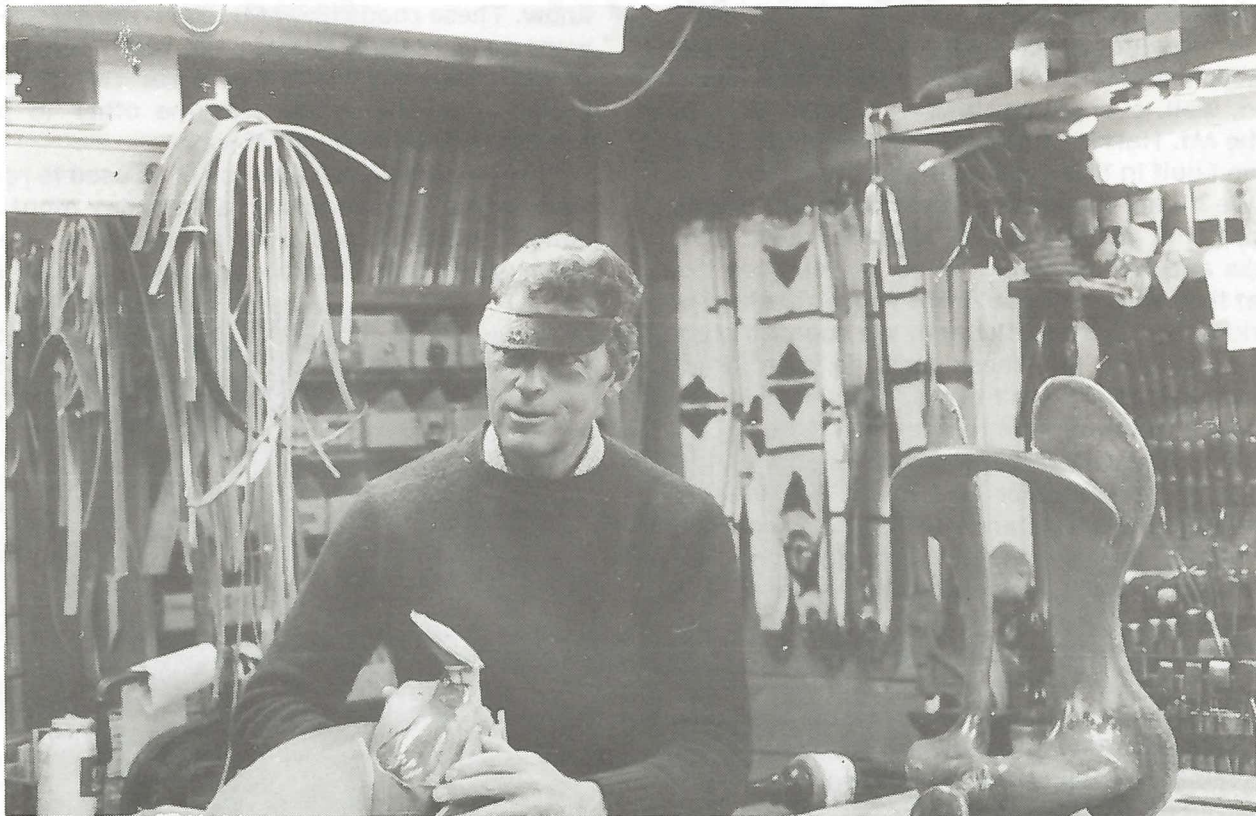


"SADDLERY USED TO BE A VERY SECRETIVE TRADE."



PETE GORRELL

BY JAY LYNCH AND JOE ADAMO

Joe and I (Jay) went to interview Pete Gorrell knowing that he was a first rate ski instructor. Upon our arrival Pete was starting to make a saddle for a friend. During our visit we both became interested in this other profession. Neither of us knew anything about saddlery, so we called Pete again and asked him for another interview, this time on saddle making instead of ski and first aid instruction.

After talking with Pete, we found out that his saddle making abilities were as good as his skiing techniques. After making saddles over the last 30 years Pete has become aware of good saddle making techniques and has learned that there is really a science to making saddles.

Pete told us, "My background in saddlery is related to my own history with horses since I've worked them most of my life. My father would take me down our front walk to ride around the block on the milkman's horse. This was when I was still in diapers. My folks taught me both English and Western style riding. I rode hunters and jumpers in high school, and I played quite a bit of polo and competed in gymkhanas. After graduating from high school in 1947, I got into rodeoing.

"I rode bareback, bulls, and did some bulldogging. I won the Western Slope Bull Riding title in 1956. And in 1957, I placed fourth in the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Finals in bareback bronc riding. I quit rodeoing in 1957, because I had a wife and two kids and decided there was no sense in racking myself up."

Pete continued his story by telling us about his saddlemaking. "I started saddlery in 1951, and have been making saddles ever since. The trade started out as a hobby, until in 1956 when I moved to Arizona. I operated a shop in Tucson for 15 years. The most saddles I ever made in one year was 32. Once you learn how to make a saddle there is no part that is really that hard to make because you know how the pieces fit. The hardest part is learning how to do it. I figure I had been in the business five years before I know enough about the trade to start to learn how to make a saddle that I could be proud of.

"When I was in practice I could get a saddle out in 45 to 48 hours. That was just a plain saddle. Now I'm pretty much retired from saddle making, so it takes me about 60 to 70 hours. Then if I start carving the saddle and doing little extra things, the saddle will take longer to make. I take

a little longer than most people to make a saddle because there are quite a few things that I feel should be put into one that are generally left out. I've got this thing about the way I think a saddle should be built. It can't be built in a production line method. I shouldn't say can't, but if I were working in a company I would not be satisfied with the craftsmanship I would be required to put out, because I would have to do it their way instead of mine.

"Most saddles are now made by fitters. A fitter is an individual who is just hired off the street. He goes to work for a saddle company that has patterns; he just puts one piece of the saddle together, then it goes to another person on the production line. The next guy puts on another piece. So one guy becomes very fast doing the same thing over and over again. He doesn't do the braiding or carving or whatever else in on the saddle.

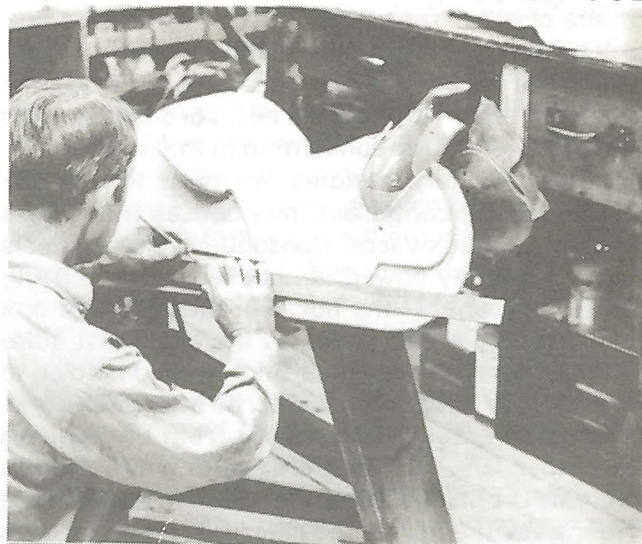
"With a production line method it is hard to build a saddle that will position the rider correctly. I make the ground work in a saddle to position the rider's hips inclined slightly forward. A horse carries 60 to 65 percent of its weight on the front quarters and 40 percent on the hind quarters. A rider should be positioned in the saddle so the weight of the saddle and the rider are both carried in the same proportion that the horse carries its own weight. To do this I have to position the rider and build the seat in a certain way. This is a decision made by the saddle maker.



PETE TELLS HOW TO MAKE A SADDLE

"When making a saddle, I start off first by marking the center line; that's what I use to bring all my ground work to. Everything is done from the center point. I mark where I want my stirrup leathers to swing. The seat is made so that it will position the rider to carry half his weight in the seat and half his weight on the stirrup leathers. I put in a bar raiser that serves two functions. It raises the front of the strainer plate bringing more height away from the horse's withers. This enables me to make the seat a little bit more narrow. This makes the

EVERYTHING IS MADE TO COME OUT



EVEN FROM THE CENTER

rider more comfortable and riding less tiring.

"The tree is the base of the saddle to which all of the leather is attached. It has the same shape as the saddle and is usually made out of wood. A tree must have flexibility. It has to be able to twist as the horse's back moves. A lot of trees are made of poplar, white pine or any straight grained, light, soft wood. There's no strength in the tree itself; the strength is in the covering and the rawhide that's over it. The tree is just a



PETE ATTACHING LEATHER TO THE TREE

frame for the rawhide to mold to. Some trees are made of other materials such as fiberglass, but my preference is still the rawhide covered type. I judge the type and size of the horse when I order the tree. I don't make the trees, I order them. It's too costly and time consuming to make them.

"Most Western saddles are built low at the corner of the cantle and this causes the rider's hips to roll backwards. Consequently, the rider's back is slightly bowed, and he's partially sitting on his tailbone. If the horse breaks out of a box when roping a calf or steer, the rider will quite often catch the rope under his arm and hold on to the horn to keep from being thrown backward. The horse actually moves out from underneath the rider and is therefore pulling the rider's weight. If I bring the hips forward to position the rider over the horse, the rider can start with his rope up ready to move with the horse. The horse, therefore, pushes his rather than pulls him.

"English saddles are much different from western saddles. I don't make English saddles, but I do repair them. I've probably fixed almost every part on an English saddle. I've never really built one from scratch, because that's a different trade, but I'm sure I probably could build one from having repaired so many. Although it still would take me a very long time, and I don't think I could do a better job than the English saddles that can be bought. Very fine



English saddles can be purchased through any one of many different companies.

"Saddle makers and leather workers go back under the guild system hundreds of years ago. Carriage, saddle, and harness making were all six-year apprenticeships before the worker

"THE OLD SADDLE MAKERS USED TO



COVER UP THEIR WORK."

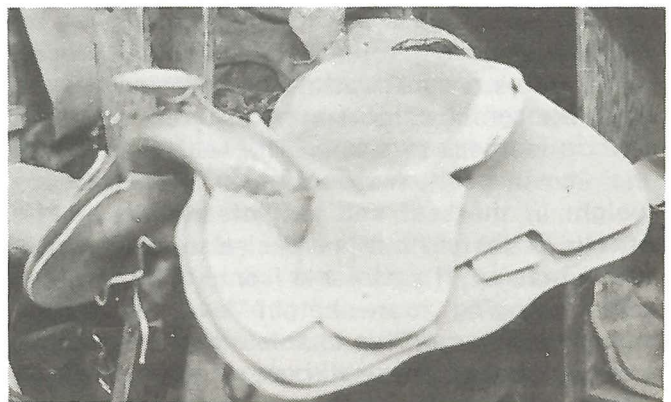
became a master. It took six years to learn the trade, and they were very secretive about their work. I've known saddle makers who would put a bench cloth over their work while they talked with me because they were so secretive about their own personal tricks of the trade.

"Very few people get into the trade anymore. Saddle making school can now be completed in a few months, and the students think that they are saddle makers. I feel that a saddle maker should be a jack of all trades and be able to do carving, braiding, knott work and all facets of the field.

"I draw all of my own carving patterns. I draw them according to the design that the person wants. I have people say, 'I don't want any flowers,' or 'I want a carved scenery,' or 'I want it carved with animals. My job is to try to give a person what he wants.

"Last summer a man came with a beautiful silver buckle that someone had made for him. We wanted a belt that was a little different. We talked about different things and finally decided on an Indian design. I took out some reference books of mine, and from them I drew up the design the way he wanted it. It's not completely authentic, but it's based on actual Indian design. Most of the work that I do is done in this way.

"Pricing today is pretty prohibitive. I used to make belts for about five or ten dollars. The



same belt today costs 45 to 60 dollars. The price of beans and gasoline and everything else is up, so is the stuff I use. Leather has gone from 55 cents a square foot to over four dollars a square foot. Anymore, I'm really ashamed to tell somebody the price of a job that I can do for them. The woolskin I line a saddle with today, costs twice what I used to charge to do the entire job.

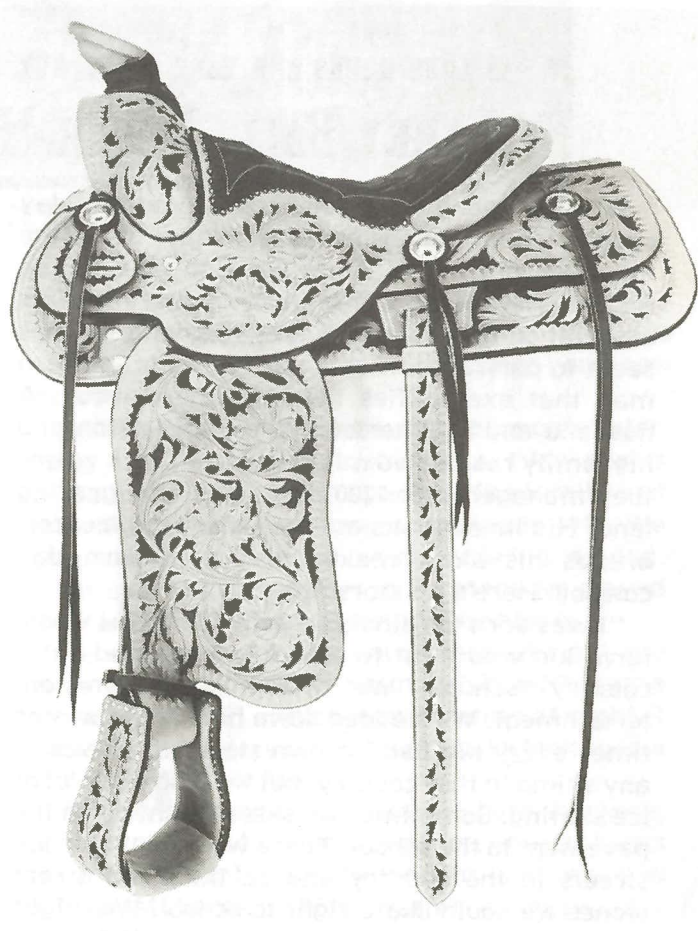
"Another problem in making saddles today is replacing tools that have been lost or broke. If anyone broke into here and stole any of these tools I'd be permanently out of business. Even though I'm no longer in business I wouldn't be able to make or repair anything. I've had tools made because I could no longer buy the tools that I needed. For instance, I have some washer cutters with scalloped edges which were all handmade for me, since they cannot be bought anymore. I have some spoke shavers that were used in the old carriage trade. It's the same thing that is used for thinning and shaping leather. Since the tool factory burned down about twenty years ago, they no longer make this type of tool. I wrote a letter to the factory not knowing that it had burned down and the wife of the owner wrote me back a nice letter. The letter said, 'Well, I'll send you these. These are all the tools that we

have left.' She sent me the tools and a newspaper article about the fire.

"I make saddles just when friends ask me to, I don't do it as a business anymore. I do it usually in the spring or in the fall because I like to travel in the summer. I've had orders from Scotland, England, France, Australia, as well as a number of places around the United States. I still get calls and questions from people I've done business with.

"I worked as a packer for six years and made equipment for individuals and the park service. It seemed to be that people just came to me to make their equipment. I do repair work, make tooled belts and other hard leather goods. I do a lot of different things, like draw house patterns and designs, carpentry and photography. I enjoy photography and sell a few pictures. Probably my second occupation today, after ski instructing is teaching first aid and photography at the college."

From talking with Pete we learned a great deal about saddlery. We learned that there are very few real master saddle makers, and a saddle really needs to be made a certain way. Saddle making is one of the many trades that has lost out to big business. Hand craft loses out to mass production, once again.



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