

## **Alberta Donkey and Mule Club News, February, 2009**

### COMING EVENTS:

February 21, Possible Winter Cutter/Trail Ride at Fort Assiniboine, AB. Contact Mike at 780 699-5522.

Sunday, March 1, Alberta Donkey and Mule Club ANNUAL MEETING, 1:30 pm at the Reynolds – Alberta Museum in Wetaskiwin.

*Fred Godberson submits the following article:*

### Mules Don't Lie About Saddles

I am writing this article for two reasons. First, I would like to share information with other mule owners with the hope that it will benefit some mule or donkey. And secondly, Marlene is twisting my arm and it is hurting.

This saddle information is not intended to suggest that I know a lot about saddle making or that I think an adjustable or treeless saddle will satisfy all mules and trail riders. I do know these saddles will not work for roping or other ranch work. The information is based on my experience with our 5 saddle mules and 8 donkeys. I do not have the equipment, skill, or desire to make saddles for other riders, but I wish to share information with others. I hope this discussion will benefit some mule and rider.

After riding my mule Dolly for five years and buying 5 saddles, including an Australian saddle, I started to understand Dolly's message. I found that things were fine for 2 or 3 hour rides and for one day. With more hours and more consecutive days of riding, Dolly started showing signs of discomfort with head shaking, crow hopping and some white hair on her back. This was with the saddle placed 2" behind the shoulder blade in full extension and adding appropriate padding to compensate for the tree not fitting the mule's back. I tried to make the saddle mirror the back of the mule. Other riders might have been able to get the saddles fitting better, but I gave it my best and Dolly did not agree.

With this message from Dolly, I started experimenting with adjustable cantles, flex panels and treeless saddles. In the end I rode 5-7 hours each day with my latest treeless saddle for 5 consecutive days in July of 2005 at the Centennial Ride at the Suffield weapons range. Dolly was telling me that "riding is fun". My seat also felt great, in fact my backside seemed better after a ride. The movement through this saddle was a gentle "bum massage". Removing the rigid tree eliminated the primary pain maker of ill fitting conventional saddles.

Like most treeless saddles available I made my first with a solid pommel and cantle. It was made to fit one animal and did not compensate for changes in condition of my mule.

I have read that the equine back can vary from day to day and from the start of a ride and the end. Also, research shows that pressure of more than 1 ½ lbs per sq inch chokes off blood circulation. If this pressure is exerted for more than 45 minutes, swelling, soreness, and then white hair will result.

My next saddle was made with an adjustable pommel. This required tools to adjust and I was always trying to get a better fit. A cantle and pommel with moveable joints was built and this showed considerable movement in the pommel. Without the joints the mule would have to experience pressure or have a thick pad to absorb movement.

The saddles I now use have a pommel and cantle made with glued up high-density foam and cloth. This material will even hold a horn, but will flex. Double rigging, no hard material, cordura skirting, and a leather seat has made a comfortable safe saddle for me and my mules and donkeys.

I have found no problem with heat build up on the mule's back as I use a Dixie pad. I purchased this pad from Canadian Trail House at Devon. Their phone number is 1 866 987 4816. The pad is placed next to the mule and is designed to have air movement and keep sweat away from the saddle pad. The advertisement for the pad states that you will never have to wash your saddle blanket again and the material has antibacterial properties. The pad is only 3/8 inch thick and is built like a furnace filter. I usually use a thin PVC pad between the Dixie and the saddle but have ridden with only the Dixie and saddle. The saddle stays in place and it has enough stiffness so that the rider's weight is spread over a large area. The sweat pattern looks good on all my animals because the saddle takes the shape of the animal's back. As Marlene would say, "the saddle mirrors the mules back".

After observing equine backs as they move, and having felt the movement while riding in a treeless saddle, I cannot see how a rigid saddle cannot cause discomfort and/or restrict movement even if it "fits". Also, the treeless saddles only weigh 10-20 lbs.

Most treeless saddles sold on e-bay have solid pommels and do not have double rigging. This makes them unsuitable for most mules and riders. I had the pleasure of using a Bob Marshall sport saddle on my mule. It was a good fit and was a pleasure to ride with. This saddle did have a solid pommel and a back cinch.

For mules and donkeys that do not fit the conventional mold of a rigid saddle, I think a treeless saddle will help. I would also like to stress the proper position of any saddle as suggested by Tim Barton. I have attended Tim's saddle fitting clinics and also have his video. I will mention again that Tim wants the saddle tree 2" or more behind the movement of the shoulder blade. He also wants the back cinch behind the belly roll. This holds the saddle from moving forward. With this arrangement I find no breast collar and crupper is required in the mountains on my mule, Dolly. The position of the front cinch should be about 4 to 6 inches behind the elbow to prevent cinch sores and the back cinch should be attached to the front cinch to prevent it from moving too far back into the flank. Some treeless saddles have the cinch, and stirrup straps attached with velcro and

can be moved. I will try this on my next saddle if I can find some wide industrial quality Velcro. This feature is used with the expensive “Torsion saddles” made in Italy.

To give some credibility (joke) to this information, I would like to say that my wife Janice will not use one of my saddles. Janice feels more secure in a rigid saddle and she bought a “fit all” Steve Edward’s mule saddle. Steve Edwards makes a saddle with a short tree with less curvature. The Edwards saddle does fit Janice’s mule better than her other saddle, but it does have some rock because the tree has more curvature than her mule’s back. We corrected this with foam padding on the front part of the bars. This also helped level the seat. A level seat is necessary for a comfortable ride with reduced knee and back strain.

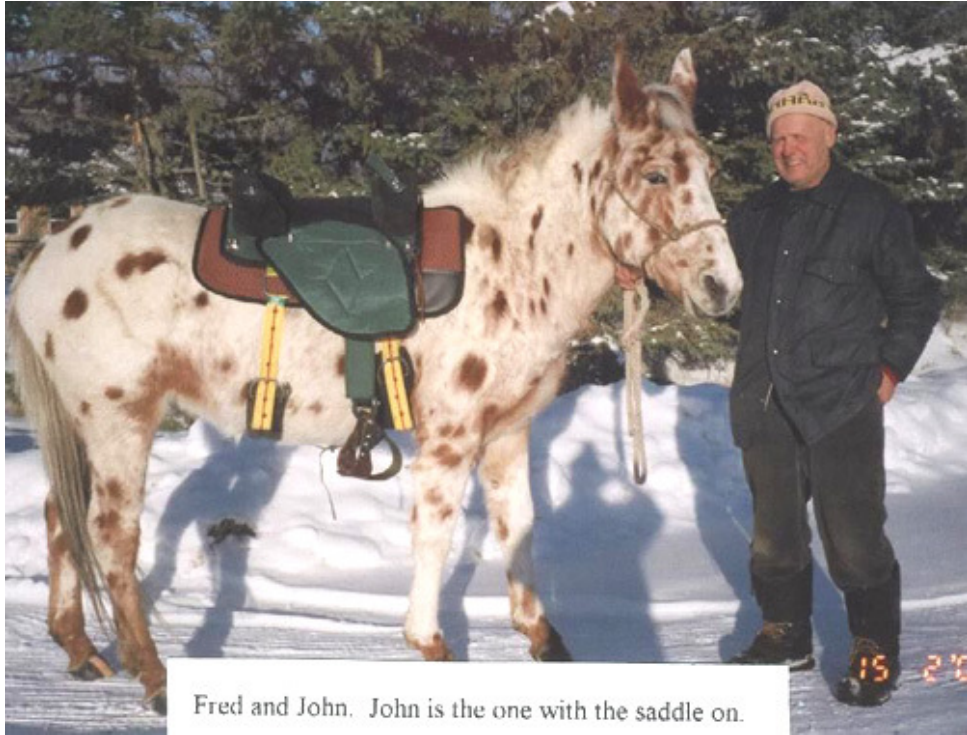
Janice’s mule Molly did tell me that she likes a treeless saddle better. This is right from the mule’s mouth.

Happy Trails

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Showing front and back cinch placement with a hobble strap in between to keep the back cinch from sliding into the flank.



Fred and John. John is the one with the saddle on.



One of Freds mules with one of his home built saddles.