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Clint Mortenson's home and shop in Santa Fe, New Mexico, reflect his creative style.



# Cowboy Crafted

Clint Mortenson took a roundabout route to get to where he is, but the journey helped the silversmith and saddlemaker focus on the things that really matter.

Story by SUSAN MORRISON

Photography by ROSS HECOX

**R**ARELY DO PEOPLE'S LIVES FOLLOW A STRAIGHT PATH. Clint Mortenson's experience is no different. Although his home base is now Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he moved 15 years ago, the silversmith and saddlemaker took what could mildly be described as a circuitous route to get there.

His journey included stops in Hollywood, California, and Paris, France. His jobs have been varied, from trick rider and movie stunt double to horse trainer and saddlemaker. But after years of moving and following his muse, Mortenson has put down roots, built a business, and found time to enjoy horses again.

## **SOUTH DAKOTA START**

Mortenson grew up in Groton, South Dakota, where his parents, Carlyle and Marion, had a small breeding and training facility.

"We trained and showed Quarter Horses and Paints, mostly in reining," he says. "And we always stood a few stallions."

After finishing high school, he attended Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota, earning degrees in commercial art, marketing and management. But he also kept his hand in the horse business.

"I had my own stable and was training, and did farrier work," Mortenson says. "I didn't want to have to borrow money."

While it was art that initially intrigued him, business classes also interested him. What he learned would eventually help him in ways he didn't expect. Back then, however, "there wasn't really a set plan."

That was clear shortly after he graduated, when relatives in California urged him to visit, and he packed up and moved to Los Angeles. He even bought a suit, thinking he would leave the arena dirt in South Dakota.



"I thought since I'd been training and riding horses seven days a week ever since I was a kid, I would move to L.A.," he says. "I bought a sailboat in Marina Del Rey and thought I'd get a business job and stay clean for awhile! I got a job managing a vintage and custom leather store on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood. We made a lot of custom things for movies and celebrities. It was interesting, but I started missing the horses probably after two weeks. So I started training some horses at Will Rogers State Park [in Pacific Palisades]."

Although the store's customers were an eclectic bunch, Mortenson met an equally diverse group of actors and celebrities at the park's stable.

"I met a lot of people through the shop, but then I started training horses for C.C. Huston, [famed film director] John Huston's ex-wife," he says. "There were other people who had horses at the barn where I was—Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver, Billy Crystal. Then I started working polo horses out there. That was a change, but I enjoyed it. I did that for about three years."

He stayed until some friends told him about an audition for a new production in Europe.

#### EUROPEAN VOCATION

As might be expected, auditions for EuroDisney (now Disneyland Paris) in Paris, France, attracted several thousand prospective performers for its new Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Although Mortenson's acting experience was non-existent, the chance to spend

time in Europe was too enticing to resist. His horse know-how and youthful confidence paid off.

"I was one of the 15 cowboys selected for that show, so I moved to Paris," he says. "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show is Disney's largest live show in any of the parks, and it's been going on for 23 years now."

Mortenson roped, drove wagons and did trick riding in two dinner shows each evening. He remembers it being "pretty rough at the beginning," with numerous injuries to the cast as the show was fine-tuned. But the experience was memorable.

"It was a great time," he says. "A couple of friends and I, every time we'd have a few days off, we'd jump on a train and go wherever it was going—Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, England. I traveled a lot when I was there."

Although he was in Paris only a year—leaving after he decided to pursue a career with more stability—working in the show had a

great impact on his life. It was where Mortenson met his future wife, Silvie, who managed the show's stable. Although they are now divorced, they share custody of their 14-year-old son, Wyatt. It also provided him an outlet for his creativity.

"The saddle they used for Buffalo Bill in the show was a 1950s parade saddle, so I submitted a proposal and asked if they would want something more authentic," he says.

Mortenson received a commission from Disney to build replicas of Buffalo Bill's and Annie Oakley's saddles.

"I worked with the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody [Wyoming] on those, and they turned out pretty dang close [to the originals made 100 years earlier]," he says.

**ABOVE:** Mortenson works with the "supervision" of his horses and dog. His ranch includes his home, shop, barn and arena.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Mortenson's saddles are made to use, and he ropes in one whenever he gets a chance.





"Then I started supplying them with saddles, tack and chaps. They've been flying me back for two weeks every year for 23 years."

Mortenson makes wrist cuffs, chaps, gun belts and horse equipment for the show, and when he visits he makes sure all of it is in good shape.

"I've got a little toolbox with an assortment of tools that I need. I send leather over before I go, so it's waiting on me, and then I set up a little shop there," he says.

Although Mortenson says he always enjoyed working with leather, he didn't get serious about it until he returned to the United States. In fact, he built the replica saddles while attending a saddle-making school.

### SADDLEMAKING SAVVY

When Mortenson returned to the United States in 1993, he was ready to find a new outlet for his creativity. As a young boy, he had made belts and billfolds, and remembers both his grandfather and father doing leatherwork, so the idea of getting instruction intrigued him.

"A couple of friends told me about Harry Adams and how good he was," he recalls. "He was highly recommended."

So Mortenson headed to Lusk, Wyoming, and attended a two-month workshop with Adams. He

ended up staying a year, working in Adams' shop and developing his skills.

"After that I went back to South Dakota and started my own shop in Aberdeen," he says. "Then I bought out my teacher's shop, and he came to work with me for awhile."

Mortenson credits Adams with teaching him precision, along with flexibility in design.

"There are other saddlemakers who make higher-end saddles, but he was a master about pattern-making and originality," he says. "He would try anything. At some schools they give you patterns and you cut out a saddle, and everybody makes a saddle just like the saddlemaker's. Harry made us make every pattern, and told why they're shaped a certain way, and how to create

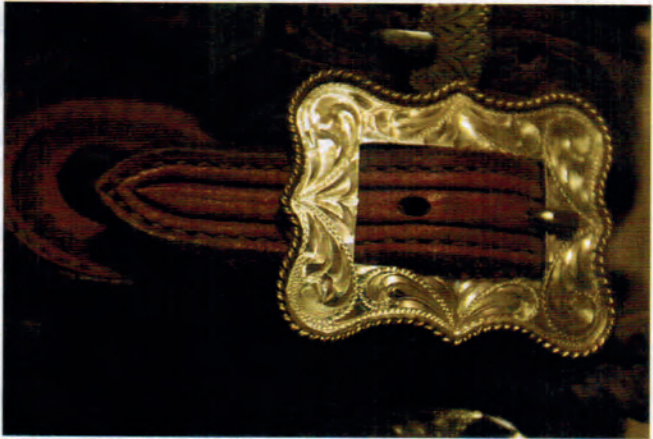
illusions with the saddle lines. He was one of the best teachers in the world."

Mortenson kept his connections with Disney, but building saddles, along with doing repair work, was the mainstay of the business. His saddles also have been in demand with working cowboys, ropers and trainers who appreciate that Mortenson rides what he makes, and understands horse conformation.

"All of the saddles I have from him darn sure fit a horse," says Mozaun McKibben of Whitesboro, Texas, a three-time AQHA world champion who has known

**ABOVE:** Mortenson and his son, Wyatt, rope together at his arena.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Mortenson makes leather goods, but also enjoys silversmithing. • His bits range from simple to elaborate. • Silver buckles show detailed engraving. • The silversmith says he gets his inspiration from items as diverse as plants and vintage posters.



Mortenson for about 15 years. "I love showing in them, and have won my world championships in one of them."

Mortenson also rides the saddles he makes. While in Aberdeen, he team roped on his horses. He also began dabbling in silver work. In the years since, he says, several silversmiths have helped him.

"One person I'd like to give credit to is a good friend who passed away a little over a year ago, Linda Doyle," he says. "She was a great teacher. I didn't go to silversmith-

ing school, but I worked with several silversmiths. Ernie Marsh, Greg Darnall and Wilson Capron are a few others who have inspired me.

"Some people get stunted in their creativity or stop looking for new ways to do things. I like to be creative, and I'm fortunate to have had creative teachers."

Darnall, who now makes custom bits exclusively, says Mortenson's willingness to learn has allowed him to keep improving through the years.

"His work has to be good to be competitive," Darnall says. "Clint has managed to not only survive, but has done very well."

After seven years in Aberdeen, Mortenson and his then-wife decided to move to Santa Fe in 2001.

"I was busy with the business, but we rode year-round and didn't have an indoor arena," he says. "There were days we were riding and it was 20-below zero. It was so cold in the winter and so hot in the summer. I like South Dakota, but the weather is more cooperative here [in Santa Fe]."

"I had friends here, and there wasn't a saddle shop in town. It's a beautiful place, and there are so many artists here. It was a good place to set up shop."

Although he didn't know it at the time, the move to New Mexico was another fortuitous decision that would lead him down yet another inspiring path.

#### MOVIE MAGIC

Santa Fe has long been a draw for artists and artisans, actors, and film producers looking for unique sets, particularly for Westerns. Films from *Lonesome Dove*, *Appaloosa* and the John Wayne classic *The Cowboys* have been shot in and around the city, where both the scenery and the architecture are magical to a camera lens.

When Mortenson found a hacienda-style home and barn, it seemed the perfect spot to set up a small horse facility, and it was close to town, where he first had a shop.

He added an arena and, eventually, a shop where his business would move. It's a comfortable place, with warm adobe walls and windows where his horses can nose their way into his shop while he's working. The location is between two ranches that are frequently used for movie sets, so the neighborhood traffic frequently consists of actors, directors, extras, props managers and set designers.

"Probably one of the first [from the movie industry] to stop by was [props manager] Keith Walters. He had us make a saddle for Tommy Lee Jones for *The Missing*," Mortenson says. "We made saddle bags for Pierce Brosnan to carry in *Seraphim Falls*, and just made some holsters and gun belts for Jeff Bridges for a movie they're filming now."

## A Navicular Nightmare

Shortly after purchasing my gelding I had him checked by several vets. We took x-rays and that told the story — my gelding's worst nightmare, navicular! He had multiple holes in both front feet. I tried all the conventional treatments but there was no improvement. I was told to consider surgery on both front legs because, in his condition, he would soon have to be destroyed.

### Miracles Can Happen

Feeling desperate, I took a chance on something a friend had told me about. I called TLC Animal Nutrition and started him on several products that are specifically designed for horses with navicular. Two weeks after I started the program he was sound. Six months later I had more x-rays taken and the vet said it was a "miracle" and I have to agree. The holes on the navicular bone were filling in.

"Angel" has taken me to the state finals each year, very impressive for a horse that may have otherwise been destroyed.

### Another Second Chance

I had such great results with the first horse, I purchased another problem horse that I saved from certain death. This horse is fourteen years old and has been lame for more than half his life. Again x-rays confirmed five holes in the right front foot, navicular. But this wasn't his only problem. This horse also had arthritis so badly he could barely shuffle off at a fast walk. He literally smelled rotten, had a very bad hair coat and was loaded with large and small strongyles. The former owner sold him to me for one dollar and was sure he would never walk a sound step. Again I contacted TLC Animal Nutrition for a recommendation. We changed his feed and added TLC's Performance Plus, DBG Min and Niacin along with Glucosamine and Ultimate DE.

### Don't Give Up

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Mortenson also has given riding lessons, housed livestock and provided a few horses for movie scenes.

"Viggo Mortenson rode here during [filming of] *Appaloosa*, and Hilary Swank took some of her first riding lessons at my place [for *The Homesman*]," he says.

The movie business keeps things somewhat unpredictable and encourages creativity to flow in different ways on Mortenson's ranch, but his world always circles back to horses. They have led him to Europe, helped him hone his craftsmanship, and play a big part in his day-to-day life.

### BALANCING ACT

At 50, Mortenson says his life is more balanced than it was for many years.

"I'm lucky. I have another great saddlemaker, Wes Mastic, working for me, and a lot of other great people working for me," he says. "I used to be in the shop six or seven days a week, for almost 20 years. Now the store is open five days a week, and I'm able to get out. I'm giving some roping and riding lessons, training a few horses, and I'm able to take off and go to a branding. I don't dread going to work. The diversity of it is good."

He's also donated time to The Horse Shelter in Santa Fe, and serves on the rescue facility's board of directors. He has hosted events at his ranch, including a 100-day trainer's challenge for the shelter (which he won on a rescued mare) and a children's horse show, both held on National Day of the Cowboy.

"I like to do anything to promote horses in the community," he says.

Mortenson also enjoys spending time with his son, who is becoming an accomplished roper and may also be following in his dad's artistic footsteps.

"Now I have a little more time to spend with Wyatt, and that's what I like to do now," he says. "I've been working a lot to get the business going, but it's nice to be able to step away and do other things. It's sort of evolved to where I want it now."

Mortenson appreciates the varied work that comes in (including a knife for Marlboro and a custom truck with extensive silver-tooled accents for Brooks & Dunn). One of his recent projects—a tooled leather belt and silver buckle—was photographed for a wrap for Tyson Foods semi-trailers that will be going to

Professional Bull Riders events, which Tyson sponsors.

"It's so diverse—we never know what's coming in the door," he says.

But the traditional cowboy prides himself on saddles and gear that ultimately get covered in dirt.

"It's interesting to look for your stuff in the movies, but being at a branding and seeing several of my saddles makes me feel good," he says. "I get a good feeling out of the things that are getting

used constantly by people who are good hands.

"I think the combination of the art and being a trainer helps me make a quality saddle. Some people are great craftsmen but haven't ridden much, and some may know what makes a good riding saddle but don't have an artistic eye. I want to make a beautiful, functional piece of art."

**SUSAN MORRISON** is managing editor of *Western Horseman*. Send comments on this story to [edit@westernhorseman.com](mailto:edit@westernhorseman.com).

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