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CLINT MORTENSON



Santa Fe, New Mexico – craftsman Clint Mortenson

photos by A.J. Mangum

A lifelong obsession with quality horse gear drives the New Mexico craftsman

BY A.J. MANGUM



Clint Mortenson stands in his tack room, a concrete-floored chamber at one corner of his horse barn. On the wall before him, several hundred bridles occupy row after row of overburdened pegs. The floor-to-ceiling sea of dark bridle leather obscures an endless variety of bits, from simple snaffles to ornate spades.

Several bridles hang from Clint's left forearm. He studies each in turn, the way a clotheshorse might brood over which pieces of a department store's inventory to try on and which to return to the rack. One imagines a version of this scene – the deliberation as to which bridle might be *the one*, the right choice for the ride to come – playing out most days, its outcome ever complicated by the sheer volume of available options.

One of the country's most sought after makers of trophy buckles and custom horse gear, Clint has been fascinated by tack since his childhood. He grew up in South Dakota, training show horses beside his father and brother.

"I grew up showing horses, primarily reiners," Clint says. "We also made 30-day wonders. People would drop off horses and when they'd pick them up in 30 days, they'd neck-rein, take leads in both directions, stop, back up. Then we'd get another string of horses in."

With little money to spare for high-end equipment, the family learned to get by with what they had; Clint recalls polishing an aluminum grazing bit for use in the show ring, decorating the bit with black electrical tape cut into diamond shapes.

Such austerity triggered an obsession for the kind of gear that was just out of financial reach. When he wasn't riding or in school, Clint worked in a Western store his parents owned. He spent hours poring over tack catalogs, learning

making under Harry Adams – the author of *The Saddle Maker's Shop Manual* – then settled in Santa Fe, New Mexico, charmed by the area's mild climate and thriving equestrian community. Clint operated a saddle shop on

Santa Fe's Rodeo Road for nine years before moving the operation to his ranch on the town's southwestern edge.

At Clint's ranch, the horse barn forms a U shape: a grass-covered courtyard separates two rows of stalls joined at one end by the tack room and a guest apartment. His workshop occupies a 12-by-24-foot space on one end of a row of stalls. Leatherworking tools hang neatly arranged on a wall above a workbench. Saddles by Chester Hape, Dale Harwood and Don King occupy a corner rack, offering inspiration. A split stall door leads to a corral outside; a horse



Clint's workspace is filled with tools, mementos and various inspirations

to identify on sight every bit and saddle on the market, and perhaps daydreaming of what it might be like to one day use such equipment.

After earning college degrees in marketing and art, Clint relocated to Los Angeles and landed a job in Hollywood managing a clothing store that sold custom and vintage Western wear, catering heavily to celebrities and film productions. Riding was in his blood, though, and while in California, he trained horses on the side, working out of Will Rogers State Park and Griffith Park.

In 1992, Clint learned Disney was auditioning riders for its new theme park in Paris, France. Plans for Euro Disney – or, formally, Disneyland Paris – included extravagant horseback shows built around the mystique of the American West's frontier days. Clint, one of thousands of riders who tried out for 30 available slots, landed a spot in the troupe and spent a year in France working with the park's horses and performing with his cast mates in a variety of horseback stunts; he drove teams, rode in action-packed dramatic scenes and acted in a comedy routine. The show, an immediate hit, became Disney's largest live production, drawing up to 2,200 spectators each night.

When he returned to the United States, Clint sought a new vocational direction. He spent a year studying saddle

occasionally sticks his head through the open top half in the hope of being offered a handfed treat.

Over the past two decades, Clint's areas of specialization have evolved. He still builds the occasional custom saddle and has made leather goods and horse gear for several films that have been shot on location in New Mexico; his work has appeared in such motion pictures as *Cowboys & Aliens*, *No Country for Old Men*, *3:10 to Yuma* and the Coen Brothers' adaptation of *True Grit*. And, since his departure from Disneyland Paris, Clint's contracted with the park to make and repair tack for their still-thriving Wild West show.

"Every year, I fly back to Paris with a box of tools and work on saddles," he says. "They use around 25 or 30 in the show."

Much of Clint's current business, though, centers around making saddle and bridle silver, as well as custom trophy buckles that are presented as awards at all manner of equestrian competitions, from local goat ropings to international polo tournaments. The work begins as a set of sketches, mechanical drawings that give direction to a project's architecture and aesthetics.

Clint finds inspiration in all manner of sources, from the works of Garcia and Visalia to the trappings of the horsemen of Spanish Colonial California. Textile patterns



At the engraving wheel, Clint puts finishing touches on an oversized, California-style concho for a headstall. The concho is fashioned from an antique silver coaster Clint discovered at a thrift store.

have long fascinated him – for years, he’s obsessed over somehow adapting paisley patterns for his work – and, of late, he’s studied tattoo design, enamored with the medium’s intricacy and expressiveness.

From the sketch stage, Clint progresses to the engraving block; there, concepts and raw materials become buckles and conchos, the process guided by steadfast commitments to design and balance.

“I like my work to be functional,” he says. “Some things are nice to look at, but aren’t functional. Some things are functional, but look pretty bad.”

Vestiges remain of Clint’s boyhood habit of studying the tack market; he devotes moments of leisure to perusing catalogs and horse magazines – learning what riders are using, critiquing the work and pondering how it might be improved.

With a half-dozen saddle horses at the ranch, Clint competes in the occasional cow horse or ranch versatility event, and ropes on a near-daily basis in the outdoor arena adjacent to his barn. He’s an equally devoted polo player, and calls upon each of his horses to pull double duty with stock and English saddles, and to be as comfortable with polo mallets as they are with ropes.

“I appreciate all disciplines of horsemanship,” he says. “You should be able to do anything with them. I get in

arguments all the time with people criticizing one kind of riding or another.”

His eclectic equestrian interests explains, to some extent, the mix of gear in Clint’s tack room. On a whim, he can swap out a Wade for a swell-fork or, for that matter, a dressage saddle. On any given day, his spurs might have their roots in Adolph Bayers’ West Texas or Garcia’s Great Basin. And, of course, headgear options are virtually limitless, with Texas- and California-style bits intermingled past the point of cataloging. Regardless of the price Clint has paid for a piece of equipment – or its rarity or the prestige of its maker – it gets used. Limitless horseback pursuits, of course, provide plenty of excuses for his tack collection to continue growing.

“When I was younger, I always thought it would be nice to have a few more bridles,” he says, reflecting on childhood yearnings. As he surveys the dense collection of bridles hanging on the tack room wall, he smiles and adds, “Then I overdid it.”

Despite such an admission, though, the smart money says that space in Clint’s tack room will always be at a premium, the stacked saddles and mass of bridle leather reflecting not only childhood ambitions, but a lifelong love of riding and a never-ending fascination with the trappings of horsemanship.

