



Billy Klapper with
first bit he made

BILLY KLAPPER

Legendary Bit and Spur Maker

By Carolina Walden

Born 83 years ago in Hardeman County, Billy Klapper has quite literally made his mark in the bit and spur trade. Today, his pieces go for thousands of dollars and are hard to come by. "I'm still working, but I've slowed down some," said Klapper with a sparkle in his eye, glancing around his workshop. "My wife, Roberta, kept wanting me to retire. I'd tell her no. As long as I can keep moving and am able, I'm going to keep making."

Billy met his wife in Amarillo. "Roberta and a friend of hers were in the riding club here in Pampa, and they were over there in Amarillo at a dance looking for a band to play for their Halloween party. Well, I had gone to the same dance. We met that night, and the rest is history."

While he has been building bits and spurs in Pampa for several decades, Klapper spent the first 22 years of his life in Cottle County, 12 miles west of Quanah in a place called Lazare. "It was a just a little ol' hole in the road, there where I was raised," he smiled.

Nestled in farming and ranching country, Lazare had a population of 26 from the mid-1930s through the early 1990s. The community was established in 1909 when the railroad was extended from Acme to Paducah. The railroad eventually went all the way from Quanah to Floydada. A school was built the following year, and by 1914, the reported population was 100. At one time, the town had a handful of businesses.

"I hadn't been back down there much since my dad died in 1974," Billy relayed. "Used to, when you came from Quanah, you'd pass by the general store and the railroad track. You made a turn, then you went about a quarter of a mile, made another turn. It sure was a crooked road, up there. There were more wrecks at that last turn than anywhere, coming from the west.

"One Sunday, I had been to a ranch rodeo in Archer City

– I had made the awards for it – and decided to come on back that way and go through Lazare. When I got up there, there wasn't a building standing," he explained. "No sign at all, and they had straightened the road out. I thought I was lost. Come to find out, the old buildings had been torn down, because everyone had died or moved away.

"My dad was a jack of all trades. There was a feller that lived about a mile and a half away from us named Roy Walkup who raised quarter horses. When I got big enough to work, I went to work for him. I stayed over there more than I stayed at home," Billy said with a smile. "You might say I've rode horses all my life. I been pretty lucky with them. None of the colts I started bucked me off."

As with everything, starting horses has changed a bit since the 1950s. "Back then, they would stake a horse with a big rock and a rope. The last ranch I worked on was the Open A Ranch. They didn't have a stake. I told Dud Ellis, owner of the ranch, that I needed a big rock and a foot rope. There was a holding pen there, where they would show the calves to the buyer. That's where I would put 'em when I was starting them," explained Klapper. "A buyer came, and I had just put one out there on that rock – was petting him, running him around. I heard that buyer say, 'That kid is gonna kill one of them horses on that stake block.' Well, you can if you get a big enough rock and a long enough rope. It never happened to any of the horses I started. There was a guy who did that at the Y Ranch where I worked. He tied one through a telephone pole and had a 30-foot rope. When that horse hit the end of that rope, he broke his neck. That's why get you a short rope and a block they can move."

Klapper spent his young adult years day working as a cowboy. "There was one guy from Jacksboro that I would help a lot. His mother-in-law had a place between

Childress and Paducah,” he recalled. “I would go down there and see after the place when he was gone.”

Klapper helped the historic Buckle L Ranch near Childress gather in 1959 and went to work for them from 1960-1962. “I moved down there, and that camp didn’t have running water or electricity,” Klapper explained. “There was a deep creek about a quarter of a mile from camp, and there wasn’t a bridge across it, neither. If that river came down running, that creek would fill up. No one was going anywhere at that point.”

As for making bits and spurs, it wasn’t until a little bit later. “I didn’t start until I went to the Y Ranch at Paducah. There was a little shop there, and Jim Roark, the foreman, had messed around with making some spurs,” Billy explained. “When I went to work there, he had cataracts and had quit messing with it. He told me I could make what I want.”

At the time, the only spur and bit maker in the region was the famous Adolph Bayers at Truscott/Gilliland, Knox County. “Mr. Bayers was four to five years behind back then,” said Klapper. “I was breaking colts there at the Y, and one day, there came a big snow. We couldn’t move. So, I went in there to the shop and made my first bit. That was 1963.”

Klapper made his first pair of spurs and started stamping in 1966. He transitioned to making full-time in March of 1968. “I told the foreman there at the Open A Ranch I was quitting and gave him two weeks notice. He said, ‘What, you want more money?’ I said, ‘No, I’m gone,’” Klapper laughed. “I got in with Ryon Saddle shop there in Fort Worth. He got to ordering spurs,” Klapper recalled. “I would cowboy all day and work on orders at night – had a pretty good backlog when I quit cowboying. That’s one reason I quit. Of course, there’s no money in cowboying. I got to studying about it and thought, ‘I can make more at this than I can punching cows. If it doesn’t work, why, I’ll do something else,’” he explained.

As we know, it worked. When he started making 52 years ago, Klapper spurs went for \$20 a pair. Today, the price point begins in the thousands, and the wait is long but well worth it. “I never thought it would turn into this. If I had, I would’ve done things different,” he

laughed. “I never have been caught up. Got within one day one time, but there when the economy was really strong, I was about four years behind.”

For comparison, an order placed today will take about three years to fulfill. “It may be more than that, the way I work now,” he smiled. “I used to make five pair a week, but I worked hard at it. I was making a lot of hardware for that saddle shop in Fort Worth in the late ’60s. It takes a lot of equipment to grind, and boy, it gets tiresome. My brother wasn’t doing anything at that time, and he came by there [to the shop]. I said, ‘Do you want a job?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘I’ll give you a job grinding that stainless steel hardware for saddles.’ He took me up on it and lasted a week,” grinned Klapper. “The shop was out there at the house. I’d work until 11 o’clock at night. He told Roberta one time, ‘I thought when you went to supper the work day was over, but I found out it wasn’t.’”



Beginning spur making process

When Klapper first started making spurs Bayers was using axle rods for the metal. "Bayers was making a one piece build from those axle rods. So that's what I did, too," he said. "They were the same size all the way through to the end in all the models from a T to a '48 Ford. Then, starting in 1949, they didn't have a nut at the end, were a little shorter, and were tapered. I made some out of those. The metal was still pretty good. Whenever I started going to those junkyards, you could find all the axle rods that you'd want for fifty cents apiece. Next thing I knew, weren't any left."

In time, doors opened for Klapper. "I got in with a guy in Fort Worth who owned a steel business and had some horses. He worked me up some steel," Billy recalled. "I took him one of those axles and found out later that he took it to Halliburton and had them analyze it. They told him it wasn't any good. People would bring me a shaft out of something, and I never would use it because I didn't know what it was made out of. You might spend half a day and then find out it wasn't any good. I can tell when I cut right down the middle of that axle by the sparks. If it's good, the sparks will be really fine. If it's not, they will be bigger."

Knowing his metal and being resourceful, it isn't a stretch to think Klapper would get some creative mileage out of his own vehicle. "I bought a 1948 Ford off my grandmother for \$300 in the 50s. It was my first pretty good car. I drove it and drove it, until it just about quit. Then, I saved my money and bought me a new car – a 1956 Chevy. Gave \$2100," Klapper said. "I parked that '48 Ford, took the axles out of the rear end and out of the driveline and made spurs out of them. I took the springs out and made oxbow stirrups. I got my money back out of that car."

Klapper still has the first pair of spurs he made, and with the help of divine providence, he also has his first bit. "The bit is unique, really kind of an odd bit. I don't know why I made that first bit like that, but I did. I really shouldn't have put that spoon in there. I should've put what they call a dog bone in there," he said, pointing to the piece in the middle. "I didn't know how to do



Billy Klapper and Johnny Trotter

the silver work at that time. There was a guy who lived nearby Mr. Bayers, and he always helped us work cattle. I asked him to take it down there and get Mr. Bayers to mount it, and he did."

"Then, in 1971, I had loaned the guy from Jacksboro that I had helped three or four of my bits, including that first one I had ever made. He had had them a good while, and I told him that I needed to get them back," Klapper recalled. "He was working cattle that weekend and said he needed to keep this one a little bit longer. Somebody stole it."

Getting that first bit back was important and not impossible as folks in the area did a lot of trading. "It wasn't marked, and I hoped it would turn up after it was stolen," said Klapper. "I was going to a lot of bit and spur shows back then. I would set my stuff up then go all over that building looking for that bit. I knew if it got stolen there in Childress, the people that helped him would know where it came from. It never showed up until two years ago."

In 2018, Billy was at Abilene, the biggest and best show,



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scouting the whole place. "I had just about given up on ever finding that first bit," Klapper sighed. "This guy walked up. He had these two sacks. He said, 'I got some bits I want you to look at. Got one, I want to see if you knew who made it. The other one, I want to know what it is worth.' When he pulled that first one out, I bet my eyes got this big around."

Having made trades his whole life, Klapper knew he showed his cards too soon. "I messed up right off the bat. He said, 'You know who made that?' I said, 'Yeah, I know who made that. I did.' It took me a week to make a trade with him and get it back, but I did."

Of course, the man with the bit in question wanted a bunch of money for it after he found out it was in fact a Klapper make. "I had a fancy

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AD DESIGN BY TRACK MAGAZINE



Klapper's exceptional craftsmanship gained international fame largely by word of mouth. Top competitors across equine industries starting placing orders. Ranch rodeos, cuttings, ropings across the country started seeking Klapper bits and spurs for their awards. "It really started in the mid 1990s when this guy Pat Earnheart from Hernando, Mississippi called me up out of the blue," Billy said. "He told me they were going to have this cutting in Memphis, TN and needed 4 pair of spurs for the awards. At that time, I was getting \$275 a pair. He said they would give me \$500 a pair. Then we wanted me to make one pair to auction off for the St. Jude Children's Hospital. I jumped on that."

Earnheart then told Klapper he needed to be there for the cutting. "I said that's a long way to go, but they flew me down there and paid for everything," said Billy. "That pair of spurs brought \$5,000. The next year they wanted a bit, and it brought \$7,500. The year after that, \$12,000. When they quit doing that auction,

pair of spurs that he wanted to trade even for. I told him that wasn't going to happen," he explained. "I had one pair that I didn't have much money in, and I told him they were the only thing he was going to get from me. We argued up and down for four hours. He left. I came home. He called me the next Friday said he was going to take me up on that spur set I offered."

It had been 47 years since Klapper had seen that bit. "Whoever stole it, used it quite a bit, but it was still in good shape. I don't know if I would ever get it back or not had my name been on it," he said.

Unfortunately, due to their high value Klapper pieces have increasingly become targets for theft. "A guy called me said he was at a cutting in Fort Worth. He asked me to make him a bit and that he would pay me quite a bit extra if I could make it in a hurry. He told me he tied his horse up to go pay his bill, and when he came back, his bridle was gone. Horse was loose."





they were bringing \$20,000. One guy from North Carolina was buying them all. One year, he spent \$60K on three pair. That is how mine got as high as they did. I got around the right people.”

Johnny Trotter of Bar-G Feedyard talked Klapper into making a pair of spurs for the 25th Anniversary of the Spicer Gripp Memorial Roping in 2019. The pair went for \$27,000 at the auction, providing scholarships for ag students at West Texas A&M University in Canyon.

“Tommy Blasingame ordered my first pair of Klapper spurs for me when I was in high school,” said Trotter. “Billy and his wife Roberta have been my good friends ever since then. He is the master of the trade.”

Klapper has made 898 different styles of bits and 786 different styles of spurs. He keeps record of the designs in spiral notebooks. “There are only about a dozen different patterns of bits and about a dozen different patterns of spurs,” Klapper explained. “But, people get to messing with the design. They’ll narrow the band, raise the shank, lengthen the shank. Do something to it. Used to the cutting horse folks all wanted 1 ¼” band and a six-point rowel. Now there’s no telling what they’ll want. They all want something different.

“At one time, I could get pretty close to telling you how many I had made, because all I did was work,” he said.

“But, then I started taking days off to go to trade shows. I used to go to Wichita Falls when they had the ranch rodeo and to Amarillo. I don’t go to any but Abilene anymore. I don’t really need to go, but I like to see my old friends. I got all the work I ever want to do.”

Perhaps the most famous of his designs is 27 bit. The Klapper 27 has been copied around the world but never with any success. “I made the first one for Matlock Rose in Gainesville in 1972. He was going around the world cutting – sold many a bit and spur for me. He designed a spur too, the 78,” Klapper recalled.

“Then some of those big traders and horsemen out in California took them bits and spurs, sent them across the water and had them copied, but they aren’t the same,” he smiled. “The first time that happened, a friend of mine in Oklahoma was showing some horses. He bought one of the copies and said, ‘They’ve got you down pat.’ I said, ‘Have they?’ He said, ‘Yeah, I’ll send it to you.’ I sent it back to him and told him he needed better glasses,” Billy laughed. “Of course, I know what to look for. The average person wouldn’t. You can take the bit and set it down on a piece of paper, chalk the outline, cut it out, make the bit, but when you make it, it won’t fit like the original. You’d think it would work, but it won’t.”

While imitators will always be around, there will only be one Billy Klapper. *AW*