



Ask Post Falls saddle maker Bob Hickman about his family history and he'll tell you that he's got the "Western theme" in his blood. He grew up raising and herding cattle on horseback along the Snake River near Colfax, Wash., with his father. "We did things the old way," Hickman said. "We sure didn't go out there on motorcycles."

His grandfather helped breed Appaloosa horses back into popularity after the U.S. Army confiscated them from the Nez Perce Indians in 1877. As a child, Hickman's grandfather gave Bob some sound advice, which, to this day, he credits his professional success.

"I've been tooling leather since I was 12," Hickman said. "He told me to find something you like to do and figure out a way to make a living. That's why I started thinking about becoming a saddle maker and trying to make a career out of it. It's been a long trip, but it's been very fruitful."

Twenty-one years after founding Hickman Saddlery, which relocated to Post Falls from Colfax in 1999, Bob and his custom-made saddles have built a strong reputation in the cowboy and horse riding communities? Communities where a deep sense of tradition and nostalgia have left some reluctant to embrace change.

But change, it seems, is what's keeping Hickman ahead of his competitors and his products in high demand.

Lightweight carbon fiber trees (the foundation of a saddle) have brought a craft dating back more than 2,000 years into the space age, and Hickman is at the forefront of what he believes to be a revolution in the industry.

"They are incredibly strong," said Hickman, who began using the carbon fiber trees six years ago. "I think this is the way the saddle industry is going but our saddles will make your butt smile."

Hickman's saddles, which start at around \$2,500 average between 27 and 34 pounds? 25 percent lighter and 10 times stronger than traditional rawhide-covered wood saddles. Aside from a weight advantage,

Hickman said carbon fiber trees are more versatile, flexible and resistant to moisture? A feature that recently helped Bob sell a saddle to a customer in Hawaii.

Hickman sells saddles to customers nationwide, thanks in part to a rigorous travel schedule that takes him to more than 20 expositions across the Western United States each year, from which he estimates 70 percent of his business is derived. Half of the 40 saddles he makes each year are shipped to customers in other states.

Rising gas prices have begun to cut into Bob's business.

"Fewer people are coming out to the shows these days," he said. "It's really beginning to take its toll."

But a looming recession won't stop Hickman from making high-quality and sought-after products. He recently began work on his most expensive saddle to date? A \$17,000 parade saddle lined with custom-stamped silver. "Or heart and soul is the working cowboy," said Hickman, who makes several styles of saddles, including trail riders, reiners, cutters and specially designed saddles made to fit the flat backs of mules.

"With the way times are, being creative and working with your hands is really beneficial," he said. "Everything changes, you just have to be able to change with the times, adapt your abilities, strengths and weaknesses."

But saddle making isn't Bob's only skill. Give him a piece of leather and a sewing machine and he can just about make anything you can think of. The walls of his store are lined with leather photo albums, phone book covers, ropes, "cowboy" wine racks, chaps, fly-swatters, purses and gun holsters, to name a few.

Like most great craftsmen, Hickman feels the obligation to teach others his trade and opened the North Idaho Saddle Making School, which operates out of his shop, four years ago. Over the years, he's taught five students how to make chaps, saddles and other leather goods at the rate of \$400 a week, or \$1,200 a month.

"Everybody wants to learn how to do this, so I thought, 'Well, I've been helping people forever, so this would be a good opportunity to really teach others.'"

Learning how to make chaps takes about a week, Hickman said. Saddle making, however, takes a minimum of four months training, during which students must gain hand strength, learn about leather and learn how to put things together.

"My hands will probably fall off when I decide I'm not going to do this anymore," Hickman joked. "I'll probably do this for the rest of my life. I'm having fun with this."

Bob Hickman sews leather chaps Wednesday in his Post Falls saddle shop. Besides saddles, Hickman makes everything from fly swatters to wine racks for his business.

Bob Hickman mounts a rope strap to a custom-made saddle Wednesday in his Post Falls saddle shop. Hickman makes 30-40 custom saddles per year. This one will go to Hawaii.

Custom leather detail and styling on an item in Bob Hickman's saddle shop.

Info box

"Our saddles will make your butt smile." BOB HICKMAN, saddle maker

[www.Hickmansaddlery.net](http://www.Hickmansaddlery.net)