

CATTLE CULTURE

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Sasser's Saddles

The craftsmanship that goes into making a saddle that fits perfectly is only comparable to the years spent chasing the title of horseman. Neither the horse nor the saddle truly makes the cowboy, but riding nice ones certainly helps.

The tree

The tree is the foundation of a saddle. It determines what horse it can be used on and how long a rider can comfortably remain in it. For the working cowboy, a saddle tree should be their main focus.

"If a customer can bring their horse into the shop, I can take measurements for the perfect tree," says Mike Sasser, a custom saddle maker from Vinita, Okla. "I also have a saddle rack with standard measurements on it."

A broken back was the end of a professional bull riding career for Sasser almost 30 years ago. An aging saddle maker took him in and taught him the skill that would become his next career move.

"Biff Davis had been making saddles for probably almost 40 years when he taught me how to build them," Sasser says. "He told me I needed to learn because nobody would ever hire me because of how bad I broke my back."

The feel

When cattle are harvested, their hides are pulled off and sent for rendering. Each hide is

split in half when they are going to make a saddle.

Roughly two and a half sides of leather are used in the process of making a saddle, but some of that is shaved off until you're left with the final product.

Under a lamp and a pair of glasses, Sasser's expert hands carve the floral designs for his latest project. Tooling from top to bottom adorns the custom saddle waiting for each hand-crafted piece.

"Tooling is like team roping," he says. "If you don't practice you won't get any better. I enjoy tooling because I get to sit down at my desk and kind of get into the zone."

Building a saddle is about more than just the precise measurements or intricate details, it takes a certain type of feel. Sasser finds himself sitting in the saddle more often than not as he shaves away at

the ground seat — the leather pieces under the seat.

Three large pieces of leather are put together on the tree. This is what forms what could easily be the most — or least — comfortable ride of your life.

"The hardest part of making a saddle is getting the correct slope and making sure I get the pocket deep enough in the seat," Sasser explains. That's only after getting the right rocker on the tree bars. **AJ**

Order of the build

- 1 Saddle tree
- 2 Rigging
- 3 Ground seat
- 4 Horn
- 5 Swell cover
- 6 Skirts
- 7 Seat
- 8 Cantle binding
- 9 Fenders and stirrups
- 10 Back billet and cinches

