

Calvin Allen | Banking on Quality

by Nick Pernokas, Southwest Media Coordinator



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Many of us can't really remember when "the spark" happened. For Calvin Allen, it could have been in his genes. His great grandfather was Joe Robert Richards who was in Company C of the Fourth Virginia Cavalry, better known as "The Madison Invincibles," a part of Jeb Stuart's cavalry in the Army of Northern Virginia.

It could have been seeing all the serviceman who rodeoed back in the Norfolk, Virginia area.

Whatever the catalyst was, the Richmond native was roping calves, and doing leatherwork, while he was still in high school. A friend from Texas told Calvin about Weatherford College and its close proximity to the saddle shops and roping around Ft. Worth. So after high school, Calvin headed west. By 1973, he was working for the famous Ryon's Saddle Shop in Ft. Worth. Calvin, however, really wanted to learn to make saddles so he moved down the street and went to work for Bud Canella at Cajun's Saddlery. A saddle maker named David Andrews worked there and he actually taught Calvin to make saddles.

Although Calvin loved roping, he soon saw that there were more potential customers in the cutting horse world.

"I thought that probably ten percent of the ropers were potential customers as opposed to ninety percent of the cutters. They had more disposable income for higher end merchandise," says Calvin. "Customers in those days were pretty knowledgeable."

When Calvin opened his own shop, he focused on the cutting horse market. The oil boom of the late 70's fueled the cutting horse boom, and Calvin rode it to the top. He credits much of his success to famed cutters like Larry Reeder, Terry Riddle, and Buster Welch, all of whom used his equipment and endorsed it.

"Each of those trainer's saddles were different. They showed and trained differently, and the saddles reflected this. All of these trainers also had large followings."



Location is everything, and Calvin Allen Saddlery is located right on Interstate 20 in Weatherford, Texas, in the heart of cutting horse country. The stone building fits the turn of the century mercantile store image.

As luck would have it, Calvin was able to offer a variety of styles to accommodate these different philosophies. Trainers rode a lot of different horses. They needed saddles for themselves and their help. Their customers, many of whom competed in Non-Pro classes, also needed saddles. This was a tremendous market at the time, and the "foundationists" wanted very good quality, high-end tack. Cutting continued to grow, and new divisions and classes were added to offer more opportunities to compete.

This was a double-edged sword because, although it brought more customers in, it also brought more large sponsors and companies and mass produced merchandise into the events.

There's not as much brand loyalty anymore, says Calvin.

Calvin got into making saddles because he was around horses. He feels that this gave him an advantage over many saddle makers of the time who didn't ride. He began showing cutting horses, and this in turn gave him an edge in the cutting saddle business.



Calvin has an extensive collection of mid to late nineteenth century U.S. Cavalry equipment.



Calvin also collects saddle making tools and is a self proclaimed "tool nut".

The flat seat cutting saddle is unique in that it moves dramatically with the horse. It has to allow the rider to sit down in it yet be able to stay relaxed and not have to follow every movement of the saddle. The hardest part is making a flat saddle that doesn't feel wide. On wider horses, this is even more of a problem because, if you thin down the already slim cutting bars, the saddle is significantly weakened. Today, there seems to be more cutting horses with better withers so this has helped the fit of cutting saddles.

Calvin feels that most of the saddles he builds today are similar. He has two main styles, The Calvin Allen and the Buster Welch which start at \$3,950.00. The most common "custom" touch is varying the heights of the swells. With cutting, the swell height is inversely proportional to the length of the rider's arms because they hold onto the horn. Calvin's early saddles were often made with really low fronts because the trainer Larry Reeder had long arms and that was the way he liked them. Today, many of Calvin's swells are taller as a wider variety of take up cutting. Longer is better, and Calvin recalls Buster Welch saying that riders need "a lot of slosh in their saddle" if they're sitting it correctly.

Although many of Calvin's saddles are similar, it



Calvin Allen is surrounded by history in his book and memorabilia lined office.

is the handwork and attention to detail that sets them apart from the mass produced cutters. He thinks that you have to change if you see a better way of doing something and points to several improvements that he's made over the years. To remind people of this, Calvin advertises moderately, generally in the Cutting Horse Chatter magazine. He doesn't believe in blowing his budget on advertising though, so much of it is through word of mouth. The trainers dictate what a lot of the customers ride, and Calvin has pointed out to them the advantages of having a happy customer who's riding a quality product versus an unhappy customer with a poor quality product.

A large part of Calvin's business is going to the trade shows that are held in conjunction with the large cutting events. He goes to ten or twelve a year, from Georgia to Utah. Most last about a week but the major events are longer. The National Cutting Horse Futurity in Ft. Worth lasts for three weeks. Most are indoor trade shows, but Calvin's trailer is versatile enough to be set up outside, too.

But to do well at the shows and in his store, Calvin thinks that you have to have a diversified inventory.



Saddle maker Chad Hazleton fits a back housing. Juanita Lingle, Faith Rains, and Rod McEntire round out the shop crew.



Calvin thinks that the strap goods are as important as the saddles, and his strap goods department reflects this. Everything is neat, and Calvin saves all of his scraps for later use.



Some of Calvin's reins and headstalls waiting for a ride to the Cutting Futurity.

He thinks the vendor who only sells one specialized product is at a disadvantage. Diversity creates cash flow. When one product, like saddles, aren't selling, he has a good selection of strap goods that might. (However, he doesn't make as much training type strap goods as he once did.) He also carries a lot of high-end clothing, much of which is crossover type apparel—horse people as well as the general public wear it and that's important. Calvin's wife, Brenda, has a good eye for women's fashions and keeps that end of the business going. Clothing sales is a source of serious revenue for the store.

"We try to carry the good stuff. If people don't want that, if they want the cheap stuff, then I don't know how you compete with that," says Calvin. "There's not a whole lot that I can do about it."

I pay attention to the quality of my strap goods as much as I do the saddles.

"I've used the products and I know what lasts and what doesn't hold up. I always try to think about how I could make something a little better."

Calvin Allen Saddlery is located in a beautiful building along Interstate 20 in Weatherford. The main building houses 2,800 sq. ft. of retail space. The store is furnished with antique fixtures including a large collection of old display cases. Clothing and gift items greet the shopper while tack and artwork are displayed on the walls. A small functional saddle shop sits in the rear corner of the retail area with enough room to work on one saddle. People like watching a "real saddle maker" working at the bench. It's good PR for the shop.

The main saddle shop "L"s off the retail area and it's 1400 sq. ft. and houses everything needed to build any kind of leather goods. Calvin employs three saddle makers, in addition to Calvin, as well as a chap and belt maker. He also has an employee in the retail area.

Connecting the two buildings are some offices and one of them resembles a museum. Calvin has collected U.S. Cavalry equipment for a long time and has an extensive collection of gear from the Civil War and the Indian Wars periods. A lot of Calvin's Civil War interest comes from being raised in Virginia. He's a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans which has a mounted unit



Brenda Allen does a great job selecting retail merchandise for the store. Most of it is upscale Western with a lot of crossover potential. The store is laid out with many antique fixtures that they have collected. This display case is one of Calvin's favorites



Calvin's saddle and tack retail area also has a small saddle shop (background of photo) in it. It is functional and many customers think that it is the main saddle shop.

that participates in parades and cavalry reenactments. Calvin's interest in history has paid off; he was commissioned to make Santa Anna's saddle in the film, *The Alamo*.

Calvin also has a large collection of saddle making tools, including numerous round knives and draw gauges.

"I'm just a tool nut," laughs Calvin.

Calvin feels that the key to success in this business is to know your customers. The average person thinks that everyone who wears a cowboy hat is the same, but you need to know the difference

between the cutters, the reiners, and the ropers. You have to know that the Western business has become segmented and know how to appeal to your target segment. The important thing is to get feedback and then respond to it.

"My customers knew what they wanted. My job was to figure out how to make it," says Calvin. "The saddle business has been good to me. I still like to do leatherwork, and I like being in the shop. I consider myself lucky."

You can reach Calvin and Brenda Allen at 800-535-8225 or www.calvinallensaddlery.com.

