

Antique American Cowboy Spurs



By Ann Kathryn Orsinger

COLLECTOR/DEALER BRUCE BARTLETT grew up loving the West, and as a history major at Baylor University he was particularly interested in the region. His interest in spurs developed a few years after he graduated, when he stopped in Santa Fe on his way back from a ski trip in Colorado and bought a pair of Mexican Chihuahua spurs. At that point, Bartlett fell in love with the artistry and beauty of antique Western spurs and began his own—now extensive—collection. Eventually, he began to buy and sell spurs full time and later opened Rio Grande Trading Company in San Antonio, which specializes in Texas-style bits and spurs as well as other Western Americana. Below Bartlett discusses spur collecting.

Cowboys & Indians:

What is the history of the American spur industry?

Bartlett: The American spur industry began to emerge around the 1870s. Before this industry began, early cowboys used mostly Mexican or military-

style spurs. As the American spur industry developed, two distinct styles appeared: the California style and the Texas style. Both styles were influenced by the desires and needs of the customers: Western cowboys.

Both the California and Texas styles were strongly influenced by the prevailing spur-making trends in the Mexican states south of their respective borders. The spur makers from Northwest Mexico (near California) in the 1860s were strongly influenced by the European and Spanish Colonial styles. The spur makers from Northeast

Mexico (near Texas) in the 1860s favored larger one-piece spurs with wider heel bands and shanks. These regional style preferences were carried across the border and became the foundations on which the California and Texas styles grew. Aside from these two distinct traditions, there was a third style that mixed the California and Texas styles. The resulting spurs were called Northern Plains-style spurs.

Although the California industry peaked



These Northern Plains-style spurs were made in Wyoming by Rex Schnitger, the state's most important early maker. Schnitger made spurs in Wyoming until the late 1920s when he moved to California to work in the shop of Edward Bohlin in Hollywood. The Northern Plains style is a hybrid between Texas style and California style; this is made evident by Schnitger's use of Texas-style overlay and rowels along with California-style inlay and pins. The "Cheyenne split heel bands," domed conchos, and styling are classic Northern Plains characteristics. This is one of the best pairs of Schnitgers known. \$22,500 to \$27,500.

ENTRY LEVEL



There are many excellent opportunities for the beginning collector to enter the field. The new collector should determine his or her area of interest and budget. Several broad types of collections are most popular. Collecting a representative example by the important makers of a collector's style of interest is the most common way to start. Another method is to focus on a single maker and to accumulate as many different patterns from that maker as possible. Whatever type of collection you decide to pursue, you should buy the best examples obtainable within your budget.

The Nocona-period, ca. 1930s, McChesney-marked, Johnny Mullins pattern spurs at right are an outstanding pair of entry-level Texas spurs. They are in excellent condition, are an interesting pattern, and are marked by the maker. Nevertheless, they are still very affordable because they are some of McChesney's latest productions. \$1,000 to \$1,200.



MID-RANGE

West Texas master Wally Boone, who operated out of Lubbock, Texas (then San Angelo), between the 1920s and 1940s, made these fantastic Texas-style spurs. At this level, expertise or purchasing with the assistance of a trusted advisor is mandatory. Forgery and misrepresentation abound. Collectors should expect some level of intrinsic value in this price range, as the collection inherently becomes an investment. This pair features many of the style characteristics associated with Texas spurs: one-piece construction, use of overlay, larger heel bands, blunt rowels, a combination of different metals, and stylized decoration. \$9,000 to \$12,000.



HIGH END



These Kelly Bros., ca. 1920s, "Arizona Bill" No. 208 pattern spurs represent the acme of early Texas spurs. Originally sold in the 1920s for a princely sum of \$12, they are today worth \$30,000 to \$40,000. This particular pair has been known to collectors since the early 1990s and has changed hands at least four times since their initial discovery. Spurs in this class rarely sell on the open market and are instead traded behind the scenes, going directly from one collection to another. Provenance becomes extremely important in collecting mid- and high-end spurs because forgery always becomes more pervasive as an art market matures. The provenance of a rare and valuable piece like this can dramatically affect its value. These "Arizona Bills" have been in the possession of some of the field's most important dealers and collectors, and each one has signed off on their originality.

a little earlier than the other two traditions, the golden era of all three styles lay between 1900 and 1930. The Depression ended the glory days of spur making, and after the country recovered from the Depression the needs of the cowboys had changed: The Western range cowboys were giving way to rodeo cowboys. At this point the market changed, and more machinery began to be used in spur production, diminishing the individual craftsmanship and lowering the overall artistry.

C&I: What impacts the value of antique American cowboy spurs?

Bartlett: There are three main factors that influence value: 1) the maker, 2) the pattern, and 3) the condition.

The Maker: Like the artist of a painting, the maker of a pair of spurs is key. There are more than 100 important early makers of antique American cowboy spurs. Some of these early masters like J.O. Bass of Tulia, Texas, made fewer than 2,500 total pairs of spurs. Today, when available, these spurs average \$9,000 a pair. P.M. Kelly employed up to 30 men in his shop and made exponentially more spurs than Bass' one-man shop. Today Kelly's creations marked "Kelly Bros." or "K., B. & P." can sell for between \$100 and \$50,000. They average about \$1,200 a pair. Both makers are extremely desirable today and are among the top handful of early Texas makers.

The maker's artistry, diversity of patterns, ease of identification, and relative rarity all contribute to the value of a pair of early Western spurs. Aside from J.O. Bass and P.M. Kelly, some of the most sought-after Texas-style spurs were made by J.R. McChesney, Oscar Crockett, G.A. Bischoff, and Joe Bianchi. The top California-style makers include GS Garcia, LD Stone, Mike Morales, Abbie Hunt, and Jesus Tapia.

The Pattern: Many of the early masters sold their creations through catalogs with period pricing varying from 50 cents a pair to as much as \$35 a pair. As a general rule, the more expensive the pair was, the more elaborate the workmanship, design, and materials used during manufacturing. Fewer customers chose to purchase the more expensive and elaborate designs. As a result, today the early makers' most elaborate

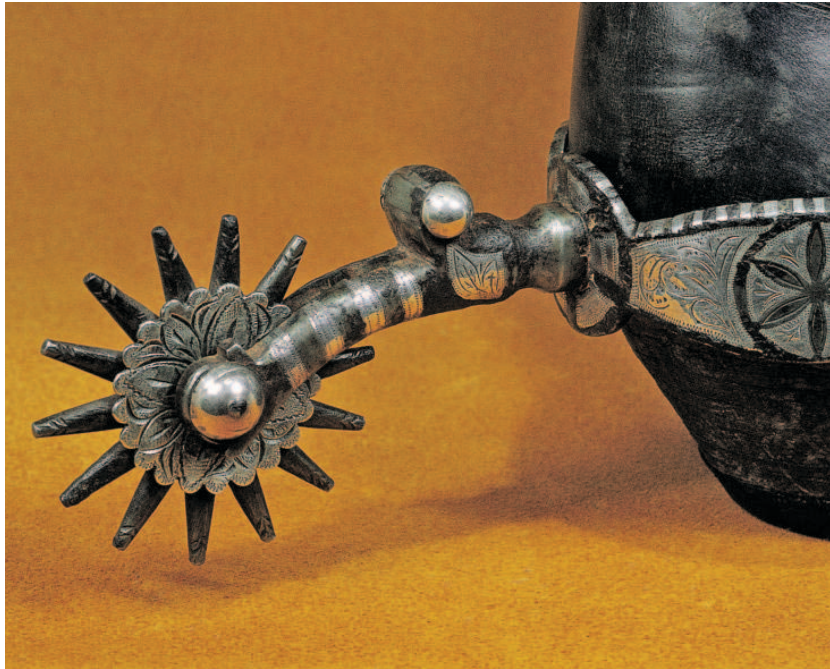
patterns are among the most rare and desirable. For example, I have seen more than 100 pairs of P.M. Kelly's venerable No. 4 pattern spurs over the years. The No. 4 was listed for \$4.75 in Kelly's 1920 catalog, No. 18. However, I have seen only one pair of Round-up Specials, which were listed for \$15 in the same catalog. Today, a pair of No. 4s averages \$800, whereas the Round-Up Specials could sell for as much as \$50,000.

The Condition: Cowboy spurs were made and bought to be used so it is difficult to find antique spurs in excellent condition. As a result, the better the condition of a pair of spurs the higher its price. While there are a limited number of collectors who seek out spurs with honest wear, most collectors

are looking for spurs in good condition so that the original craftsmanship, detail, and beauty of the spur can be seen.

C&I: Where can you purchase antique American cowboy spurs?

Bartlett: You can find antique cowboy spurs at Western shows and auctions. You can also purchase them from private dealers and on the Internet. Where you should go to look for spurs depends on your specific collecting goals. Purchasing spurs at Western shows and over the Internet requires skill and knowledge of the field in order to avoid forgery. Many auc-



Of all the early California makers who have come to epitomize the style, perhaps none is more famous than Guadalupe S. Garcia of Elko, Nevada. This pattern called the "Dandy" was priced at \$30 in Garcia's 1912 catalog. This pair exhibits stunning detail and Garcia's mastery of the many disciplines required in the production of early California-style spurs: two-piece construction, heel chains, inlaid silver, curved shank, elaborate ornamentation, and sharp rowels. \$15,000 to \$20,000.

tion houses guarantee their representations; however, even at auctions a new collector needs to have some knowledge and expertise to keep from making costly mistakes. If someone wishes to develop a collection without investing the necessary time it takes to avoid the many pitfalls, the best way to buy spurs is from a private dealer. In order to find a suitable dealer, a collector should shop around and look for a dealer whose personality fits well with his or her own. The best way to find a dealer is by word of mouth: Nothing tops recommendations from other collectors.

C&I: Do you have any preservation tips for collectors?

Bartlett: Antique spurs are best if left untouched. Clean and remove the original patina only as a last resort to stabilize rust or to prepare for restoration. Some collectors do lightly clean their spurs in order to bring out the detail. As a dealer, I rarely clean a

pair of spurs. Original untouched patina speaks volumes about a valuable pair of spurs' originality. However, many pairs do need minor restoration. If an early pair of spurs needs restoration and you suspect they may be valuable, only allow a qualified restorer to perform the work. Poor restoration can seriously damage a pair of spurs' value, whereas quality restoration will enhance it.



RESOURCES

Bit and Spur Makers in the Vaquero Tradition and Bits and Spurs: Motifs, Techniques and Modern Makers,
Ned and Jody Martin.

The first book gives detailed information on California- and Northern Plains-style spurs. The second book focuses on contemporary spurs and can help a collector learn the difference between antique and modern spurs.

www.hawkhillpress.com

Bit and Spur Makers in the Texas Tradition, Ned and Jody Martin
and Kurt House.

This book gives detailed information on Texas-style spurs.

www.hawkhillpress.com

Hand Forged for Texas Cowboys,
Kurt House.

This book explains the general background of the spur-making industry and provides specific information on several great Texas spur makers.

cowboyhouse@aol.com

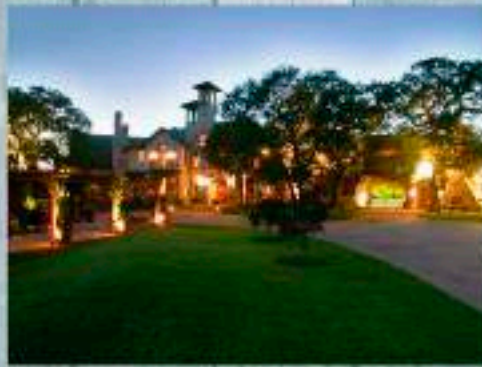
National Bit, Spur and Saddle Collector's Association (NBSSCA)

This association will put you in touch with other collectors who can provide helpful knowledge and resources for beginning as well as experienced collectors. It also provides a quarterly calendar of relevant events.

www.nbssca.org

Rio Grande Trading Company
www.riograndespurs.com

ARGYLE, TEXAS



Magnificent home nestled on 20.8 acres of park-like beauty in Argyle, Texas. Situated on a hilltop and surrounded by old growth oaks, cedar, elm, and pecan trees with seasonal creek and no neighbors. Just minutes away from both I35E and I35W and towns like Denton, Flower Mound, and Highland Village. When you enter the property on your private drive, a sense of peace and quiet envelops you. You then pass two of the three stocked fishing ponds, one of which is large enough to canoe or Jet-Ski on, and a 12,000 square foot putting green with sand traps and tees up to 250 yards. The main house is a natural blend of Southwest and Spanish styles all in stone and stucco with 12,000 square feet under roof and 8500 square feet in climate control. The house features many impressive amenities, such as a fully-contained guest apartment, 6 bedrooms, 6.5 baths, 4 stone fireplaces, wet bar, exercise room and sauna, all hardwood and Saltillo tile flooring, hand-trowelled wall treatment, two kitchens, and two laundry areas. Other amazing site features include a 35,000 gallon pool with 2 heated spas, a cookout cabaña, 2100 square foot separate guest house, horse barn with shop and office, horse stalls, RV storage, lighted tennis court, sand volleyball court, Frisbee golf, 4 fishing docks, site irrigation, 2 water wells, jogging trails, and lots of wildlife including wild turkey and deer. **\$5,660,000**

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