

His Name's on the Saddle

For 20 years Wyoming saddlemaker Steve Mecum has created functional pieces of art.

By Guy de Galard

It's been said that beautiful surroundings help stimulate creativity. Painters, writers and photographers have produced their best works in such settings. This must also be true for Wyoming saddlemaker Steve Mecum. For 20 years he's created functional pieces of art from his ranch facing the majestic snowcapped Wind River Range, his horses grazing peacefully in a pasture in front of the house.

Creating From Experience

Mecum's grandfather was a renowned horseman and stock-dog trainer, and the Mecum family had ranches along California's northern coast.

"I remember riding and driving cattle on the beach, something you wouldn't be able to do today," the saddlemaker recalls.

He's spent most of his life riding.

"I can't remember the first time I got on a horse, but I can remember the first time I got gravel in my chin from falling off," he jokes.

After moving to Crowheart, Wyoming, more than 30 years ago, Mecum guided hunters, cowboyed for northwest Wyoming outfits, wrangled dudes and started 700 to 800 colts in the process. His experiences, out of necessity, sparked a keen interest in the tools of the trade, foremost the saddle, and how to make it better, stronger and more comfortable for horse and rider, as well as pleasing to the eye.

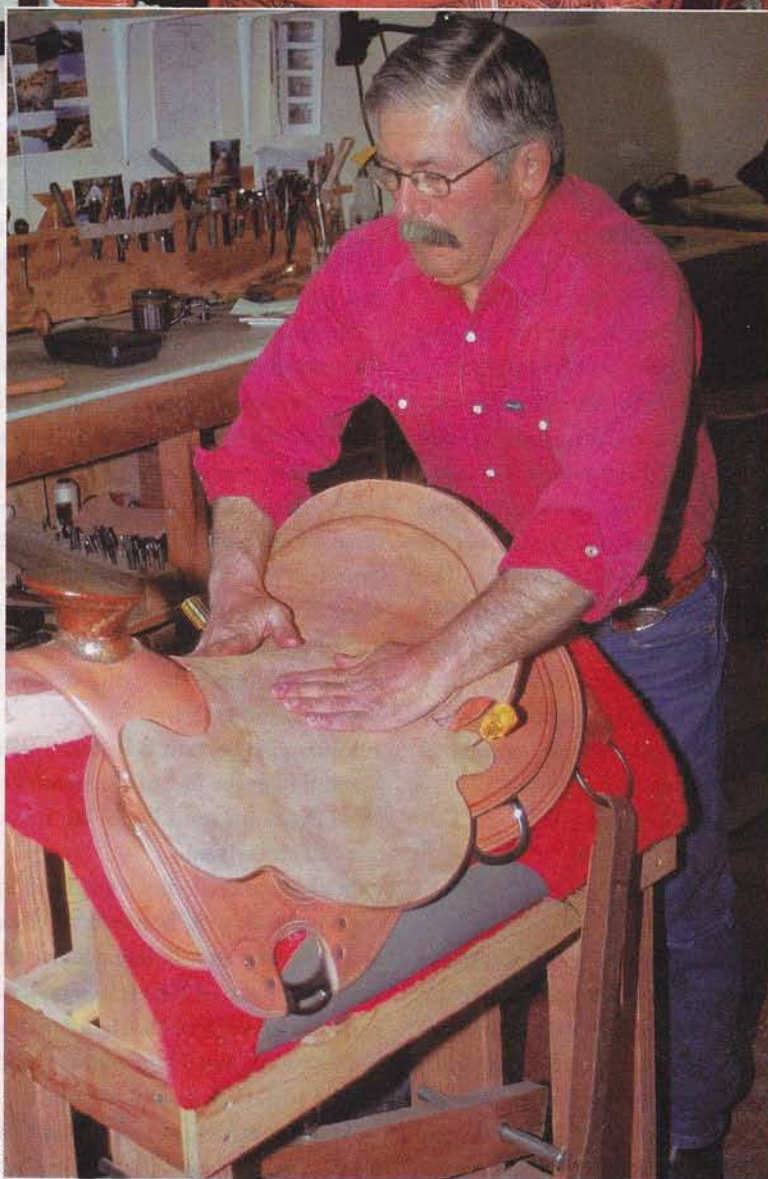
Steve Mecum built this rough-out saddle in five days while two students with the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association scholarship program were at his shop.





Mecum built this 15½-inch saddle with full-flowered water-lily design on a Wade tree for the TCAA show, held annually in Oklahoma City. Fellow TCAA member Dave Alderson did the silver work.

DAVE MECUM



GUY DE GALARD

Mecum adjusts the seat, kept wet for a perfect fit, to the tree.

"I always rode a saddle that I wished was a little bit different," Mecum recalls, "which made me start thinking about building a saddle that would be just like I wanted."

The Wyoming weather influenced his decision, as well.

"There was a time when I rode and started colts all winter on frozen ground, and in sub-zero temperatures," he adds. "The older I got, I started thinking that it'd be nice to make a living indoors when it's 10-below outside."

In 1986, Steve met Bob Douglas from Sheridan, Wyoming, who agreed to teach him the saddle-building mechanics, but first told him: "If you're not going to do a good job, don't tell anybody who taught you." Mecum took that seriously and always tried his best.

He started by building a couple of saddles in the winter for friends, then increased the number to five, and after 20 years produces an average of 18 to 20 saddles a year. Although he could build as many as 30 saddles annually, the more elaborate flower work his customers request is time-consuming.



Mecum smooths the edges of the saddle-seat leather on his worktable.

TCAA Benefits

"Good saddle-, bit- and spurmakers and rawhide braiders do beautiful work, but most of those people don't earn that much for working with their hands," claims Mecum. The Traditional Cowboy Arts Association, created in 1999, preserves North American cowboy traditions, encourages its members to excel in their work and promotes the old-fashioned mindset that an individual needs to create quality work with his hands.

Each artist applying for TCAA membership must submit a piece of work that's voted in by 75 percent of the jury. A TCAA member since 2001, Mecum is required to display his work at the TCAA show the last weekend each September at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

"Being recognized by my peers is most gratifying because they're the ones who know what goes into a saddle," he explains. Mecum was invited by Jeremiah Watt to display a saddle at the 1994 Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, received the best-of-show award at the 1999 Trappings of Texas Show in Alpine, and was nominated for saddlemaker of the year.

TCAA also has an extensive educa-

tional program that provides hands-on seminars so people can learn to engrave and carve leather or braid rawhide. A scholarship program enables members to exchange information and practice techniques they wish to improve. During their week-long stay, students study with Mecum and learn about designing saddles, smoothing edges, fitting parts together tightly, and fitting flat-plates and seats.

Many things Mecum does today came from advice given by some of the best saddlemakers and horsemen in the world, such as Buck Brannaman, Ray Hunt and Bryan Neubert. Certain saddle-seat design features make some things easier to do, but good horsemen get a lot from their horses, no matter if they ride bareback or with a lot of leather underneath them.

Function First

A perfectionist at his craft, Mecum appreciates clean, smooth work. However, his priorities are functionality and practical design. He thrives on building superior-quality saddles designed to work properly on a horse, for the horse's and for the rider's sake. Mecum uses the same tree, hardware and design for a

saddle that's put in a show as he uses for a working cowboy riding 12 hours a day.

"It doesn't matter how beautiful a saddle is," he says. "It's a functional object that has to function properly first."

Mecum's also a purist who enjoys working with old-fashioned materials and appreciates the intrinsic value of long-standing cowboy traditions. He favors well-designed, top-quality, rawhide-covered wooden trees. Handmade trees allow him to be more versatile and "change things around" if needed. Mecum stresses the importance of good rawhide work covering the tree.

"It's an important factor that determines the saddle's strength," he says. "It keeps the joints tighter."

Equally important is leather quality. Mecum likes the feel of Hermann Oak, from St. Louis, and West Tan leather, out of Pennsylvania.

"It's light-colored, molds good and holds the stamp really well," he explains. "Through years of experience building hundreds of saddles, I learned which tree styles are versatile enough to fit the majority of horses well. Once I know what works, I try not to deviate from it too much."

As for comfort, Mecum likes a little bit of a "rise" in a saddle, as long as the low spot in the seat is more toward the

middle rather than the back. A long gradual curve to the top of the cantle helps balance the rider and aligns his heel with his hip and shoulder. Next, Mecum considers how smooth the edges are and how nicely carved the leather.

Thinking Way Ahead

More than 30 years ago, Mecum first looked at a slick-fork Wade saddle. The style was originally designed by late horseman Tom Dorrance, and Steve immediately appreciated the saddle's smooth, streamlined, classic look.

"When I first had one, everybody laughed at me, but now, that's what most of my customers want," he declares.

Ten years ago, Mecum built saddles mostly for working cowboys. Although a percentage is still for them, the bigger portion is now built for horse trainers, clinic participants and collectors.

When building a saddle, Mecum puts the rigging on first and works on the flat-plate and ground-seat at the same time.

"The key," he explains, "is to think way ahead. I have a lot of pieces of wet leather in a plastic bag, cased all at once, before I actually need them."

Experience taught him to be more effective and organized when building a saddle, to the point that he can build a flawless saddle in five days. But don't expect to get one in five days now; there's a two-year waiting list.

Mecum felt he wouldn't be a complete saddlemaker unless he was proficient at carving leather.

"By compressing the fiber in the leather, the carving and stamping also help a saddle last longer," he explains.

Although he's largely self-taught, he was influenced by saddlemakers Don King, Dale Harwood and Chas Weldon. Mecum blends these different styles that he admires into what he likes.

"I threw away a lot of leather in the process. It was a long process," he says.

When displaying his work in a TCAA show, Mecum prefers using an antique finish that darkens the background and gives the carving's intricate detail a richer look.

"We also try to have a TCAA member do the saddle silver work," he explains. "It adds value to the saddle and makes it more of a collectable item."

However, Mecum tries to keep the plainer saddles within reason so that cowboys can still afford them.

"I enjoy building saddles for cowboys," he asserts. "They have pride in the equipment they use and are willing to sacrifice a lot to get a good saddle. Some of them might even save money for several years in order to buy a full-flow-ered saddle that they'll ride every day."

The "Pow!" Noise

When it comes to choosing between a used, broken-in saddle and a new one, Mecum offers his customers the best of both worlds: His new saddles have the feel of broken-in saddles. That comes from his expertise in selecting soft, pliable leather, although he prefers a little heavier saddle with firmer leather, so the seat jockey really snaps hard when picked up and let go, making a "pow!" noise.

Also, a firm, thick leather lasts longer, especially if the rider packs a rope.

"A person might not rope that much," Mecum explains, "but just packing a rope wears on the side of the saddle."

Weight is another important aspect of saddle selection, especially for ladies, for whom he likes to keep the weight in the low 30s.

"There's a trend today with people wanting lighter and lighter saddles with thin leather, light trees and small skirts, but those wear out quickly," he points out. "Depending on how much and how hard you ride, the seat jockey can become paper thin in a matter of a few years."

Handmade vs. Custom

"When a handmade saddle is built with very little attention to detail, you might as well buy a factory saddle," declares Mecum. "Handmade doesn't automatically mean better. The only thing that makes a custom saddle better than a fac-

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tory saddle is the mindset of the person building it. When custom-building a saddle, we put more thought into the tree, the rawhide on it and how it fits the horse. All the different parts are usually finished better and fit tighter, and the sewing's more consistent. Equally important is how the rigging is laid, how the stirrup leathers fit and the type of leather used."

Mecum appreciates that more people today are concerned with quality and want their saddles designed to satisfy their own specifications.

"Good horsemen usually have good equipment, which reflects their concern for quality," he says. "This way of thinking has rubbed off on a lot of people."

Mecum never advertises, doesn't have a Web site and doesn't even own a computer; however, his work is displayed on the TCAA and the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum Web sites. Word of mouth and horsemen's clinics have generated good business as well.

"I would ride a horse in a clinic, end up selling the horse, and get three or four saddle orders at the same time," he says.

Brighton Feed & Saddlery in Colorado has helped by carrying his saddles, as has fellow TCAA member Dale Harwood, by recommending Mecum's work to potential customers.

Mecum agrees that he does better work now than five years ago and hopes that his work will have improved five years from now. But always striving for excellence, he's never built a saddle that he was completely happy with. Although only an expert eye can see some flaws, Mecum thinks that the whole world can see them.

"Since I don't like that feeling, and because my name is going on that saddle," he says, "I try not to make mistakes."

Regular contributor Guy de Galard lives in Buffalo, Wyoming.