



Bulletin # 10

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☛ Riding ☛ Collecting ☛ Restoring ☛ Research ☛ History ☛

Making Leather Saddles for the Ordinary

HAMMOCK SADDLES

Leather saddles for the Ordinary are generally of the sling or hammock-type construction in which the leather is supported by a small metal front bracket and a larger curved metal rear bracket and hangs freely in between. The amount of sag is controlled by the rigidity of the leather, and by the adjustment of the brackets. On most Ordinaries, it is possible to move the rear bracket backwards on the backbone, thereby tensioning the leather until it is fairly tight.

Preparing such a saddle from a piece of leather is not difficult if certain steps are followed. First, however, take a little time to obtain a good piece of cowhide. For this purpose it should be an 8–10 oz. weight. Good leather stores sell this material in top grain cowhide either by the square foot or by the pound. Look over the supply—make sure that the top is smooth and free of scratches and blemishes.

PAN SADDLES

Older Ordinaries and most safety bicycles use a pan saddle. This saddle consists of a padded metal or wooden pan covered with leather and stitched around the edges. Pan saddles are mounted on Ordinaries with a leaf spring support. Leather for pan saddles can be thinner for ease of sewing, 2–4 oz. will do nicely.

LEATHER WORKING

When received, the leather will be in flat sheet form, and will be fairly rigid. At this stage the leather face is fairly light in color and is very susceptible to staining from dirt or grease. Make sure your hands are very clean and that the work is done in a clean area. Stains picked up here are almost impossible to remove. Oak tanned tooling leather is the easiest to stretch and form. It also takes the dye

properly. Chrome tanned leather is water resistant and will not stretch well.

Lay the leather on a flat surface and trace the pattern you wish to use for the shape of your saddle, using a soft lead pencil. This pattern is important—it should be the shape of the original saddle as closely as possible. In many cases, the saddle on the machine as received is a replacement saddle, even though it has an old appearance. Some of these did not correspond to the original, and some were extremely bad in design. If the shape of the old hammock saddle on your machine is an original style, use it. If not, it should be modified and a cardboard template should be made that fills the bill. The shape of a pan saddle follows that of the pan. Usually there are flaps at the forward end. Most pan saddles are covered on the top and bottom while on some the bottom leather is first riveted to the pan, the pad inserted, and then the top and bottom sewn together.

CUTTING AND FORMING THE LEATHER

The leather should be cut 1½” to 2” larger than the pattern all the way around. Use a razor-type knife with a new blade.

The leather must be formed to avoid wrinkles, particularly around the rear of the saddle. A wooden form in the shape of the saddle should be cut from soft wood. One inch pine boards can be built up to a thickness of about a three or four inches, and glued and shaped with rasp and file. Sand smooth and varnish to protect from moisture and from staining the leather.

The leather is soaked in clean, cool water for an hour or so. It is then stretched over the form and nailed down around the edges. Dry the leather overnight on the form. After the leather is completely dry, it may be removed. Hammock type saddles can now be cut to the pattern referred to previously. For pan type saddles do not trim

until after stitching. Cut the leather on a hard surface like an old piece of plywood. If you have difficulty following the pattern free hand, try using round objects like can covers or dishes to hold your line. Cut edges can be smoother with fine sandpaper.

Some saddles have a center hole or holes. Now is the time to cut or punch these holes. Tools for this purpose can be purchased in a leather store or punches can be made from sharpened tubing. Make sure the center cut or holes are truly lined up on the center line of the saddle.

CEMENTING LEATHER

Cementing leather to the bottom of the saddle pan (if that is the proper construction) will aid in keeping it from slipping. The top leather can then be stretched to fit as you sew. Be careful not to over-stretch so that the top leather is uneven.

RIVETING

Punch holes in the leather to match those in the metal parts. If the saddle is adjustable for length, punch to the minimum dimensions to allow for stretch. Punches can be obtained from leather stores or you can make your own from steel tubing. Copper rivets, obtainable from leather or hardware stores, are used for riveting. Use burrs (washers) when the shank is on the leather side. Rivets should protrude 1½ times the diameter. Use a riveting tool obtainable from the leather store. It is inexpensive and will do a professional looking job. Set the rivet using the hole in the end of the rivet tool. Then head the rivet using the shallow round portion of the tool. Place the head of the rivet on a clean, flat, solid surface while riveting. An extra pair of hands may be helpful for a short time to hold the assembly while riveting.

PADDING

Hammock saddles are not padded. Pan saddles have a pad between the top leather and the pan. Use upholstery

felt about 1” thick cut and shaped to fit the pan. Round the edges by cutting and combing the felt. Cement padding to pan.

STITCHING

Pan saddles using two pieces of leather must be stitched. It will be easier to stitch if the bottom leather and pad are cemented in place. Note: This may not be possible on all types. Some pan saddles call for the leather to be stretched front to back and do not touch in the middle.

After preparing the leather and pads, carefully stitch the two pieces together. Use a sewing awl made for the purpose, following the manufacturer’s instructions. Use waxed thread or wax it with beeswax. Draw enough thread for underside through needle. Push needle through leather and withdraw slightly. Pull thread through loop at needle. Withdraw needle. Tension thread so that it crosses inside leather. Repeat. You should be able to stitch a saddle in about two hours. After stitching, trim edges of the leather close to the stitches using scissors and an Exacto knife.

DYEING

Good dye can be found in shoe stores in spray cans or liquid dye available in leather stores. Swab liquid dye on leather liberally and let dry. Apply several coats until an even finish is obtained.

POLISHING

Regular shoe polish provides a good finish.

PRESERVATION OF LEATHER

Saddles, both old and new, need to be conditioned from time to time. A 60% lanolin, 40% neatsfoot oil mixture is a good preservative. Warm the lanolin to melt, add the neatsfoot oil, and mix. An old shoe polish can is a good container for this mixture. Apply like shoe polish.

REFERENCE

Collecting and Restoring Antique Bicycles
by G. Donald Adams, Pages 290-295
“Making a New Saddle”

Saddle Construction Hints

SADDLE MAKING TOOLS

Hammer
Drive punches or rotary punch
Sewing awl
Exacto knife
Scissors
Rivet set

Suppliers

LEATHER AND TOOLS

Berman Leathercraft Inc.
25 Melcher St.
Boston, MA 02210-1599

Tandy Leather Co.
Local shops in most metropolitan areas

COPPER RIVETS AND BURRS

Local hardware store

SADDLE PARTS

David Metz
25 Broadway
Freehold, NJ 07728-1865
Tel. (908) 462-2735 (Send SASE)

COLUMBIA & LADIES' SADDLE PANS

Robert Sawyer
3 Flintlock Road
Lexington, MA 02173-1703
Tel. (617) 862-6517 (Send SASE)

COMPLETE SADDLES FOR ORDINARIES

James Spillane, Jr.
85 Nortontown Road
Madison, CT 06443-1937

PLYWOOD: AIRCRAFT GRADE

Local hobby shop

FELT PADDING

Local upholstery shop

LANOLIN

Mother Earth stores

NEATSFOOT OIL

Local shoe repair shop

Note: Review Wheelmen Bulletin #3a for additional Wheelmen suppliers

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