

A man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a light blue long-sleeved button-down shirt is riding a brown horse. He is wearing a western saddle with a large coil of rope on the back. The horse has a decorative halter with a large silver and pearl ornament. The background is a blurred, natural outdoor setting.

Michel came from France to the United States more than 30 years ago to experience the authentic cowboy way of life. Today, he is considered one of the premier makers of working ranch saddles.



● CRAFTSMEN

## George Michel

Having drawn wages as a cowboy for 17 years, this California saddle maker now stays connected to the lifestyle by customizing his saddles to the needs of working ranch cowboys.

Story by GUY DE GALARD

IN 1973, 17-YEAR-OLD FRENCHMAN George Michel was flipping through the pages of *Western Horseman* and made a life-changing discovery: He realized that the ranches and cowboys he'd read about still existed. Bank Langmore's book *Cowboy* confirmed what he had learned, and he lived vicariously through the pictures of cowboys seen on its pages.

"People were telling me that the West was gone," he says. "I wanted to see it for myself."

So, in 1980, at age 24, Michel left his native France, bound for Tucson, Arizona, to experience for himself the real cowboy way of life. Equipped with a bedroll, a used roping saddle and driving a 1971 GMC pickup, he traveled to remote ranches looking for work, even offering to work for free. Joe Goff, from the 6 Bar Ranch in Oracle Junction, Arizona, gave him his first chance.

While learning the ropes at the 6 Bar, Michel heard about the big northern Arizona outfits, such as the Diamond A,

the ORO and the Babbitt ranches, and eventually landed a job at the X Bar 1, near Seligman. A year later, he wound up on Nevada's TS and Spanish ranches.

At the Spanish Ranch, he worked on the wagon when Bill Kane was the cow boss, and says that Bill "had a PhD in cattle, horses and men handling." Eventually, Michel made his way to California and hired on at the Tejon Ranch, where he met his future wife, Michelle.

ON THE RANCHES he worked, Michel noticed that most of the cowboys had a craft or hobby related to their trade.

### MAKER'S MARKS

**Craftsman:** George Michel  
**Shop:** CX Ranch Saddle Shop, Fort Bidwell, California.  
**Specialty:** Ranch saddles and replicas of the G5 Garcia card-suit headstall.  
**Fact:** The 2007 winners of the Jordan Valley Big Loop chose Michel to build their trophy saddles.  
**Contact:** 530-279-2780; cxranch.net.

Some braided rawhide, others twisted horsehair or worked with silver.

"I didn't have the patience for braiding, and like most of the buckaroos around me I wanted to dress up my gear with silver," Michel says. "Terry Riggs and George El-sner helped me get started back in 1984."

Michel also had the chance to meet talented saddle makers such as Scott Brown and Eddie Brooks, who both worked for J.M. Capriola Co. in Elko, Nevada, and freely shared their knowledge with him. He also cowboied with Brown on the Spanish, Gamble and Rafter Diamond ranches in Nevada, and the Quien Sabe Ranch in California. However, it was Bruce Grant's book *How to Make Cowboy Horse Gear*, which he read in 1976 before coming to the United States, that sparked Michel's interest in saddle making. He also credits Dale Harwood and Jer-



Before he became a saddle maker, George Michel worked with silver. Today, he doesn't do much silversmithing anymore, but he offers his customers a variety of silver-mounted headstalls.



Form, fit and function are qualities found in Michel's saddles, such as this roughout Wade. "At the end of the day, my lower back and pin bone don't feel tired," says California horseman Destry Campbell. "I feel I sit in my saddle instead of on top of it."



The 2007 winners of the Jordan Valley Big Loop, Will DeLong and George Barton, selected Michel to make their trophy saddles. Bob Wage of Anaheim, California, created the silver cantle plate with the ropers' 25.8-second time engraved on it.





Michel worked horseback on ranches in Arizona, Nevada and California. That experience gives him an edge when building saddles.

emiah Watt for helping him refine his craft.

Michel drew his last cowboy wages in 1997 and decided to become a full-time saddle maker.

"I saw saddle making as a way to work for myself while staying connected to the lifestyle," he explains.

Michel has had a rich relationship with saddle making, but it was an excerpt from Will James's book *Big Enough* that made him realize how he felt about working with leather and the special connection between a cowboy and his saddle. "... he stood back and looked at it and then finally reached and touched it, rubbed his hands over the new leather and felt the flower stamping, the cantle, the horn and all that was part of it.... That saddle meant a heap more to Billy than any shiny automobile or airplane could mean to any kid. It was bred in him to love saddle leather."

According to Michel, a cowboy's saddle sometimes determines how he is evaluated at first glance by the cow boss and the rest of the crew when applying for a job.

"It tells where he's from, what he's

done and for how long," he says. "But mostly, it reflects the pride the cowboy has in his work."

Michel once took pride in the saddle he rode, but he now takes pride in the saddles he builds. He claims that his saddles are guaranteed not to "leak" under normal riding conditions.

One of the most common problems riders express to him when placing a saddle over a horse is that their old saddles throw them forward and they can't sit down in them. Michel says this is because the seat might not be deep enough or is too short, causing the rider to get ahead of the horse. The most common reason Michel sees riders getting out of position, however, is that the stirrup leathers aren't anchored far enough forward. To keep a rider centered in the saddle, Michel hangs his stirrup leathers as far forward as possible, much like the bound stirrup leathers on a bronc saddle. Proper stirrup-leather position allows the rider to stay out of his mount's way, while also enhancing a rider's feel and timing.

"Most of my customers are ranchers and cowboys who do a lot of roping," he points out. "It's important that they keep

their balance when they raise up in their stirrups and swing their loops. The more forward the stirrup leathers hang, the farther the rider can lean forward without having his feet slide behind his center of gravity, thus losing proper stirrup support."

The proper positioning of the stirrup leathers is also determined by their width. Michel likes to use 2½-inch-wide stirrup leathers versus the 3-inch style.

"A narrower stirrup leather allows the saddle maker to set the anchor point a half-inch more forward, thus gaining more freedom in the swing," he explains.

Seat size is also an important factor. According to Michel, the longer the seat, the easier it is for the rider to keep his feet "ahead of his hat," which is important when riding a colt.

"Although some riders are successful with a shorter seat, they also tend to ride more precisely," he says. "The shorter the seat, the more riding skills are needed to stay in sync with the horse. Also, a saddle with a decent seat but a poor stirrup-leather position won't feel as good as one with a mediocre seat but a correct stirrup-leather position. The stirrup-leather

position, combined with their length and the way they hang, is all part of the equation for keeping the rider balanced."

Another common concern is improving saddle fit. An ill-fitting tree could be causing the problem, not allowing the saddle to sit properly in the horse's shoulder pocket. Pulling the skirt off the saddle allows Michel to read the marks of the tree on the skirts and check for uneven wear.

"Even wear marks indicate that the tree doesn't fit that particular horse," he explains. "More or less 'rock' [the curvature of the tree from front to back], the 'flair' [lateral twist in the tree] or a different bar pad could improve the fit of the saddle on horses with asymmetrical withers.

"Uneven wear marks indicate a crooked tree, but the rigging could also twist the saddle out of position. The wear marks on the skirt will match the dry spots on the horse's withers. But sometimes the horse's withers aren't symmetrical due to confirmation or trauma."

Through the years, Michel has used custom trees built primarily by Sonny Felkins and Ben Swanke.

TODAY, MICHEL WORKS from a shop outside his home in Fort Bidwell, California. He has a web site, but prefers to talk to a potential customer on the phone or in person to best identify his or her needs.

"They need to make a living with my saddles as much as I do," he says. "They need to be able to use their horses no matter the horse's conformation or the type of riding they do."

Although most of his customers are ranchers and working cowhands, Michel recently took an order from a 12-year-old buckaroo who wanted to trade one of his horses for a saddle. The youngster also wanted to make sure that "the horse was gentle enough for George to ride."

It's been more than 20 years since Michel came to the United States to cowboy. He still holds the men and women who make their living horseback in high regard, but knows he's found his niche making saddles.

"Saddle stamping might sometimes feel like a slow and tedious job, but it sure beats digging postholes," he says. "Or, I'll just think about riding in a blizzard during calving season or riding fence in the desert. Then, I know I am where I want to be." ●