was in the American traditional style, what might you think of when you consider tattoos. Bold lines depict art that has an almost cartoon-like look, except that it's more complex than simple cartoons. The symbolism often references patriotism, nautical life, beautiful girls and I-o-v-e.

That's no accident. American traditional tattoos as we know them came of age in the port town of Honolulu, where, during and after World War II, tattoo shops inked sailors who visited town for a bit of R&R. Part of the deep history includes Norman "Sailor Jerry" Collins, who, besides becoming part of the lore of tattoos, developed the typical ships-and-girls motifs into the definable style seen today.

The style seems simple, but there are rules to designing any piece of art. Like any designer, when Stewart – who is passionate about the American traditional style – creates a tattoo, he first narrows the focus and scope of the design.

"Some people have 15 different ideas, and they'll throw it all in one tattoo," he said. "It's too busy. I like to throw three to four things in. That's what usually looks the best, so your eye is not being

dragged around as much."

For him, the arrangement of elements is the most important thing about a tattoo.

"The first thing I notice is the concept. Is it put together right? The second thing I'll look at is line work. Is the line weight correct for the tattoo? Is the line too thin? Is the line too thick? Is there a nice balance of thick lines with thinner lines? The third thing, I'll look at the shading and color."

He's been honing his eye since he was quite young, having grown up in Santa Cruz, where, he said, "Tattoo was a normal thing. A lot of people had really big tattoos. In Santa Cruz there are some well-known tattooers who were doing some really good work."

Stewart had drawn and painted his whole life, and the tattoo industry was a natural fit for him.

"That whole culture kind of took me over, getting to know the different styles and meeting the different artists," he said. "I became engulfed in that industry."

An apprenticeship in Detroit taught him the basics, and he's been tattooing ever since.

"Having the art background from painting and drawing, I thought it would be something that I could pursue as an actual career." He waved his hand, encompassing the shop, "And here we are, so many years later."

## Collecting tattoos

According to Garrett Fransen at Sierra Tattoo Co. in Angels Camp, "Apprenticeship used to be the only way you could learn the tattoo trade, and it was very difficult to find a teacher. It's like a lineage getting passed down from person to person. Trade secrets. Little tricks of the trade that have taken people 10 to 20 years to figure out, that one little piece of information passed down to make somebody a better tattooer."

Fransen, who was an artistic kid, originally thought of tattooing as a way to pay for art school after high school.

"At the time, I had no idea what it was about, but I figured I'd check it out."

He visited tattoo artist Tree Neal in Tuolumne, showed some of his drawings and a few months later, started his two-year apprenticeship.

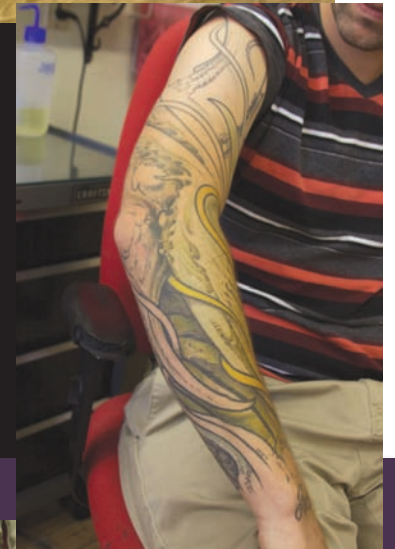
"I never made it to art school," Fransen said. "When I started tattooing, I fell in love with it. I knew right away that I was going to do it. But's not like all I do is tattooing. Tattooing is just another facet of my art."

Fransen's artwork – watercolor paintings of waves, line drawings of flowery wreaths, a half-finished acrylic canvas – decorates the back of the shop, but otherwise, the walls are white and empty of flash.

The shop is bright, sunny, cheerful and elegant. While Fransen does



Garrett Fransen at Sierra Tattoo Co. in Angels Camp.



Sean Stewart takes a moment to relax in Sutter Creek.



Tattoo stencils at Garrett's shop.

seen them; people covered with ink from head to toe. People who love tattoos often seek out specific artists and the bodies become galleries.

"I have a collection from all kinds of people," Fransen said. "I think that's pretty common with heavily tattooed people. They get tattooed from all over the place."

Fransen, who is dressed casually in a striped polo shirt, khaki shorts and sneakers, has examples of the American traditional style on his legs, but the markings that catch my eye are those that roll down his forearms.

"This is called biomechanical," he said. It's a style that borrows a bit from traditional Japanese tattoos and a bit from modern science-fiction fantasy art. Waves curl around his elbow and sinuous tentacles flow from his wrist to his shoulder. It's pretty cool.

"It's a free-flow abstract. A meaningless artistic piece," he jokes. And then he gets serious: "The cool thing about this is that it really becomes a piece of your body. When you twist and bend, everything moves with your bone structure and muscle structure. It looks like you were kind of born with it. There are no weird lines that break — they just twist — and everything flows with the arm."

"The Japanese and biomechanical styles can really accentuate the flow of the body. That's why I'm more drawn to that larger-scale stuff, because you really can design it for the person. It adds a whole new element to the tattoo. It's not just a sticker tattoo any more. It's a living, breathing piece of art."

offer small tattoos in his shop, he says "The whole idea for this shop is that it's basically a private, custom studio. You come in and get something designed specifically for you. It's a little bit more of a process. It's more intimate. You get what you want, because you're not sacrificing your idea just to get a tattoo that day."

"Everybody's at a different place in their life," Fransen said. "There are younger people who come and they just want to get tattooed. They've never had one, and they just want to get something simple."

"Older generations put a lot more thought into it, and those are always fun, because you can really dive into the meanings. A lot of people are open to suggestions, so if they come in with a really cool idea, in our consultation we'll talk about it, and figure out what it is that they're trying to do with the tattoo."

And then there are the collectors. We've all

## The primal urge

At West Side Ink in Tuolumne, afternoon light streams in through two half-moon-shaped windows while Tree Neal touches up a tattoo on his mother-in-law's shoulder. At 73, Carol Southern

## Choose your tattoo shop with care

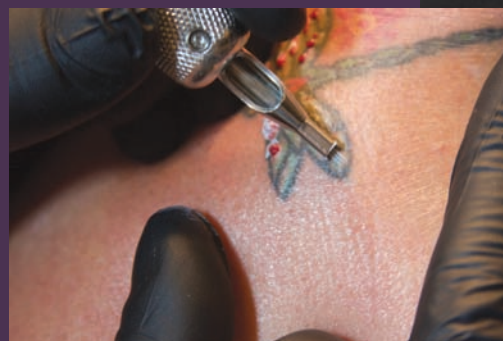
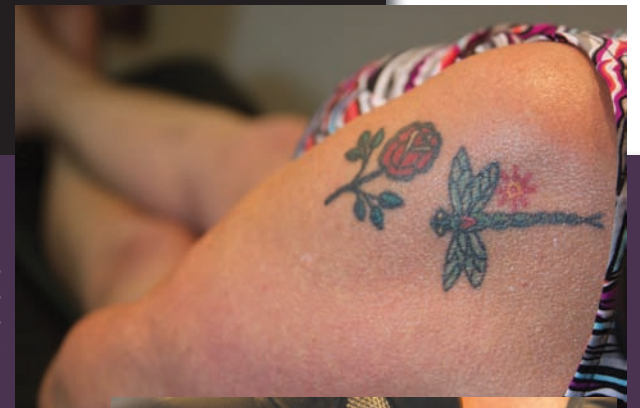
Before you settle into the chair to have that fantastic piece of body art you've always wanted tattooed onto your skin, Mother Lode experts advise you to check out a few things.

- Make sure the shop is clean. "They should be following all the health code standards," said Sean Stewart at Fat Cat Tattoo in Sutter Creek. That includes autoclaving reusable instruments and getting tested regularly for spores. "Ask to see the log; they should have them."
- Make sure your tattoo artist wears gloves; let them know if you're allergic to latex.
- Look at the shop's portfolios. Stewart has eight books full of photos of tattoos that he or people at his shop have done and most tattoo artists have similar collections of their creations. "They are the examples of the quality of the shop's work."
- Get the artist you want. "Make sure that if you like somebody's portfolio, that they will be the person doing your tattoo."
- Avoid ink trouble. Some inks are of questionable quality. "If you stick to the good inks that are well known, there's very little problem," Stewart advised. "If you think you might have an allergy, get a small area done first."



Tree Neal of West Side Ink in Tuolumne.

Tree Neal touches up a tattoo on his mother-in-law's shoulder.



only recently began getting tattoos. After Neal married her daughter Lisa (who takes care of the day-to-day shop concerns so Neal can, as she said, “Do art all day”), Southern was so impressed by his work that she let him create several small, but deeply meaningful tattoos on her shoulder.

“Lisa and I have a dragonfly in memory of my dad – her grandpa – who passed away, and the other one is in memory of a little dog that I had. And Tree did a rose on him, a rose on Lisa and a rose on me.”

Neal called the desire to mark your body “the primal urge.”

“There’s something inside your soul,” he told me, but not everybody feels it. “When Capt. Cook went over to the islands, half the people couldn’t wait to get off the boat to see what these people were about. The other half were scared to death and stayed on the boat.”

After 26 years working in the tattoo industry, and nearly 12 years owning West Side Ink, Neal is someone who would get off that boat. He has earned his reputation as an artist of high rank, and he is, of course, a tattoo collector: On his chest, a Japanese-style mask grins; on his back, a samurai rides a black horse. He’s gregarious and funny, but as an Air Force veteran, he brings a military precision to his craft, making sure everything is clean and sanitized, asking clients about any allergies or illnesses that may be affected by the process, probing to find out what kind of art they might want.

It’s hard to choose: American traditional, bio-mechanical, watercolor, a portrait or a hyper-realistic animal. Tribal art and mandalas provide ethnic decoration, and traditional Japanese-style influences are felt throughout. Most tattoo artists don’t limit themselves to one style of tattoo over the other. They are, after all, businesspeople as well as artists.



“We go through so many different aspects of art,” Neal said. “It’s not like we’re just painting flames all day. We get to go from traditional Japanese portraits to flowers to faeries and landscapes, and this is all in one day. That’s really nice to me.”

When Neal designs a tattoo, he works with the flows and angles of the body he will work on, paying attention to the S-curve, known in art circles as “the beautiful line.” And as part of the process, he gets to know his clients because, he says, “The difference between ‘I hope they like this’ and ‘They’re going to dig this’ may be one more question.”

Inking skin is not simply about making art.

“With tattoos, you have the artistic, and then you have the mechanical, which is the machine itself. Then you have the psychological, which is dealing with the person on the best day of their life, or on the worst day of their life. People don’t usually get tattooed when things are going halfway good. Most people get tattooed when ‘I won the lottery’ or ‘I just lost my mother.’ Sometimes those things happen at the same time.”

“When you’re sitting here, and there’s no counter between you and your client, you literally have them in your hands, and you can feel their pain if you’re that receptive. The stories that you hear from them, you know? It’s really hard to not start relating to it and to let them speak, because it’s their time and their pain for it.”

Ah, yes, the pain. Southern waved her hand when I asked her about the pain.

“It’s not so bad,” she said.

But by their nature, I’m told, tattoos hurt. Small needles punch holes in your skin and push colored ink into those holes. If you watch a slow-motion video of a tattoo in progress, you can see the skin dimple then stretch as the needles go in and out.

Every person is different, and some may feel a lot of pain while others feel very little. It can depend on where the needles puncture, too; near nerves and bones or over scar tissue, the process can hurt more than on meatier parts of your body.

The first time Neal got inked, “Every hair on my body stood straight up and I started sweating profusely. I said, ‘Hold on,’ and ran into the bathroom and grabbed a towel, rinsed it with cold water, put it behind my neck, and sat and rocked for five minutes until the endorphin rush went away.”

He assures me that after the first 15 minutes of the process, most people start to get used to it, and it stops hurting so much.

At any rate, the pain doesn’t seem to deter people.

“If I retired from this job tomorrow, I’d probably be hunted down by a whole bunch of people who wanted their tattoos finished,” Neal said. “Everything is an ongoing process. Tattoos are never really done.”

To show me how a tattoo is started, he drew a few Japanese-style clouds known as finger waves on a scrap of paper and put it under what looked



like carbon paper sandwiched between two pieces of heavy plastic. He ran all that through a thermal imager machine that heat-transferred the design onto a piece of tissue-thin paper.

He wet the paper and pressed it on my arm, leaving fine-lined purple waves that wrapped around my wrist and stormed to my elbow. Then, with a purple pen, he drew a design of lotus blossoms on my arm.

I’ve never before seriously considered a tattoo, and didn’t quite understand its appeal. But while he was creating – on my skin – the gracefully looping lines of a sleeve tattoo, I suddenly got it. An artist – a good artist – was drawing on my arm. I had a piece of art on my arm. I was wearing a piece of art. It was an amazing feeling.

Quite suddenly, getting a tattoo seemed like a real possibility, and not scandalous at all.