

Saddle Savvy

Saddlemakers at Sean Ryon's draw
from decades of experience

Paul Garcia remembers when Hollywood stars used to hang around the tack shop where he worked, shooting the breeze while he built saddles.

Back before horse shows were regularly held at the Will Rogers Memorial Center, Western supply stores in the Fort Worth Stockyards were a popular hangout for trainers, local businessmen and any other celebrities wanting to soak in the smell of leather and the culture of cowboys.

Garcia has been around long enough to see show ring trends come and go and plenty of horsemen ascend to stardom and then disappear. He has also witnessed firsthand the ways competition saddles have both changed and stayed the same.

"I remember after Buster Welch developed the cutting saddle with a flat seat, how everyone wanted one just like his," Garcia said.

Since 1943, Garcia has built saddles in Cowtown. He's still at it, now working at Sean Ryon's Western Store and Saddle Shop in the Stockyards.

Both he and James McLauchlin, who has been crafting saddles since 1949, represent well over 100 years of experience at Sean Ryon's. Additionally, there's Gilbert, Able and Jimmy, each having been in the trade for over 20 years.

James McLauchlin is the brother of renowned saddlemaker Price McLauchlin. James' son, Jim, and grandson, Jimmy, work beside him in the shop.

The generations of saddle making skill is what Sean Ryon touts the most about his business.

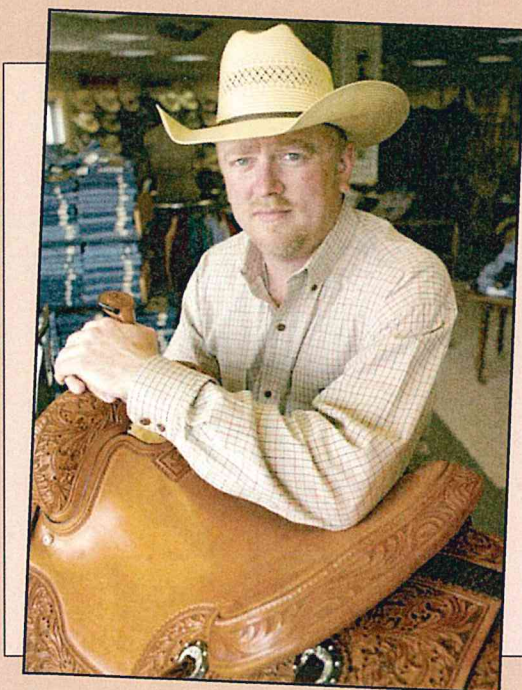
"We build right around 200 saddles a year," he said. "We completely hand-cut and hand-fit every one of them. Some things have changed, like the design of the trees. But as far as the quality and the way they're put together, they're still done the same way.

"We are using premium materials for everything, all made in the U.S. if we can. Very few things are imported."

Ryon estimates that a basic saddle consists of almost \$2,000 in material and at least \$1,500 in labor.

Most are designed for cutting, and that includes 14 trophy saddles that Sean Ryon is providing NCHA members for the next three years. The saddles are awarded to champions of the NCHA Super Stakes and Summer Cutting Spectacular, plus winners of the NYCHA Scholarship Cutting, held during the Summer Cutting Spectacular. ★

Clockwise from top right: Paul Garcia, who has been building saddles since 1943; Jose Gilbert Ojeda; Jimmy McLauchlin; James McLauchlin, who has built saddles for 61 years; Jose Aguilar.



About Sean Ryon

Sean Ryon's family has worked in the Fort Worth Stockyards for more than a century. T.J. Ryon moved there in the late 1800s.

"He was a cattle buyer," Sean said. "He had a ranch where Meacham Airport is now. The Marine Creek Lake was part of his ranch. When those cattle drives came in, that was the last watering hole before the cattle came into the stockyards."

T.J.'s son, Don, was an auctioneer and appropriately nicknamed Windy. His son, Don Jr., also known as Little Windy, opened the original Ryon Western Store in the Fort Worth Livestock Exchange Building in 1944, and eventually relocated to Main Street.

Don Ryon III, nicknamed Whistle, continued the family business, then had to sell it in 1978.

In 1989, Sean re-established the family business, opening the Sean Ryon Western Store and Saddle Shop, which is located on Main Street in the Stockyards. His sons, Kevin, Mathieu and Michael, represent six generations of Ryons located in the historic section of Cowtown.