

Saddle Up: Company carries on tradition

By Janet Williamson, Ag Weekly correspondent

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John Calhoun, left, owner of the Ray Holes Saddle Company, pauses with long-time customer Ike Pryor, who is buying a Decker Pack Saddle for this year's huntin season. Photo by Janet Williamson

GRANGEVILLE, Idaho — If “the proof of the pudding is in the eating,” the proof of a good saddle is in the riding.

The Ray Holes Saddle Company in Grangeville can boast being the oldest custom Western saddle shop in the United States, making its own trees and cinches. Most of its customers today are third-generation saddle buyers who, because of the quality and comfort to both horse and rider, believe the Ray Holes saddle to be the best made saddle in the country.

The story of Ray Holes and the evolution of his remarkable saddles, known among the Northwest’s working cowboys and buckaroos as the “very finest cowboy using saddles,” is an important part of Idaho history.

Ray Holes grew up working the rugged terrain along the Salmon and Snake rivers of central Idaho. He spent most of his days in the saddle and his spare time working with leather. Because his family’s ranch, along with many others was a long way from town, Holes found a way to make money by repairing leather. This inherent interest led him to experimenting and eventually producing saddles for local ranchers.

His first saddles’ success was verified after he closed his little shop to work for Frank Shearer, a neighbor rancher, during the heavy work of spring roundup. By the end of the job, Hole’s check included an extra \$65. The money was earmarked for a new saddle to be made for his employer. When the saddle was delivered, his boss was so pleased that a second order was placed for a Western riding saddle for Shearer’s wife.

The die was cast. The young cowboy set his sights on becoming a saddle maker.

Chance inspiration

A Western Horseman article from the 1950s recounts how Hole’s legendary saddle seat evolved. Ray was hunting in the rugged Seven Devil Mountains with one of the native stockmen who summered his cattle in that area. The rancher was a tall, angular man who had spent most of his life in the

many saddles he had owned over the years. The campfire talk one evening came around to saddles, and the fact that this cowboy suffered pain when riding most saddles on long rides. While drinking coffee around the campfire one night, they talked about what makes a comfortable saddle. Ray asked the rancher to point out what he considered a good seat, and the cowboy pointed to a spot about one-third the distance from the cantle to the fork and replied: "A good seat starts right there and goes out in all directions." In one sentence, the cowboy gave Holes the formula for a perfect seat and he identified the "sweet spot."

Thus began the tradition of the Ray Holes legendary "using saddle." A "using" saddle, according to most folks who "use" saddles, and don't just look at them, includes any saddle that is used as a tool to get the cowboy's work finished before the sun goes down.

By 1937, the Ray Holes Saddle Company was a full service, Western wear store, and his custom Western saddles were well known. At that time, in order to complement his established market, Holes started making pack saddles with the help of O.P. Robinette. Robinette was a smithy, and he helped carve out what we now know as the famous Decker Pack Saddle by forging bronze arches for the pack saddles that were being produced by the Decker brothers.

Robinette was from Kooski, Idaho, and, according to The Packer's Field Manual by Bob Hoverson, crafted bronze arches for the saddles in response to Forest Service personnel who wanted a pack saddle built to carry heavy, bulky loads for long distances. This rugged, versatile saddle became very popular with the Forest Service and packers in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington and has remained the pack saddle of choice to this day.

When Robinette decided to retire, he helped Holes get started in the pack saddle building business. Ray averaged out the dimensions of the Robinette trees and started producing them on a lathe. Copycat companies sprang up all over the country, but the quality and craftsmanship of the Decker tree kept the Ray Holes saddles a standout. The Ray Holes Saddle Company grew from a Western saddle store into a full-service store for outfitters who want the best equipment.

"We use magnesium bronze on our Deckers. It doesn't rust and rot out the canvas and ropes," said John Calhoun, owner of the Ray Holes Saddle Company.

International renown

By the 1950s, the saddle shop was known worldwide for its riding saddles and pack saddles, with orders coming in from California, the East Coast, Europe, and Asia. In 1974, Holes and his wife, Lillian, retired from the saddle shop and their eldest son Gerald and his wife, Ellamae, who had been managing the shop, continued the tradition of making the famous Ray Holes saddles. Gerald and Ellamae worked in the shop until 1998, when John Calhoun purchased the saddle end of the store.

What might have been just another "changing of the guard" in the business world became a lifetime goal for Calhoun: to continue the tradition of fine craftsmanship of the Ray Holes Saddle Company and to make the legendary saddles just a little bit better. This is what the story of the Ray Holes Saddle is all about hard work, ingenuity, and lifetime achievement.

Calhoun's father had a saddle shop in Central Point, Ore., and John apprenticed for Gibson Saddlery in White City, Ore. Everett Gibson worked for the Visalia Saddle Company in San Francisco during the war, which was one of the oldest and most prestigious saddle companies in the West. Calhoun said Gibson not only taught him how to make a quality saddle, but how to use the very best materials in a way that helped him improve upon what Ray Holes had established in saddle making.

"We do things the best way, the old fashioned way," Calhoun said. "For years, I worked 20 hours a day, every day."

And modern technology has not changed the way he works or makes saddles.

"Ray was making his own pack saddle trees in 1940, and in 1955, he bought out the West Coast

Tree Co. in Portland," Calhoun said. "He bought the lathe and it was made in 1880 or '90 n we still use it almost every day ... it was probably one of the first ever made."

Calhoun works tirelessly to uphold the tradition of the Ray Holes legacy and that age-old secret: Nothing can replace hard work and attention to details in craftsmanship.

"We use the very best leather, it's Herman Oak in St. Louis, and we use lumber in the saddle trees that is aged and has just the right moisture content," he said. "I have about thirty back orders right now, which means I'm backed up about a year. It takes me about 10 or 15 days to put a saddle together." Calhoun broke out in a wry smile and went on, "Yeah, about 10 days and 30 years of practice to put together one of these saddles."

Calhoun's wife, Evelyn, is a former member of the Navy and is a woman with a sharp wit. She explained that most of the machinery they use to build saddles is so old that spare parts aren't made anymore.

"We have two spare machines in our shed that we use for parts. If that machine goes down, we go down," she said.

The splitters are from the International Harness Machinery Co. and are about 100 years old. A catalog from the 1800s shows strap end clipping machines the operation used to use. Today, the Calhouns use a Landis sewing machine that is over 70 years old.

"The new machines don't hold up. They'll just end up breaking down on us because they can't hold up to what we put them through," Evelyn said.

Legacy lives on

The history of the Ray Holes saddles makes it clear why they are still in use today. Even though packers are a rare breed these days, outfitters, hunters, cowboys, buckaroos, and trail riders alike swear by the quality and comfort of the saddles built in the Ray Holes saddle shop.

"Unfortunately it's (packing) a dying art," said Gene Bailey, a Yakima, Wash., resident who has packed into the Selway for almost 50 years using Ray Holes' Decker Pack Saddles.

He believes that packing is considered "old school" and being replaced by four wheelers.

"It's (packing) an accomplishment. You can't just walk into a store and buy the outfit and do it right. You gotta survive the crashes and learn," he added.

Bailey uses Ray Holes saddles exclusively. "Every saddle I own n I have seven or eight of them n they're all Ray Holes. I have a stock saddle, a Selway Packer, and I love it!" he said. "They make their own trees, and the saddles fit the horse and the human. It's not like they're out to make just a pretty saddle, although they do that, too."

But Bailey's attachment to the Ray Holes Saddle Company goes beyond a great "using saddle."

"When I was a teenager and not old enough to go into the bars with the crew (Twin Mule Shoes Outfitters), I'd go into the Ray Holes shop and sit on the stool, and I would just sit and watch him (Ray Holes) work," he said. "One day I had a shaggy old, worn-out belt, and Ray took me to lunch and said that I needed a new belt. He picked leather out of a scrap pile, and he hammered out a belt and put a buckle on it. I still wear the belt today."

It is this sense of goodwill and honest, hard-working camaraderie that keeps the true, working cowboys faithful to the Ray Holes Saddle Company.

Curly Francis from Orofino, Idaho, testified to the quality of the saddles and the loyalty of most Ray Holes customers.

"I've cowboied almost every place in the state of Idaho. I started when I was 12 years old, and I started on ranches up on the Snake River where it dumps into the Columbia River up in Yellowstone n hell, most of those ranches, like the Hansen Ranch, are covered with water now," he said. "I bought my first Ray Holes saddle for \$30. I bought two of them because saddles are like boots, you can't just have one pair. You need to give one a day to rest and dry out.

"When I worked for the Spencer Ranch on the river, I had three or four new saddles, and I could wear one out in five years. I bought one (a Ray Holes saddle) for \$2,300 and rode it for five years. I took it in for new sheepskin and stirrup leathers. After they worked on it I turned around and sold it for \$2,000," he said. "My point is, these saddles hold their value because they're quality made. If you can ride a saddle for five years and turn around and sell it and get your money back, that's pretty cheap riding."

But good investment and value are not the only things that keep the working cowboys buying Ray Holes saddles.

"One weekend, the crew and I came up from the river for the weekend and I forgot my wallet," Francis said. "I went into the saddle shop and they loaned me \$300 for the weekend n that's the kind of shop it is."

Bob Williams manages the G.I. Ranch in eastern Oregon and was in the store checking on his current saddle orders and visiting with the Calhouns.

"I own four Ray Holes (saddles), and one is a 1963 model. The trees hold up, and it's easy on the horse ... and it's easy on Bob," Williams said with a grin.

He said he and his crew walk through 700,000 acres worth of cows, and both he and his hands own Ray Holes saddles.

Greg Pole has been the equine manager at the Flying D Ranch for Ted Turner for five years and is emphatic about the unique fit and comfort of the Ray Holes saddle.

"I personally own three and my son has one. I've had one of mine for 30 years, and I use it everyday. Some days I ride 30 or 40 miles n I just can't sit in another saddle," he said. "John (Calhoun) really knows how to put the saddles together. I've guided all over the world, and I've taken these saddles with me. Right now I'm riding colts out on the ranch, and I wouldn't use anything else."

The respect and friendship the customers feel toward the shop owners is reciprocated by the Calhouns .

"You never know when you'll get good conversation and get something to think about in here," Evelyn Calhoun said. "We've solved many world problems right here in this shop but we just haven't implemented them yet."