

The Sky's the Limit

There's no reason why comfortable, well-balanced saddles can't look like museum-quality showpieces, say Lisa and Loren Skyhorse. The Durango, Colorado, saddlemakers prove it's possible every day.

Article by Kyle Partain • Photographs by Chris Marona

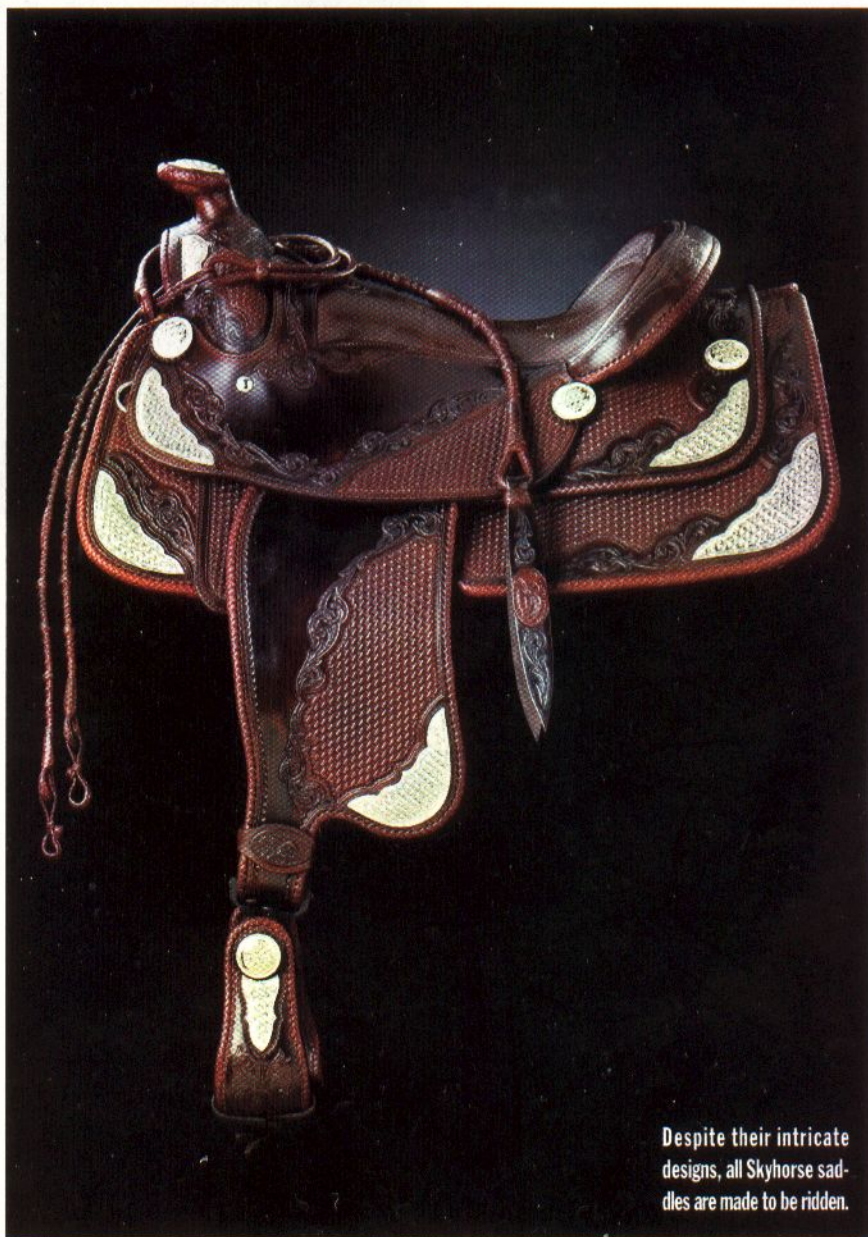
Their saddles might look more at home in a museum or art gallery than on a horse's back, but a little silver and fancy tooling shouldn't blind consumers to the facts. Lisa and Loren Skyhorse's work is designed for everyday use.

Skyhorse Saddles' husband-and-wife team has a simple philosophy when it comes to good saddles: You can have it all. That means buyers should expect a comfortable, well-fit, balanced saddle that's as fancy as anything seen in classic western movies and television shows. For saddle aficionados, Skyhorse pieces might evoke memories of Ed Bohlin's over-the-top parade-saddle designs.

"No matter how beautiful or ornate our saddles, it's important that they're all rideable," Lisa says. "Some of the fanciest ones might never be ridden, and some are more delicate than others, but they're all designed as functional pieces."

Function and beauty are the hallmarks of all things the Skyhorses set their minds to, whether it's saddles, elegant furniture or the custom leatherwork that decorates everything from doors to an entertainment center in their Durango, Colorado, home. It quickly becomes obvious that Lisa is an artist who makes saddles, and not a saddlemaker with a touch of artist in her. Instead, she's shunned the traditional painting and sculpting in favor of leatherwork.

"The combination of leather and how



Despite their intricate designs, all Skyhorse saddles are made to be ridden.

it fits into my horse lifestyle is what pushed me into making saddles," Lisa admits. "I love creating functional artwork, and leather just seems to be the best medium for that."

An Artist First

Some artists believe there's no such thing as "functional art." Once you take a piece and put it to work, it's no longer art. Lisa, as one would imagine, doesn't subscribe to this theory.

"She'll lock horns with any traditional artist who believes that," says Loren, sporting a slight smile that appears to hold back stories of such encounters. "I think she's always wanted to prove that she could work in leather and it still be art."

Even more so is the enjoyment Lisa derives from leatherwork. Always a horsewoman, the chance to work in an industry that revolved around horses, where company research required time spent horseback, seemed a perfect career choice.

Of course, becoming a female saddlemaker in the early 1970s was easier said than done. However, with the help of a seasoned craftsman, Lawrence DeWitt, Lisa learned the basics of building a traditional cowboy saddle. Not long after, she opened her own shop in Arcata, California.

"Lawrence was always supportive of my unique style as it developed through the years," Lisa says. "But even back then there were things I was doing differently. He was always such a wonderful mentor, and obviously very open-minded, since he was willing to work with a woman at that time."

Three years into her new career, Lisa and Loren were married. The two have been together since, spending much of that time living and working at their Trinidad, California, ranch, which they called home for nearly 20 years before moving to Durango. Loren had no real saddle-building experience, but he was a seasoned ranch hand who understood basic saddle design. The rest, he learned quickly from Lisa.

Surprisingly, the third saddle Lisa built started the company down its unique road.



This design incorporates a variety of animals and flowers.

The fully tooled, intricately carved saddle featured custom-made, turquoise conchas and sold for \$1,000 to the Abercrombie & Fitch store in San Francisco, California.

"Most of our fully tooled saddles were going for \$450 at the time, so to sell one for \$1,000 was a big deal for us," Lisa recalls. "I realized then that my heart was in building really beautiful saddles, not just the traditional cowboy stuff."

And thus, Skyhorse's saddle-market niche was born. "It was kind of like the baseball movie (*Field of Dreams*): If you build it, they will come," Lisa says. "All we wanted to do was sell enough saddles to make a living, but our willingness to follow that dream has paid off through the years."

In an attempt to embrace their artistic natures, Lisa and Loren have developed a "collection" series that ultimately will

include at least 10 designs offered in extremely limited editions (three of each design will be produced). The artists plan to keep one of each design, while offering the remaining two for sale to the public. The first two saddles in the collection, "We Are All Related," and "Good Luck Sidesaddle," already have been completed.

New Home

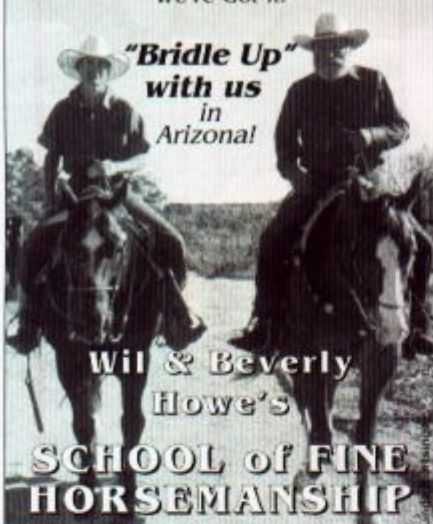
After nearly two decades on the Pacific Coast, the couple decided on a whim to relocate to Durango. They'd visited the town just a few times when, on the way back from a New Mexico trip, the decision was made. The southwestern Colorado community offered some definite benefits for the couple and their work.

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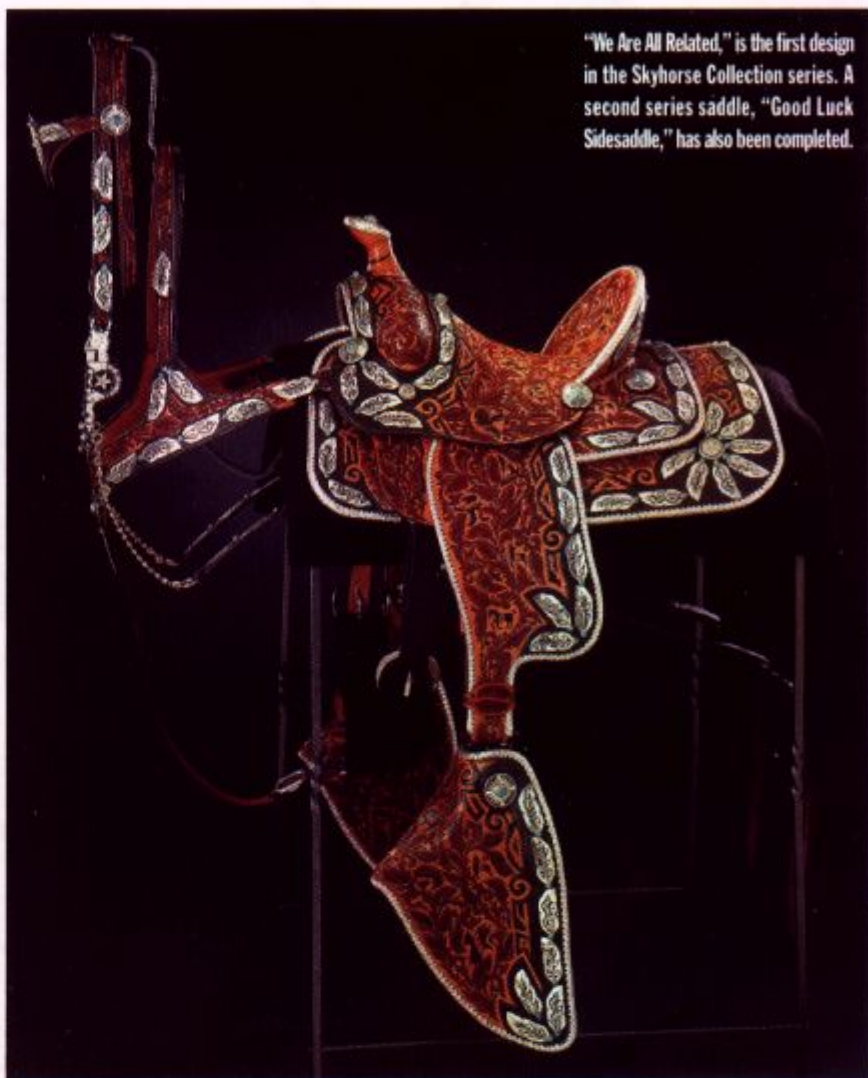
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"We Are All Related," is the first design in the Skyhorse Collection series. A second series saddle, "Good Luck Sidesaddle," has also been completed.

been in the past, Lisa and Loren found themselves among an affluent clientele, while also benefiting from a stronger western influence.

"We thought we might just live here for a year or so, kind of like a working vacation," says Lisa. "It was the last year our two kids were at home and it was a great adventure to move to a place with new trails to ride. We just fell in love with the mountains, the community and everything about the area. So we went back to California, sold the ranch and came right back to Durango."

The area's amenities are too numerous to list, but Loren counts the fact that 80 percent of the county is public land as a top selling point. Numerous trail systems through a variety of landscapes (canyons and mountains, to name two)

add to the eclectic mix of cowboys, American Indians, retirees and a thriving art community that makes Durango an ideal location for the Skyhorse family.

And with 35 acres out their back door, there's plenty of room to pasture the family's horses — when they aren't being used.

Durango certainly has its advantages, but Lisa and Loren are quick to point out some good things about their former California location, as well.

"I used to feel like it was a terrible disadvantage because we weren't out rubbing elbows with a lot of western people there," Loren says. "We didn't have many opportunities to glean ideas from other saddlemakers, silversmiths or artists. Looking back, I think being that isolated was a gift. It forced us to create our own style and our own look. You might even

say we were 'ignorant' about what a saddle was supposed to look like."

Time in the Saddle

Former endurance riders, Lisa and Loren have taken to backcountry riding and camping since the Durango move. The outings provide time to research saddle concepts and designs.

"We went on a ride recently where our long day was just under 20 miles," Loren says. "We spent seven hours in the saddle and never did get uncomfortable."

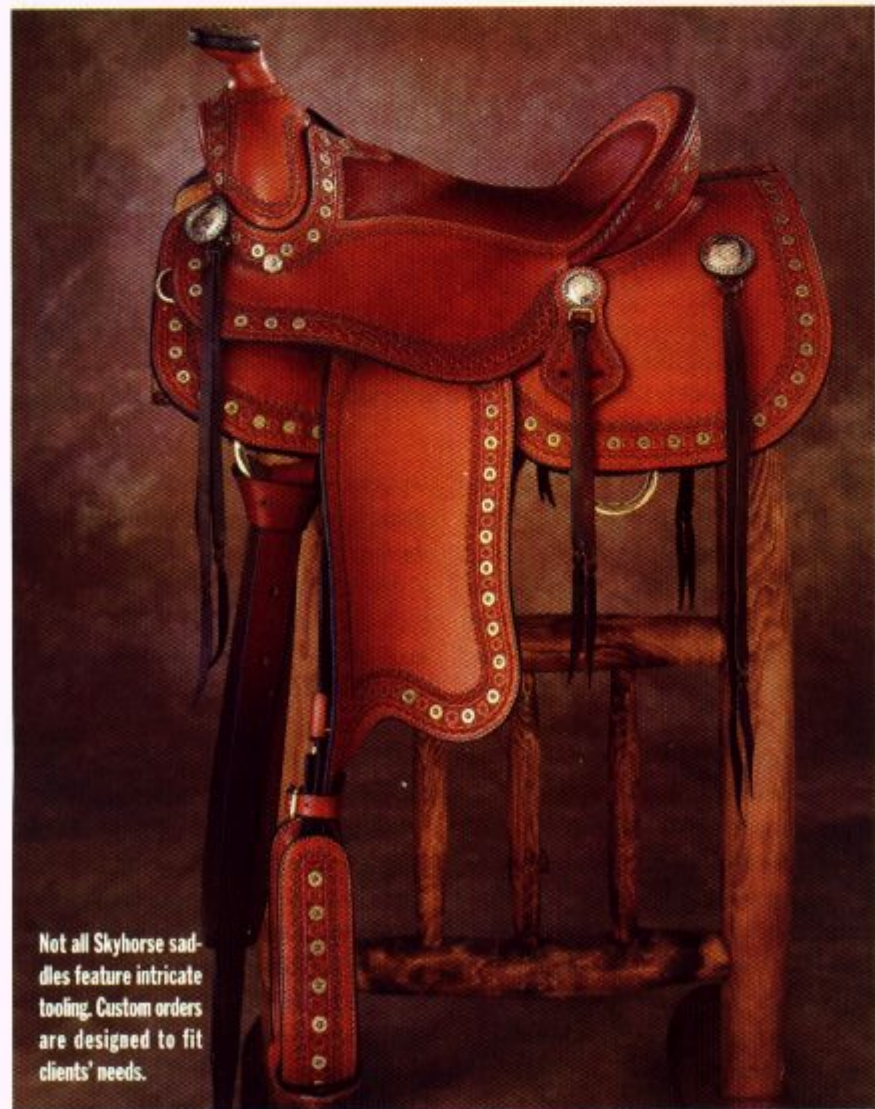
The couple sees no reason why any western saddle should feel like sitting on a "2-inch-by-6-inch board." They've also developed ways to eliminate extra saddle bulk, so it doesn't feel like a rid-

er's straddling a "55-gallon barrel."

Details, such as how the ground seat's carved, make all the difference between a useable saddle and a comfortable saddle, in Loren's mind. In fact, his focus with any project is simple: Take care of the smallest details first, and the bigger picture will take care of itself. The Skyhorses go so far as to carve ground seats differently for men and women, a luxury they can afford as custom saddlemakers.

Inlaid, padded seats top the company's design plans on most saddles, which are constructed from Hermann Oak No. 1 leather and feature less bulk than many current-day saddles. Skyhorse saddles usually weigh between 30 and 40 pounds.

"But they're still strong enough to rope a cow, if that's what you need to do,"



Not all Skyhorse saddles feature intricate tooling. Custom orders are designed to fit clients' needs.

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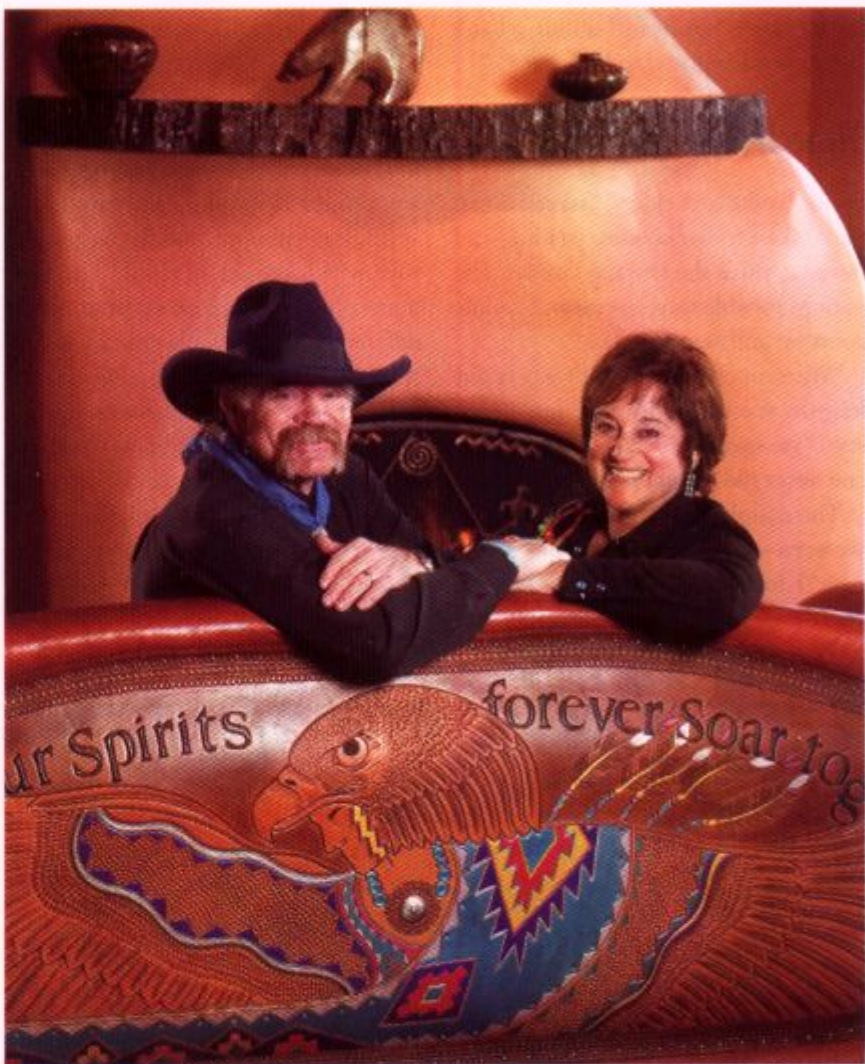
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"Well, no — I think we can probably
rule out "Mad Cow Disease."



Saddlemakers Loren and Lisa Skyhorse use leather in all their decorating. They've designed many of the furnishings that decorate their Durango, Colorado, home.

Loren points out. Well, except for the one they made to hang on the wall as "art." And it might have held up to roping, as well, but it was cut in half to become two art pieces. "What we've done with all our saddles is taken a traditional base and put in some of our own twists. But they all still start with wood trees covered in rawhide."

The trees come from Timberline Saddle Tree Company in Vernal, Utah — each one specifically ordered from a handful of measurements provided by the customer. But that doesn't mean the saddle's built for a particular horse.

"We don't usually build saddles that way," Lisa says, "because the saddle should outlive the horse. We want to build a good-fitting, all-around saddle. Typically, if folks

replace a horse for whatever reason, they're going to end up with a new horse that's the same breed and roughly the same size."

Horse size is the biggest change Lisa's seen the last 30 years. On average, she says, horses are more heavily muscled and usually 200 pounds heavier than when she started in the business. And that means saddles are wider than they used to be — to allow the horse to move freely.

"And there are so many gaited horses now with long shoulder movements," she says. "I don't want to inhibit their movements by putting too small saddles on their backs."

"First and foremost, we have to make sure the tree fits the horse," Loren adds.

As for their own horses, the former endurance riders have a "leftover" Arabian, Blaze, in addition to two gaited

horses – another reason why they've been so careful to design saddles that work with gaited breeds. Nizhoni (Navajo for "Beautiful One"), a Spotted Saddle Horse, and Cheyenne, a Missouri Fox Trotter, are Lisa and Loren's regular backcountry riding mounts.

Thriving Partnership

One reason the Skyhorse partnership works so well is because Lisa and Loren are wired just a little differently. Lisa is the visionary who likes to start projects, while Loren focuses on the details and enjoys finishing the work. Unlike some two-person shops, there's no competitive situation driving the two in this partnership.

"Every saddle that comes out of the shop has had all four of our hands on it," Loren says. "It's always been a collaboration of our talents. Actually, in the beginning, Lisa always gave me the stuff she didn't like to do, and I learned to like it."

Building stirrups, sewing a cantle and some of the less-artistic aspects of their saddle design have fallen on Loren's shoulders. However, he plays a key role in the look of every Skyhorse saddle because he's the "master of oiling."

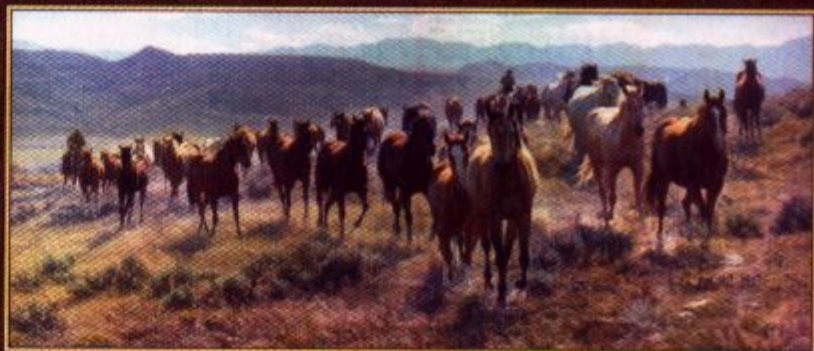
Skyhorse saddles often feature color variations accentuated with oil. And it's Loren's job to make sure those differences are as prominent as Lisa has envisioned.

"I think I've really developed an eye for that color," Loren admits. "I can't draw a stick figure, so I guess that's where I get a chance to exhibit my artistic flow. The best part about our partnership is that we probably get three or four times more work done than an individual. If we were working on our own, it'd be tough to produce enough work to make a living."

Despite filling a "really small" saddle-market niche, Skyhorse Saddles has thrived thanks to Lisa and Loren's attention to detail, customer service and artistic flair.

Contact Skyhorse Saddles at 970-385-7660; www.skyhorse.com. Kyle Partain is a WH associate editor. Send comments on this article to edit@westernhorseman.com.

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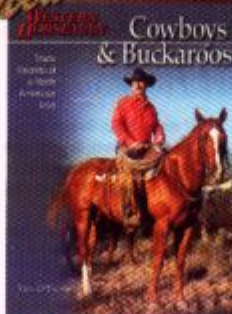
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