

CRAFTSMEN

Dave Thornbury

Had it not been for rodeo, and Ray and Carolyn Hunt, this chaps maker might not have found his calling.

Story by **MARY MCCASHIN**

Photography by **JENNIFER DENISON**

FOR MORE THAN 38 YEARS, Dave Thornbury has had a special corner tucked in the back of Calabasas Saddlery in Calabasas, California. There he spends part of his day repairing tack for riders of all disciplines, from rodeo to dressage.

However, the artisan is best known for his custom chaps and chinks, which he makes in the shop behind his home in nearby Agora Hills. Horsemen around the globe, including Buck Brannaman, Craig Cameron and Richard Winters, wear his leggings. His workbench contains sentimental tools given to him by one of his mentors, Mervyn Ringlero. Propped behind the tools are faded photographs of one of his early customers, Ray Hunt.

Raised in Mason City, Iowa, Thornbury grew up with horses and rodeo. His family performed trick riding and roping acts at rodeos in seven midwestern states. He also started riding steers and bulls at a young age.

"Back then contract acts would camp out all week; we didn't travel every weekend like acts do these days," explains Thornbury. "So when I was about junior-high age—13 or 14, I guess—I started working on belts, wallets and purses. It was just a hobby to pass the time between performances."

Thornbury made his first pair of chaps in 1962. They were bull-riding chaps he crafted for himself.

"When I first made them I thought they were just so cool, then I saw them a few



Dave Thornbury makes custom chaps and chinks in a shop behind his home in Agora Hills, California.

MAKER'S MARKS ARTIST: Dave Thornbury, Agora Hills, California **SPECIALTY:** Custom chaps and chinks **BASE PRICE:** \$460 **FACT:** Thornbury has shipped custom chaps as far away as Australia, Finland and Norway. **CONTACT:** Dave Thornbury Custom Chaps on Facebook; 818-591-0292; thornburychaps.com

years later and they were just horrible," he chuckles.

The self-taught craftsman started paying attention to his fellow leather workers, including Buddy Breckenridge, whose shop was 120 miles away in Des Moines, Iowa. Thornbury drove there to watch "Bud" work, noting his attention to grain, texture and hues.

The U.S. Army drafted Thornbury for the Vietnam War in 1966, which put his leatherwork on hold. Two years later, he returned to Iowa, unpacked his duffle bag, and immediately went to California to ride a bronc at a rodeo in Palm Springs.

"It was January, and I remember looking around at the sunny skies and the 70-degree weather," he says. "I recalled how the wind had been blowing the snow sideways when I left Iowa just a few days before. I may not be the brightest, but I caught onto that pretty fast."

After a brief stint in Texas, he returned to California and has made Agora Hills his home for the past 40 years. Though he did learn to make saddles from Ringlero, he's only made three or four in the past five years and only does repairs now. That allows him to focus on making custom leggings.



Thornbury draws, carves and stamps the tops of his chaps by hand.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Thornbury adds piping or a scalloped border to all of his chaps. • Each pair of Thornbury leggings is made to order. This pair of buckskin shotguns has red leather lacing and floral-tooled tops with red dyed background and scalloped border. • Mervyn Ringlero, who was Thornburg's mentor, made his maker's stamp. • Thornbury proudly displays a collection of tools passed down to him by Ringlero. "Those are not tools you can buy at Lowe's or Sears, so they're pretty special to me," he says.

What or who truly kick-started your career?

Early on in California I was out at the racetrack a lot, making chaps for outriders and such. It was before anyone really knew Ray Hunt, but he was out there riding horses for [trainer] D. Wayne Lukas. He stopped me one day and asked if I'd make him a pair of shotguns. I told him I would, and that was the start of my real business.

A few months later, Ray's wife, Carolyn, called me up and asked me to come out to New Mexico for a horse sale at Dead Horse Ranch. My wife and I flew to Albuquerque, rented a car, and drove out to the middle of nowhere. I told my wife, "No one is going to come all the way out here for a horse sale!"

We got there and there weren't any other vendors. Carolyn had me display my chaps on an old wagon between the sale ring and the barn, and I ended up selling out. They asked me to come

to another sale, and things just took off from there.

What's your favorite aspect of your job?

Honestly, it's therapy. I never make the same pair of brown chaps over and over. Each pair is different: I use different leathers, make my own piping, and each stamp is [done by] hand. I usually have four or five pairs in the works at all times. I get to be creative in mixing up colors, and I take pride in the fact that my chaps are truly custom-made; they're made to fit perfectly and every pair is unique. I will not copy anyone; that's a standard I live by. You can't go to the store and buy a pair of chaps like mine. I don't know how anyone else makes his or her chaps; I've never focused on that. I know what works for me and I just do my own thing.

Would you say you're a workaholic?

Oh, absolutely. I work at least

80 hours a week. I'm at my shop at my house by 6 a.m., then I head to Calabasas Saddlery about 9 a.m. and do tack repairs until about 2 p.m. Then I head home, take a nap because I'm older now, and then it's back to work in my home shop. I'm following my passion, though; I'm making a living doing my hobby. If I won the lottery I'd still make chaps. The colors are always changing, there are new styles, and I'm so programmed to do this. I don't know what else I'd do. I'm addicted to it.

How do you let down and take a break?

Every Wednesday I go to my friend Gene [McLaughlin's] place and we trick rope for a few hours. Gene will be 87 in October and I'm in my late 60s, but we make an effort to get together every week. Some Saturdays we'll get together again and rope steers at his place. I guess that's our little escape.