

THE FRANK VELA SADDLERY

In 1921 Frank Vela bought a two story building at 1016 "C" Street in Floresville in which to establish a Shoe, Harness and Saddle Shop. He purchased the building which originally had been used as a buggy and harness shop and later as a barber and tailor shop.

Mr. Vela had previously been employed for over 20 years at the Straus-Frank Company in San Antonio where he developed the leather craftsmanship needed for making saddles for the working cowboys. He developed his saddle making trade in this building and created an international reputation for himself with his handcrafted saddles. He became well known as a master saddle maker.

Evidence of the popularity and demand for saddles made by the Frank Vela firm was well expressed. On one occasion he received saddle orders in the daily mail from ten different states. Vela also developed a large trade among rodeo performers of the nation. He frequently got orders from New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and other states. On occasion, he would even receive orders from Mexico, Cuba and Canada. Frank Vela's reputation for making fine saddles became known worldwide. He developed this demand by creating a first class product which would meet the most exacting demands of his clients.

Included in his saddle making talents was the ability to create especially beautiful designs. Perhaps one of his most artistic saddles was the one he made for Miss Eleanor Grona of San Antonio. This saddle was made entirely of black and white leather and was to be presented to her as a special Easter present. His design included Easter Lilies of white leather plus other flowers of white leather embossed in the saddle design. The creation was truly a great work of art.

Another of his special saddle designs was created for S. A. Armstrong, a widely known cattleman of Big Wells, Texas. This particular project was a makeover saddle. The saddle tree itself was one of the most expensive from old Mexico. It was common to the Mexican style saddle and had a large horn. On the horn was stamped "General Ortiz, Troop 36, 1914, Chihuahua, Mexico", the name of the former Mexican general. The six inch cap horn was of embossed silver, top and bottom. The tie ornaments were covered with silver and the stitching was done with silver thread. The entire saddle was highly trimmed and decorated with silver creating a beautiful work of art.

He created another beautiful saddle for the rider of the beautiful white horse in "The Cavalcade" of the Texas pageant presented at the Texas Centennial celebration in Dallas. The saddle, a real work of art, was hand carved on premium black leather with special handmade designs. The highly trimmed black leather saddle on the white horse created a beautiful sight.

One of Mr. Vela's finest saddles was a special design in white. It was an elaborate hand-carved design of a cowboy riding a bucking bronco. In addition, the saddle was trimmed from the horn to the toe fenders including the initials of the owner stamped on the back. Included in the design package was a beautiful bridle, spurs and blanket designed to compliment the complete outfit. The saddle was a gift from Mrs. W. F. Fordtran to her husband.

Mr. Vela's saddle business was getting national and international attention. In 1941, his business had grown to such proportions that he outgrew his original two story building. He was able to increase his manufacturing area by purchasing an adjacent, brick building. The two buildings were interconnected by constructing two arched openings in the central common wall. In the new area a modern leather workshop was arranged to house the saddle making and other leather working machinery. The original two story building was developed into space for his office, sales room and display area. The upper floor was utilized for storage of manufactured goods, a large stock of leather and other materials needed in the manufacture of saddles.

Through the years, many of Vela's employees became outstanding artisans in their own right. One such person was Oscar Carvajal, a member of a well known local family. At times, he would travel with Mr. Vela to inspect tanneries in the United States and Mexico to obtain the fine leather required in making their products.

Another great craftsman was John P. Sanders of Floresville. He was a longtime employee of Vela Saddlery and had a great talent. He could design his own leather decorations without a pattern. On occasion he appeared on television to demonstrate his creative abilities.

Mr. Vela employed as many as twenty employees at times. Many of these had some previous training at the local CCC Camp. These individuals were carefully trained under his watchful eye which enabled the firm to produce as many as six or more saddles daily. Ranchers, cowboys, rodeo performers, dude ranch operators, movie stars and plain horseback riders from everywhere were daily placing orders for one to six saddles. Some of these were plain working saddles, while others would be especially designed and decorated to suit the owner.

Frank Vela established Floresville as the place to buy a fine saddle as well as other manufactured leather goods. He was an outstanding artist in the trade and was well known nationally and internationally as an individual who could create an original artistic work of art in a saddle.