The old alligator, he slides around in bayou mud until Leroy Gilley puts an end to all his fun.

FROM BAYOU MUD TO LUXURY LEATHER

By Maud O'Bryan Ronstrom

The Louisiana Alligator is "just an old smoothie.

He seldom gets callouses on his tummy. He has "the skin you love to touch."

All summer long he slides around on his stomach in swampy, soft bayou mud. All winter he hibernates in that same soft mud. It does for his hide what a mud pack does for a lady's complexion.

Experts grade the Louisiana alligator's hide as "A-Number One—the king of leathers."

Alligators and crocodiles of other parts of the world live in more tropical climates, crawl around on rocks and hot sand, and their hides sometimes become extremely calloused. The Louisiana alligator seldom gets frontal callouses until past the age of 100 years. Even then the callouses are slight compared to those on a crocodile.

Now, the backs of all alligators, even those in Louisiana, are horny and tough, with large humps, but alligator backs are seldom used for commercial purposes. Usually a gator is slit up the back, leaving the front intact for use. So it behooves an alligator buyer to look for a gator with a smooth front surface. The Louisiana species, known to biologists as Alligatoria Mississippiensis, seems to fill the bill perfectly.

In New Orleans, some 1200 to 1500 alligator hides of all sizes are tanned every month by the oldest alligator tannery in the Western Hemisphere. It was founded in 1865 by Wenzel Zimmerman and is still operated by his son, C. E. Zimmerman, and grandson, Wenzel Zimmerman II, in the original building at 2756 Toulouse street, which was erected in 1812.

According to the Zimmermans, Louisiana alligators may live to be over 100 years old.

Then what happens? Why, young Wenzel Zimmerman tans Mr. Alligator's hide. The tannery is 81 years old.
and grow to be 15 feet long.

On the same day, C. E. Zimmerman was picking a 15-foot hide in a large vat and his son, Wenzel, was glazing a 13½-foot hide.

Slung over wooden cross beams, raised six feet from the floor of the tannery, were dozens of pickled hides of various lengths, some measuring 12 feet.

After an alligator is skinned, its hide is measured, put into a lime pit to remove scales, and grow to be 15 feet long.

On a single day, recently, LeRoy Gilley, alligator hunter and trapper, brought one eight-foot, one five-foot and four seven-foot alligators to the tannery. On the same day, C. E. Zimmerman was picking a 15-foot hide in a large vat and his son, Wenzel, was glazing a 13½-foot hide.

It will keep indefinitely, awaiting the subsequent processes whenever convenient.

“I have tanned every kind of skin but hippopotamus and rhinoceros,” C. E. Zimmerman declared. “I have rattlesnake, boa constrictor, leopard, bear, raccoon, mink and frog skins in the tannery now, but we specialize in alligator and calf.”

As a hobby he mounts deerheads and makes bearskin rugs out of Louisiana black bears, brought from the woods around Amite and Bayou Manchac. He has on display a most realistic bear with its mouth wide open to show bright red gums and snow white teeth. Mr. Zimmerman carved these out of Brazilian ivory nuts or “vegetable ivory” in a manner any dentist might envy.

Maximilian Rinow, international expert and importer, through cooperation with the Zimmermans, has established a thriving industry producing high-quality alligator belts, wallets, keycases, watchbands, compacts and cigarette cases, all expertly hand-crafted by artisans who use the hides from which the Zimmermans tan.

George Hirdes is manager of Maximilian Rinow’s factory, which is housed upstairs over the tannery. Mr. Hirdes designs the different products, makes the dies, and is foreman in charge of production. Mrs. Gloria Zimmerman, Mrs. Alma Hansel and Miss Lillian Dragon are among the staff of skilled workers.

It was almost an accident through which Maximilian Rinow became interested in the Louisiana alligator. A few years ago he imported some crocodile hides from South America and had requests from leather and shoe manufacturers up East for a New Orleans tannery. Then he discovered the Zimmermans. Since then the Rinow-Zimmerman co-operation has worked out ideally.

“Most Americans outside Louisiana think alligators are from South America,” Mr. Rinow said. “We are trying to let North American people know that the mouth of the Mississippi river is the finest alligator home in the world.

“Our beautiful products so far have carried the fame of the Louisiana alligator to Paris and London,” he pointed out. “New Orleans-made alligator goods are sold in fine shops on New York’s Fifth Avenue and in leading stores all over America. One notable retail outlet is Brooks Brothers of New York, 127 years in business, who claim to have clothed every president of the United States since Lincoln.”

“If you see an alligator belt on President Truman, or observe him using an alligator watch, cigarette case, keyholder or watchband, you can presume it came from New Orleans.”

Mr. Rinow plans future production of overnight bags, men’s and women’s leather furnishings in calfskin as well as alligator. The 140-year-old frame building in which the tannery is housed will be completely modernized, he said.

Wenzel Zimmerman the elder, who established the tannery 81 years ago, is believed to have been the first man to tan an alligator’s hide in the Western Hemisphere and probably in the world.

A native of Austria, he learned tanning of calf leather in Bohemia, then came to America in 1856. From Dubuque, Iowa, he and his brother floated down the Mississippi to New Orleans on a craft, carrying their trunks and belongings along with them. During the War Between the States, Mr. Zimmerman worked for the Union Tannery on Lessens Street, where leather cannon sweepers made of sheepskin and used to clean out the barrels of cannon were being manufactured for the Confederate army.

When the war was over Mr. Zimmerman established his own tannery on Toulouse Street, with a capital of $60. Someone brought him a few alligator hides and asked if they could be tanned. Mr. Zimmerman tanned them and sold them to a New York dealer. Mrs. Vanderhill bought the material and used it to cover a chair, which she liked so well she ordered more alligator skins.

Soon a new industry of alligator tanning was born.

Today some experts consider the hide of the Louisiana alligator to be the most luxurious leather in the world.