

A Seasoned Saddle

New technology links a modern consumer with the past.

By Tom Moates

AGONIZING!

Impatiently, I clicked “refresh” to reload the Internet page on my computer.

The eBay site proved perplexing for this first-timer. However, for the chance at an affordable, yet serviceable vintage saddle recommended by Sharon Myers, who owns a western saddle museum and knows her stuff, I threw caution to the wind.

I managed to register for bidding. I didn’t bid; two days remained to do that. Stealthily, like a hawk silently circling above its prey, I watched: refresh-refresh-refresh.

In truth, for all my angst, nothing happened. The minimum was exceeded by a single bid, which sat at \$306.99.

The saddle was an original Fred Mueller. Although quite collectable, I sought a quality working saddle: one to ride daily that fit my horses and myself and would be suited for long-distance traveling.

In several years of searching for a decent affordable saddle, antique saddles never crossed my mind. Used saddles, sure, but saddles pushing a century in age? Never. Not until I met saddle aficionado CuChullaine O’Reilly of the Long Riders’ Guild who introduced me to Sharon. Through our conversations, I realized that saddles built for working cowboys of the Old West can’t be beat. Those horsemen proved or destroyed makers’ reputations.

I blinked at the screen. Yikes! \$357.99 – someone bid! And still a day left.

CuChullaine loaned me a book explaining that Mueller apprenticed under renowned saddlemakers, and in 1891 landed in Denver. Mueller sold the business to his employees in 1917 and died in 1924, but his famous saddles were made under his brand until 1957.

A chapter concludes, “When the firm celebrated its golden anniversary with a Mueller old-saddle contest, in 1941, the employees uncovered a Mueller saddle still in use at that time. This saddle had been purchased from the original stock built by the firm shortly after 1891. Its owner, C.E. Miller, an old-time cowman of the Big M Ranch near Elizabeth, Colorado, had ridden it almost continually until he turned it in as the contest winner. He received a new saddle from the firm, while the old one became one of Mueller Co.’s prized possessions. That, as the old cowboy said, is ‘A brand that won’t fade, unravel or bust out at the seams.’”

“That’s what I want!” I thought. Not only a saddle better built than many found today, but one with real history.

The saddle on the auction block, aside from being a beautifully custom-tooled old high-back with an oak-leaf pattern, had a history. “JHB” was tooled into the cantle, for the original owner, James Henry Bradford. The saddle was made around 1932. Among other usage, it made the trip from somewhere in Louisiana to Houston, Texas, 47 times.

The more I learned, the less I wanted to lose it. My upper range stopped around \$550. My daughter, Arika, explained that the last several minutes of bidding are when the real price range becomes evident.

A quality custom saddle with tooling these days runs at least \$3,000 to \$7,000. The market stands that kind of pricing because these saddles are worth it.

But the average Joe like me can’t afford that. So my sights were set on finding a tough, serviceable, appropriate-to-my-needs saddle. It, however, amazed me that a beautifully tooled saddle of a quality equal to the best new saddles, and a real piece of American history to boot, might be mine for a fraction of the cost.

Time ticked, and I wore the paint off the refresh key as everything came down to the wire. Two bidders nickel-and-dimed it up to \$410 as five minutes remained.

It was time. Arika explained the eBay system automatically ups a bid in \$5 increments above other bids up to the maximum amount, until it either wins or is beaten. Taking into account additional advice to add a few dollars over the rounded amount I wanted to bid (thus make a bid like \$50 more like \$52.67, just to beat out the other guys making a flat \$50 bid), I entered \$556.

Then I watched anxiously: refresh,-refresh,-refresh . . .

Three minutes passed with a flurry of activity. I retained the lead until, with less than a minute left, the bid hit \$556.55 and stopped.

Hmmm . . . tick, tick, tick, what to do? Tick, tick, tick . . . I typed in \$600 (26 seconds left), then remembered those sage words, hit backspace (18 seconds) and changed the bid to \$603 (10 seconds), and clicked enter.

Refresh,-refresh,-refresh,-refresh.

Then it was over. My \$603 bid bested out my opponent, whose final bid in the last seconds ended up being \$602.55. I won the Fred Mueller saddle by 45 cents.

A week later, a huge box containing the saddle arrived. I opened it, reflecting on the puzzle pieces that dovetailed for the old saddle to wind up here. Likewise, I wondered just what trails lay ahead for us, as I saddled up my mare, “Sokeri.”

I put a foot in a stirrup, threw my leg over and sat for the first time in my antique Mueller, just feeling its absolutely perfect fit. Then off we went. 🍷



TOM MOATES

Tom Moates is a special contributor to The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to aqbajrnl@aqba.org.