



# The Ride Stuff

Saddle making is a family affair for Willi Baughman, her grandmother, Rosemary Wilkie, and her sons, Patton and Jefferson.

**A national arts program propels a Carlsbad woman into becoming a master saddle maker. The future of her craft? It's all in the family.**

BY *KATE NELSON* PHOTOS BY *KATE RUSSELL*

**IN THE BEGINNING**, there was a pony. Rosemary and James Wilkie got it for their five-year-old son. But the Carlsbad couple freely admits they had no business owning any property of the livestock variety. “We were so poor,” Rosemary remembers, “that we couldn’t even pay attention.”

How they would pay for oats, hay, horse-shoes, vet bills, and tack was a notion that galloped too far ahead of their love for the horse. So they nosed around. James asked his grandfather what he had left over from his cowboy days. The old man dug up some tattered bridles. “I got out my sewing machine,” Rosemary says, “and we bought a bundle of junk leather, and I started making headstalls so we could ride.”

That boy is grown now, with a grown-up younger brother, and both of the Wilkie sons have children, and some of those children have babies. In all those years, enough horses have come into the Wilkies’ life that Rosemary can only cheat a sideways glance about it before breaking into a guilty grin. Along the way, her maiden effort at reforming one worn-out bridle turned into a hobby, then a career, and now a nationally recognized legacy as a master saddle maker who helps preserve an endangered art, in large part by keeping it in the family.

“She’s so modest. She’ll say, ‘I’m not an artist. I’m not a master artist.’ But she is—and she’s an amazing teacher,” says Lilli Tichinin, folk art coordinator for New Mexico Arts, a part of the state’s Department of Cultural Affairs. “Her work itself is spectacular.”

She’s no show pony, and her saddles aren’t the gussied-up and glittering kinds you see in parades (although then-Governor Gary Johnson did once ride one of Wilkie’s in a parade). Rather, exacting precision puts her in high demand by those dwindling numbers of working cowboys who still ride the New Mexico range. For all the romance of purple sage, campfires, and yippee-ki-yay, those folks require a saddle that can’t be even an eighth of an inch off in any of its measurements.

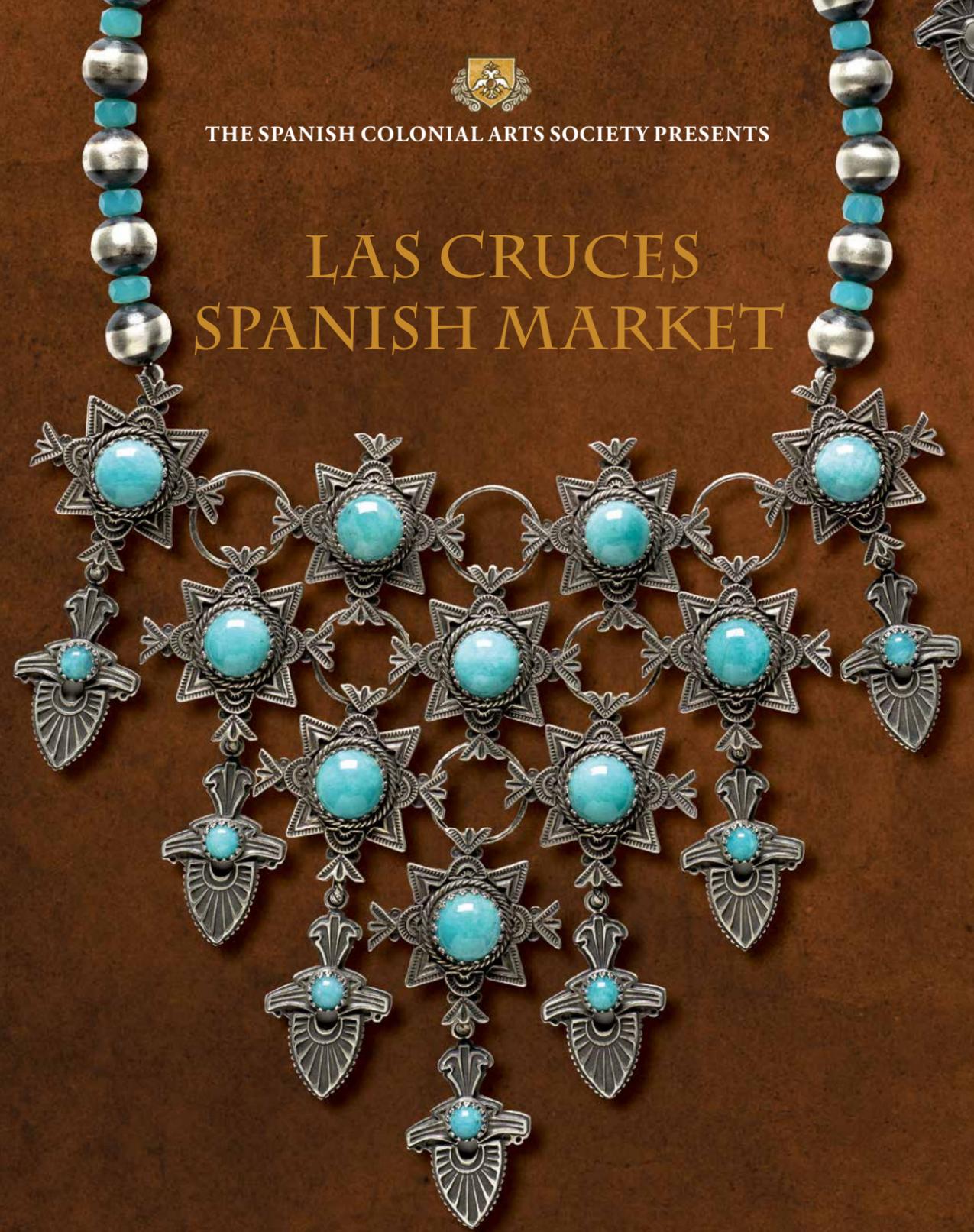
“That’s the difference between people making things by hand and people who have sort of assembly-lined it,” says Wilkie,

*Below: Master saddle maker Rosemary Wilkie in her Carlsbad shop. Bottom: Willi Baughman leans on a saddle she made for her husband.*



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Attaching the rigging works best with four hands—two to stretch and hold the leather in place, two to tack it down.



who also earns raves from local sheriff's deputies for her tooled-leather holsters.

She didn't achieve that renown on her own and is quick to lay praise where it's due: on her own master-artist teacher, Billy Cogsdil, on advice she gleaned from legendary saddler Slim Green, and on a few twists of fate that she prefers to call the hand of God. One of those twists involved a horse in her little-girl Texas days. A herd dog spooked the horse, the horse bucked wee Rosemary, badly, and instead of turning her into a horse-fearing woman, it nestled something mysteriously opposite of that deep inside her heart, something that would refuel her artistic passion whenever the leather fought back, whenever blades cut her flesh, whenever she despaired of learning the craft right.

"Always my whole life," she says, "all I wanted was another horse."

**WE'RE DRINKING** sweet tea at a dining table in the one-story rock-and-stucco house the Wilkies built on the western, wildland edge of Carlsbad in 1974, back when they couldn't even afford to pay

attention. Daughter-in-law Sandi, wife of youngest son Mark, and their daughter Willi Baughman have joined us to explain how all three women came to surround themselves with horses and the craft of horse stuff. A saddle stand separates us from the kitchen. Two saddles are on display in the living room. Around the corner, a utility area holds a makeshift work space for quick leather repairs. And next to a nearby comfy chair, a toy bouncy horse awaits one of Willi's young'uns.

The real horses are out back, beyond the Wagon Trail Riding Equipment commercial tack shop, home to Trinity Saddles, which long ago displaced James' once-dreamed-of home workshop. His space just wasn't meant to be. Not when you, your wife, and your kids choose to live less in the house and more in the barn, just to be closer to the horses.

In the early days, all of them thumbed through copies of *Western Horseman* magazine, admiring the animals and the saddles. Rosemary particularly liked the ads for the Ferdinand Big Bull sewing machine. Sure,

the thing cost \$7,000, but it could do everything she couldn't. Besides, she says, "I'd already tore up my sewing machine."

James was working in the potash mines, and every extra cent went into building the house. Rosemary got in touch with a tack wholesaler who said she could buy at cost and sell at retail, but only if she bought \$50 worth. "I didn't have \$50," she says. "But it was the sweetest thing ever: My boys cleaned out their piggy banks. I had some money and, with theirs, we came up with \$60. I bought some tack, and my friends came and bought it, just so we could get into business."

With that, she tripped along, selling and mending other people's work and dreaming about that Ferdinand Big Bull. One day in 1991, an ad in *The Thrifty Nickel* stopped her cold: "Saddle Shop for Sale."

"It had a Ferdinand sewing machine in it," Rosemary says. "I freaked out. I threw it down and walked off. About a week later, I looked at it again." The place was in Hobbs, an hour's drive away. She called the owners and asked if, maybe, they'd just sell her the

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Rosemary advises her friend Orlando Villegas on lacing a pair of suspenders. He hoped to become her apprentice, until his recent untimely death.

machine. Well, sure, they answered, “but we’re only asking \$5,000 for the whole shop, and \$3,500 of that is the machine.”

She and James went to look at it. It wasn’t a Big Bull, but a nice Ferdinand, for chaps work. There were also 100 well-made tools. Plus a stack of leather. Still, that price. The Wilkies stepped away to pray about it. When they came back, the owner offered to throw in an unmade saddle. That clinched it, and, in retrospect, Rosemary says, good thing. “I didn’t have a clue. That shop was worth way more than he was asking before the saddle came with it.”

Her grandpa had loaned them money, and Rosemary wanted to pay it back by assembling the saddle and selling it. She bought eight hours’ worth of saddle-making videos and began fumbling through the process. In the meantime, a fellow popped into her tack shop one evening, and only later did she learn he was Billy Cogsdil, an experienced leather man right there in town who could do everything from boot repair to saddlery. When she finished her saddle, Rosemary steeled her nerves and asked him to critique it.

“I sweated blood, I was about to panic and run away from him,” she says. “Billy had a way. He was really gruff and grouchy. But he began to tell me what a nice saddle I’d built—which it wasn’t—but, he says, ‘Next time, I want you to do this and do that.’ He was teaching me! I guarantee you, Billy Cogsdil taught me more in 20 minutes than any eight hours of videos ever did.”

Rosemary went on making a saddle here and a saddle there. In 1994, Cogsdil heard about the National Endowment for the Arts’ folk art apprenticeship program. New Mexico helps fund a branch and uses it to match master artists with people who show signs of excelling at the crafts. Masters can get up to \$2,000 in cash; apprentices up to \$2,000 for materials and travel. The program matches furniture makers, basket makers, colcha embroiderers, singers of Zuni lullabies, violinists for matachines dances, and other artists.

Cogsdil bit, and picked Rosemary for an apprentice. “I felt like a million bucks,” she says. “He helped me fill out the paperwork and everything.”



Under his tutelage, she built her eighth and ninth saddles and, most important, learned to look at her creations with no regrets. “At number 10, I was a saddle maker.”

**HERE’S THE THING** about saddles: They need to feel comfortable to both horse and rider, and what the horse and rider do together may vary from a gentle trail ride to barrel racing, reining, cutting, roping, and more. Maybe you need it only occasionally. Maybe you sit in it eight hours a day, seven days a week. For the best fit from a manufactured saddle, Rosemary advises forking over at least \$1,400. If you can go another \$1,000 (for starters), then a custom handmade saddle will buy you all the difference in the world.

And it will likely be a one-of-a-kind piece of art that lasts twice as long as the manufactured kind.

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Later they’ll figure out ways to wrench the leather up around the horn, hand-stitch



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An original Sandi Wilkie belt, one of the products at the Recycled Cow, a shop she owns with husband Mark Wilkie.

it, tool unique and lovely designs into it, dye it, decorate it with silver conchas, attach handmade stirrups—and, already, anyone with an ounce of horse sense has smacked their forehead at this gross simplification of the craft. Know this: It's complicated.

"There's a good part of saddle making that's actually sculpture," Sandi says. Besides a lot of parts, there are a lot tools. Crescent knives. Round knives. Swivel knives. Knife grinders. End punches. Strapping cutters. Stamps. Bevels. Mallets. Petal lifters. Jerk needles. And, you bet, sewing machines. Yes, plural.

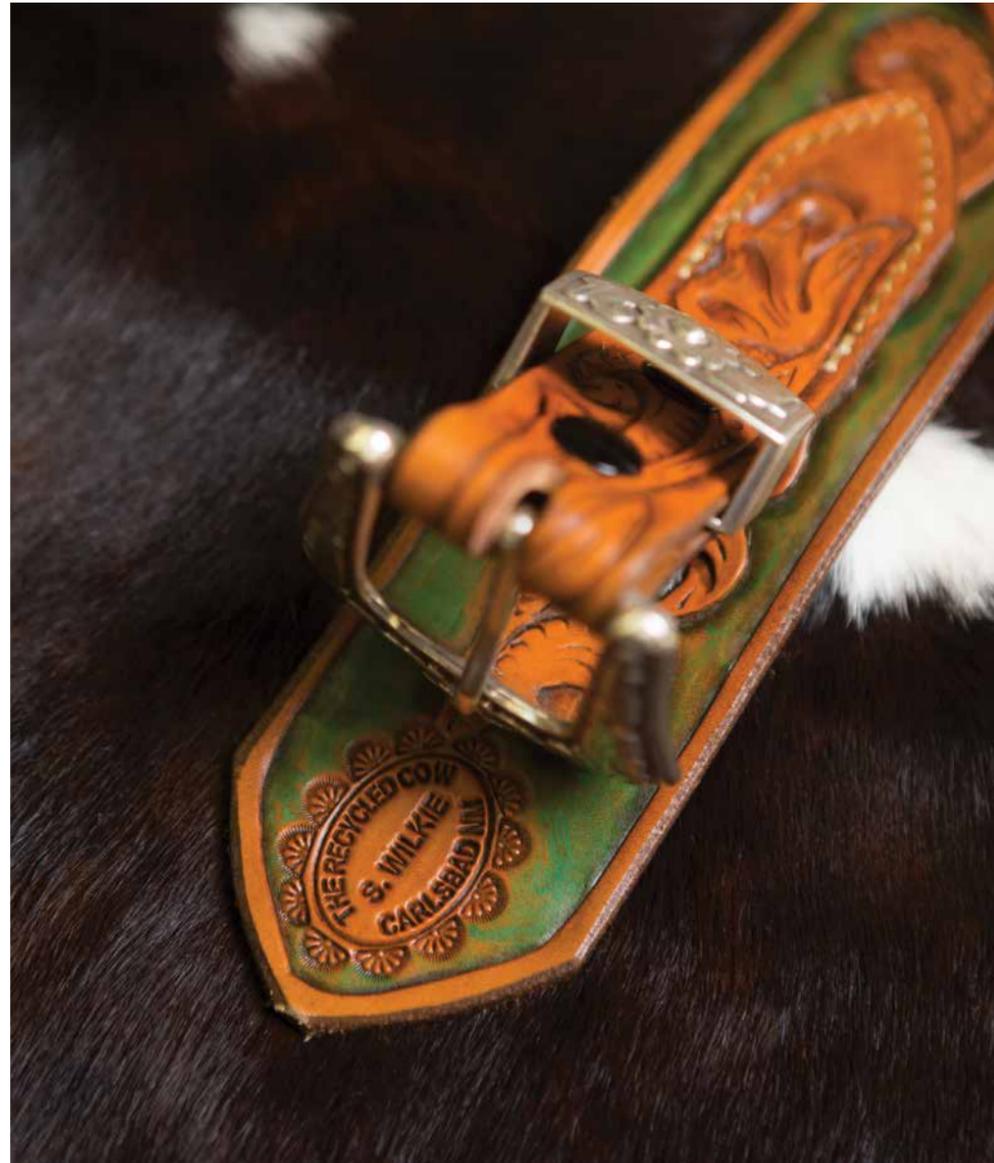
"I don't put dirty stuff"—i.e., repair work—"on my Dorkopp Adler," Rosemary says of her favorite machine. "When I finally decided I couldn't afford the Ferdinand Big Bull, I thought this was the next best. Turns out, it's a Cadillac."

We've moved from the dining table to the tack shop, its interior heady with the aroma of fresh leather—"the smell of money," according to one of my horse-nutty friends. The front half holds the bounty of what a well-equipped rider needs, including a few manufactured saddles. The back half is where the magic happens. There, on workbenches and at sewing machines, Rosemary has trained a small parade of apprentices, including Sandi and Willi, neither of whom thought they'd bother to make a second saddle after struggling through their first one.

These days, Sandi pores over research to revive the lost art of historical saddles, such as an 1880s half-seat that so confounded her she called Slim Green and asked for advice. By the time she got to his home in Las Cruces, "He had started one just to show me. Then he really fussed at me while I was making it."

Her saddles aren't for everyone, and she produces them bit by bit, preferring to whip out chaps, holsters, and leather hair accessories. "If you just want a good roping saddle," she says, "I'll probably pass you on. I'm more the prima donna *artiste*."

Willi grew into the family business while sitting on her grandma's lap and wondering why customers couldn't repair their own gear. While home from college one winter, she got it into her head to make a Christmas saddle for her sister, Timi, and pulled a few



sunset-to-sunrise sessions with Rosemary learning the ropes. It only made sense that when she got engaged to Tyler Baughman, she'd gift him a saddle, too. She's since carved an original design of prickly pear cactus into one saddle and left another nearly bare—a spare and rough look that her rootsy, millennial tastes prefer.

One year, the trio took four saddles to a horse show in Wichita Falls, Texas, including one by Timi, who mostly pursues other interests these days. Rosemary's sample was her 54th. Given the general

male domination of the craft, folks were plenty impressed.

"I think we're probably the only town that has four women saddle makers, three generations, all in one family," Sandi says.

**SANDI AND WILLI** both got NEA apprenticeships; Sandi twice. Five other wannabes won similar chances, but non-NEA apprentices have passed through Rosemary's hands as well. One who nearly made it was a close friend, Orlando Villegas, a lifetime resident of Loving, New Mexico, who endeared himself to

the family in part by helping around the tack shop. "He's the only person I ever trusted with my animals when I went away," Rosemary says, awarding him the highest compliment country people give. In September, a congenital illness took him at a far-too-young 44, and his death still puts a stopper in Rosemary's throat.

Losing someone who thirsts for the craft deepens the wound left by the fact that the craft itself is dying—even in a state with as rich a tradition of horses, *vaqueros*, ranchers, and rodeos as New Mexico. "Agricultural markets can affect our business," Sandi says. "The actual working cowboy is going by the wayside. The hobby people pick up some of it, but there's less people making their living in a saddle now."

The apprenticeship program bridges some of the gap, critically so for a trade that requires investments in expensive tools and leather.

"That stipend is a lot of money for somebody just trying to get materials to make things—especially young people," Willi says. "And it plants the seed. You can sell the saddle and get money for the next one."

Willi and her family live on the Wilkie compound, enabling her to blend saddle making with baby wrangling. Sandi and Mark took their skills and purchased the only shoe repair shop left in Carlsbad. The Recycled Cow sells and repairs boots, hats, saddles, tack, gun leather, chaps, and more—just one example of how the NEA program pivots from nurturing the arts to building an economy.

In the years since the Wilkie women took up the craft, both Slim Green and Billy Cogsdil have passed on. Lucky owners of their saddles still use them, and museums have acquired a few, too. Inside Rosemary's shop, their legacy joins with hers as she

happily bypasses retirement in favor of churning out work—most recently 1,000 tooled holsters that Cabela's liked so much, the company bought 650 of them off the top. We wander outside and slowly make our way to my car, then stop to watch the sun hang lower over a sweep of land that the town of Carlsbad never did catch up to. Nothing but a hill interrupts our view. Rosemary reminisces a bit about how her kids grew up out there, riding the scrubby acres and exploring their way through a childhood she now gives to Willi's boys, who soon enough will graduate from bouncy horses to the real thing.

"Land, horses, and sky," she says softly. "That's our culture." ■

Managing editor **Kate Nelson** occasionally sees horses of the wild variety wander near her Placitas home.

