

# THE HEART OF IT ALL

I would imagine that trying to cover something like the rich history of tattooing in Ohio, would be difficult in a book... let alone in a mere five pages. Important figures and places for one person will always be different for another. And, with a place like Ohio, the vast amount of information is daunting. But we tried our best, and in the end, I think we did well. This is by no means a definitive guide, nor an in-depth one... but we hope it is enough to spark an interest that will get people looking back at their tattooing roots. Because, at the end of the day, without these early pioneers, we would all be working in a different field. Rich T. & Duró Morrison As credited



The Ohio Tattoo History Museum  
www.bicknee.com

Tattoo Archive, Winston Salem  
www.tattooarchive.com

The Motor City Tattoo Museum  
www.motorcitytattoomuseum.com

**W**ater brings life to everything, and the same could be said for tattooing in Ohio. From Cincinnati's Ohio River to Lake Erie in the Cleveland area, the fresh water routes brought sailors and river barge workers into the area. And from the very centre, the capital city of Columbus, to its neighbouring cities of Cincinnati, Cleveland and everywhere in between, Ohio has a rich history of tattooing.

It has always been an important liberal state, not just politically but artistically as well, and the art form of ink and skin has flourished here since the early 1900s. Ohio has a tradition of amazing talent within its borders, having one of the best art colleges in the country, The Columbus College of Art and Design. You just have to look around at Ohio's various art festivals throughout the year to see how much art is appreciated and admired throughout the state. Tattooing has been an embraced art form in Ohio for a long time which has helped produce many fine tattoo artists over the years.

## The early years

Nestled in the Ohio River valley where Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio meet, Cincinnati was where the grandfather of traditional tattooing, Cap Coleman, was born in 1884. It's said that as a young man Coleman did hand tattooing and plied his trade along the Ohio River. Another great name of the time was Joseph Clingan, born in 1873 in Wooster, who also worked as a paper hanger and painter. Though during his 50-plus year career he tattooed in Cleveland, Toledo, Youngstown, Detroit, and Chicago, the lion's share of it was spent in Ohio. And it was men like these, who though they might not have known it at the time, were the start of a line of tattooers who were to be a major influence in the tattooing world.

In the early turn of the century, J.F. Barber tattooed and operated a supply business in Cincinnati and the city of Cleveland. Likewise, on the south shore of Lake Erie, Joseph

F. Verba offered electric tattooing, tattooing machines and supplies.

Letters from Verba to a fellow tattooer, named Al Schiefley, place Al in Cleveland in the 1930s. Schiefley is probably best known for the Sandusky Tattoo Club and his relationship with Les Skuse and The Bristol Tattoo Club (BTC).

Schiefley began tattooing professionally in 1927, age 15, from his parents residence in Sandusky. He worked full-time as a conductor for the Pennsylvania railroad, taking the night shift to allow his seven-day-a-week shop hours; 5-9pm week days and the weekends. In 1953, Schiefley started corresponding with Les Skuse, a well-known English tattooer and president of the Bristol Tattoo Club. Following Skuse's tattoo club example, he founded The Sandusky Tattoo Club (STC) in November of 1954.

The following year, Al travelled to Bristol, England, to be the guest of





**SCHIEFLEY WORKED FULL-TIME AS A CONDUCTOR FOR THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD, TAKING THE NIGHT SHIFT TO ALLOW HIS SEVEN-DAY-A-WEEK SHOP HOURS**



PH. F. VERBA  
Professional  
Artists Supplies

**TATTOOING**

JOS. F. VERBA  
Professional  
Artistic  
Tattooing  
Seven  
Different  
Colors

14 EDGEWOOD AVE.  
DIO AND MANUFACTURER  
CLEVELAND, OHIO

Verba catalogs, 1930s  
Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum

honour at the BTC 'Unique Party'. Likewise, in September 1956, Les Skuse travelled to Sandusky to be the guest of honour, at what might be described as an early tattoo convention.

In addition to STC members attending the Sandusky Tattoo Club Party, there were also the likes of Paul Rogers, Huck Spaulding, Milt Zeis, DC Paul, and Tiffin Ohio tattooer, Bill Evanoff. No doubt one of the highlights of the party was Jean Parker, Al Schiefley's sister-in-law, who made herself available for posed saucy photos. Many of these photos still show up in tattoo books and are often not properly credited.

Manning the grill at the party was Al Cooke, aka Cookie, a Cleveland native; Al Cooke was not tattooed and didn't tattoo, but he did have a beautiful collection of tattoo design sheets from all over the USA and Europe which he used to decorate his basement den. Cookie had a host of



tattooer friends, among them Schiefley and Les Skuse, who he visited at least once some time in the mid-1950s.

Al Schiefley would be the guest of honour twice more at the BTC Unique Party; in 1957 sharing it with Milt Zeis, and again in 1960, sharing the honour with Huck Spaulding. ➔

**THANK YOU...**  
Rich and Durb would like to thank the following people who helped them to pull together this feature...  
Carmen Forquer Nyssen (Joe Clingan research),  
Christine Valenza, Dano Collins (Motor City Tattoo Museum),  
Dana Brunson, C.W. Eldridge, and Marty Holcomb.

STC Party, September 1956, Al 'Cookie' Cooke (left) manning the grill  
Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum

**OHIO HAS A VAST COLLECTION OF TALENTED TATTOO ARTISTS THAT WOULD LATER BECOME KNOWN AS HISTORIC FIGURES IN THE HISTORY OF TATTOOING**

**RICH T.**

Ohio native Rich T. has 20-plus years experience as a professional tattooer of the old school variety. In addition to tattooing, Rich and his wife, Bobbi, operate Bicknee Tattoo Supply. Bicknee is run in the finest American mom and pop family tradition. Rich is acknowledged as the builder of fine tattoo machines, which are available at Bicknee. The Ohio Tattoo History Museum is on the premises, displaying art and artefacts stretching back to the beginning of electric tattooing. The museum is open to the public by appointment.

**Building foundations**

Leonard 'Stoney' St. Clair, a well-known old school tattooer, spent the last ten years of his 50-plus year career, tattooing in Columbus. In 1969 the state of Florida had passed a law requiring a licensed physician be on premises in tattoo shops, so Stoney, living in Tampa, relocated to Columbus a year later. While in Columbus, Stoney put his mark on a lot of folks, and he apprenticed, or helped, several people get into tattooing, including Jan Gawronski, Dave Boucher and Marty Holcomb.

Marty Holcomb talking about Stoney says, "Although Stoney was handicapped and had very limited movement and reach, he was determined to support himself and to be as independent as possible. He was a unique artist with great wit and personality and was one of the most inspiring and memorable individuals that I have known."

"These days, Marty Holcomb is a tattoo artist fixture not only in Columbus, but around the globe. One of the first to employ a painterly style in his tattooing, he was most certainly a pioneer in the early '70s; "I did my first homemade tattoo in 1969, I met Stoney in 1971 and a year later. After showing Stoney my drawings, he agreed to take me on as his apprentice," recalls Marty.

Marty began tattooing professionally in 1972 at Artistic Tattooing. "In 1973 I met Cliff Raven in Chicago and then in 1974 I met Carl Bleile. I consider these three tattoo artists to be my teachers in tattooing."

**AL'S TATTOO**



STC Party, September 1956, (L-R) Al Schiefel, Jean Parker, Les Skusa  
Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum

Marty has been a prolific artist over the years. In addition to his tattooing and painting, he has produced large amounts of commercial flash sold by major suppliers—his flash can be found on the walls of shops all around the world.

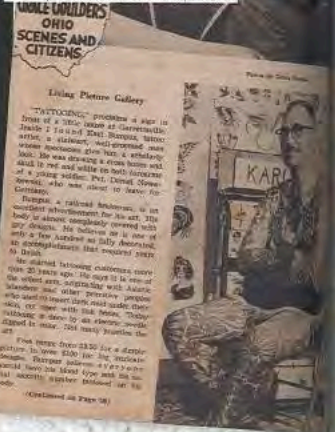
Jan Gawronski, originally from Cleveland, also apprenticed with Stoney in 1973 and part of 1974, opened his place, Jans Tattoo Shop, in 1974. Jan's shop was traditional in every sense, with his own flash on the walls. He occupied the apartment above the shop and worked the same location until his death in 2009. His son, Jan Jr., now carries on the business.

Cincinnati in the '70s had Carl Bleile and Tim Meguire, who started off with a shop together. "The next year Tim opened his own shop and Carl dropped out," recalls Dana Brunson, who relocated to Cincinnati in 1977 and worked with Tim. "For 11 years we were the only shop in town!"

In 1989, Dana open his own place,



Karl Bumpus news clipping  
Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum



Verba comercial flash (reproduced B&W photograph), 1930s  
 Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum



Stoney flash  
 Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum



Schieffley's card, 1920s

Over 1,000 Designs

Old work covered

**ALF. SCHIEFFLEY**  
**TATTOO ARTIST**  
 Absolutely Sanitary Treatments  
 Satisfaction Guaranteed  
**REASONABLE PRICES**

Jan Gawronski's business card

1301 W. Market St. / Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum

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 Wed. & Sun. by Appt. only

1000's of Designs  
 Bright Colors  
 Colors or rework

**TATTOOING**  
 Jan's Tattoo Shop

565 West Broad St. • Col's Ohio

State Law: 18 yr. picture ID required as proof of age. • Inspected by the Col's Health Dept. • Sterilized equipment • New needles each customer  
 "Tattooing ancient as time, modern as tomorrow"  
 "Your Design or mine"



Al Schiefley and Karl Bumpus at Schiefley's 1513 Pearl St. Sandusky Shop, mid-1960s  
 Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum



Milt Zeis tattooing Bill Evanoff at STC Party, Sandusky, September 1956  
 Courtesy of The Ohio Tattoo History Museum

**WHILE IN COLUMBUS, STONEY PUT HIS MARK ON A LOT OF FOLKS AND HE APPRENTICED, OR HELPED, SEVERAL PEOPLE GET INTO TATTOOING**

Designs by Dana, and it quickly became a destination tattoo shop. His wife, Dot, and son, Jason, have now joined him in the business, along with a capable staff of outstanding tattoo artists.

After his father's death in May of 1973, Dale Schiefley moved Al's, now famous, shop and continued tattooing until his retirement in 2000. Tattoo shops continued to flourish in the '70s with Jon and Debbie Lenz opening a shop in Youngstown, while in Wooster, Lynn Delaney opened her shop, Moving Pictures. In the Cleveland area, G&G Tattoo opened in 1975, and Finest Lines in 1977. In Toledo, The Toledo Tattoo Co. opened in 1978, and in Dayton, Glenn Scott opened shop in the early '80s.

It was the 1980s when things really started to move. In Springfield you had ReRun, often with his right-hand man, 'Carney' Brian Carney. ReRun worked from numerous locations, one of which was a converted school bus buried into a hillside. A ReRun apprentice, Shane 'Hez' Smith, recalls 'The Cave' where

Carney and ReRun liked to tinker. Together they made some very clever: tattoo machines in the '90s, many of them single coil. The name of the style of machines was 'Sow's Ears' because of the appearance of the frame, which looks very much like a pig's ear.

The popularity of tattooing was on the rise and tattooers started showing up in smaller cities and towns all over the state... it was on.

### Flying high

In the early 1990s there weren't too many studios in Columbus, or Ohio for that matter, and there were very few that were doing work deemed worthy of the word 'tattoo'. At that time, there were still no written laws, local taxes, or Board of Health regulations for any studio or artist; it was somewhat of an outlaw art, a free-for-all. The tattoo history and movement in Ohio was already strong due to the early pioneers and the godfathers of tattooing in Columbus—like the late



Dana Brunson at the 1st National Tattoo Convention, 1976

Photo: Albert L. Morse

Tim Miller



**RERUN WORKED FROM NUMEROUS LOCATIONS, ONE OF WHICH WAS A CONVERTED SCHOOL BUS BURIED INTO A HILLSIDE**

**DURB MORRISON**

Born in Newark, Ohio, in 1972, Durb spent his early years absorbing as much art as he could. At the age of 14, Durb was already experimenting with small handpoked designs. He was slowly brought into the world of tattooing through a family member and eventually abandoned the art college dream to focus intensely on tattooing. At 18, Durb began working under Tim Miller. In 1994, Durb opened Stained Skin, and in 1999 he opened his second studio, Second Skin. Durb has since sold both studios to focus intensely on personal fine art and design work. He is also the owner of Pint Size Publishing, which has released 'Miniature Paintings By Big Artists', the first of many pint size books to come.



Stoney St. Clair, Marty Holcomb, Jan Gawronski, and Tim Miller—who had, through apprenticeships and sharing similar clients and collectors around Ohio, all handed down their knowledge to one another over the years. Tim Miller would later bring along Durb Morrison to also become a part of Columbus tattoo history. Durb has made Columbus his home base, bringing the legendary Hell City Tattoo Fest to the capital city of Ohio, once more furthering the appreciation of the art form in Ohio and inspiring future tattoo generations to come.

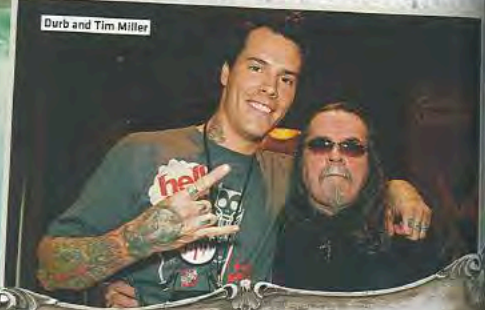
Ohio has a vast collection of talented tattoo artists that would later become known as historic figures in the history of tattooing. Many other recent tattoo artists have made an impact on this state as well; Gunnar, Dave Fevenal,

Anthony Dubois, Brian Brenner, and others. The talent spreads from border to border, ranging from Cincinnati, where tattoo artists like Kore Flatmo, Mike Dorsey and Dana Brunson have focused on their art. Passing through Dayton, one would find tattoo veterans, Glenn Scott, Glen Freisen, and St. Mark. In the mid-to-late 1980s, one would have had the pleasure to meet Norma Sonnevile, one of the first female tattoo artists in Ohio. In Toledo, you could visit the inspirational Brian Taylor and traditional artist, Sailor Woody. Right along the eastern border lies Sweet Chuck and Ron Meyers creating their art, arriving in the northeastern part of Cleveland, the talents of the late David Nicoli Araca, and more recently Phil Robertson, Al Garcia, Dave Maynard,

and many other great tattoo artists. The Midwest has always been an integral part of the United States, with it's swing state impact influencing many things throughout the entire country. And the long list of talent in Ohio has surely influenced the tattoo world and industry down the years. The Ohio Tattoo Museum, owned by Rich T, has also had a major influence on preserving the rich history that Ohio tattooing has, housing many artefacts that are important pieces of the history of tattooing in the state. And Columbus has produced tons of talented tattoo artists that have gone on to contribute much to modern tattooing in Ohio and throughout the country.

Ohio really is, the 'Heart of it All', influencing the rest of the country with new and innovative styles and studios. Ohio has, and always will be, an influential state for tattooing in the United States. **TM**

Durb and Tim Miller



Norma Sonnevile



Dana Brunson Family 2006. L-R: Souli, Kosta, Jason, Dana and Bob. Courtesy of Dana Brunson