

Made In America

IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD, THE AMERICAN WEST CONTINUES TO BE A THRIVING PLACE FOR CRAFTSPEOPLE.

By William C. Reynolds

I RECENTLY READ A STORY ABOUT A LITTLE U.S. company that ships old wrappers from cookies and energy bars to Mexico, where they are stitched together into items such as umbrellas and messenger bags and then shipped back to the U.S. All this shipping done by a small company brought to mind a common question that looks us square in the face all the time but even more so now that the economy is faltering: How many things do we still manufacture completely in America? Is there still a sense of pride in making things here, things that are indigenous, that belong to America?

The answer, of course, is yes, but less—way less than there used to be. In the Western genre, the answer is a more definitive yes, and for that we should be pleased. There continues to be a booming entrepreneurial spirit in the West that encompasses a broad spectrum of crafts. Sure there are “Western” products made offshore—all sorts of boots and shoes and apparel and leather goods—but there are a growing number of customers who desire fine craftsmanship and a product that is taken from concept

to completion by a small group of makers or a single craftsperson here in the American West. From saddles, bits, and spurs to fine silver-mounted headstalls, there is a growing appreciation of things made in America that focus on the ways and the tools of the cowboy.

Longtime Western historian and writer Byron Price spoke of this “craftsman renaissance” in his tribute to all things Western, *Fine Art of the West*. He described the decline of the number of fine craftsmen who produced high-quality cowboy goods after World War II and the seeming disappearance of the atelier system of shop-employed craftsmen. However, he stated that the flame wasn’t completely extinguished—far from it.

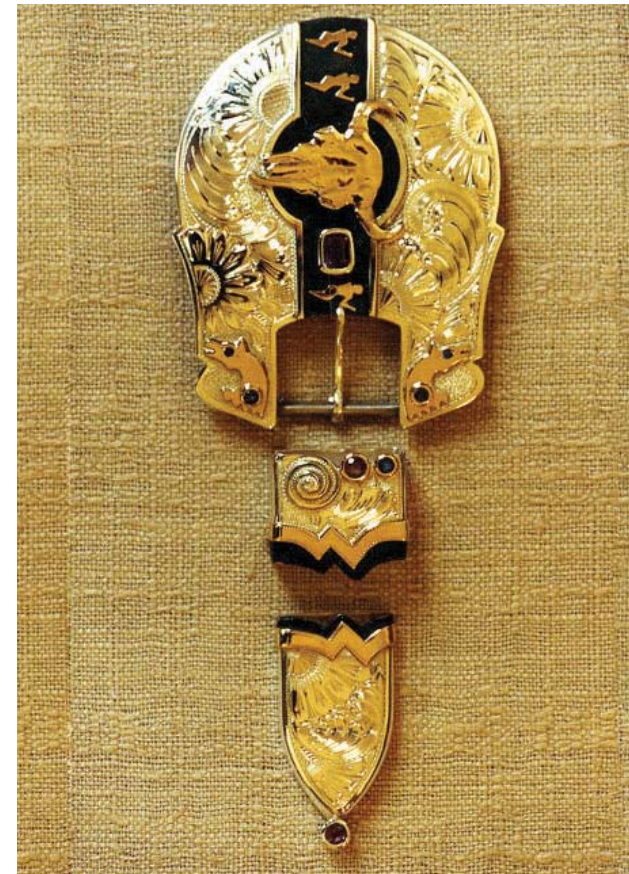
“A few precious artisans and apprentices kept the flame

of craftsmanship flickering, and on the eve of the twenty-first century, with the help of a growing cadre of collectors, dealers, scholars, and museums, precipitated a revival of interest in the fine arts of the West that continues today,” Price wrote.

In addition to the collectors and scholarly aficionados Price described, further proof of the continued growing



Snake cheek piece bit by Chuck Irwin.



LEFT: Belt buckle set by Victoria Adams. RIGHT: Detail showing San Juan hondo from a 72-foot rawhide riata by Mike Beaver.

appreciation of Western craft is the fact that most of the finer items being created today are being used for what they were intended, not just catalogued in a museum or hung on a wall. Saddle makers, bit and spur makers, silversmiths, rawhide braiders, boot makers, hat makers, and all kinds of kitchen-corner creators are crafting items to support the activities of the cattle and horse business in this country. And so long as cattle continue to be tended from horseback, this appreciation of finely crafted gear will continue.

There may be an even more basic reason why we are seeing an increase in appreciation of handcrafted items made in the American West. Our basic human nature leads us to believe that our personal work is important. Whatever our individual tasks are, we maintain our uniqueness through the craftsmanship we employ.

In his book *The Craftsman*, author Robert Sennett explains. “‘Craftsmanship’ may suggest a way of life that waned with the advent of the industrial society—but this is misleading,” Sennett writes. “Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake. Craftsmanship cuts a far wider swath than skilled manual labor; parenting improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does citizenship. It focuses on objective standards, on the thing itself.”

The qualities that define each person’s craft are unique to the individual. Equally important are the unique desires of each customer, the ends to which one plans to put the handmade item, making it a part of his or her life.

One such customer, who has always held a deep respect for indigenous craft, is former President Jimmy Carter, who described his particular passion in his prologue to the recent book and PBS television series *Craft in America*. “Craft, both historical and contemporary, is all around us, and it recognizes and communicates much about what we are as a country,” Carter says. “It is our identity and legacy. The things we hold most dear, often handmade, are a record of who we are as a nation. They stand for individualism and the satisfaction that comes from making something with one’s own two hands.”

America is a young nation by most standards. Yet as a country we still cherish the uniqueness of our regional cultures and celebrate their roots. The West, especially, holds a large part of our collective hearts. And as our national focus becomes more international, we can rest assured that somewhere—out there among the sage—someone is working with care and understanding on a fine silver bit or a pair of spurs that are destined for an appreciative customer. These Western craftsmen and –women are keeping the uniqueness that lives and breathes in the American West alive one piece at a time.