

## **Becoming a Saddle Maker**

For anyone interested in leather craft, horses, horseback riding and entrepreneurship a career as a custom saddle maker can be very rewarding. In this article I describe how I developed my business as well as “a typical day in my shop” in order to help anyone contemplating this career understand the pros and cons of running your own saddle making and/or horse equipment business. I will also discuss some of the fundamental requirements for becoming a saddle maker, the time and financial resources needed for setting up your shop, and the economic outlook for the future of this business. Hopefully, by the end of this article you will be able to answer the question: “Is this right for me? Do I see myself as a saddle maker?”

### **My Story**

My fascination with saddles started when I was a child growing up in the 50's. I watched all the old western movies. The cowboys, like the Lone Ranger, riding across the big screen with their silver-mounted saddles just caught my eye. I remember thinking there couldn't be anything better than a good horse and a silver-mounted saddle. Between my childhood and the early 80's, I did many things, but I never lost my appreciation for good horses and good equipment.

My career in leatherwork evolved gradually. In the late 70's, I worked in the construction industry, which was suffering due to high interest rates, so I started doing some small leatherwork projects – belts, purses, wallets, dog collars, leads and bridles – for extra income. Then I learned to do some repair work on saddles such as changing out stirrup leathers, re-stitching horns and changing out tie strings. Originally, I had only a basic shell of a building with a gravel floor, a table with a bare light bulb overhead and a few tools. The repair work I did at first gave me the capital to improve my shop and purchase more tools. As my skills grew, so did my customer base and income. Necessity pointed me toward this work, but my passion for this craft kept me wanting to learn more.

I bought every book I could find on leatherwork with an emphasis on saddles, and let me tell you, there was not much out there. (See the list of books later in this article.) I learned a lot from visiting leather shops and reading. It was also at this point that I started buying old saddles that were still serviceable, but needed repair. As I repaired these saddles, I had a first hand opportunity to see how they were put together. I noticed what worked well and what did not and started making mental notes of these things. You might call this developing an artistic or craftsman's eye.

During this period, I had an opportunity to meet a gentleman whose family had been in the saddletree business for years and as a side business built a few specialized custom saddles. They took me in because they liked what I was doing with leather and gave me work doing some of their actual saddle building. I had the opportunity to design and put into practice those things that I thought worked really well. For example, one design problem that I dealt with was the way a stirrup leather is attached to the fender. Another is how the fender can accomplish the task for which it was designed and how to make it

free swinging and have the stirrups turned correctly. When this is done, many leg and ankle problems of the rider are eliminated. (I cover the techniques for doing this in my saddle making school.)

And so years have passed doing custom saddle and horse equipment work. My saddles are owned by people all across the United States and in some foreign countries. When I started in this business, saddle makers were rarely willing to share how they actually went about building saddles, but as the continuation of my story I hope to pass on my skills and knowledge to those that also want to learn.

### **A Typical Day in My Shop**

Working as a custom saddle maker is totally different from working in a saddle-making factory. In a factory, all of the pieces are precut by machine and basically everybody in the factory puts on one piece as it goes down the line, just like in an automobile manufacturing plant. For me, I might start the day out by fiberglassing trees or repairing antique trees. While the fiberglass is drying, I could be designing a saddle pattern for a particular customer and cutting up new leather. I would probably spend some time tooling as this is tiring on the hands and needs to be done in intervals. I might end the day designing a silver piece and working it out. Some days may just be passed doing repair work on a saddle to put it back into use. There is hardly a typical day for me. Each day brings a new challenge and often something new to learn.

### **Your Shop**

Should you decide to pursue this course as a leather craftsman and develop it into a business, one of the first things to consider is a place to work. I know a number of people who have been in the business for years who started in a garage next to their home and continue to do so today very successfully. As you develop your skills, you will find that your shop is never big enough. The size of your shop will depend on how big you want your business to grow, whether or not you will have employees and how much inventory you want to carry.

### **Hand Tools and Large Tool Recommendations**

C. S. Osborne & Company makes a large number of hand tools for the leather craftsman and they have been around for years. One thing you must consider is that tool companies are like car manufacturers. They make all grades of tools from the commercial grade that are very expensive initially to the hobbyist grade that are reasonably cheap but do not hold up for someone who plans to make a living in the leather business. You can expect to eventually spend \$2,000 for hand tools.

Two large purchases that you will need to make will be a sewing machine for heavy work and one for lightweight work. They are both very important for a full-line craftsman. Singer Sewing Machine Company has been around for years and parts are always available for their machines. They are reasonably priced. In today's market place, there

has been a large influx of foreign machines; some are good, but some are cheaply built. You should look into reliability before purchasing. Union Special and Landis are a couple of other sewing machines that have been around for many years. You can expect to pay \$2500 – \$5000 for heavy-duty sewing machines. A light weight machine can sometimes be picked up used, in good condition for \$300 - \$400. Other tools that you may add such as drill presses, band saws, grinders, welders and cutting torches will be determined by how many leather craft areas you develop in your business. It is highly advised that you get some experience actually doing the work before you make a large investment.

### **Leather Vendors**

When you talk about brands of leather, my particular choice is Wickett and Craig out of Pennsylvania. I just happen to like this particular brand of leather because I can buy it drum dyed and the back side of the leather is finished as well as the front side. Another top brand is Hermann Oak Leather out of St. Louis, Missouri. In dealing with leather companies, you will find that most companies deal with a particular type of leather such as garment leather, harness leather and vegetable tan leather.

### **Books for Saddle Makers**

If you are serious about a career in saddle making, I recommend acquiring the following books for your personal library: Saddles by Russell H. Beatie, They Saddled the West by Lee M. Rice and United States Military Saddles by Randy Steffen. Also, there are several excellent leather crafts books by Al Stolman sold by Tandy Leather Company. Stolman books have designs that can be copied and changed to meet your own needs.

### **Saddle Making Skills**

You can learn a great deal about leather work from reading and watching videos, but there is no substitute for hands-on training with a skilled craftsman. I and many other craftsmen that have been in the leather business for years develop techniques and skills that are unique to us. You are not going to get this information from videos or books. Many of these techniques are guarded like the gold at Fort Knox. When you attend a school such as the one at Pete's Custom Saddlery, you will learn some of these unique skills – the first step toward a very long and satisfying road on the way to becoming a true craftsman.

One may wonder whether artistic skills are required in saddle making. The answer is “yes and no”. If you just want to build saddles, period, you can buy patterns that you can copy. Then, it becomes an assembly line affair. However, if you want to become an accomplished saddle maker and let the artistic skills flow, you are going to find that it is a never ending educational search that will keep you adding to your skills. I wanted my saddles to be unique in the way they fit the horse and the rider and to be pleasing to the eye and perform the function for which they were designed. I also wanted to be able to do the silver work for my saddles and attended a school to learn this craft. From the

silver work on saddles, I branched out into making bits and spurs and doing engraving and then into the gun-engraving field.

By necessity, I found other skills had to be developed and improved for working with saddletrees. Woodworking skills are necessary for repairing and modifying trees. The art of fiberglassing, a function used in body repair for automobiles, is important to know as this is used to add strength to saddletrees.

Another skill that you might not realize is important for a saddle maker to cultivate is working with people--being able to help your customers problem solve. Many of them will not be sure what they need, such as saddle type, size, rigging, seat, etc. You will be the expert and can tactfully give them the best information.

### **Age Requirements for Saddle Makers**

If you have access to a place to work, you can start developing your leather craft techniques as early as middle school. As for an upper age limit, I have people who have worked with me who are close to retirement age and now want to do something they really enjoy and they are doing well in the development of saddle making skills.

### **Economic Forecast**

There is a lot of work out there for leather workers (English and Western saddles and accessories, restoration of antique saddles, gun accessories, disability equipped saddles, motorcycle accessories and on and on) and whether or not you get that work will be determined by how good you are. In the best of times, people want new items and when times are not so good, they want their leather goods repaired. There will be times when your work will fluctuate with the economy in the area where you are located. This is true with all businesses and you must plan for it. One solution is to develop a business that reaches out to a large area and with the World Wide Web this is very possible.

The bottom line for me is if you love what you do, you will never *work* another day in your life!

Vaya con Dios and Happy Trails, Mi Amigos

Pete Harry