



## Ink

*Tattoo artist Jesse Dickson discusses his trade, and the legacy of Smitty's Tattoo shop in Bremerton.*

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When I step into Smitty's Place Tattoo in Bremerton, I am confronted with two options.

I step into the shop on the left. It is shadowed and moody. Plants climb the walls, smother the large front window. Dust dances in weak slivers of light. The sound of wet tires swish out front. Rich, antique, dark wooden display cases run along one wall and through the middle of the narrow room. The floor is covered in worn brown linoleum, the walls dark forest green. Somewhere, a clock is ticking. The walls are lined with artwork and old tin signs. It feels more like an antique store than a tattoo parlor.

The room on the right is a renovated 1950s soda fountain, complete with bright cherry red walls. It is also narrow, but filled with sunlight. I can imagine the chrome and the long soda counter, the round stools, milkshakes, poodle skirts. These days, the walls are filled with artwork, stickers, Jesus pictures, and shelves of curios -- alligator skulls, trinkets, pieces of metal, animal teeth, old spoons, bones.

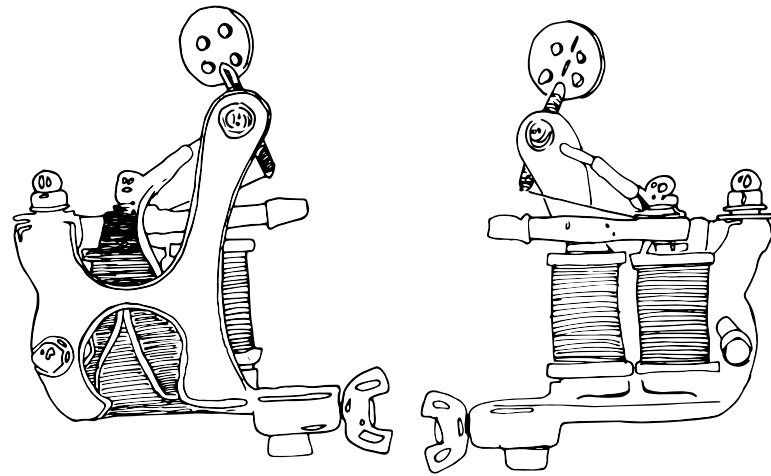
Jesse, one of the artists at Smitty's, pops out from the back. A long-haired, kind-faced, bearded guy in his mid-twenties wearing glasses. Definitely not your stereotypical tattoo artist. Or not the kind I had in mind, anyway. He shakes my hand, we sit down and he gives me a rundown on the history of the building.

Formerly Moeller's Jewelry shop, Smitty's has retained the original hardwood hutches and display cases; they would be impossible to extract without removing the front window of the shop. The giant wooden cases were brought over piecemeal on a steamship from Germany, the legs adorned with M for Moeller's Jewelry, and are rumored to have been made of Black Forest conifers. "My grandmother used to shop for jewelry out of these cases," Jesse says, pointing over his shoulder.

Even the old street clock outside beckons a romantic ambience. The clock was dedicated in memory of George and John Moeller. "It's a great landmark, and the only one in town," Jesse said. "It's a real piece of history."

Sitting on the overstuffed leather couch, amongst the plants in the front window, Jesse tells me that the modern tattoo machine actually uses the same technology as the doorbell, which was invented by Thomas Edison. He tells me to hang on a second and leaves the room. Comes back with a doorbell in one hand and a tattoo machine in the other, and indeed, they look fairly similar.

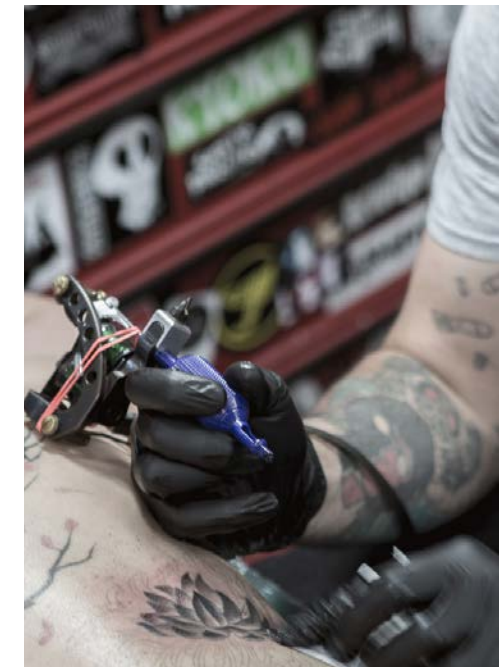
They even have a skeleton. "Some guy came by one afternoon with that thing," Jesse reports, pointing at its' final resting place, seated in one of the floor-to-ceiling cabinets. "And he was like, hey, do you guys want this skeleton? And we were like, sure, why not, here's twenty bucks," he laughs. "He probably got it out of a dumpster, it looked pretty gross."

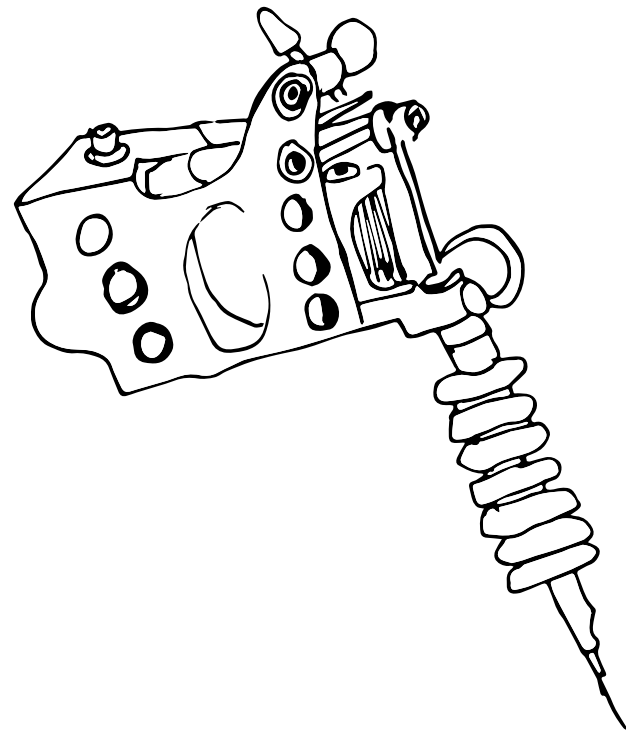
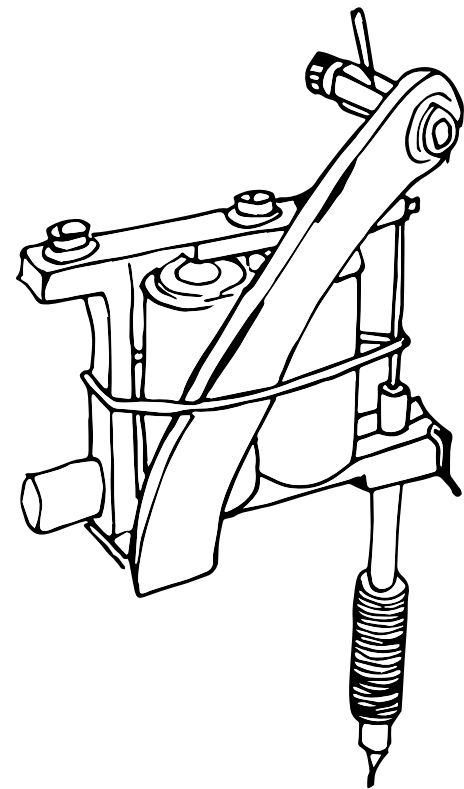


Smitty, the owner, moved to Bremerton from Anchorage, Alaska, with his wife and five kids. He wanted to move to a small town, and being a tattoo artist by trade, living near a naval base was a must.

"We are the closest shop to the base, so we get a lot of navy traffic," Jesse says. "I'd say 60% of our business is from there. There has always been a tradition of tattoos with the navy. They're gone a long time, and for some reason that's always what they want to do first, when they get back."

Smitty is preparing to retire from the tattoo business; passing the baton to his daughter, Bonnie, which makes Smitty's a second-generation tattoo shop.





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For Jesse, staying in his hometown has had its benefits. “I’ve been drawing since I was a kid. I wanted to be a cartoonist or an illustrator. I was always getting in trouble for doodling,” he says, looking down, smiling. “I knew Bonnie from high school and I asked her if I could apprentice at Smitty’s and she said yes. Which is unusual. Normally when you’re looking for an apprenticeship you get used to hearing ‘no’ a lot.”

That was seven years ago. Now Jesse and Bonnie have their own apprentice, Kaylon, working under them.

The stigma around tattooing has changed a lot between Smitty and Jesse’s generations.

“It’s not just for sailors and whores anymore,” Jesse says, laughing. “I think it was in the mid-80s that people’s attitudes began to shift. The quality of the art got better and sterilization became more important. But really in the past 10-20 years tattoos have become a lot more popular. Also, the industry has become a lot more heavily state-regulated. The shops that were cutting corners eventually just got weeded out.”

In fact, several shops in the area have had to close because of new state laws, under which it now costs considerably more to acquire the necessary licences and insurance.



Smitty surprises us by dropping by to pick up some mail. He's not the biker-type I expected him to be. In fact, he is a well-spoken small businessman.

"I have worked in this industry for 36 years. They let criminals out of jail sooner than that," he says, with a chuckle. "The art has improved so much over the years. I decided to make like Johnny Carson and get the hell out while I'm still doing good work."

"It's no longer thugs, bikers and hardcores getting tattoos," he continues. "The demographic has shifted. Now, the people getting tattoos are arts school grads. There is a much more educated buying public out there now. It's a more fertile ground than it has been for years."

Despite a more educated market and better-than-ever standards of quality, there are still a lot of "scratchers" out there. Scratchers are people who attain inexpensive equipment online and tattoo out of their houses.

"Now it's easier than ever to get equipment on the internet -- needles, inks, machines, everything," Jesse tells me. "The inks are cheap, made out of compromised materials. I don't even know what they're made out of. It's not good for you."

Like any other trade, if you want to get good work done, you get what you pay for.

Kaylon expressed it best. "It's kinda disgusting how good [Jesse] is at finding the flow line [the focal starting point of the tattoo], and lining the art up with the curves of the person's body. It's custom art, but it's also custom to the shape of your body. It's an intuitive thing."

Smitty's Place Tattoo is located at 322 N Callow Ave Bremerton, WA 98312, ph:(360) 479-4908

