

E.C. Lee – The Great Saddle Master

Emmett C. Lee was a great master saddle maker and leather craftsman in Pierre. His leather carvings were uncharacteristic of this period in time, however, that is what he excelled at in his craftsmanship and they were world famous from the 1900s through the 1920s. His first catalog was issued in 1907 with his twentieth catalog in 1927. Lee's saddle shop was located in the present day location of Hogan's Hardware Hank. This was mostly due in part as he made the original "Cooper Contest Saddles" for Kenneth Cooper, who lived west of Ft. Pierre, South Dakota.

The "swell" or "pommel" of the contest saddle was designed wide on both sides so a rider could get his knees underneath and lock on. The saddles were later disqualified for competition due to this design as the rider had an unfair advantage.

Lee's career came to an abrupt halt in the fall of 1933. He was travelling during a storm with three others to take part in polo games. A large flash was seen and instantaneously an enormous cottonwood tree came down on the car, crushing Lee's torso and injuring the other passengers. The flash was caused by electrical wires severed from the storm which also electrocuted a number of nearby cattle. Lee was killed from the tree's impact just as his twentieth catalog came out issuance and the catalog company closed. He left behind a wife and two adopted children.

The Casey Tibbs Foundation purchased this private collection of saddles from Bill Abernathy of Pierre. Additional saddles have been placed on loan by private owners. All 12 saddles are on display in the atrium of the Casey Tibbs Rodeo Center beside the two large bronze statues.