

SPUR MAKERS

BLACKSMITHS *AND* ARTISTS

By Sue Goodman and Mary Adams

Opposite page: In this 1994 photograph, Ron Tollison watches mentor and friend Earlon Shirley sketch a design on a spur. This page: A James Oscar Bass creation is used to illustrate the parts of a spur. Photographs courtesy of the W. K. Gordon Museum.

The earliest Texas spur makers probably would not have called themselves artists, but rather blacksmiths by trade. They repaired wagons and farm implements, made horseshoes, sharpened tools, and shaped heated metal into new tools as needed. The skills acquired in this vocation enabled blacksmiths to also create spurs and bits—and an artistic legacy.

These spur makers took great pride in their artisanship. Some made spurs with little to no decoration, while others adorned them with elaborate artistic embellishments, precious metals, and gemstones. Most took custom orders designed to specifications provided by the buyer.

In 2004, Hugh Edmondson became intrigued following the discovery of an August Buermann-style single spur in his father's home. That find sparked his passion to collect spurs and bits created by Texas artisans. When asked what direction he chose for his collection, Edmondson replied, "There is a book by Kurt House [*Bit & Spur Makers in the Texas Tradition: A Historical Perspective*], and it has all of the early spur makers. I thought, wouldn't it be neat to have at least one pair of every one of those old makers, about 65 or so. I got about 60..." In 2021, he donated the collection he assembled to the W. K. Gordon Museum at Tarleton State University in Stephenville.

Edmondson became well versed in the biographies and styles of the highly skilled craftsmen and entrepreneurs whose work he gathered, which represents a span of more than

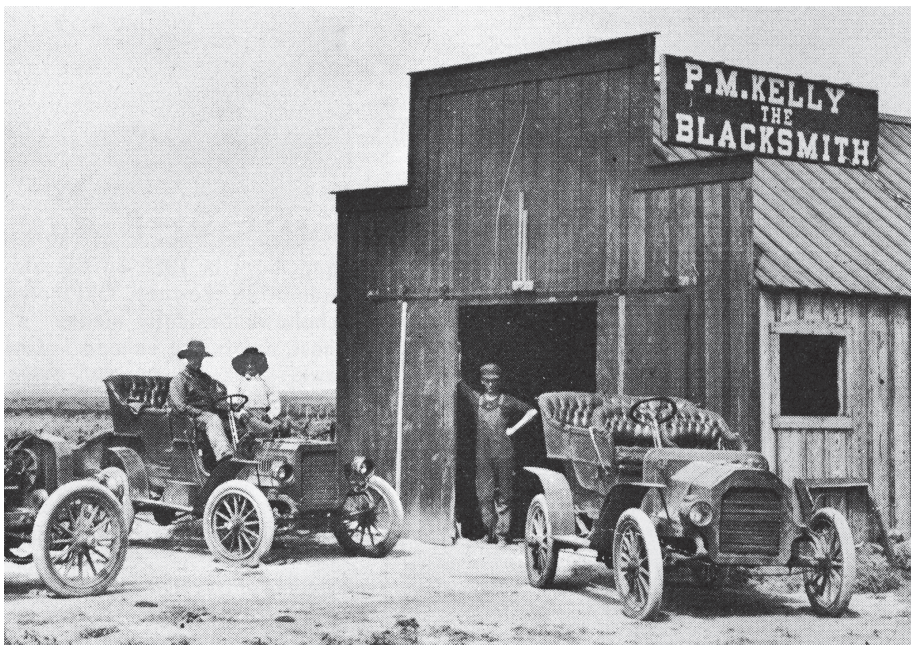
120 years. All the spur makers mentioned in this article are included in Edmondson's collection.

OLD-SCHOOL STYLE

Joseph Carl Petmecky (1840-1929) emigrated from Germany with his family to settle in New Braunfels in 1845. He left there eight years later to work as an apprentice in a gunsmith shop in Austin. When the owner died, Petmecky, at age 15, operated the business under his own name. Acclaimed for his gunsmithing abilities, he also is one of the earliest known makers of Texas spurs. He gained attention for creating a patented and lightweight, *spring-tempered steel* (a process that gives the metal more elasticity for shaping and bending) spur known as a "Petmaker" or "O. K. Spur." Despite that renown, the German immigrant did not stay in the business long. According to his granddaughter, he sold his spur patent to August Buermann, who mass produced the style, though there is little evidence to confirm such a transaction. The few known pairs of Petmecky spurs are believed to pre-date Buermann's production of the "O. K. Spur."

James Oscar Bass (1879-1950) opened the first blacksmith shop in Quitaque, 96 miles southeast of Amarillo, when he was 18 years old. He began making bits and spurs with long, straight shanks for cowboys who worked on the Matador Ranch. He became famous for his gal-leg and goose-neck shanks and heart-shaped buttons.

"You don't have to own a horse
to own a piece of the West."
—Wilson Capron



This page: Blacksmith and spur maker Pascal M. Kelly, standing in the doorway of his Hansford, Texas, shop in 1907, spent 58 years making bits and spurs. Photograph courtesy of the authors.



Inmate Artisans

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Texas prisons with machine shops often permitted inmates to use equipment and tools for spur making. Some inmate artisans etched their name or prison identification number into the design, but many spurs were fabricated without a maker's mark. However, collectors most often can identify the state penitentiary based on the style and materials.

Top: These inmate-made spurs, circa 1930s, are from the Ferguson Unit in Midway. The two inside buttons on the heel bands appear to be Venezuelan coins, dated either 1835 or 1855. The outside buttons have a Texas star on them. Photograph courtesy of the Huntsville Prison Museum. Original in color.

Bass developed an early rudimentary locking rowel that allowed forward rotation but would lock when turning backwards. During 27 years of spur making, he produced approximately 800 bits and 2,000 pairs of spurs, many made using old buggy axles. Almost every piece was marked in the same way, numbered and stamped "made by J. O. Bass, Quitaque, Texas" or "made by J. O. Bass, Tulia, Tx."

Pascal M. Kelly (1886-1976) learned blacksmithing while living in Childress, in West Texas. His family rented a home from local smithy Arthur Foster, who taught Kelly how to use the forge and tools. In 1903, the young apprentice made his first pair of spurs, which he sold for four dollars. A year later, Kelly's family moved to the Oklahoma Panhandle, where the 18-year-old set up his own blacksmith shop in Guyman. By working long hours, with his younger sister pumping the bellows and handing him tools, Kelly created two pairs of spurs per day. In 1907, he moved back to Hansford County, Texas, where news of his metal-working abilities had spread, creating a demand that often was difficult to meet. Kelly made spurs and bits for most of the next 58 years.

Louie Marvin "Cowboy" Traylor (1893-1955) was born in Camp County, Texas, to former slaves. Following his marriage in 1913, he tried supporting his family with farming. Unsuccessful, Traylor became involved with bootlegging and, as a result, served time twice at the Clemens Unit in Brazoria in the 1920s. It

is believed that he learned to make spurs during his incarceration and later took up the trade for a living. Traylor's designs were typical of prison spurs, with straight or bottle opener-shaped shanks and rowels made with a drill press. He liked to use coins for buttons and a nickel alloy, later switching to stainless steel. Some believe that Traylor made almost 1,000 pairs of spurs, but with no markings on those he produced and the lack of records for his orders, that claim is impossible to confirm.

A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY

Throughout spur-making history, there have been relationships between makers that have produced friendships, business partnerships, mentorships, and family legacies. Regardless of the nature of these associations, the craft and artistry of spur making carefully has been imparted from maker to maker. A contemporary example of this tutelage is the interrelationship between Ron Tollison, Earlon Shirley, Adolph Bayers, and Billy Klapper.

Ron Tollison (1954-2021) was born in Chickasha, Oklahoma, where he grew up in a family of builders and farmers. He later settled in the West Texas town of Shamrock, working as a mechanic. He became interested in cowboy gear when local ranchers would bring in trucks for repair and ask him to fix or straighten their spurs. He honed his new-found skill by working with mentors who shared their spur-making expertise. Tollison traveled to Erick, Oklahoma, to learn the art of etching metal from **Earlon Shirley (1931-2000)**, a master engraver and top spur maker, offering to help Shirley with his orders in exchange for instruction. When his mentor's health began to decline, Tollison

Two-page spread, left to right: Mercury dime buttons became a decorative detail on spurs created by Louis Marvin "Cowboy" Traylor. Photograph courtesy of W. K. Gordon Museum. Middle, left: Spur maker Billy Klapper is still at work in his Pampa shop. Photograph courtesy of Mary Adams. Middle right: Wilson Capron's skill at inlaid design is showcased in these spurs made in 2008. Far right: Hugh Edmondson donated his Texas masters-made spur collection in 2021. Photograph courtesy of Tarleton State University.



son made the spurs, and Shirley added engraving and overlays. After the Oklahoma spur maker's death, Tollison received a call from Billy Klapper, who had mentored Shirley. A friendship grew, and Tollison continued his hands-on education by learning to make bits from Klapper, which became a large part of the young man's business. A meticulous recordkeeper, Tollison made more than 700 pairs of spurs and 200 bits and was one of the industry's masters who kept the old ways alive.

Billy Klapper (1937-) grew up in Lazare, a small North Texas town, and learned blacksmithing from his father. As a teenager, while working at the Y Ranch, he placed an order for a pair of spurs from local maker **Adolph Bayers (1912-1978)**, who already was several years behind on fulfilling commissions. Later, Klapper decided to take advantage of the Y Ranch's blacksmith shop to make his first pair of spurs. An admirer of Bayers' work, the young ranch hand often visited the spur maker's smithy, despite the master crafter's insistence that he had no time for mentorship. However, when Bayers fell behind on a contract to create D-rings for a Fort Worth saddle shop, he taught the younger man how to make them. As a result of their friendship, Klapper's work is heavily influenced by Bayers' style.

For a few years, Klapper worked as a cowboy by day and crafted spurs at

night, but as orders increased, he transitioned to full-time spur maker. According to Klapper, he could fabricate a pair of spurs in a day—one that started at 5:00 a.m. and ended at 10:00 p.m. Now in his mid 80s, his workday is shorter, but Klapper still makes spurs in his Pampa shop in the Texas Panhandle.

A TRANSITIONING WESTERN TRADITION

While the days of finding a blacksmith shop in every town are long gone, the craft of making spurs continues in the hands of a new generation of artisans. When asked about contemporary Texas spur makers during a 2021 interview at the W. K. Gordon Museum, collector Hugh Edmondson said, "Wilson Capron is an extraordinarily good maker.... If you want a pair of really good quality spurs, Wilson is the man to see...."

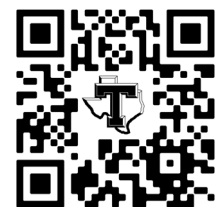
Capron, who grew up on a ranch in West Texas, worked for spur maker Greg Darnell while on the rodeo team at East Texas State University. He tried his hand at engraving before moving on to crafting two-piece spurs and then bits. What began as a college job turned into a career. Capron's workshop blends traditional metal working methods and tools with thoroughly modern technologies (see sidebar on page 29).

According to Capron, it took him 22 years to learn the craft of spur making

by working at the knee of real masters. He views the creations of those artisans as being of measurable historical significance. "The story of Texas is right here in the spurs. What you see in the Edmondson Collection are icons...that are a large part of our history." These handcrafted artifacts, he said, speak to a staple in Western tradition and to the stories of individual spur makers who collectively contributed to the artistic legacy of the Lone Star State. ★

Sue Goodman is the curator of education and exhibits at the W. K. Gordon Museum, and Mary Adams is director and curator at the W. K. Gordon Museum.

A two-minute video featuring Hugh Edmondson and Wilson Capron is available on Tarleton State University's YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=itocwAG6K-Q. Or scan the code below to watch.





THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Blacksmiths of yesteryear needed only a handful of basic tools to set up a shop and get to work: a forge, anvil, hammer, tongs, hacksaw, punch, and files. Variations and types of these essentials have evolved with time, but contemporary spur makers now have power tools and technology. Artisans utilize equipment such as a drill press, bench grinder, belt grinder, band

saw, welder, vise, and torch, along with a myriad of hand-held tools and devices.

When no tool exists, it is common for spur makers to create their own implements. For specific artistry with inlaid designs, Wilson Capron, owner of Capron Bits and Spurs in Christoval, 20 miles south of San Angelo, made a small chisel to obtain a desired artistic effect. He also cleverly designed a clamp held

in a vise that keeps a rowel in place when filing the points. Crafting a tool to solve a problem, fill a need, or become more efficient has endless possibilities in spur making.

Capron's workshop illustrates the adaptation of modern technology, from using a digital spreadsheet for keeping track of working hours to creating designs with

a stylus on a computer screen. A high-powered microscope provides added clarity for his intricate engraving.

Still, old-time spur makers never could have imagined such a powerful tool as the internet. In contrast to traditional, time-consuming mentorships that teach skills of the trade to apprentices, Capron began sharing spur making tips in a "Workshop Wednesday" video series on his YouTube channel. He also created a website and Facebook presence, plus a Patreon.com subscription page for more in-depth spur-making instruction, tips, and demonstrations. Today's aspiring spur makers are fortunate to have a cyberspace teaching tool that allows them to learn from the experts, but at their own pace.

—Sue Goodman and Mary Adams



Above: Wilson Capron's rowel-holding clamp is attached to a vise mounted on a self-made telescoping, adjustable-height pedestal. A handle welded to the tightening bolt eliminates the need for a wrench. Photograph courtesy of Wilson Capron.