

# BOB AND BETTY MARRS

## 62 YEARS OF SADDLE MAKING

By Carolina Walden

Legendary saddle maker Bob Marris and his wife Betty were born in northeastern Oklahoma just a year apart in the late 1920s. “Bob is from Delaware, and I am from Hominy,” smiles Betty Marris from a comfortable chair in their southwest Amarillo home. “Just two little bitty towns.”

When Betty was seven years old, her father died of spinal meningitis. “He was 29,” shared Bob. “Then, her mother died two months later of pneumonia.”

“She died three days before my eighth birthday and was buried on my birthday,” recalled Betty of that life changing January. Since then, she was raised by her uncle who was a cowboy. “Bob had come to see my uncle at Christmas one year. We’ve been lovers ever since.”

Truly, Bob and Betty Marris have a love that has endured the test of time. “We were just 15 and 16,” explained Betty. “We’ve been married 72 years now.”

“I was working for the Ewing Halsell ranches and was on the Mashed O Ranch, near Muleshoe in the summer of 1943,” recalled Bob who worked in the summers before quitting school and going to work for them full time when he was 16. “They’d take us down there to the wagon for two or three weeks at a time to do their branding. I liked it so well, I just stayed there. I got to be friends with one of the cowboys there who turned out to be Betty’s uncle. He showed me a picture of her, but I didn’t think much of it at first.”

That fall, Bob heard about the Waggoner Ranch from his boss at the Mashed O. “He told me so much about it, that I put my saddle on the bus – this was during the war – and went to Vernon. I called Tony Hazelwood, manager

of Waggoners and got a job there,” said Bob. “That was September of 1943.”

Bob remained friends with Betty’s uncle. That Christmas, when Bob went home to visit his family, he decided to go see Betty’s uncle. “He was running one of the Halsell ranches, pretty close to my parents’ homeplace. Well, when I got there, he was out working, and Betty came to the door. That was how we met.”

The two stayed in touch. At that time, the Waggoners had the north end of the Bell ranch in New Mexico. “We spent a couple weeks up there branding. I liked it so well – it was beautiful country – that I decided I would go up there and work, which I did.”



*Bob and Betty Marris*

In the fall of 1944, Bob went west. “I had heard about the big 3V ranch in Arizona. It was so big, it ran two wagons,” recalled Bob. “So, I got my bedroll and my saddle and got on a bus, and rode out to Seligman. There was another cowboy on the bus, an older man, looking for a job, too.”

At Seligman, Bob and the older cowboy found their way to the local watering hole. “They had an old bar, about like the Longhorn Bar you see

on TV. We went in there, and I asked them if the 3V was hiring. He said, ‘No, but they are shipping cattle. They are just coming in with a bunch. You could probably go out there and see the wagon boss.’ So this other guy and I went out and talked to the wagon boss.”

Both men were hired. That night they threw their bedrolls in an old hardware building. “We slept there that night,” said Bob. “He picked us up the next morning, and we went to work.”

That year, drought had spread across the Southwestern United States. "There was such a drought at that time, that every nearly ranch in the country had to sell out – just didn't have any feed left," explained Bob.

The 3Vs, now known as the Diamond A, is considered the largest ranch in Arizona at 770,000-acres. It ran about 60 miles from Seligman to the Grand Canyon. Because of its flat land, Seligman was an important stop for the railroad. It's large switching yard made it an ideal livestock shipping center for not only the 3Vs, but for other areas ranchers.

"It took us six days to drive all those cattle into town. We couldn't go but about 10 miles a day. The cattle were poor," recalled Bob. "By the last day, we had to bring them up in bunches. They were tired."

That was the last trip Bob made with the cattle on that ranch. "It was November, and we were staying out at the wagon. I remember throwing a few inches of snow off my bedroll that morning," said Bob, with a smile. "Since there were only a few stragglers left on the ranch, the wagon boss told us if we wanted to leave, we could. So, we did. We went to California and went to work for Rudnick Land and Cattle Company of Bakersfield."

The change of scenery was good for the 17-year-old cowboy, Bob Marrs. "They had two or three ranches scattered. It was quite a change to work in the mountains after working on the plains of Texas and New Mexico. We'd be driving cattle on the top of mountains and look down and see the clouds below," he recalled. "It felt like we were up in the sky."

The next year, in May of 1945, Bob went into the Army. "I was taking basic training with the infantry at Camp Roberts," he explained. "Before I finished basic, the war was over in Japan. So, they sent me and a few others over to Italy to send home the combat troops."

In the meantime, Betty and Bob had kept in touch. "Every time I went home, we would go out on a date," recalled Bob. "That last time before I went to Italy, I went to see her. We became engaged then I went overseas. That was in December of 1945."

Bob was discharged after about a year in Italy. In January of 1947, Bob married his sweetheart, Betty Lucas. The newlyweds went to work for Waggoners. Tony Hazelwood, manager of the ranch, set them up on a camp on the east side of the ranch. "After a few years, Tony sent us over to Whiteface near Electra to help take care of the mares and colts," explained Bob.

Then, a conversation sparked a slight shift in terms of occupation. "A good friend, one of the cowboys, was talking to me. He said, 'You know, Bob, you and Betty are going to have kids one of these days. Cowpunching

doesn't pay that much money. It would be good if you could learn a trade.' Of course, all cowboys work with leather, or fool with it, anyway, so it was natural to pursue saddle making."

At that time, Bill, Jack, and CW Oliver had started a saddle making school in Vernon for ex-GIs. "It was really more for leatherworking

in general. I talked to Tony Hazelwood, the boss at Waggoners about going there at night. He said it was alright as long as I didn't let it interfere with my work," said Bob, who went to the school for about a year. "We learned to tool and make notebooks, purses, spur leathers, belts. Things like that, but we didn't make saddles."

After that, Bob and Betty went to work for different saddle shops in the country while chasing the cowboy dream. "We went clear to Montana, looking for a good cowboying job, and ended up in Gunnison, Colorado. There they had an old western store that had a saddle making department with nobody there," explained Bob who was pretty skilled at getting hired. "So, I talked the boss into letting me work there. That's where I made my first saddle. That was in 1949. The government was supposedly going to send me money while I was still learning the trade. About three months into it, I got a letter from the government that told me they wouldn't finance me, because I didn't have anyone to teach me."

So, Bob and Betty started looking for a cowboy job again but again, were drawn to leatherwork. "We were looking at the *Colorado News* out of Denver, and I saw a saddle maker in Woodward, Oklahoma had a letter in there, saying that he needed a leather worker," recalled Bob. "So, I wrote him a letter, told him what experience I had. He wrote right back and said, 'Come on down. You're just the kind of man I'm looking for – somebody who doesn't think he knows it all.'"

Betty and Bob then loaded up everything they had in the car and went to Oklahoma. "We didn't have much – it all fit in the car," laughed Bob. "We went to work for Thad Leachman in Woodward. That's where I really got started



*Last saddle he made for the Texas Ranch Roundup at Wichita Falls in 2000*

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making good saddles. He was an excellent saddle maker.” Later on, the pair went to Lubbock and worked for Brown Saddle Shop. “Then, come spring, and the pretty weather, we went back to cowboying at the Waggoners,” said Bob. “When our oldest girl Kathy was two years old, we had another baby – Debby, our youngest daughter. I worked seven days at a week at Waggoners at that time,” recalled Bob. “Tony let us live there at headquarters. Every morning, the cowboys would catch a pickup there to the wagon, which could be 35 miles away from headquarters to work cattle. I would get up at 3:00 in the morning to milk the cow, so Betty and the girls would have milk. I didn’t hardly get to see Betty and the girls in the day time. After a few long months of living like that, we went back to saddle making.”

The Marrs family then moved Fort Worth. “We worked for Frank Leddy Saddle Shop,” said Bob. “That got us started.”

In 1951, the Marrs moved from Fort Worth to Amarillo. The drought that had started in the mid 1940s had yet to fully relent. It was a terrible time for the cattle industry. Bob went to work at Stockman’s Boot and Saddle Shop. “They had a saddle department, but there was only one old man in there. He just did repairs. Cowboys weren’t hardly buying saddles, and the shop didn’t have much for us to do in 1953-54,” recalled Bob.

So, back to cowboying the Marrs went. “We went to work for M.T. Johnson on a camp there at Clarendon. We had been there for about 8-10 months, when we found out the guy who had the saddle shop, Cotton Harvey, was going bankrupt,” said Bob. “We had done some trading and decided to take over the business in 1954.”

Bob and Betty Marrs changed the name to Bob Marrs – Stockman’s Saddle Shop – Amarillo, Texas. In early 1955, things started getting a little better. “We got a little rain. Things started picking up,” said Bob. “The Lord has been good to us. We’ve been really fortunate.”



Johnny and Jana Trotter with Betty and Bob Marrs



Saddle he made a few years ago with the brands from the ranches he worked on

Throughout the years, the working cowboy has been Bob Marrs main customer, along with those who show and rodeo. “People would call and ask if they could collect our bad debt. We hardly ever had any. We’ve been very blessed to trade with really good people,” said Bob.

In the 1960s, Bob Marrs worked with horse trainer Sonny Perry to develop a particular style of cutting saddle. Sonny rode Cutter Bill in 1962 and won the National Cutting Horse Association world title and the 1962 AQHA Honor Roll Cutting Horse title, making him the first horse to win both awards in one year.

“Between the two of us, we figured out a cutting horse saddle that was the most comfortable thing you ever sat in,” recalled Bob. “We sent those nearly everywhere until Buster Welch came out with a new design. The trend went from a high-rise front seat to a low-rise flat seat. Everybody went with Buster’s style. I made a few of those later on.”

Johnny Trotter, Bar-G Feedyard owner and AQHA Past President, calls Bob and Betty friends. “We have known each other a long time. They are great people,” says Trotter, “I got my first Bob Marrs saddle when I was 14. It was \$75 used. Back then, he was getting \$250 for the new. That was 54 years ago.”

Bob Marrs had the honor of making the Top Hand prize saddle at the Wichita Falls Texas Ranch Roundup for nearly two decades. The event was founded in 1981. “The second year, those guys got together and invited me to make the Top Hand saddle. I made those for many years, but I finally told them to let someone else have the privilege,” said Bob, who made his last prize saddle for the Roundup in 2000. Bubba Smith, who was working for Moorhouse Ranch Company at the time, became the proud owner of the saddle.

Bob has made saddles for nearly every ranch in this area

– Waggoners, Pitch Forks, 6666s, all the big outfits. “We used to send saddles to Australia, but it got so expensive. By the time they got them, they had to pay customs and import taxes, the cost of sending it over there by air. It doubled the cost of the saddle, and it took a long time to ship,” explained Bob.

The Marrs owned and operated the business from August 2, 1954 until selling it decades later. “The people who bought it turned it back to us, shortly after buying it,” explained Bob. “But, we didn’t want to go back to the building. We made saddles at home and had all the work we could do. Later on, there was a girl from a ranch up at Perryton that bought the shop, but that didn’t work either. She soon turned the business back.”

The Marrs sold the building that housed the saddle shop for years to a western artist. “It was a metal building, but he fixed up a place to live there and paid it off about two years early,” recalled Bob. “He dropped the insurance at that point. A few years later, the building burned down. If it had been possible to sell all the art he had in there, he’d have been a millionaire. He died from complications with diabetes about three months after the building burned down.”

All their years in the saddle business, Betty worked alongside her husband. “She stayed home until the girls got out of high school, but then the last 20 years we had the shop, she worked right with me all the time,” explained Bob with pride. “She’s done all the bookkeeping and waited on customers at the front, so I could work on saddles.”

“When the girls went off to college, I didn’t like being home by myself,” added Betty. “And, he needed the help.”

“A lot of people can’t work together, a man and wife, but Betty and I have done it for many, many years,” smiled Bob.

Three and a half years ago, when he was in his late 80s, Bob made his last saddle. Although, he has not given up leatherwork entirely. “I make mostly spur leathers now,” said Bob, standing in his garage shop. “Just the other day, a guy out of Colorado called. He wants 10 pairs. That will take a while.”



*Bob as cowboy, 1948 Waggoner Ranch*

The Marrs artistry isn’t limited to leather, though. A fact demonstrated by the numerous completed canvases on their walls. “In 1970, Betty and I started taking lessons. We have painted off and on for years,” Bob explained. “When we first started, we just couldn’t get enough of it.”

When Bob and Betty finally moved into town, they found the perfect place. “It was just right for what we wanted. The guy that used to own it was a watercolor artist,” said Bob.

“He had a studio built in it.”

Just off the den, Bob stepped into their studio, a peaceful place filled with light and memories. “This is the last one I finished. It’s a branding scene,” he explained. “The picture was taken in 1948 down at Waggoners. This was the only paint horse they had on the whole ranch, but he was a good one. He was a South American paint. You can see that white there on his hip.”

Turning toward the window, Bob pointed to a vibrant reproduction. “A rancher at Tucumcari bought the original. That’s part of the Palo Duro Canyon and that’s Jesus up there in the clouds. I call it ‘The Promised Land,’” smiled the artist.

Bob flipped through photo albums, telling of good times throughout the years. “You’ll have to come back,” he encouraged, as the ticking clock snapped me back to the reality of fast-paced life. Assuring him I would, I rushed to pick up my kids, all the while feeling inspired to slow down in light of their example.

Betty is turning 91 this year. Bob is turning 92. The two are longtime members of Comanche Trail Church of Christ. Bob has been awarded numerous honors, including the 2000 Western Heritage Award from the Big Bend Museum in Alpine; the Chester A. Reynolds Award from Oklahoma City’s National Cowboy Museum and Heritage Center in 2001; and a Western Heritage Award from Amarillo Range Riders in 1999.

“Bob told me one time that if he couldn’t make a living cowboying, he wanted to make saddles and work with leather,” said Betty. “So, it turned out that way.”

May we all be blessed with such satisfaction through the work of our hands and a life well lived. *AM*