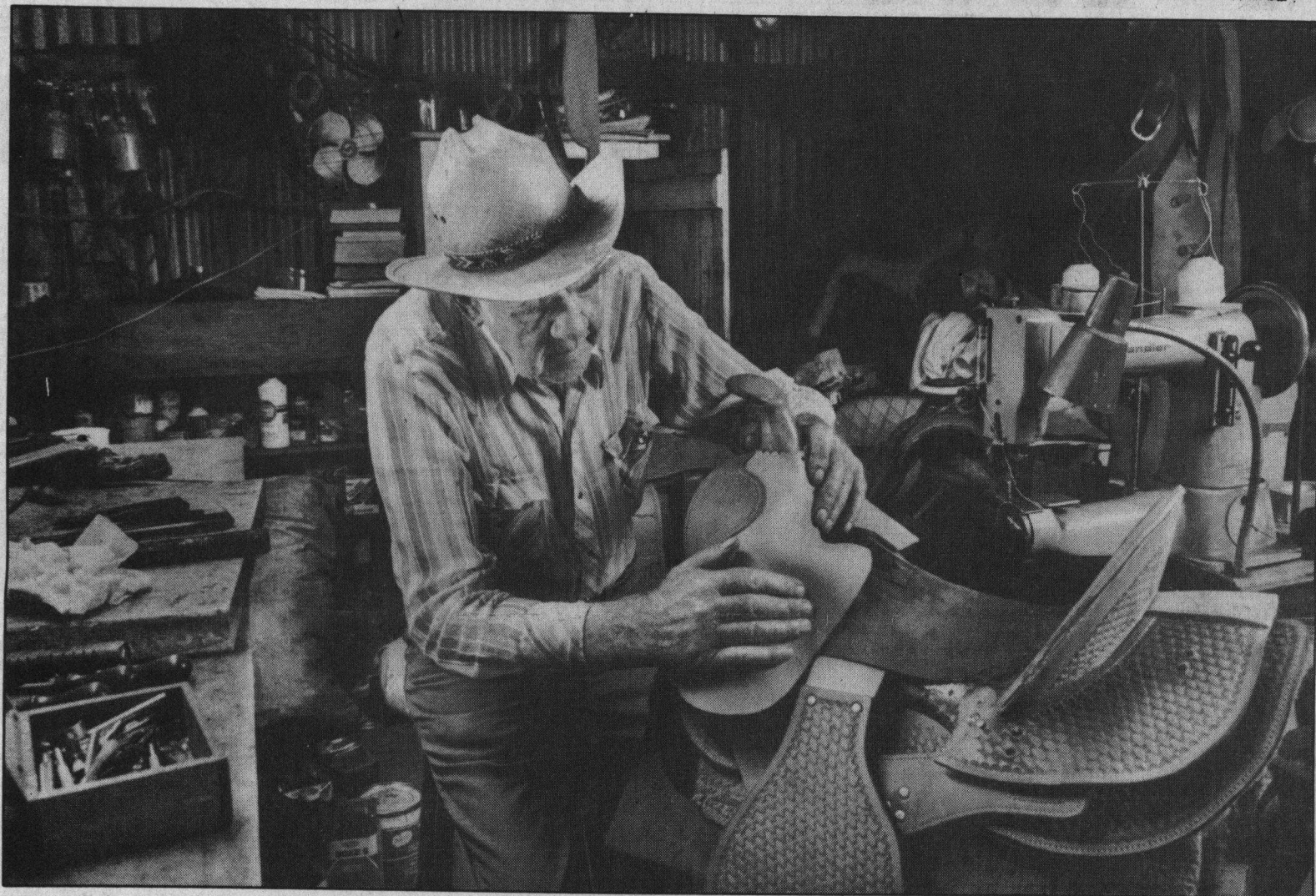


Keeping a craft alive

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Jack Smith shapes wet cowhide over a saddle form in his Aromas workshop.



Jack Smith shapes wet cowhide over a saddle form in his Aromas workshop.

Aromas saddle maker pursues lifelong interest

By LARAMIE TREVINO
STAFF WRITER

Jack Smith may not ride high in the saddle any more, but he can still make one.

The 78-year-old Aromas resident figures he's built 40 or 50 saddles since he first learned the art in a Utah saddle shop when he was in his 20s, working for \$2 a day.

World War II, earning a living, farming and other pursuits interrupted his pastime for about half a century. But a decade ago the Oklahoma native started making saddles in earnest again, working a few hours each day in his workshop on the edge of a canyon up Rea Road.

The dull pounding sound of a mallet on cowhide leads a visitor to Smith, huddled over his workstation, the brim of his cowboy hat nodding in time with the hammer.

Sitting on a high stool at a counter, Smith sets his own pace.

It takes about 40 hours to complete a saddle, he said. He's sold saddles for \$800, and on the high end, he once duplicated a saddle for \$3,500.

He's hard of hearing, and poor eyesight has slowed him down, but he keeps working away at his hobby.

"If I quit I wouldn't have anything to do," he said. "I've got to be doing something."

Much of his work is decorated

with figures from stamping tools, which he uses because it's faster than hand carving. Smith stamps or hand-cuts the designs into the cowhide while it's wet and redefines the images later.

Cutting, fitting, sewing and design work constitute the major stages of saddle making, Smith said. His box of stamps, engraved on the tip of metal stakes, include motifs of oak leaves, acorns, roses and other designs. A host of leather-working tools, three sewing machines and a form for shaping the wet leather crowd his workshop. Chaps, old cowboy boots, bits, spurs — trappings from his cowboy era — gather dust.

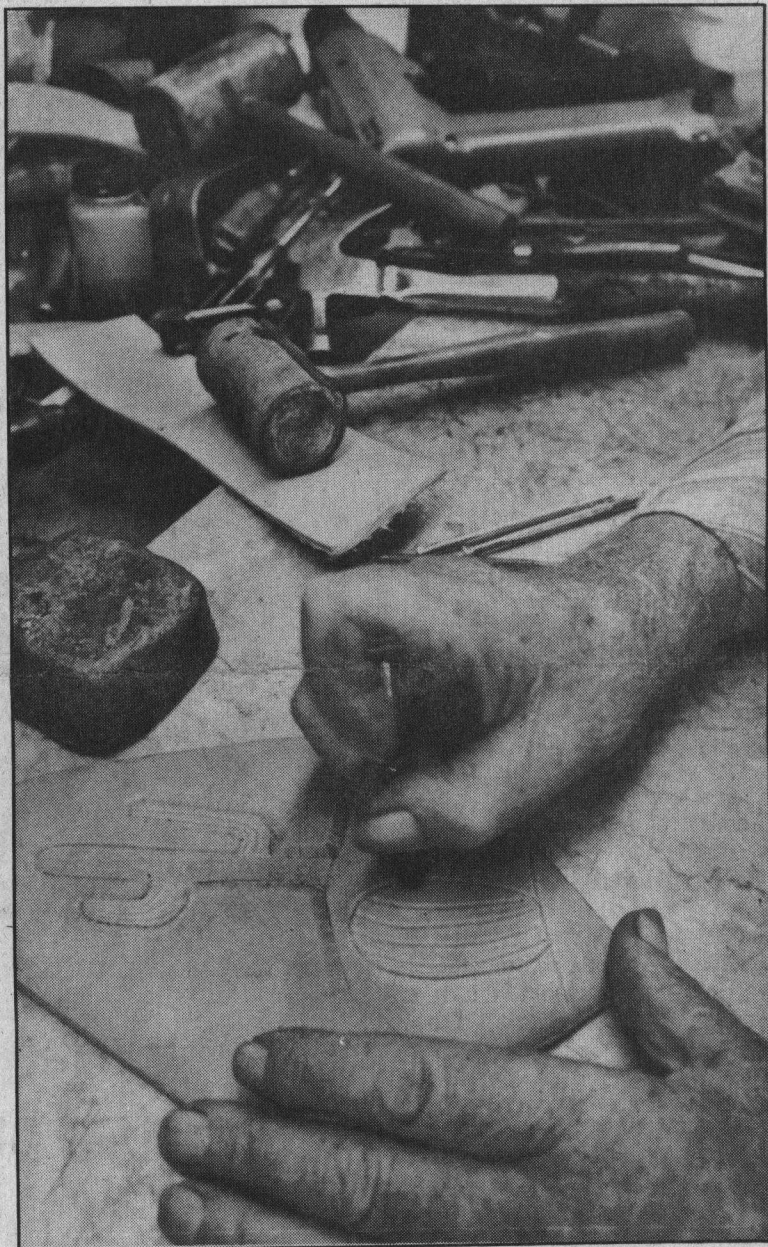
"I don't throw much away, I just bring it back here," he said.

One blond leather western saddle he keeps in his workshop is decorated with an elaborate desert scene including a Saguaro cactus and a steer's head.

Over the years, Smith has observed master saddle makers in Guadalajara, Mexico, and also spent time working with saddle makers who once operated in this area.

Even when he wasn't making saddles, Smith said he was constantly repairing equipment for cowboys and friends.

While serving with the U.S. Army in 1943, he got married in Austin, Texas. A couple of years later, he and his wife, Dorothy, moved to Desert Center, where



Smith uses hand tools to work on a design.

for "practice" he made a pair of open-toe shoes and matching clutch purse for his wife.

One creation, a sidesaddle, stained several shades of brown, rates a prominent spot in his shop and serves its role as a "conversation piece" well.

With the economy being tight, Smith said business is slow. Two work goals, to make a saddle for his son, Paul, and grandson Marcus, weigh on his mind.

The Smiths once owned the 79 acres fronting Carpenteria Road up to Rea Road. Only a couple of apricot trees are left on the five acres of property now constituting the Smith

spread. In Oklahoma, Smith's family farmed 2,000 acres of corn.

Before retiring in 1974, Smith worked for Granite Rock for 17 years after being employed by a cement company at Moss Landing.

When he was a working cowboy in Oregon, Idaho and Colorado among other stops, a bedroll and saddle were all it took for him to find work.

At one time, the Smiths always had a few horses on their land. But no longer.

"I've done my share of riding," Smith said.



A finished saddle shows a desert scene.

Photos by Kurt Ellison