

The Story of Dennis George – Section 2

By Stephenie Tanguay

Arizona Time

Dennis and Randy decided Scottsdale, Arizona should be their destination. The pair justified the choice to Barb citing the location's connotation of exclusivity and warm weather.

"It wasn't very hard," remembers Corley. "It was December or January in Canada. The temperature was well below zero."

The trip south was arduous. "We stopped for one night in Las Vegas on the way to Arizona," Corley says with a nickel of naughtiness. "I had a phony ID, so I could gamble."

While trying to settle on a business name, Dennis found inspiration in the bacon section of the local grocery store. "There were about 20 different types of bacon, but the one that stood out to me was Bar S," he says.

The year was 1971. At the age of 27, Dennis George founded G Bar G Bronc Saddles in Scottsdale, Arizona with the help of a silent partner from Denver, the other G in G Bar G. "Originally, it was G-G, but I changed it to G Bar G because it was too hard to explain it on the phone," Dennis clarifies.

Dennis, Barb and the kids moved into a small apartment. The only affordable area zoned for the shop was in the river bottom between Scottsdale and Tempe. For two years Dennis worked diligently, building the bronc saddle business.

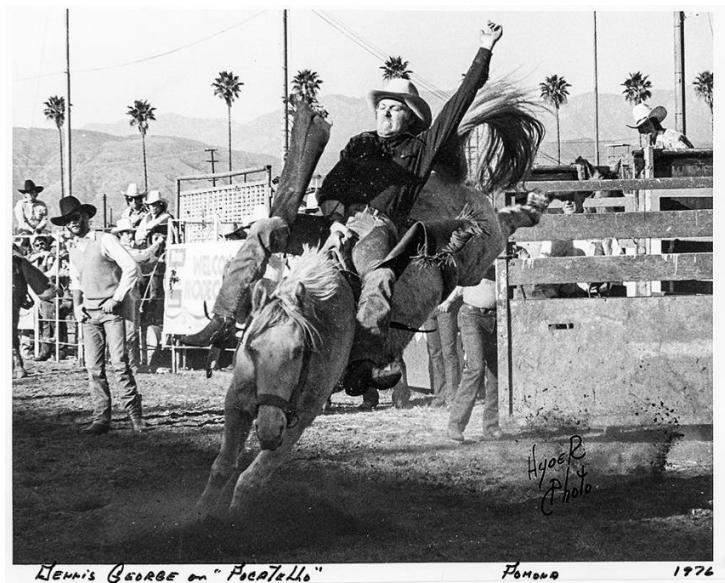


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“When I was building bareback riggings and bronc saddles, there was many, many times, because I was down in Scottsdale and it was so hot, I would work in the shop until 2 o’clock in the morning. Then I would be back down there again at six or seven – seven days a week. If I snuck off to any rodeos, I left the shop and would drive straight through so I could be back there as soon as possible,” Dennis describes his time management.

“I probably lost a lot of money in the rodeo arena in those years,” Dennis continues. “I was always looking at my saddle rigging during my rides and not focusing on the making the ride,” he explains. As the builder of his own saddles and riggings, his concentration veered towards the equipment’s performance rather than his own.

“I got to using (riding broncs) as a tool,” Dennis says. “I quit riding bareback horses and just started riding broncs because I was working on the saddles. Then, I started making rodeo gloves.”

Dennis was the first in the industry to build bareback riding gloves designed specifically for bareback riders.

“Everybody before that would just buy two pair of gloves or find a glove that fit and throw the other one away or turn it inside out and use it that way,” Dennis remembers.

Not long after the family moved to Arizona, Larry Mahan called Dennis from Oregon with news of a company that excelled in the area of rodeo gloves. The owners were getting up in age and wanted to sell their business. “I went up there and bought them out,” states Dennis.

G Bar G Rodeo Gloves

your choice of calf,
steer, goat or steer and
goat leather — thick or
thin

Sizes 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 — left
or right hand



\$8.00 each
add 50 cents postage and handling

Finest Quality Saddles
(fashioned after old Gold Seal Saddle)

Basket Stamp with Rough out seat
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(Send 25% deposit with order)

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“There was some (contestants) that used their glove, but they weren’t made strictly for that. They were making them in pairs,” Dennis continues, “Well, when I got it, I started by finding different leathers that worked well.”

Dennis returned to riding bareback horses in order to experiment with his product. “I came up with a special chap leather. I had an outfit in Colorado over by Durango, a little tannery was making this leather for me.”

For the backs of the gloves, an extra thick goat leather was imported from Europe. “It had some elasticity in it. So, you close your hand and it would kind of form, with putting alcohol on it,” Dennis shares.

A deal with Jimmy Dix and Joe Alexander was arranged behind the bucking chutes in Denver. “Both of them was wearing a 9 ½. I would save all those gloves and put them in a box,” Dennis explains the agreement. Making only one glove at a time, eventually, Dennis would have 20 or 30 gloves in the box.

“They would go through them and pick out what they wanted. They would each buy a dozen. They would take the best ones and that would last them all year,” says Dennis.

Eventually, contestants such as Chris LaDoux were signing Dennis’s gloves, a sure sign of success.



1974 Image of Chris LaDoux reproduced with permission of Gene Hyder

Maintaining his humility, Dennis says, “Of course, I used to go down there when I was in high school and get on bucking horses with Chris, and John Holman, and John Forbs. Whatever horses we could find we would run in and buck. It didn’t make any difference. If we couldn’t find any bucking horses, then we would run in somebody’s saddle horses and buck them.”

“I packed the gloves around with me rodeoing. I used to pack a lot of equipment with me just for helping people out,” the saddle maker says.

During a rodeo in California, Dennis dropped down on his bareback horse. “I had my hand run in my rigging. There was just one ahead of me. Some kid crawled up on the chutes and asked if I had size such and such glove with me.”

Offended by the lack of respect, Dennis never carried gloves with him again, and eventually sold the glove business to Bob Blackwood in the mid 70’s.

Making History

It could be said that Dennis George changed the course of rodeo history in 1975 when Brad Gjermundson came across the G Bar G booth at the National High School Rodeo Finals in Gallup, New Mexico. The future Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame inductee was representing the state of North Dakota in the team roping as a heeler.

“I wasn’t a bronc rider at the time, but Dennis had this bucking machine in his booth, and I wanted to try it,” Brad remembers.

Brad and Dennis became fast friends. Gjermundson qualified for the National Little Britches Rodeo Finals in Cheyenne that same year, this time in calf roping, bull riding, and bareback riding. Once again, the young competitor found himself drawn to the G Bar G Saddles booth and Dennis’s bucking machine.

By summer’s end Gjermundson was hooked. “That fall my dad ordered three (bronc) saddles and a bucking machine,” Brad states. “The first saddle, I rode it my whole career.”

The Gjermundson family continued to purchase not only bronc saddles from Dennis, but also roping and ranch saddles. “Eventually, I endorsed his bronc saddle. Dennis is a good guy and treated me right all of the time,” says the four-time World Champion. “He was particular about his leather. Dennis studied what made (the saddles) fit and stood behind his work.”

Now retired from the rodeo arena Gjermundson teaches future rodeo stars the fundamentals of bronc riding at clinics. “We continue to be friends. Dennis makes it a lot easier during my schools. He is always there to help,” Brad describes the saddle maker’s devotion to education. “Even my daughters, Hali and Jori, ride G Bar G barrel saddles.”

“G Bar G Bronc Saddles became prominent fast. Dennis drew attention from guys like Bob Blackwood and JC Trujillo,” Randy Corley adds. “He was astute and always looking to restructure things. I would sit and marvel at (Dennis). There is nothing he can’t do with his hands. He looks at things and is driven to make them better,” Corley relates. As an afterthought Randy adds, “And he cut my hair for years.”

In later years, Dennis built Randy’s first Announcer of the Year saddle. “Copenhagen Skoal were the ones that donated it to him, and he had his choice of who built it. He chose me,” Dennis states. “I told (Randy) there is only one thing, the saddle could never end up in his living room.”

The Alps of Arizona

The mid 70s brought a variety of growth and change to the George family. Dennis heard of some professors who needed someone to stay and care for a lodge and cabins in Alpine, Arizona so he and Barb took another drive. They travelled east for a little over four hours, climbed 6,755 feet in elevation. Instantly, the ambiance infatuated the duo.

Dennis and his family lived in one of the small cabins for between five and six years. A huge leap forward was taken by the bronc saddle business during the time period.

“From there it was many years of working not only with champion cowboys, but also those just getting started or needing help getting their saddle the way it should be,” says Dennis.

“Dennis was big on taking his product to the client,” Randy Corley remembers.

G Bar G Bronc Saddles maintained a booth at the National High School Finals for 44 years. Dennis George shepherded several generations of rough stock riders at a multitude of rodeos through the years.

Each year cowboys arrived at the National High School Finals from across the nation toting worn out saddles fashioned to meet only the rule requirements for their individual state. Empathetic and destined to make a

difference in the world of rodeo, Dennis spent his nights earnestly working to get the saddles competition ready for the young contestants.

Back in Arizona, Dennis finally persuaded the lodge owners to sell him some acreage where he built his family a home of their own.

“After several years, I didn’t have the time to spend on bareback rigs and chaps as I was busy working on the bronc saddles,” Dennis says. “The rigging business came to a halt.”

The transition out of the rigging business was made easier by the difficulties in obtaining quality materials. Tanneries in the United States were going out of business due to losses in the shoe industry.

“The years spent making the equipment did give me the money to design a bronc saddle, similar to the old Hamley,” Dennis adds appreciatively.

A Better Curriculum

The George property backed up to a school for at risk boys ages fifteen to eighteen. Occasionally, one of the boys would run away, crossing the George property in the process.

“I hollered at them (the school) about their education program,” Dennis says. In response to his grievances, the school offered Dennis the job of creating a vocational program for the boys. With a swagger like that of Chuck Connors’ character Lucas McCain in *The Rifleman*, Dennis took them up on the proposition.

It was the nation’s Bicentennial. Rodeos across the country were celebrating the creation of the United States of America and the Declaration of Independence. Adding to his already full schedule, Dennis set up programs for the boys. He taught them about not only his forte, leather work, but also upholstery, dark room techniques, animal husbandry, farming, and even the benefits of raising worms. “I used rabbits to teach genetics, and why there is diversity in skin color,” Dennis explains.

“What I was really wanting to do, is put in a feeding program for different types cattle at elevation. That would give those kids all the responsibility of feeding. They would have to measure everything. They would get a lot of science and math without even knowing it.”

Before Dennis could implement his plan, however, the school converted to a private high school. “It was a summer resort type area,” Dennis explains.

Major League Rodeo

Extremely modest concerning his achievements, the trophies and trinkets advertising a life spent in the arena are unseen in the George household. Pictures line the walls of the G Bar G saddle shop signed by oodles of grateful professional rodeo cowboys and saddle clients. Yet, the singular visible vestige from all his days participating in the sport of rodeo is the buckle dated 1978 honoring Dennis as Major League Rodeo’s Coach of the Year.

Major League Rodeo was established in 1977 and Dennis was selected as the coach for the Denver Stars Rodeo Team. The organization presented the sport of rodeo in an innovative manner. At the time of Dennis’s involvement, the league consisted of 6 teams, the Salt Lake City Buckaroos, the San Antonio Rowels, the Kansas City Trailblazers, the Tulsa Twisters, the Los Angeles Outlaws, and Dennis’s team, the Denver Stars.

An article in the Dec. 5, 1977 edition of the New York Times reads, “According to the press release distributed at the draft, the teams will be “stocked” with cowboys from the various professional rodeo associations. Each team will have 14 players and 11 additional reserve players. The season is to consist of 84 games and six teams.”

The teams played “games” with two halves. The seven traditional rodeo events were in each half — team roping, steer wrestling, calf roping, barrel racing, saddle bronc riding, bareback riding and bull riding.

One unique characteristic of Major League Rodeo was the timed event competition. During a typical rodeo, the contestants compete individually. The winner is determined once all the contestants have made a run. However, during the Major League Rodeo games opposing ropers, barrel racers, and steer wrestlers battled against each other in the arena at the same time. Fans knew the outcome immediately.

“Initially, they put a calf chute on each end of the arena, and they actually run at each other,” Dennis remembers. “Well, we went through one performance, and I could see that wasn’t going to work.”

The chute arrangement was then changed so that the chutes were positioned side by side at one end of the arena. A system was devised with

two judges and two timers. “I spent three months writing the rule book for that,” Dennis says.

Working with a scoreboard company, the stop light starting arrangement, now commonly seen at barrel races, was created. “We set it up so that everything was done by air. We had a little air compressor. We had air lines running to both calf chutes. Each one had a timing light on it, just like race cars, red, yellow, green.”

A head judge observed both the calf ropers. When they indicated that they were ready, the judge would begin the race. “The judge would push the button and that started the red light. When the yellow one went, the gates would open and let the calves or steers out (in the steer wrestling). And then the green one run the barrier. Everything was automatic and timed within 1/100th of a second of each other.”

“Barrel racers, we set up 3 barrels and then 2 barrels. They had to run the right-hand barrels first. The crowds loved it,” Dennis says.

The New York Times article from 1977 also stated, “The Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association is said to oppose the new concept. The association could not be reached for comment. The promoters of team rodeo say it will benefit cowboys by offering regular salaries, opportunities for additional prize money, a fringe benefit program and paid travel expenses, none of which the contestants receive when they go from rodeo to rodeo on their own.”

Professional Barrel Racer, equine equipment designer, and member of the Denver Stars Major League Rodeo Team, Marlene McRae remembers the time stating, “I was 21 years-old and had a very nice barrel horse that helped the team win the World and myself the Most Valuable Player Award. We competed head to head at the rodeos and Dennis helped the team with strategy - who to match against whom. It was a great time in rodeo’s history.”

“We won the championships one year. Our rings were the same as the Super Bowl rings, the same company made them,” Dennis remanences. “We had jerseys like other professional sports.”

The Right to Work

The unprecedented growth experienced by the rodeo industry in the 1970s allowed construction of the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs, Colorado in 1979. Rodeo contestants were abundant and the PRCA felt comfortable returning the dues checks of those who were participating in the Major League Rodeo events.

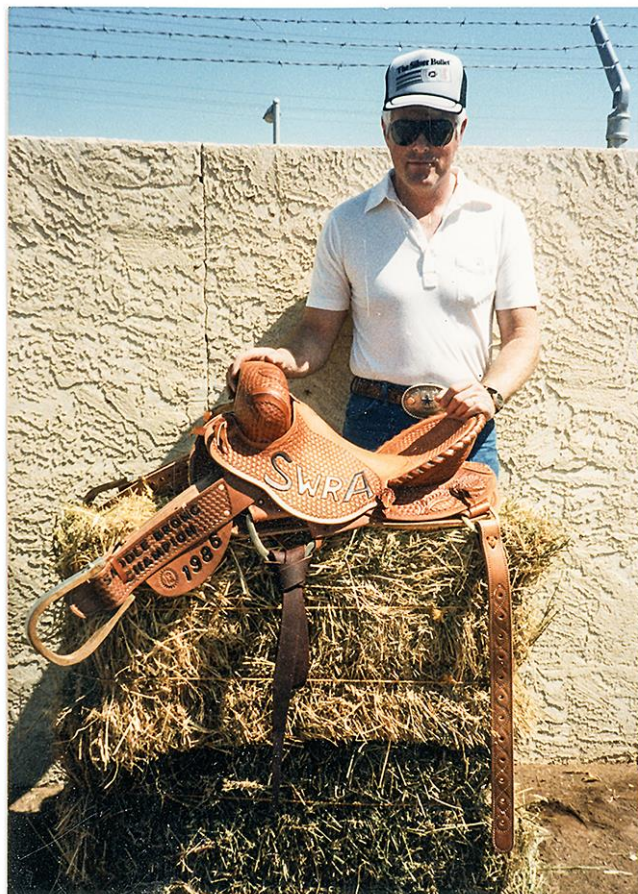
“They took our cards away,” says a still agitated George, “The PRCA had become iron fisted.” Not past the age of competition himself at the time, the rodeo coach for the Denver Stars lamented more for his players than himself, cowboys like bull rider Doug Shipe.

A meeting between then PRCA Board member, Shawn Davis, and Dennis was set up in Phoenix. The fellow bronc riders discussed the situation for over four hours. Feeling that a resolution was eminent, Dennis was startled when Davis concluded the meeting by asking, “What are you going to do when you lose this case?”

The legal war continued and ultimately, a decision by the Federal courts allowed the cowboys to once again compete in the PRCA rodeos.

More triumphs and troubles.

A fire took all the saddle tree patterns perfected by Dennis in 1980. The loss devastated the company, but Dennis managed to trudge forward.



In 1984 the PRCA moved the National Finals Rodeo to Las Vegas, Nevada. Dennis had expanded the saddle business to include stock saddles for working cowboys. “I have always tried to make the saddle the working cowboy could use every day, all day and still enjoy his job,” Dennis explains.

A conversation with an old-timer in his booth at the first NFR in Vegas led to more innovations. Evaluating the Toots Mansfield style saddle Dennis was displaying, the old-timer told Dennis he would buy it if the cantle was exchanged for that of the bronc saddle. “This got me thinking and I went to work on this tree design as soon as I got home.”



“I took a low association and raised it 1” in height on the swell, put my leg cut under the swell to narrow down the front end like a slick fork and put my 4 1/2” bronc cantle on it. The rig is a 7/8 Montana flat plate I redesigned, taking it behind the cantle rather than up into the seat, giving more forward free stirrup leather movement that is still balanced for strength and provides a narrow feel. I finished with the hand-carved ground seat that I put in all my saddles,” Dennis explains leaving those with little knowledge of saddle design in the proverbial dust.

1989 to 1995 – The Central Wyoming College Rodeo Team

Family obligations called Dennis and Barb back to Wyoming after 18 years in Arizona. “The kids were grown, our family needed us, and the coaching job was available,” Dennis says.

The interview for the coaching job corresponded with the start of the National High School Rodeo Finals where Dennis once again, had a booth featuring his saddles. Central Wyoming College did not waste time, quickly providing an offer letter to their new rodeo coach.

To be continued...