

Don't Sell Your Saddle?

Not unless it's a business for you, anyway. And it might be, if you were part of the crowd at Cody, Wyo., in the last weekend in June.

BY WILLIAM MAINS

Back in the late '80s I was wandering around the famous Brimfield Flea Market in Massachusetts when I came across a cowboy with a truckload of saddles, buffalo mounts, spurs, and other enticing Western gear. These were things seldom seen in that part of the world. I could tell real fast by the rounded heels on his boots and the dust on his hat that he was the real deal. His name was Brian Lebel, and he started to tell me about a cowboy antique show he was getting ready to put on in Cody, Wyo. Lebel went on to tell me about his start in this trade. He had been working as a hunting guide in the Yellowstone area when a wealthy client offered him several hundred dollars for his spurs. That set him off on a new career of buying and selling Western relics.

The interest and prices have grown considerably since that time, along with Lebel's stellar reputation in the field. The first Cody cowboy antique show was intended primarily for dealers. There were barely 75 dealers in attendance that first year. It has now grown to one of the best in the nation with several thousand collectors arriving from all over the country. The event takes place in this colorful Wild West town founded by its namesake, William F. Cody, in the 1890s. Cody's old Irma Hotel is still the gathering place for most of the dealers. It is pretty common to see spurs and guns being passed around the breakfast tables at the Irma, with dealers debating the merits of various pieces.

It has become a million-dollar affair. This year more than 200 dealers traveled from as far away as Florida and New York



Made by Stratton and Cassettey of Victoria, Texas, in 1874, this saddle was a bargain at \$3,850.

to set up in the Riley Community Center for the weekend of June 27 to 29. The aisles and booths stretched for thousands of feet and were overflowing with all the trappings of the old-time cowboy, including saddles, spurs, hats, guns, boots, and chaps, plus a fascinating array of paintings, as well as saloon, gambling, and Indian relics. Most items dated from the Civil War to the 1920s. There was also a wonderful collection of material focusing on Hollywood cowboys and cowgirls of the '30s and '40s.

Each year seems to bring some new enhancement. This year the Buffalo Bill Historical Center teamed up with pro-

ducer Lebel to host an evening at the museum, dubbed "The Rest of the Best." The affair included a cocktail party and dinner along with an auction of about 50 Western items, with a portion of the proceeds going to the museum. Attendees described the evening as a hit, and the event is now slated as an annual affair. The auction featured top quality spurs, miniature saddles, artwork, Buffalo Bill memorabilia, and other Old West antiques, with lots selling from prices from a few

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This Cyrus Noble Whiskey advertising sign, circa 1907, measures 46 by 34 inches and is titled "Bucking the Tiger." It brought \$7,150.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY FLETCHER