

The Gaff Factory



By Craig Matsuoka

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- Fifth Edition -

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Introduction

Card magic is replete with possibilities toward presentation and method, but it's hard to spend much time on the creative side of things without running into walls. Specifically, where do you obtain cards having the backs and faces you need, when you need them? If immediacy is paramount, many times, the only solution is to make them yourself. So, naturally, interest in homemade card gaffs has always been strong.

This is neither the first nor last book to deal with the art and craft of card gaffing. Indeed, several good books and videos already pepper the market. Why yet another? A trite answer would be, "There's more than one way to skin a cat", but that's a disturbing visual. Let's go with, "There's more than one way to peel a black tiger". Now *there's* an idiom I can get behind. Any way you care to look at it, there's a niche to fill. This knowledge gap is all the more apparent by the incessant stream of gaffing questions on Internet magic forums despite all the information published heretofore. Hence, this book.

Yet, redundancy can be annoying. So to save space, we won't dwell on applications (i.e. tricks). They lie outside the scope and purpose of this book, which is written with the assumption that the reader is fully aware of the possibilities. Furthermore, aside from incidental usage, rubber cementing and inkjet printing will not be discussed, as they have already been covered in great detail elsewhere. Instead, we will focus on the lesser-known "dry mounting" technique. Awareness is growing, but most never bother to try it because they think it's either too expensive or they don't know where to begin. This book is meant to remedy that situation. It takes you step-by-step and shows how professional-quality gaffs can be made using easily obtainable materials and equipment. With practice, it offers an alternative to rubber cement that yields results anyone will be proud of.

This work presents some unusual construction methods that are not described anywhere else, distilling years of painful experience into a form beginners can easily digest. As well, great care was taken to avoid guesswork and speculation. Everything you see here was actually tried and tested. In most cases, clarifying photographs and illustrations are included to complement the text.

If creativity is the fuel of innovation, then home gaffmaking is the engine that drives magic forward. It is my sincere hope that you will find this information to be eminently practical, equipping you with an earned skill that repays itself many times over. If nothing else, it should give you a greater appreciation for all the labor that goes into constructing the gaffs you can buy in magic shops.

Craig Matsuoka
2007

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Getting Started

Step one: The right attitude

I applaud your sense of adventure in wanting to learn the material in this book, but you should know what you're getting into.

Card gaffing is tedious work. Frankly, it's a chore. However, when you find yourself questioning the cost of the labor, consider this: The effort you put into learning this craft gives you the power to flesh out your ideas. Finally, you can stop wishing and start having! Those weird gaffs you've been fantasizing about in your notebooks will come to life through the industry of your hands. How much is that ability worth to you? Only you can determine that.

Discouraged yet? No? Then do this: Read through each procedure several times first and try to visualize yourself doing it all. That way, you won't get snagged on the horns of nasty surprises. Begin at the first page and read all the way through to the last. The explanations are progressive, and rely on knowledge gained from previous sections. So if you skip around, you'll get lost.

The best advice I can offer is to hang in there and work in a room where no one can hear you scream. There's no royal road here. Working with dry mounting tissue involves a great deal of patience and attention to detail. You'll make mistakes aplenty and ruin countless gaffs on your journey to perfection.

Don't rush. Taking shortcuts will often lead to frustration and gaff crapitude.

Inside the Factory

A good place to begin our discussion is at the United States Playing Card Company. By understanding how cards are made, you'll have a better idea of what it takes to properly gaff them.

Bicycles begin their lives as huge rolls of linen/wood pulp paper measuring about four feet diameter. They are fed into a pasting machine where two layers of the paper are fused together with black paste. USPCC says it's the secret sauce that lends durability, playability, and "shuffleability". Next, the dried/cured paper is given a plastic laminated coating and sent to a machine called a "crusher" that ensures uniform paper thickness before it's handed over to the printing department. A dimpled pattern embossed into the surface creates a texture called an "air-cushion" finish that eliminates shine while improving slip and durability.

The finished rolls of laminated paper are infed to a four-color high-speed web offset press that, like all such presses, prints on continuous rolls at a dizzying rate. The freshly printed paper then zooms straight through a drying oven where the ink rapidly cures.

At the output, things start to look more familiar. Sheets of fifty-four cards are cut from the roll, each arranged in a grid of eight cards wide by seven cards high. Most of us have seen them offered to collectors as "uncut sheets". These sheets are inspected and fed through a machine that cuts them into horizontal strips of eight cards each. You would think a knife guillotine is used, since it can cut through a thick stack all at once, but that's not what happens. The machine cuts sheets one at a time, possibly for the sake of consistency.

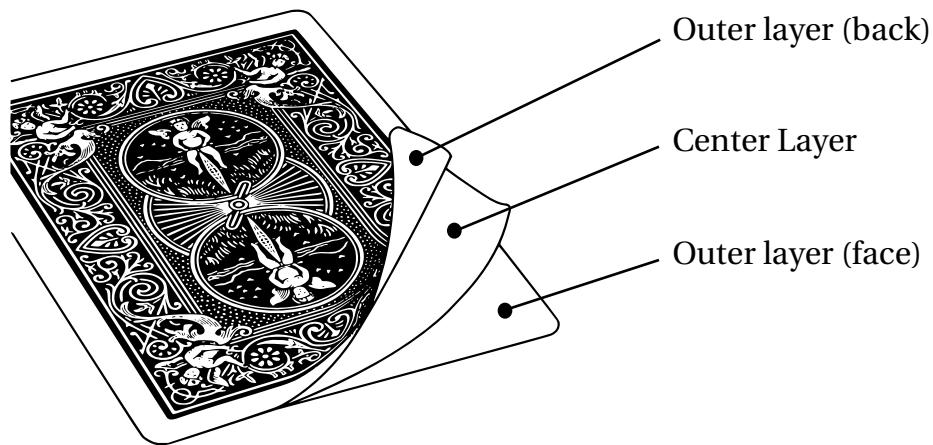
Finally, the strips are stacked and loaded into a die-cutting machine where individual cards are punched out. From there, it's on to inspection and packaging.

As you can see, much happens before you can play Victor Frankenstein.

Playing Card Anatomy

Playing cards have three layers. In figure 1, you can see that two outer layers sandwich a dark gray center layer.

Figure 1



These layers can be separated with a waterless technique called “dry splitting” or “dry peeling”. It's a fundamental skill that you'll need to have before attempting anything else in this book. To newcomers, this might sound daunting. However, if you follow the instructions in the next section and devote an entire practice deck of Bicycles to destruction, you'll be peeling like a pro soon enough. Before we begin, we should discuss why...

Water is all Wet

The center layer is actually black water-soluble glue, so why not soak the cards in water or steam them and be done with it? Easy, right?

Wrong. There is nothing quick and easy about wet splitting. It helps to understand what happens when you soak a Bicycle playing card. It weakens the interface between the paper and the plastic coating, making the surface prone to bubbling. In this fragile state, it doesn't take much effort to accidentally tear the wet surface of the paper and crack the ink. A rubber brayer can help squeeze away the water, but damage is still hard to avoid, particularly to the dimples of the air-cushion finish.

Thereafter, much time is wasted in carefully drying the card. Even after it dries out, the finish never looks or feels as good as it did before the soak. Save yourself the aggravation and stick with dry splitting.

Dry Splitting

Forget water. Dry splitting is the way to go. It's quick and allows you to handle the pieces with little risk. There are different dry splitting techniques and after a while, you'll settle on one that works best for you. Some expert peelers scrape cards across a table edge in one quick uninterrupted motion, but the learning curve of that approach is steep. There's an easier method where you peel the card a little at a time diagonally from corner to corner. Expert Card Technique teaches it, but it's so fundamental that we'll explain it here and add a few helpful tips to make things even easier for you.

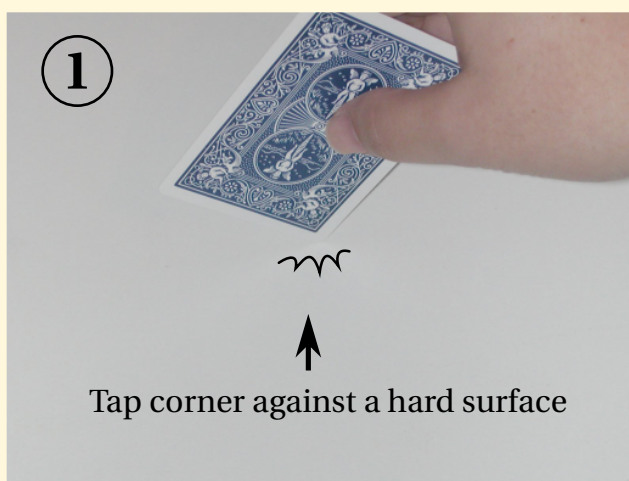
We'll peel a face for this tutorial.

Start with a fresh new card and tap one non-index corner against a hard surface until it dents slightly (photo 1). Fray the corner just enough so you can separate the outer face layer and begin peeling.

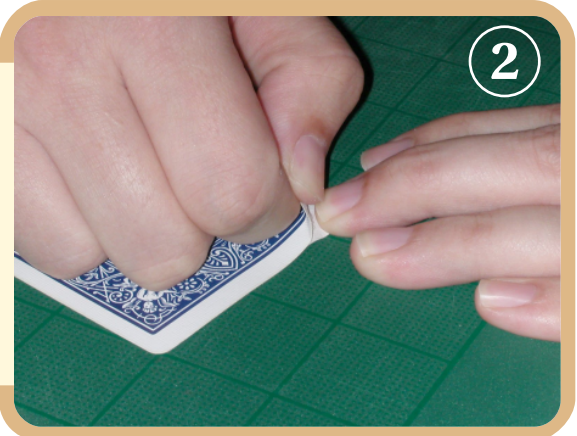
Bear in mind that you're fraying the corner into two parts: a thin layer and a thick layer. In our example here, the thin layer is the face, while the thick layer actually consists of two layers: the center and the back. If you're confused, refer to page 7 again.

If you have short fingernails, you'll find it helpful to use a razor blade or a hobby knife to pry the corner layers apart by about a millimeter. Then, grab the thick layer with eyebrow plucking tweezers and pull it backward on itself to increase the separation by another millimeter or two.

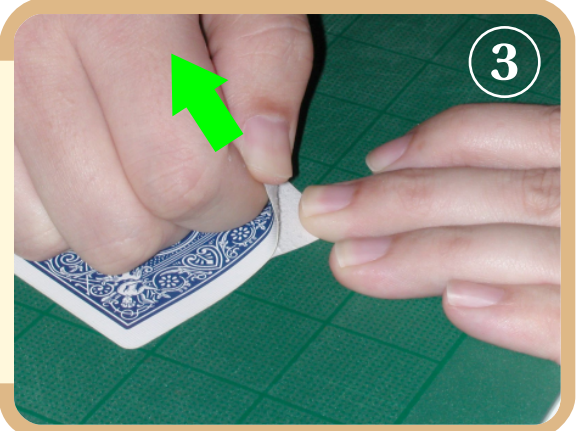
Getting the corner started is tricky and might become the part of the job you'll hate the most. While you're learning this, the corner might end up looking like your rabbit had been chewing on it, but keep practicing. You'll get better. Avoiding nail dents and wrinkle marks isn't easy, but you have one thing working in your favor: The marks are less noticeable after you glue the gaff together, so the corner needn't be flawless.



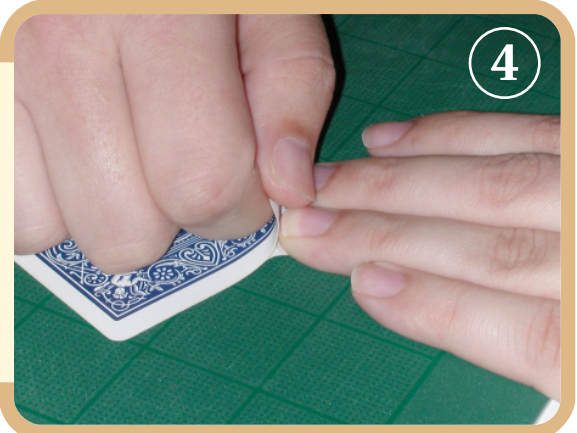
Once you fray enough of the layers to get a purchase on them with your fingers, lay the card (thick side upward) on a hard flat surface. Hold the thin corner down with your middle finger and grab the upper thick corner with your other hand. Keep your knuckles firmly pressed against the card.



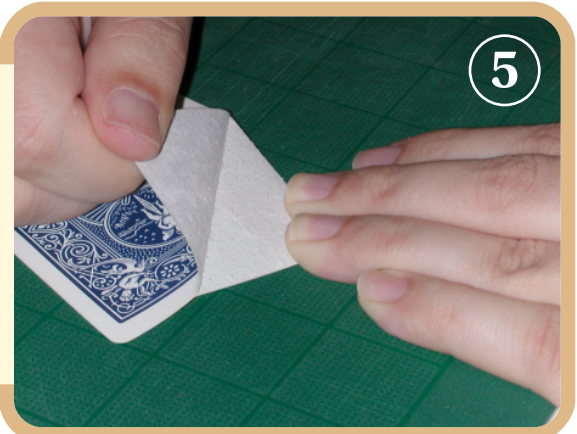
Now pull back and upward on the thick corner by rolling that hand backward on its knuckles while your other hand remains stationary. This peeling action should be fairly rapid, yet smooth and controlled. As you do this, the separation point advances by approximately 1 cm.



Next, move your left second and third fingers forward all the way up to the new separation point. Hold the thin corner down firmly.



Grab close to the separation point with your right fingers and repeat the previous peeling action to advance the separation point again.

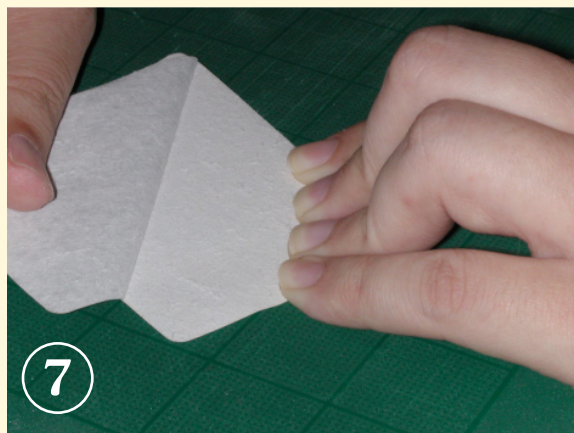


All four left fingers move up to the new separation point and clamp down (photo 6). Your right fingers grab the corner near the separation point and peels a bit more. Remember to roll back on your knuckles.



Continue this gradual pulling procedure all the way across the card to the diagonally opposite corner. With practice, you can decrease the number of pulls it takes to get to the other end. The fewer pulls you do, the less rippling and distortion there will be on the peeled face.

Pulling back at a sharp angle as shown in photo 7 makes this easier. However, it can be wasteful since it damages the finish of the thick piece. If you're planning to peel both sides of the card, you should pull at an angle that's closer to perpendicular.



Success = Practice + Practice + Practice

Congratulations. You dry split your first card, but don't stop now. It's tempting to yell "woo hoo" and triumphantly wave the freshly sundered pieces in the air, but resist the urge. Your family won't be impressed. Pat yourself on the back and calmly peel yourself a whole deck of faces for practice. Once you get the hang of it, you've passed the first major hurdle in card gaffing. Most people give up after two hundred botched attempts. Not you. You're a determined and patient masochist. In other words, you're well on your way to becoming a card gaffer. Hooray!

When you're done celebrating, discard the thick back pieces and keep the thin faces. We will soon put that big pile of faces to good use.

This is only the beginning!

You're reading just a tiny eleven-page preview of "The Gaff Factory". The full version has **eighty pages** supplemented by **126 color photographs** and 23 illustrations. Also included in this package are vector graphics of card indexes and pips that you can manipulate within Scribus, a free open source DTP application.