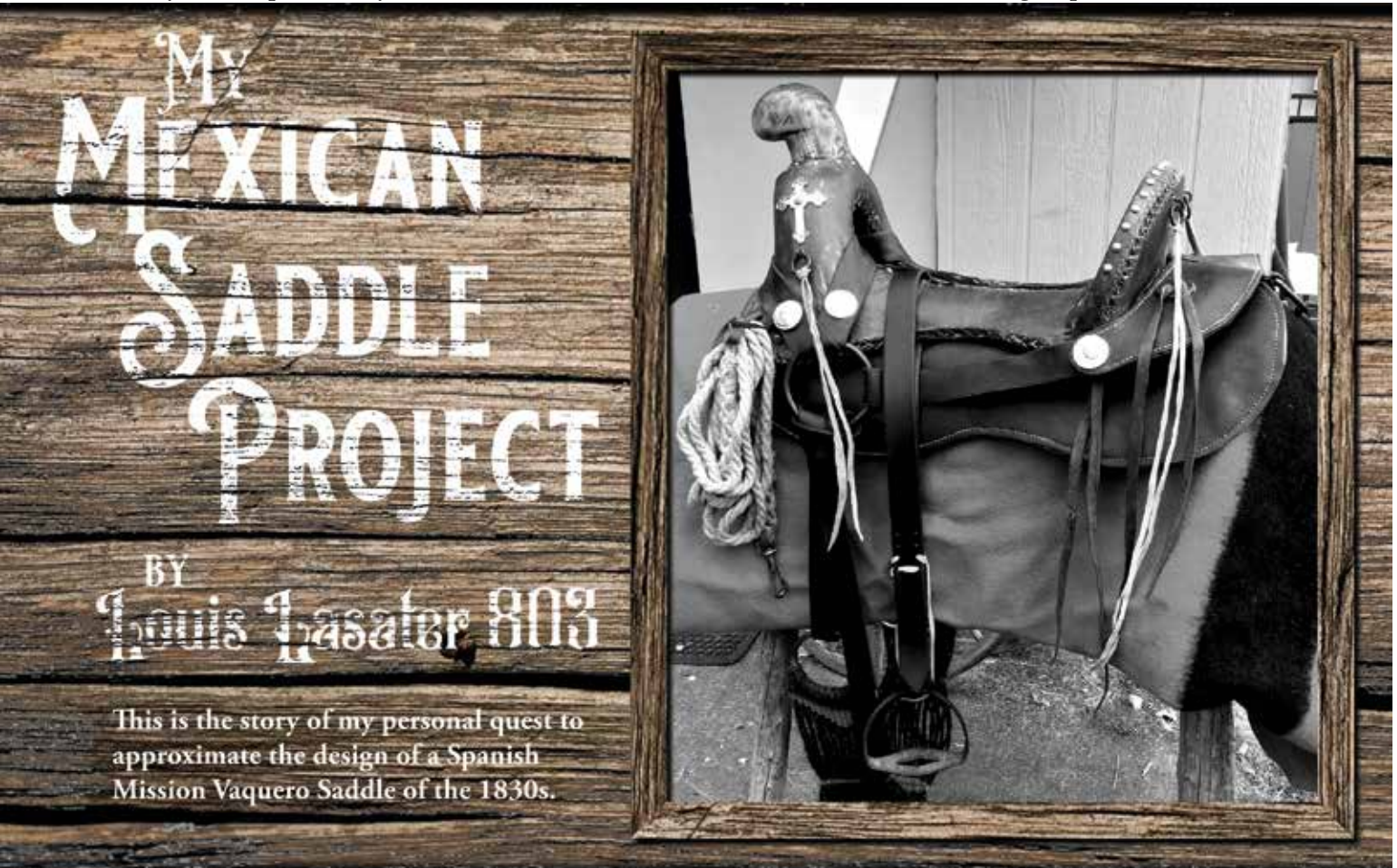


**Further to the pursuit of historically correct gear for the 19th century fur trade, possibly the most difficult item to get right is your saddle.**

Nearly all of the original Mountain Men relied upon horse travel in order to conduct the business of trapping, hunting, and freighting the equipment of their occupation all over the West. Today the responsibility to discover what their horse

## PERSONA

Establishing a “persona” is important in guiding what kind of gear you build. For example, some men take the part of a Beaver Trapper, and choose their origin. Are you American, British, Spanish, Hawaiian, Russian, Native American, black, white, Hispanic and so forth. Your gear should reflect your persona. However, one striking departure from that rule is in



gear looked like falls to The American Mountain Men. It seems that in the early 19th century this nation was growing so rapidly that very little attention was paid to making a record of events and gear that we are starved for today. We have very little information from which to draw. Fragmentary data from artwork before, during, and after the period, written descriptions from journals and museum pieces of uncertain provenance. We are forced to take the data available and extrapolate to fill in the gaps. Until more is discovered we use what we have today and live that life with the best horse gear time, money and research will allow.

horse gear. In the fur trade you would find men of all backgrounds mounted upon a hodge-podge of saddle designs. Generally speaking there is the Common (English) Saddle, The Spanish Saddle, all kinds of hybrids of those, and saddles of Native American manufacture.

## BACK STORY

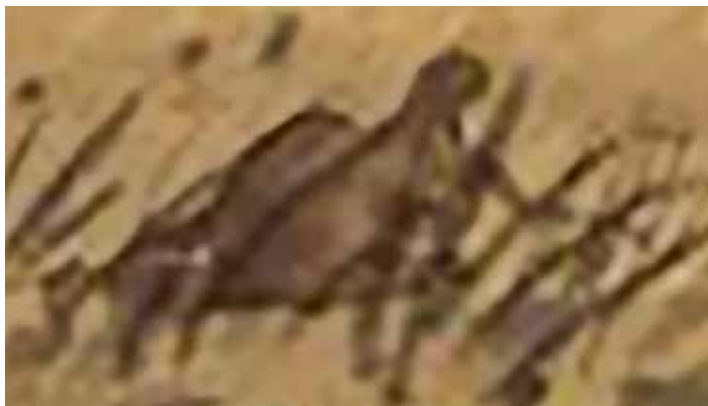
For me I have chosen the part of a Brigade Hunter. That is a man charged with the getting of meat for a trapping brigade. And so it was that in the winter of 1835 a family of the Apsáalooke (Crow)



### *Reaching Camp, Removing the Saddles*

took me in to pass the winter along the Yellowstone River, until early spring when my Rocky Mountain Fur Company trapping brigade would head west to resume beaver trapping. At that time way down south a war party of the Kiowa managed to steal several horses and their tack from an unfortunate camp of Spanish Mission Vaqueros tending cattle in Northern New Mexico. One of the saddles taken in that raid was traded to a friendly tribe of Cheyenne who roamed the front range of the Rocky Mountains in Eastern Colorado. The warrior who owned that saddle rode in a war party north into the hunting grounds of the Crow. When they were detected the Crow sent a party to run the Cheyenne out. I joined in the expedition with my friends and won this Mexican saddle as a spoil of war. For reasons known only to the Cheyenne warrior the saddle had no stirrup leathers or stirrups. These I would have to supply. In addition, the Indians had decorated it with brass tacks as is their taste and style. In 1837 I rode that saddle to Horse Creek with a company of trappers who had with them an artist named Alfred Jacob Miller. He managed to include my saddle in a painting titled;

### *Reaching Camp, Removing the Saddles*



In accord with my back story I decided upon a purely Mexican Cowboy saddle. My first task is to narrow down its general design and appearance. For that I used artwork and journal descriptions.

### TERMINOLOGY

At times I have struggled with what to call my saddle. Is it a "Mexican Saddle, or a "Spanish Saddle?" A search of the books and journals in the AMM research library I can find ONE instance of the use of the term, "Mexican Saddle."

From "Life In The Far West by George Frederick Ruxton we read:

*"His dress approached in some degree to civilised attire. A broad-brimmed sombrero surmounted his swarthy face; a coloured blanket, through a slit in which his head was thrust, floated in the air from his shoulders; leathern leggings encased his lower limbs; and huge spurs jingled on his heels. He rode in a high-peaked Mexican saddle, his feet thrust in ponderous stirrups, and in his hand swung a coil of ready lasso, his only offensive arm."*

However, I can find TWO instances of the term "Spanish Saddle."

From Jedediah Smith's Journal - First Expedition to California we read:

*"In a short time the indians returned bringing a cow as fast as she could gallop. She was held between the two horsemen by ropes thrown over her horns and having the other end fast to the Pomel of the spanish Saddle one riding before and the other behind she was forced along without the power of resistance."*



From Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans  
By Gen. Thomas James, of Monroe County, Illinois, we read:

*"We encamped at night in company with the Indians, the Chief lying near me, and in the morning nothing had been disturbed. I made presents of tobacco to the Indians and selecting one of my best horses and a Spanish saddle, bridle and rope, and leading him up to the Chief, who had no horse of his own, I presented him with this one and the trappings."*

In the *TRADE LEDGERS* of the western fur trade I can find FOUR instances of the term "Spanish Saddle," and ZERO instances of "Mexican Saddle."

Were I going on the preponderance of the evidence provided by Ledgers and Journals I would call it a Spanish Saddle. However, what Americans were calling a "Spanish Saddle" could have been either the saddle of Old Mexico or one of the many Saint Louis Spanish saddles.

Taken from *Man Made Mobile* by Richard E. Ahlborn:

*"Apparently by the middle 1820s, certainly in the latter years of that decade, at least one American saddlemaker, Thornton Grimsley, was producing at Saint Louis, Missouri, a saddle termed 'Spanish.' Although this saddle seems to have differed markedly from the Mexican article in most respects, its tree was patterned on that of Mexico, horn and all ... Although the American-made Spanish saddle was surely used in the fur trade of the Rockies, the extent to which it was employed is uncertain."*

Because it is often difficult to say exactly what the term "Spanish" saddle is referring to, we are obliged to make our best guess. Therefore, I choose to build a purely Mexican Cowboy saddle. As to what that may have looked like in 1830 I can only take what I have today and move forward.

In order to build a saddle to match my intended goal, I have to consider four factors: (1) **Design and appearance of the tree**, (2) **Rigging design** (3) **Materials**, and (4) **Decoration**.

## DESIGN

As I describe this process, pay attention to how many of our AMM brothers helped make it all happen.

In 1826 Jedediah Smith entered California and soon encountered Californio's whom he witnessed roping cattle:

*"The Spaniard mounted on a swift horse with his Larse in hand holding it so as to form the noose about 4 feet in diameter and swinging it around his head to keep it connected pursues the wild Cattle and horses of that country and arriving at the proper distance while both pursued and pursuer are at utmost speed throws his noose with such precision as to generally succeed in fastening it to the animal in the intended place while at the same time with his left hand he takes a turn around the Pomel of the saddle which is made high for that purpose with the end of the rope remaining in his hand."*

It appears this was the first time Smith had viewed a saddle with a horn, which he describes as:

*"...the Pomel of the saddle which is made high for that purpose."*

Which is the same observation made by Ruxton:

*"He rode in a high-peaked Mexican saddle"*

And the same from Zebulon Pike in 1807:

*"The saddle is made . . . with a high projecting pommel (or, as anciently termed, bow) and is likewise raised behind"*

In Miller's painting, *Reaching Camp, Removing the Saddles* we can see three saddles on the ground. They all have a horn and a cantle. To get the shape of the horn on my saddle correct I have those, and a few others.



*Pierre (1)*



*Pierre (2)*



*Evening Meal*



Alfred Jacob Miller gives us a good view of a Cattle in this art depicting Jim Bridger wearing English armor:



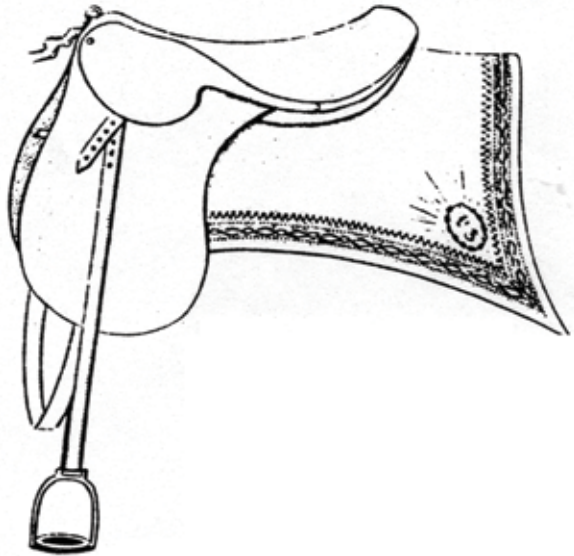
A. J. Miller - Inside of Fort Laramie:



In 1824 James O. Pattie encountered Spaniards on horseback near Taos and describes their saddles:

*"The saddle, which they use, looks as ours would, with something like an arm chair fastened upon it."*

Looking at a Spanish saddle tree we can understand how it could be described as a "chair" when contrasted with the English flat saddle. It is also interesting to note that the reaction of Americans when encountering these Mexican saddles gives us to understand that for the early years of the fur trade these explorers were riding saddles without a horn - likely common saddles something like this from the 1826 Drill Manual:

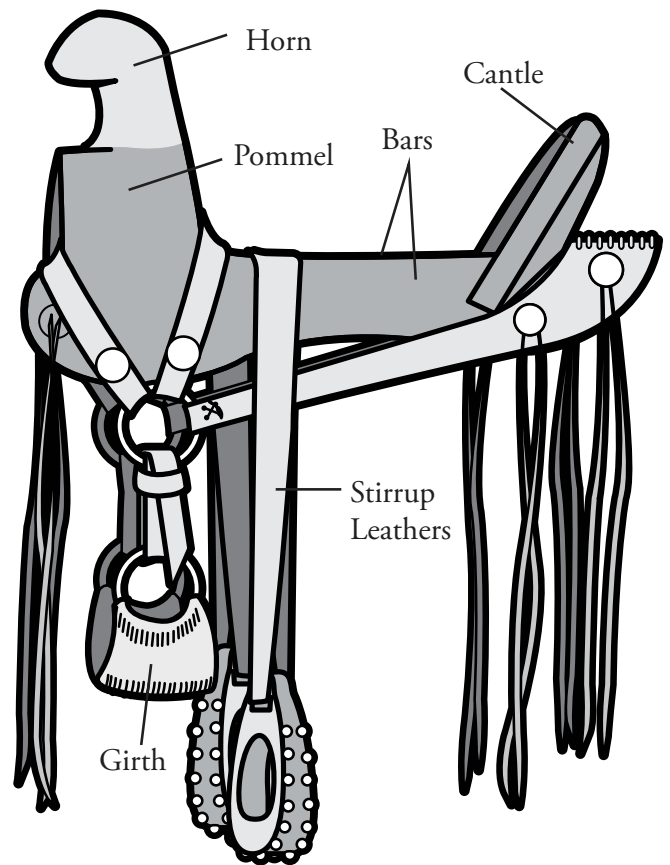


## RIGGING

Although the Saint Louis Spanish saddle, such as those produced by Grimsley, used a tree based upon trees coming out of Mexico, there is indication that they were rigged differently. Here are examples of typical Mexican rigging:

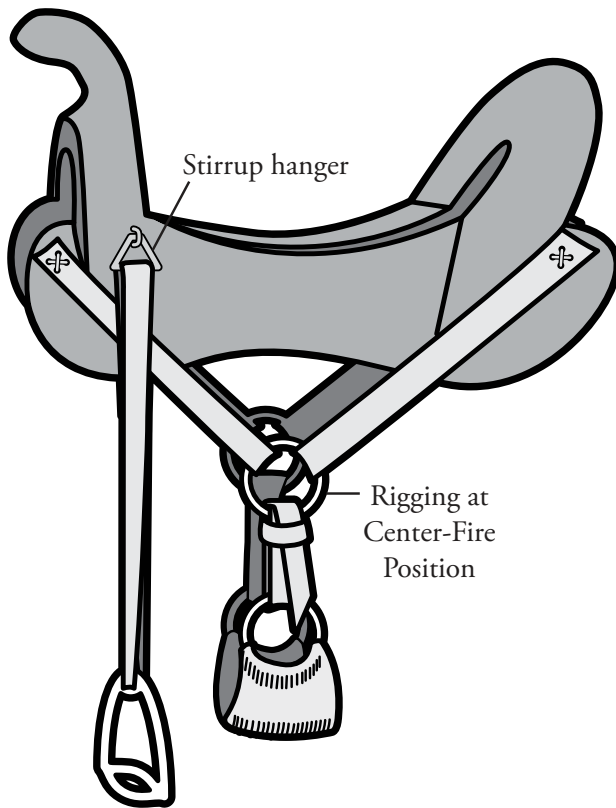


If Mexican saddles of the last half of the 19th century and into the early 20th century are a reflection of how they became accustomed to rigging a saddle, then I am persuaded to rig mine the same. Saddles in Mexico were rigged at  $\frac{3}{4}$  to  $\frac{7}{8}$  position, with the stirrup leathers looped over the bars of the tree.



The Saint Louis Spanish Saddle was generally “center fire” rigged with the stirrups leathers suspended from iron fixtures stapled to the pommel.





## MATERIALS

Having the basic design figured out, now it's time to gather the materials. First, I need a pair of BARS. Fortunately for me there are some accomplished saddle makers in the American Mountain Men including Mitch Alexander, from whom I was able to purchase the bars. Could I have made the bars? Certainly. But in this pursuit of historical accuracy we involve living creatures - our horses. Our horses did not ask to join in with our hobby, therefore we are obliged to do all in our power to see to their comfort. Saddle bars are complex components designed to follow the curve of the horse's back. For the sake of the horse I left the bars to the experts.

For the girth I needed a braided horse hair girth with iron rings and no buckles. Thanks to Ralph West for supplying this beautiful girth:



Next I needed wood for the pommel and cantle. The old saddle makers in the Spanish Borderlands used Cottonwood for this. Cottonwood is a fine material. It is relatively soft wood, making it easy to carve, and when under stress has a little give to it, and because the grain is not straight it is not as likely crack under stress. Cottonwood seems to occur all over the country. Around here (Utah) and down to Mexico we have the Fremont Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii* S. Wats.) Back east they have the Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*.)

Here in Utah every river bottom is populated by Cottonwood. It's everywhere. So you would think getting material for a saddle would be simple. However, after gathering no less than five (5) tree forks to use in making the pommel and seeing ALL of them develop huge fissures while they dried, I was losing hope. I put the problem to the AMM and soon one of our brothers came to my aid. Turns out Todd Daggett had a cottonwood tree come down in his yard. It sported a nice fork that Mitch Alexander advised would make a fine saddle pommel. So Todd mailed that great big hunk of wood all the way from Illinois to Utah. It was perfect, and even came with a Brotherhood Medallion.



Next I needed rawhide. Today most bull rawhide is bleached, but I needed un-bleached rawhide as this would be more like a Mexican saddle maker would

use. I was able to find a supplier in Hensen's Fur and Leather of Minot, North Dakota. It is a nice dark natural rawhide - just what I needed.



One thing I could not find but reasoned that I could make myself is square shanked nails. I went to Home Depot and bought a bar of iron and using a propane torch went to work. It took a lot of failure and experimentation to get this figured out. Matter of fact, this whole project was an exercise in "getting it wrong." Respect for the real saddle makers.

To do this right I needed vegetable tanned leather. I was able to buy some from Rick Tabor, some from a trader at Fort Bridger, and some of Lynn Kalan's walnut tanned deer supplied by Christian Whitesides.

In 1846 Francis Parkman, traveling the Oregon Trail, wrote that they each rode a:

*"plain, black Spanish saddle, with holsters of heavy pistols, [and] a blanket rolled up behind."*

Since the un-bleached bull rawhide I used has a nice dark brown color, and taking my cue from the above quote I dyed my leather dark. I'm not they did this in Taos, but you can get a nice dark brown dye from black coffee and green walnut husks, rendered down a couple of times, applied with neatsfoot oil and time in the summer sun.

To stitch the rawhide most tree makers use deer rawhide, It has tremendous tensile strength and can withstand the shrinking of the bull rawhide upon drying. Deer rawhide is one material which I have plenty of.

Hardware. I had some hand forged rings make by Ken Stanley. And an excellent blacksmith named Mike Mendenhall of Fighting Quaker Forge in Cache Valley, Utah, produced these staples and rings:



## DECORATION

Lastly I needed ornamentation. This saddle, being a Mission Vaquero saddle, I figured a fine decoration would be Spanish crosses of sterling silver. For this I turned to Larry Price, a life member of the AMM and highly skilled in lapidary. He produced two of these beautiful crosses that are wonderfully appropriate to the origin of this saddle.



I had to do more research to establish the historicity of silver conchos in “New Spain.” Taylor Tomlin was helpful in this, and I was glad to discover the use of silver conchos much earlier than the fur trade era. For example, this silver concho, or “decorative shell,” came from a Spanish presidio on the Texas coast, and was likely used on a saddle or bridle for a soldier’s horse.



Using this as an example I was able to get a Wyoming silver smith - Dave Gilpin, to hammer out six silver conchos.



And because my saddle had been owned by the Kiowa and Cheyenne for a time, I decorated with brass tacks.

## BUILDING THE TREE

Although I had professionally made bars, I did need to set them at the correct pitch. For this I visited Wynn Ormond who kindly made his Quarter Horse available.

The bars have to maintain a gap of 3.5 inches at their narrowest point. Using duct tape I connected the bars together so that when placed on the horse’s back they would be free to pitch into place.

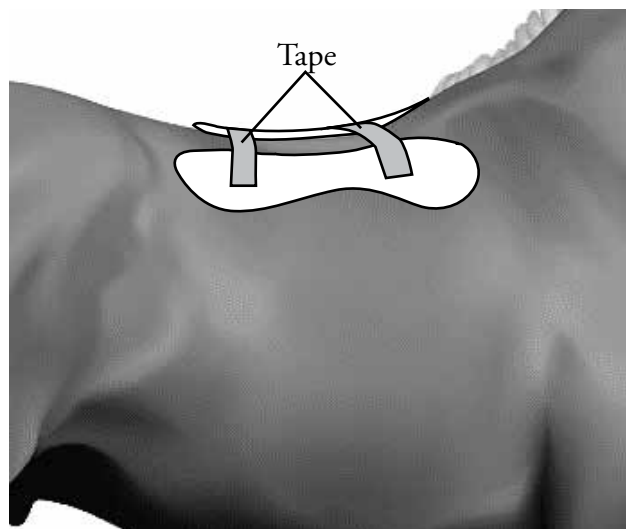
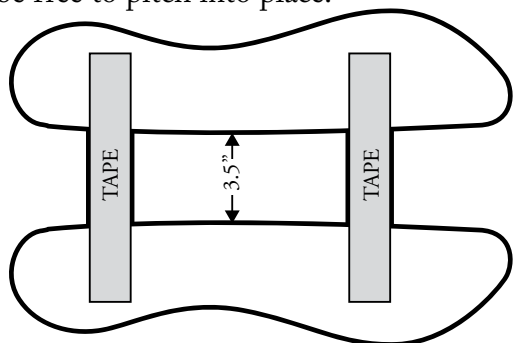


Figure 1

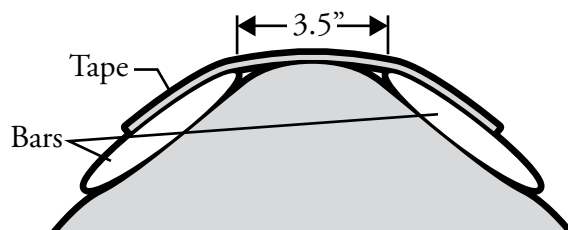


Figure 2

Measure the pitch:

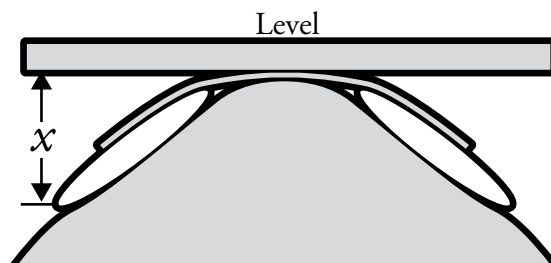
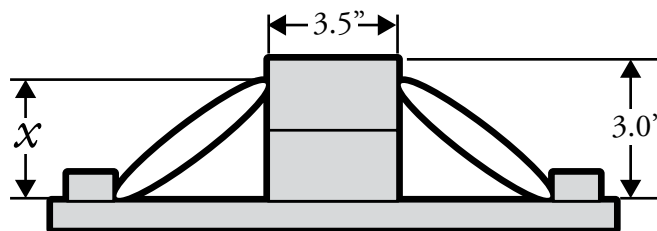


Figure 3

These measurements could then be transferred to a mounting jig that will hold the bars in this exact pitch throughout the building process. The jig can be made as follow:



$x$  = Measurement taken on horse’s back

Figure 4



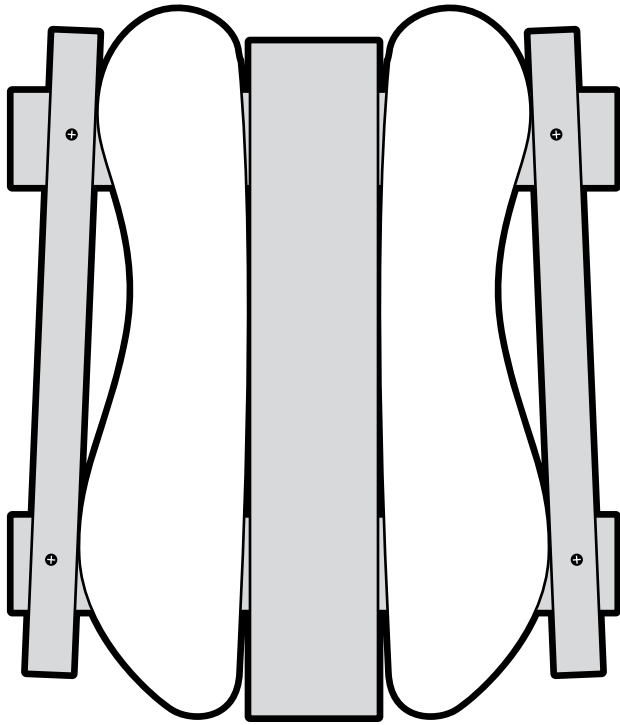
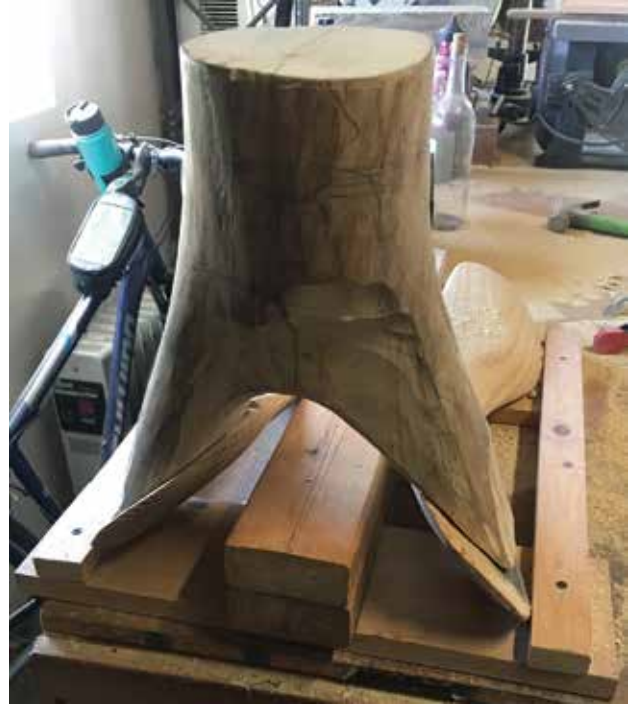


Figure 5

With the bars firmly set in place, now the sculpting begins. This was a nervous business. I had this ONE cottonwood tree fork and I could not afford to mess this up. ‘mungst carpenters there is an old saying; “Measure twice, cut once.” I couldn’t let Todd Daggett down so I sweated over the measurements for a long time.

After cutting away wood I did not need, fitting the wood to the bars was a matter of careful material attrition. My method was to cover the bars with graphite (a carpenter’s pencil) where the pommel would attach. The cottonwood was then pushed down onto the graphite to make a smudge mark. These marks were then filed off using a rasp, and the process repeated. It took AGES to settle the pommel into place.



More sawing, chiseling and rasping. As I removed material I would sketch the shape of the horn onto the wood as a guide. This process requires patience.





The pommel, cantle and bars are secured to each other with a temporary wood screw. The tree MUST be placed upon the horse again before the parts are permanently fixed together. I took it to Wynn Ormond's house in Cache Valley for a second visit to the back of his Horse.



This step revealed some important adjustments that were required.

- (1) Remove more material from the under side of the pommel to make room for the horse's withers.
- (2) Cut an inch off the back of the bars so they would not put pressure on his kidneys if the rider rocked back in the seat for whatever reason.
- (3) Increase the backward pitch of the cantle.
- (4) Reduce the height of the cantle.
- (5) Remove material from the horn to pitch it more forward and reduce it's overall bulk.

At last the pommel and horn were taking shape. Next I turned my attention to the cantle. Some of the old Mexican saddles have a flat somewhat squared cantle. Some are more dished out and round. In the early 1990's I built a Spanish saddle with a flat cantle that I rode for several days with almost no discomfort. I went with the same on this saddle. A flat cantle gives the hip joints a place to go when seated.



Having made these adjustments I then doweled and glued the tree together. To preserve the wood from water damage and to discourage hungry bugs the tree was rubbed with pine tar, then fired over a flame, for several applications. That done, I turned my attention to the rawhide.

On Tuesday I started the bull rawhide soaking. Thursday night I submerged a deer hide in water. Friday night I cut about half the hide into quarter inch strips. I ended up with twice as many strips as I needed. These were cut from the left side of the hide to the right. The



reason being that is the axis on which a deer hide has the greatest shrinkage, and would hold a tighter seam. On Saturday morning the bull rawhide was removed from the water and cut to size. A few of the deer hide strips were placed in a bucket of water ready for use. I had forged a tool - a 16 penny nail with an eye drilled near the tip. This would help push the strips through holes that I first punched with an awl.



This was a job that should discourage most people from taking on this project. For this entire step the rawhide had to be kept wet. This was accomplished with the application of wet towels the whole day.



By the end of the day my hands were pruned, and my fingers were sore. I did this once before in the 1990's, and I really can't remember it being this much work.

Here is the tree still wet and mushy Saturday night:



I left it in the shed all night to dry, and the next morning placed it outside in direct sunlight to drive out all the moisture.



It was wonderful to see how tightly the rawhide formed around the frame. They say 80 percent of the tree's strength is in the rawhide. Two days in the summer sun was all it took.

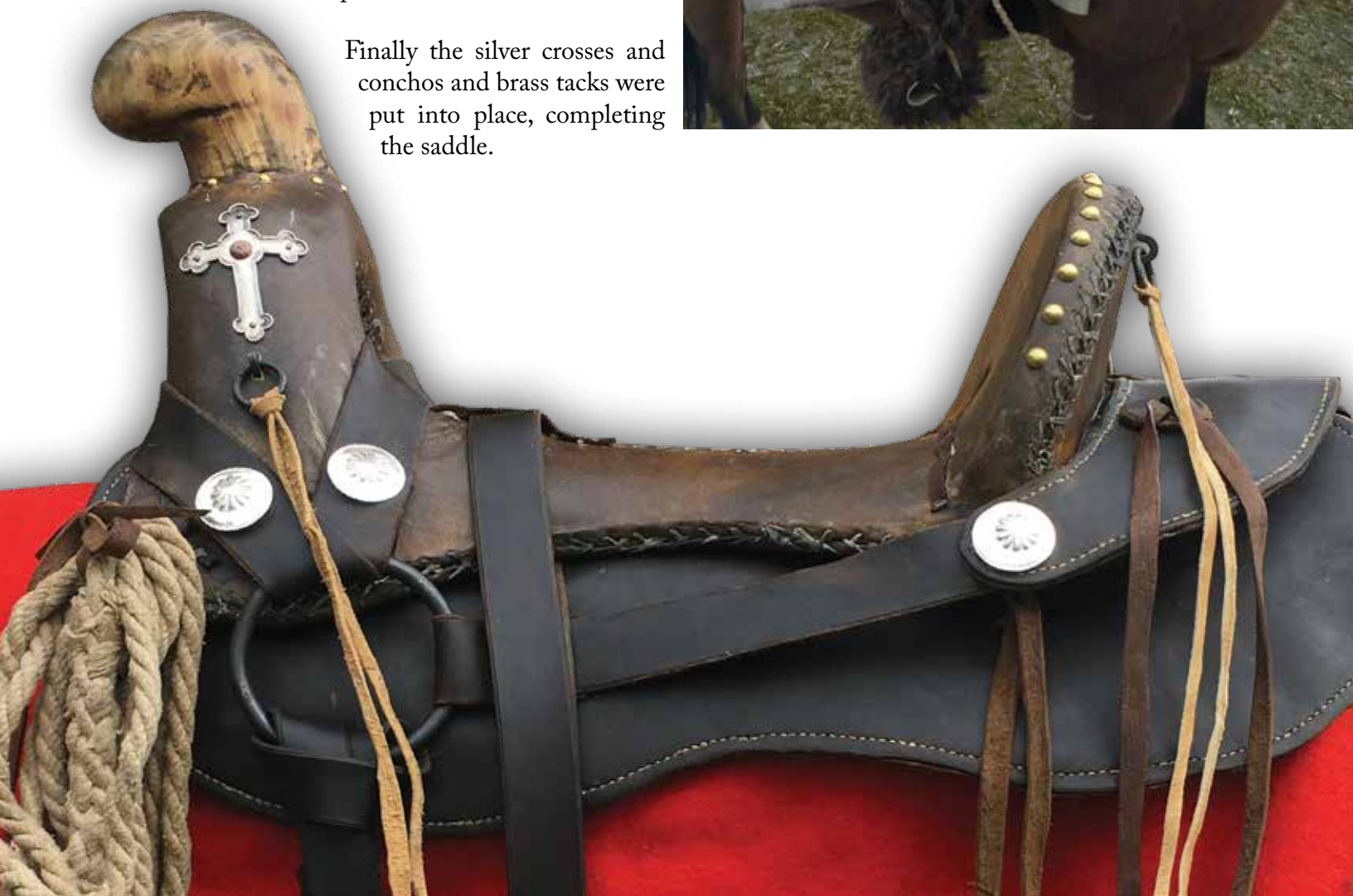
## THE RIGGING

As stated earlier, I wanted to keep the rigging as Mexican as I could and to avoid the designs and rigging of American Spanish rigs. I am persuaded the rigging of Spanish stock saddles was fairly well established a couple hundred years ago, such that what we see in saddles at the turn of the 20th century was reflective of the way Mexican saddle makers had always done it. Therefore, I wanted to follow that pattern. Although

the shape of the pommel and cantle varies, as it would from one maker to the other, some rigging elements follow through. The girth ring sits in line with the pommel very near or sometimes overlapping the side bar. These are held in place by a strap that travels from the ring, over the bar, under the pommel, and back over the bar and back to the ring. The cantle strap attaches to the girth ring then runs to a leather platform behind the cantle. Stirrup leathers are looped over the bars, and the skirts are held in place with ties front and back.

As part of my back story, the Cheyenne who lost this saddle in 1835 was riding it without stirrups or stirrup leathers. The stirrup leathers I was able to supply from company stores, and the iron stirrups were gifted to me by my Crow friends. A plausible story, yes? That is why this saddle does not use the large wooden stirrups traditional to Spanish rigs. You may imagine that a saddle making the journey I describe from New Mexico to Horse Creek, Wyoming over the space of a couple of years would have endured many repairs and component replacements.

Finally the silver crosses and conchos and brass tacks were put into place, completing the saddle.







## FINAL FITTING AND TEST DRIVE

As yet this saddle had not been on a horse's back and cinched into place and ridden. For this Me and Rick "Taos Pard" Baird went to visit Erik Dalley of Riverton, Utah. He has a nice little quarter horse named "Harley" happy to lend her back.

One wool "sweat blanket" went on first, and another blanket over that. The saddle thrown on top, nestled into place, then cinched down. The first thing we noticed is the crupper needs some adjustment. I made buffalo hide tapaderos to go over the stirrups to fend off twigs, branches and thorns that love to poke at moccasined feet and to keep the cold wind off my toes. Upon climbing on I discovered I needed more room in the tapaderos, and the stirrup leathers are too short. Next I discovered that I need a surcingle to hold my buffalo hide epishemore in place over the seat. Otherwise the saddle was comfortable and functional. Pard gave it a spin, as did Erik. Overall a rewarding result of many years of planning and many hours of hard work.

