

Saddle up: Master outfitter traces evolution of packing

ROB CHANEY rchaney@missoulian.com Jan 28, 2022

Smoke Elser hangs saddles the way an actor hangs costumes — something for every possible (horse-related) occasion.

One has a wooden frame design dating back to the hordes of Genghis Khan. Another still has the dainty gloves of the favorite client who preferred to ride into the Bob Marshall Wilderness like an English matron, without a saddle horn. A mounted artillery scout's saddle has a special leather pouch for his compass. Some match the shape of sway-backed horses. Others fit straight-backed mules.



Elser uses a modified dentist's chair to work on his saddles, which can be raised, lowered and spun around to the right positions. TOM BAUER/Missoulian
“I still try to buy old saddles,” the 88-year-old outfitter and

master packer said. “They’re built better and last longer, and they’ve got better seats. You see one with foam rubber? What a joke. It’s like sitting in a wet puddle, and you can’t move around. Your hips need to move with the horse, and for that you need firm leather.”

Tips and lessons spill out of Elser like oats from a leaky feed bag. If the COVID-19 pandemic hadn’t reined in the world, this winter would have been the 60th edition of his class in horse-packing methods.



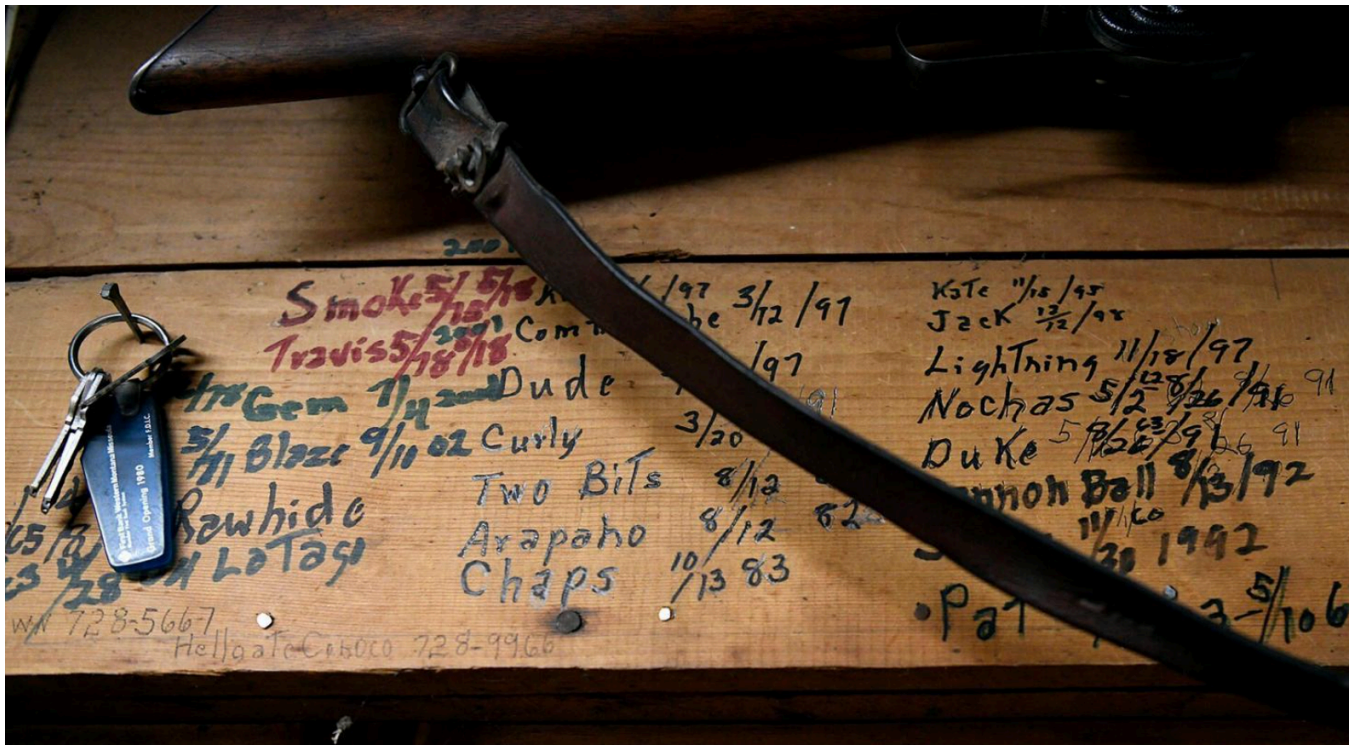
Elser keeps a few shoes from mules and horses that have died on the wall of his stable.
TOM BAUER/Missoulain

Instead, he’s been helping University of Montana professor Eva-Maria Maggi complete a project based on his experiences as a wilderness guide and advocate. Over the past four years, they’ve turned his campfire stories into oral history, and soon a book.



Some of Elser's historically significant saddles and gear have been put on display in a museum case in his Missoula headquarters. When teaching packing classes, he demonstrates the different designs and modifications to show how the gear has evolved.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

“He taught thousands of people how to pack,” said Maggi, who transformed her own experience with his classes into political science courses in wilderness policy. “When he came out here as a young boy from Ohio, he got to work with all the old Forest Service guys, and outfitters like Tom Edwards and Howard Copenhaver. He was at the right place at the right time and carried the torch from all the outfitters he learned from.”



Elser has written the names and dates of death of many of his mules and horses on a wall in his office. His pack animals often serve for more than 20 years, and can live 40.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Connecting modern needs to traditional skills has been Elser’s occupation for more than half a century. Anyone who’s taken one of his horse-packing classes (and there are thousands, including military special forces), knows his first lesson starts with “You can’t push a rope.” Elser keeps his esoteric talents viable by gently pulling them into the future, trusting their time-tested value to adapt to new demands.

When his guests stopped showing up in cowboy boots for their horseback adventures, Elser redesigned his saddle stirrups. Many have stirrups that dangle like an open “L” instead of a closed “D.” That’s because dudes arrive in lace-up boots or sneakers.



Elser uses a well-worn artificial elk quarter to teach others the right way to pack game meat on a horse.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

“If I fall off and my boot gets caught in the stirrup, my foot slides right out,” Elser explained. “A lace-up shoe won’t do that. Somewhere in the country every year, there’s usually one person dragged to death because their shoe got caught in a stirrup.”

The open-L stirrups he designed and forges in his stable give the rider support without locking their foot to the saddle. An extra bend at the end keeps it from poking the horse as well.



Elser fashions antlers into awls for working on gear, as metal awls can sometimes injure the user.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

“You’ve got to make everything when you’re an outfitter,” Elser said, demonstrating the bench where he repairs and rebuilds those saddles. It spins, rises and lowers as needed. He built it on the base of an old dentist’s chair.

Elser custom-fits each saddle to a specific animal. He sprinkles “hot-cake flour” (pancake mix) on their backs before setting the frame on them, because it will leave

marks where the wood chafes. Then he takes a rasp and files down the offending edges for a perfect match.



The wall of saddles in outfitter Smoke Elser's Missoula barn attest to his decades of experience packing horses and mules into the wilderness.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

While he prefers cottonwood to plastic in his saddle frames, Elser doesn't object to improved materials. A synthetic webbing fabric he's found cuts packing weight down to 3 pounds instead of the 22 he'd need with traditional canvas. Plus it breathes better on the animal's back. It's made in Columbia Falls.

To work the material, he uses awls made of deer horn. They're pointy enough to punch through the leather or plastic, but not so sharp as a screwdriver — so not as

likely to tear a hole in the repairman's hand. A painful story probably lurks behind that bit of wisdom.



Elser keeps a photo from the 1970s that includes Steve Ford, son of President Gerald Ford, who spent a summer with Elser. The U.S. Secret Service installed a red telephone in Elser's stable for direct communication with Washington, D.C. if needed.

TOM BAUER/Missoulian

“That’s what bailing twine is for,” Elser says, looking over the odds and ends that make up his tool kit. “People who use bungee cords to pack get hurt all the time. They get hit in the face.”

Constantly thinking of safety and comfort seems out of place for a devotee of horsing about in the wilderness. But it also determines the difference between successful dude-guiding and disaster.

Eric Piippo's family often camped in the Bob Marshall Wilderness close to one of Elser's camps. He recalled how as a young boy, he learned Elser's unique techniques for lashing and knotting pack gear.



A selection of bridles and horse tack hangs on Elser's stable wall.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

“The techniques he came up with to tie packs onto mules were always safety first,” said Piippo, who soon got a job wrangling for Elser as a teenager. “He had developed all these different safety knots that made so much more sense. If you have a mule or horse go down, you’ve got to get those manties (loaded packs) off as quick as

possible. With his knots, you can run up and grab the rope and yank in the right direction, and it just comes free.”

Piippo’s unofficial employment application with Elser was to clear the horse manure out of the rock-walled stable that now holds all the saddles. Back in 1992, Piippo said, it was literally an uphill climb to get on top of the pile.



Much of Elser's gear is handmade, and has been repaired over and over again.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

“He gave me a shovel and a tractor, and said ‘I want to see the concrete,’” Piippo said of the task. It turned out the builders of the 1905 structure had hand-poured a concrete floor in narrow strips. It was intended to store apples, relying on the stone for natural cooling.

Once Piippo passed the test, he quickly graduated to shepherding dudes deep into the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

“I can’t believe I never had a camera with me,” Piippo said. “There were whole hillsides moving with hundreds of elk. We’d see bears. I did keep a journal, and I wrote a letter every day to my then-girlfriend. I’ve still got those letters.”



Although Elser no longer leads pack trips into the wilderness, he still teaches packing techniques and serves on numerous resource and conservation committees.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Elser has letters too — scrapbooks filled with more than 3,000 cards and notes from friends, clients and happy guests. A separate

box has a pile of military trading coins. A number of military units have rotated through Elser’s classes, learning how to use horses and mules to operate in places like Afghanistan.

“They need to be quiet, so they can’t use an ATV,” Elser said. “And these days, they have so much more communications equipment, batteries, and laptops, they can’t carry it all on foot.”

The wall-mounted red telephone installed by the U.S. Secret Service is another odd touch. But when you guide the child of a U.S. president into the wilderness, certain parties like to stay in close contact. It’s no longer a direct line to Washington, D.C., but Elser remembers when Gerald Ford’s son Steve spent the summer with him, and the special phone came with the deal.



When he was running a string of more than 30 mules and horses, Elser typically had to shoe each one three times a year. Now that he no longer keeps a full pack string of mules and horses, he often makes coat racks out of the shoes.

TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Getting up from his desk (which has no computer), Elser walked over to an almost unnoticed side door of his office/barn. He opened it and yelled “Judy!” A blaze-faced mule trotted across the corral and stuck her head across the threshold. Elser held out a handful of pellets.

“I had to put a bar across the door or they’d come right in,” he said as Palmer and Woody, Judy’s stablemates, joined the gathering. Each mule took just a pellet or two and then drifted away, satisfied with their mid-morning snack.



Elser gives a mid-morning treat to his three mules, Judy, Palmer and Woody, through a door in his office that opens to their corral.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Elser says he spends a lot of time feeding mules, but he really spends it teaching classes — often about mules. He serves on the Dillon Resource Management Advisory Committee, University of Montana’s Wilderness and Civics programs, and the local Conservation Roundtable. He’s taught horse-packing classes at the Ninemile Remount Station 37 years longer than it’s been a remount station.

“He can make anybody feel welcome, from the CEO of Boeing (Aerospace) or a logger from Darby,” Maggi said. “He has a unique ability to hear everybody’s voice and bring them together.”

And he’s got a saddle to fit them.

This article ran in the January 28, 2022 edition of the Missoulian.