

# Portrait of an Artist

A victim of “bench fatigue,” saddle maker Al Gould once quit his leatherworking business to pursue a corporate career. But after years of big city life, he returned to his hometown, picked up a swivel knife, and never looked back.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DARRELL DODDS**

**JANET NORRIS**, a full-time accountant and part-time saddle maker, remembers the first time she met Al Gould at a saddle making class he was teaching in Wickenburg, Arizona.

“I thought he looked more like a guy who’d be pouring concrete than building pieces of art,” she says, “but the first time I saw him pick up a swivel knife, I forgot about how imposing he was and paid attention to the delicate work he was creating with those big hands of his. He really is an artist and a skilled teacher. I’m glad he’s finally getting the recognition he deserves.”

That recognition will come on May 7, when Gould, along with 32 other artists, will be featured in Art of the Horse, an invitational Western gear makers show to be held at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. Supported in part by the American Masterpieces initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Wyoming Arts Council, the show will feature 33 pieces by some of the most accomplished saddle makers, bit and spur makers, and rawhide braiders in the country.

The show is a spin-off of an oral history project, Gear Makers of the West, conducted by saddle maker Gordon Rees Andrus and videographer Jim Garry, both from Cody, Wyoming. The purpose of that project was to capture how “artists of significance” came to their work, and to discover the artisans’ perspectives on taking traditional crafts and transforming them through contemporary design for modern-day use.





In his element: Al Gould is happiest when a novice saddle maker stops by with a problem. "What good is a skill," asks Al, "if you can't share it."



**Inspired Work:** A newly completed fender shows the “ribbon and bouquet” theme Gould chose for his Art of the Horse submission.

“When the Wyoming Art Council became aware of the oral history project, they became very excited about the possibility of showcasing some of the work produced by the artists interviewed,” says Maryanne Andrus, Gordon’s wife and the historical center’s director of education. Consequently, the BBHC got a grant from the Wyoming Arts Council to put this showcase together.

“In choosing participants for this show, we weren’t necessarily looking for the most famous gear makers. Rather, we were looking for artists who are recognized by their peers for being important contributors to their craft—artists who have taken their work in a new direction or created a new standard of excellence.”

For a guy who once walked away from a promising merchandising career with Byer-Rolnick, then the parent company of Resistol Hats, Al Gould’s recent accolades have been a vindication of sorts. In addition to his invitation to the upcoming show, Gould received the 2009 Al Stohlman Award for Outstanding Achievement in Leathercraft. The Stohlman award honors the accomplishments of individual leatherworkers and is given only to people who have demonstrated dedication to the craft by following the example set by Al Stohlman, one of the world’s most talented and best known and respected leatherworkers.

“Al Stohlman single-handedly raised the bar for leatherworkers everywhere,” says Gould. “I was a youngster working in a Clovis, California, saddle shop in the late 1950s, when a tall, attractive lady came in on a Saturday and asked if I could open up on Sunday for a few hours. It was an unusual request, but I had lots of work to do, so I agreed. The next day, she walked in with a gentleman and introduced me to Al Stohlman, who was in town for a few days visiting local leatherworkers.

“Well, I was stamping a barrel racer on a piece of leather and was having trouble making the horse look realistic. Stohlman picked up a piece of leather and a few tools and showed me how to create the illusion of a three-dimensional character on a flat plane. Within a few minutes, he’d created a design that was accurate in every detail.

“I never forgot his kindness or his interest in helping me. That left a lasting impression on me, and I’ve tried to keep his patience in mind when I’m teaching.”

## Center Stage

It was Gould's desire to help others that caught the attention of William "Bill" Reis, publisher of *The Leather Crafters and Saddlers Journal*. Dorothy Reis, who took over management of the publication when her husband became disabled, remembers how Gould first reacted when asked to teach a saddle making class in Sheridan, Wyoming.

"My husband met Al sometime in the mid-1990s at a Colorado Saddle Makers Association event where Al was a judge," says Dorothy. "Bill has been around some of the greatest leatherworkers in the world and was very impressed by Al's prowess with a swivel knife and his ability to teach others how to use it.

"Some time later, Bill met Al at a show we sponsored in Ventura, California, and asked him to be a part of Saddle Week, an intensive workshop for up-and-coming saddle makers that we were planning as part of the Rocky Mountain Leather Show in Sheridan, Wyoming."

Gould recalls being apprehensive when Bill asked him if he were interested in teaching at the workshop.

"As everyone knows, Sheridan is the home of great leather artists, so the thought of me teaching there was more than a little intimidating," he says. "But I did go, and that allowed me to get acquainted with guys like Don Butler, Chan Gear, Barry Keen, Jim Jackson, Ralph Baird and others who are truly leather artisans. When I had a chance to see their work first hand and visit with them, it elevated my work.

"That exposure, plus the responsibility of getting up in front of a class in that environment, taught me that you can't just show people how to lay out a pattern or create an efficient workflow, you also have to explain the 'why' as much as the 'how'.

"Teaching has made me a better saddle maker and leatherworker. This will be my 11th year teaching, not only at the big show in Sheridan, but also in Wickenburg and Elko, Nevada."

Like other custom saddle makers, Gould has a loyal regional customer base—mostly Central California ranchers, outfitters, horse trainers, and the occasional recreational rider who doesn't mind paying a premium for a one-of-a-kind, fully stamped saddle. And although he made his first saddle more than 50 years ago, Gould rarely seems completely satisfied with his most recent project.

"I think that goes back to my very first job," he says.

**Working Gear:** A typical Al Gould working saddle, his saddle portfolio (bottom left) "view book," and even his tool cases (bottom right) are embellished with his delicate swivel knife designs.



## Training Ground

“When I was a junior in high school,” Gould recalls, “Slim Beaver, a local saddle maker in town, heard that I could stamp a little and offered me a job.”

Beaver Saddle Shop, located on the main street of Clovis, California, sat adjacent to the town’s rodeo grounds and was a popular gathering place for local cowboys, especially during rodeo week. For a horse-crazy kid with aspirations to rodeo, it was an opportunity of a lifetime.

“There was an older fellow named C.H. Mavis in the shop, who built saddles for Slim,” Gould recalls, “but he had bad arthritis in both hands and reeked of Absorbine Jr. When he discovered that I could stamp, he began cutting out the leather, dampening the pieces, then putting them in plastic bags for me to stamp after school. Both men were well up in years, but they were sticklers for doing a job right.

“By the time I enrolled at Fresno State College, Mavis had left the shop and Slim Beaver put me to work building saddles. Well, I’d made a saddle for my brother under tight supervision, but I certainly wasn’t a saddle maker,” says Gould. “But with Mavis gone, Slim had about a dozen saddles back-ordered and some of his best customers were getting a little testy. I learned how to build saddles like you teach a kid to swim—by throwing them into the deep end of the pool.”

Fortunately, most of the backlog were roping-type saddles built on a Chuck Shepard tree and with geometric stamping. Once Gould established a production sequence, he was able to knock them out pretty quick.

“Within a few months,” he remembers, “every saddle had been delivered.

“That experience of having to produce under pressure was a great confidence booster. At the time, I was taking a full schedule of classes, competing in steer wrestling, team roping and calf roping at college rodeos, and building some pretty decent saddles.”

After college, Gould set up shop on his own, got married and began establishing a reputation as one of the up-and-coming saddle makers in the San Joaquin Valley.

“At the time I was getting started, Art Vancore, who had a shop in Merced, was the saddle maker of choice,” says Gould. “If you



**Attention Getters:** Many of Gould’s customers now order a wide variety of work, from belts to chap tops, with swivel knife work.

were trying to make a name for yourself at the big shows like the Cow Palace or Salinas, you didn’t bother showing up if you weren’t riding a Vancore saddle.

“Most of Art’s saddles were equitation saddles. They were heavy in front, with large square skirts and a deep seat pocket next to the cantle. Fortunately for me, Art heard that I was building a seat pretty much like his and began sending some of his more impatient clients my way. In the 1960s, Art’s waiting list was legendary, and unless you were a big name, you couldn’t even get on it.”

## Bench Fatigue

Al says he can’t remember the day when he realized that going to his shop felt more like a day job than a career. The joy he once felt when bringing razor-sharp steel in contact with honey-colored hide and seeing beauty emerge from his fingertips was gone.

“I was going through a divorce at the time,” Gould recalls, “when Johnny Motta, the top salesman for McPherson Leather Company came in my shop complaining about problems he was having with saddles being made in their Los Angeles shop. Today, McPherson

is still one of the country's major suppliers of leather and other materials for saddle makers, but at that time they also employed quite a few saddle makers. Although they were trying to copy what I and other custom saddle makers were doing, they were having a lot of trouble building a seat that customers were wanting at that time.

At that time, cutting and working cow horse events were becoming popular on the West Coast, thanks in part to trainers like Bobby Ingersoll and Don Dodge. The Doc Bar horses were coming on in this part of the country, too, and people were looking for a different type of saddle to compete in. Rather than the equitation seats that locked you in place, they wanted a seat that allowed for more movement for the rider.

"I'd seen some of the cutting saddles that were being made in Texas, that had a slab seat with virtually no pocket for the rider to sit in," says Gould, "and to me, that seemed extreme. I happened to be at a hunter/jumper show in Fresno and glanced over at a saddle on this Thoroughbred and noticed the pocket was in the middle of the saddle, yet the riders appeared very balanced.

"I began experimenting with my ground seats, moving the pocket about an inch or two forward and opening up the front a bit. I loaned a couple out to local trainers, including my brother Carl, who later won the Snaffle Bit Futurity, and got good feedback. It is a slight modification but has become standard on the California-style stock saddles I build."

"Several of the saddles Johnny had sold had been returned, so he asked if I'd go to Los Angeles and show them how I was building the seat.

"Even though I was pretty green, I was smart enough to know that you can't teach old saddle makers much, but I needed a change so I shut down my shop and moved to Los Angeles. While I was there, I built a saddle for Monty Roberts that he'd ordered while I was still in Clovis, but it didn't impress those old saddle makers. After a couple of months, I went on the road for McPherson, selling saddles and tack until I met Harold Porter, who had a saddle shop in Tucson."

Porter and Gould became good friends. One day, he told Al about a job with Resistol

Hat Company, and Gould interviewed, got the job, and moved to Albuquerque for a few years before eventually relocating to Dallas.

"In the early '70s, Resistol was getting into other merchandise—shirts, sweaters and outerwear—but they were having some turmoil inside and the president of the company asked if I would come inside and work in the merchandising department," says Gould. "I wasn't there 30 days when the people who ran the merchandising department for Resistol (Byer-Rolnick) quit and left me with the whole merchandising department. Although I always carried my tools



**Cowboy Mandala:** "I show samples like this to my swivel knife technique students," says Gould, "not to intimidate them, but to show them what is possible with practice."

and enough leather to build a saddle now and then, I was immersed in the Western apparel business and didn't have time for much else."

### Back in the Saddle

After nearly a decade and multiple changes in management, Gould had enough of corporate life and moved back home to Clovis.

"While I was unloading what little furniture I had at a house I was renting," Gould recalls, "a lady pulled up and asked if I was Al Gould. I told her I was and she said, 'Great. I need a new saddle. How fast can you build it?'"

"I didn't have two nickels to rub together, but I did have a tree that would work and enough leather to get the job done. I started working on Friday night and delivered the saddle on Sunday night. You might say I was highly motivated."

Today, Gould has the luxury of choosing his clients and his projects more carefully. The saddle he is building for the Art of the Horse showcase is unique in that the carving is a multi-flower collection with a minimum amount of stem work.

"I call it a bouquet pattern," says Gould. "There are roses and poppies, but there are also original floral designs. Believe it or not, the inspiration for this saddle came from a bronze grave marker I saw when I was visiting a cemetery. Usually with flower stamping, there are leaves, vines and buds. With this design, I chose to combine floral and geometric stamping.

"The folded ribbon border is an adaptation of a ribbon I saw on the side of a delivery truck going down the highway. As soon as I saw it, I pulled over and made a sketch. It has become one of my favorite border treatments because it does more than just hold a design together; it creates a sense of movement."

Gould says that in part he owes his skill with a swivel knife to an old Indian leatherworker who he never met.

"Over the years, I've developed a reputation for my swivel knife work," he says. "When I was working with C.H. Mavis, he was going through an old suitcase one day and pulled out a belt that had been made for him by an old Indian stamper at Porter's Saddle Shop in Phoenix. That was the most magnificent piece of swivel knife artwork I had ever seen.

If you looked carefully, you could see birds were integrated in the design, yet it just flowed all together.

"I had never seen anything like that in leather, and that made me realize that you could use the swivel knife to cut in a pattern, or you could use it to make a stand-alone piece of art.

"A few years ago, I came across an old notebook from college where the notes from the class were in the middle of the page, but in the margins were pages of swivel knife patterns. I didn't realize it at the time but I was preoccupied with these intricate patterns. That is when it started and it has developed from there." 🐾

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