

BUYING A USED MULE SADDLE

Part One

By Terry Wagner

I bought my first saddle with my own money, when I was about 15 years old, give or take. That great event took place fifty years ago, give or take. I had worked after school, weekends and summers at the 5-C Stables in San Bernardino, California, for Bill and Darlene Cole. I was riding an old Cogshall saddle that didn't belong to me and I wanted my own rig.

In the fall of 1959, I had \$100 burning a hole in my pocket for a used saddle. That was not a lot of money in those days, compared to this day and age, but a hundred bucks was a lot of money to a fifteen-year-old kid in 1959. A trip to the Los Angeles sale barn resulted in my becoming the proud owner of a used Bona Allen roping saddle in rough-out leather and a padded seat. I thought I was walking in tall cotton. It was a good buy, and I rode that saddle for almost ten years.

From that first purchase, I have had dozens of saddles over the years from as many companies and custom makers, new and used. For ten years I owned Sandhill Ranchwear, a western clothing and tack store in Yuma, Arizona, and was a dealer for Tex Tan, Ozark Leather, American, and Big Horn Saddlery. I bought and sold new and used saddles as part of my living for a number of years. By necessity I have learned a little boot and saddle repair along the way, and a lot about buying saddles, both new and used.

There are mules in the world that can be successfully ridden with a saddle made for horses. I personally know of three of them. However, there is a great big bunch of mules in the world that will eventually have some back issues from horse saddles. The problems may be temporary and minor in nature, or really involved with more issues than *Time Magazine*.

If you only ride an hour or so a week, in easygoing country, it probably will make very little difference what saddle you use. However if you really plan to ride, or just want the best from your mule, you need to purchase a mule saddle.



Mules change. Their entire look, physical appearance and structure, can change, as they get older. The above photos are the author, Terry Wagner, riding his mule Jones, taken as a six year old (left) and then at almost eighteen years old (right). They almost don't look like the same mule.

Mules, because of their donkey half, present completely different saddle fitting problems than horses do. Horses have their own saddle fitting dilemmas. However, keep in mind that saddle fitting is not a complicated science, just common sense.

This article is not going to even attempt to get into the fine points of saddle fitting, but rather how to help you look for and buy a new or used mule saddle for your mule. It starts with the premise that mules are different and need saddles designed for them. However, I will point out some structural suggestions on saddles that will help the saddle make a better fit for your mule.

Currently, the vast majority of better mule saddles are custom made. These saddles will run from about \$2,000 to \$5,000, or more, if you want to spend that much. If you can afford it, I encourage you to spend the money. Plain and simple, you get what you pay for when it comes to mule saddles.

One major point to keep in mind in your shopping is there are no standards in the saddle and tree making industry when it comes to "mule bars." Mule bars are whatever a tree maker wants to call mule

bars, or what the custom maker feels are the right specs for the mule saddles he makes. The mule bars in a saddle may not fit one mule, but will fit the mule tied next to him. Just because the tree has mule bars doesn't mean it will fit.

Here is something I have learned over the years about people selling saddles. The custom maker is, of course, going to point out all the good things about his product, and he may point out all the bad things about his competitor's products. A sales person, may or may not have a broad range of personal experience to draw from, and very likely has a supervisor who has told him or her what to say about the store's saddle inventory.

A private party may be a terribly experienced person, or someone who doesn't know a seat jockey from the cantle. Basically, do your homework before you shop. Learn the parts of a saddle, and their variations. It has been my experience that saddle makers, and sales people have a tendency to degrade what they don't sell or don't understand. Being prepared will give you a better chance to evaluate what you are being told by a saddle maker, sales person or saddle owner.

There are a lot of new, lower priced mule saddles available today and they may or may not be a good choice. You simply can't get a Rolls Royce in Chevy sheet metal. There are some cheap mule saddles on the market that have a crupper ring installed, and in that manufacturer's mind, that alone qualifies those saddles as mule saddles.

Cost cutting, to achieve low-end prices, runs the gambit from inferior materials and poor construction practices, that not only look bad, but can also create safety issues for the rider and the mule. Remember, when you leave your barn on your mule, you don't want to end the ride in an ambulance.

I have spent a small fortune on cheap, expensive and every price in between mule saddle you can imagine. I can say unequivocally that you should spend good money one time rather than on saddle after saddle that won't work for you or your mule.

I never understood why some mule owners will spend \$2,500 to \$6,500 on a well trained safe mule, and \$50,000 or

more on a truck and trailer to haul him in, and then want to ride that good mule in a brand spanking new \$250 saddle that will hurt the mule's back, be uncomfortable for the rider, and have the potential to get the rider bucked off. Make no mistake about it; you need a saddle that fits the mule. There are a lot of good solid well trained mules out there that won't tolerate an ill fitting saddle and will solve the problem by bucking off what hurts.

With the cost of today's new saddles, a good quality used mule saddle becomes a good option. The mule rider is better off to buy a quality used saddle, than to spend money on a lesser quality new one. If you have done your shopping and managed to find a new or used mule saddle, here are a few tips to help you finish your shopping.

One-way to help you broaden your possibilities, especially in searching for a used mule saddle, is not to be style conscious. You may picture yourself riding in a saddle endorsed by a popular mule guru, but do yourself a favor and buy what fits you and your mule. Because the saddle you buy for style reasons only may not fit.

First off, if it's used, what is the overall general appearance of the saddle? Does it look as though it has had a lot of hard use and not been cared for? A saddle that has had lots of miles on it is ok, as long as the owner has taken care of it, and may be a lot easier to get started with if it's "broken in."

Look at the saddle from all sides. Does it look the same from all angles, or does one side appear to be higher or lower than the other? Push down on the saddle, while it is on a good stand. Is it solid or does it rock from side to side? If it does, a warped tree may be the problem

One area that is a tell-tale sign of lack of care are the fenders. Are they supple or are they hard and brittle from excess sweat and lack of care? The fenders on the saddle will soak up more sweat than any part of the saddle, as they come in direct contact with the mule's sides at all times and are subject to, not only soaking up sweat, but being splashed with water and mud, as well. If the rest of the saddle appears to be ok, remember the fenders can be replaced.

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Look at the seat and the general condition of the rest of the saddle. Are the skirts twisted or folded under at the corners? Is there any leather that appears to be hard and brittle. If so, that leather cannot be made new; it's beyond repair, meaning replacement is your only option.

Next, look at the underside of the skirts. First look to see if the lining is genuine sheepskin, or a synthetic fleece. Either will work, but some people feel that one or the other is better for whatever reason. I personally prefer genuine sheepskin and fleece that has been vegetable tanned.

Is the fleece in good shape or are there patches of it missing? Remember it too can be replaced. Also does the wear on the fleece appear to be even from side to side? Uneven wear is a sign that something is wrong. While looking at the fleece, run your hands over it. Check for any protrusions that might be felt. Screws and nails backing out can be a problem for your mule's back. Also, if the saddle has saddle strings on it, check to see how the strings have been installed on the saddle. If the strings come all the way through the fleece lining, they can cause lumps that can create real back problems for your mule.

Here's a tip about fleece linings, on a new or used saddle. How the fleece is put on has a direct relationship as to how well your saddle blankets stay in place. Gen-



Nail head baking out of skirts and through the fleece lining.



A thirty year old saddle with good sheepskin lining.

uine sheep linings are the biggest concern. The fleece is tanned sheep hides, tanned with the fleece on it. Sheep wool has a "lay" to it.

Basically on the live animal, the fleece tends to lie slightly more toward the rear of the live sheep. This lay transfers over to the sheep lining when installed as a lining on a saddle skirt. Properly installed, the front or head of the tanned hide should be installed toward the front of the saddle skirts. Otherwise your saddle pads and blankets will have a tendency to move around under your saddle. Also if the fleece is installed one direction on one skirt and the opposite direction on the other, your pads or blankets may tend to creep to an angle under your saddle. If the lining is synthetic fleece, it makes no difference.

Now, take the saddle and sit it on the ground in front of you, horn down. Look from the top to see if the skirts and bars of the saddle appear to be the same from side to side. Is one higher or lower than the other, or do they appear to be even?



A low end mule saddle with skirts on the right, mounted up into the gullet farther than on the left side of photo.



Note left side of photo: tree is exposed above skirting leather.



Standing inside the skirts, and using your hands, push down on the back of the cantle with the horn on the floor. If any part of the saddle, cantle, horn, bars, or fork moves, it probably has a broken tree. If you're strong enough, you can perform this same examination with the saddle on a saddle stand pulling the horn and cantle toward one another.

Saddletrees are made with wood and can be rawhide covered, fiberglass covered, or any of several modern coatings that have entered into the tree making equation of late.

In a used saddle, with a rawhide covered tree, look under the jockeys and take note if any of the stitching on the rawhide cover is broken, and whether the rawhide covering is in good condition. The rawhide on a saddletree is usually given a coat of shellac after it has dried and formed to the tree. This is done to make it waterproof. This shellac barrier can break down over the years, and allow the rawhide to begin soaking up water. Damage to the rawhide and tree is the result.

Some trees are made with the injection molding process. However, I am not aware, of any injection-molded tree offered in mule bars, and they require extensive grinding or sanding to alter the bars to mule specs. Some makers claim this works well, and others say it is not the way to make a mule tree. Preference in tree construction is strictly a personal choice. However, the only lifetime tree warranty I am personally aware of is offered on a fiberglass covered wooden tree. That says something for that type of construction.

Next, if the saddle is used, are all the small parts on the saddle? By this I mean latigo and latigo keeper, saddle strings, stirrup hobbles, quick change or Blevins buckles on the stirrup leathers, off side and rear billets if it has a flank cinch. If a flank cinch is present, check it for general condition. Again, is it supple or hard and brittle? Flank cinches take a real beating, like the fenders, from sweat, mud, and water. Especially check all of the rivets on the saddle rigging. Are they all in good shape or have they been worn through or have burrs missing from them?



Fiberglass covered wood tree with built in ground seat.



Rawhide covered tree.



A brand new saddle with strings coming through the entire skirt and causing a lump.



Look closely at this cantle on a low end mule saddle. The padding is crooked and the cantle binding is not even.

If the saddle has any tooling, is it hand done or embossed? Embossed tooling is a machine pressing process that has been used for years on lower priced saddles. Check the creases in the tooling. Most saddle soaps contain wax that can build up in the tooling. These ingredients attract dirt that can be very difficult to remove. This eventually takes a toll on the life of the leather.

I once saw a used saddle that had so much saddle soap build-up in the tooling that it looked as though the tooling was worn off, when in fact it was hiding under wax. If you buy a saddle with this build up, you should start by carefully removing it as soon as you get it home. Warm water and a soft toothbrush will work wonders at removing the build-up.

Does the saddle appear to be dripping in oil? Some people, unknowing store owners included, will apply neatsfoot oil to a saddle in an attempt to make the saddle look as though it is has been taken care of. A little oil is good; a lot of oil is not good. Over oiling will make the saddle collect dirt that is very difficult to remove. This in turn will deposit dirt to your clothes and chaps and doesn't add to the quality or longevity of the leather.

One word of caution to keep in mind while shopping, if you come across a lesser quality saddle that appears almost new, there may be a reason it's for sale. I suggest you really look that saddle over. Someone may have traded it in or may be offering it for sale, because it didn't fit them or their mule, or it may have all kinds of issues that shouldn't be overlooked.

Many times these are construction issues that will only show up after you have ridden the saddle several times. Or it may be a construction issue that only a trained eye will quickly notice. If any gut feelings say something is wrong, go with your feelings.

Let's take a moment and discuss having a tree custom made to fit your mule. I have been down this road as well. There is a temptation to have a tree made just to fit old long ears, it sounds good, and can work, but it has major drawbacks as well. If the maker does his job right, that tree will only fit the mule it was made for. Great, but if the mule dies, you might as well bury the saddle with the mule.

Assuming the fits; there is no guarantee that fit will carry over into the finished product, as we will then fill all those measured angles, gullets and twists, with several pounds of leather and fur that can change the whole thing before it's out of the chute. The saddle maker will have to be exceptionally good in order to make those tree measurements carry over into the finished product.

Be prepared to pay a fair amount of money for this service, as the saddle maker will earn his money in order to fill your need for a custom tree saddle. If you ride more than one mule, the custom fitted tree route is something you want to give a second thought to.

Finally, mules change. Their entire look, physical appearance and structure, can change as they get older. I have a mule that is eighteen years old, and I have had him all but about two years of his life. When Jones was around five years old, I had a custom saddle made on a tree, fitted just to him. It was great for about three years, and then it didn't fit him or me, as we both changed. Please look at the photos on the opening page of this article. They almost don't look like the same mule, and I can assure you his back at five was way different than it is at his current age.

Please join us for Part II, next month in the March 2010 issue of *Western Mule Magazine*.

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