**Price McLauchlin:
The Saginaw Special, Revisited
by Nick Pernokas** **[Editor’s note: In September 2003, we ran an article on legendary saddlemaker Price McLauchlin. We were in a transition period in our office and some of the text was lost on the way to the printer. The temp who attempted a last minute save wasn’t familiar with the material or even saddlemaking, so the article contained inaccuracies. We always strive to bring you the most up-to-date and accurate information possible, so we felt it was time to reprint the story in its entirety. Please enjoy, for the first time in print, the “uncut” version of the life and times of Price McLauchlin.]

Towards the end of his career, saddlemaker Price McLauchlin had a family show up at his shop in Boyd, Texas. They were from Ohio and they had Western pleasure horses. They had brought their young daughter to Texas to order a new pleasure saddle for her from Price. As the little girl stepped down from the motorhome, she eyed the modest saddle shop that had taken over the old horse barn. She turned to Price and said, “As famous as you are, I thought you’d be rich!”

As many artists know, fame doesn’t always have a monetary value that can be placed on it. Fame can also be arrived at by a circuitous route in which fate plays a hand. In Price’s case the story starts when he was born on March 5, 1926, in Fort Worth. His dad was a horse trader and Price and his brothers learned to ride at an early age. Both his father and grandfather had been jockeys from around the town of Santa Anna. He was raised around Fort Worth with the family eventually moving to Keller. When war came he joined the Navy. In 1946, after his discharge, he wanted to do something with the horses. Although he had experience as a machinist, he now found himself breaking horses. Price wanted to supplement his income. He had done a little leatherwork and braiding so he headed down to Exchange Avenue on Fort Worth’s Northside where cattle were traded and saddles were built.** **Price tooling a swell cover.

Price went to work for an old saddle shop called Atkins-Burnett (formally Edelbrock, then Atkins- Boothman and later Atkins-Bullinger) in Fort Worth in 1946. Price learned the trade from Ed Chapman and Ernest Myers (S.D.Myers’ nephew) who both worked there at the time. He ended up staying there until 1953.

In the meantime Price was still riding horses and participating in a local sport which was calf roping. He began going to some calf roping jackpots on Wednesday nights at Roanoke. The man who put the ropings on had a pretty daughter named Joyce who turned out calves at the roping. In 1948 Price and Joyce began dating. On one of their first dates they went to the Fort Worth Stock Show and saw the legendary Pine Johnson compete in the cutting on Poco Bueno. They went around to the back of the coliseum and visited with the cutters, many of who were daytime customers in the saddle shop. The seeds of a lifelong love of cutting were planted. Price married Joyce Kelley in 1949.

In 1953 he went out on his own and opened a shop in Saginaw, Texas. His first customers were mostly cowboys and ranchers from the Archer City–Seymour area which was northwest of Fort Worth. At the time L. White and Leddy’s were both large shops but there was a man who sold hats that was not yet in the saddle business. His name was Windy Ryon and he ran a hat stand in the livestock exchange building. A cowboy could get a hat shaped or buy a new one while he was in town on cattle business. Windy wanted to sell saddles too so he got Price to leave some calf roping saddles with him on consignment. Pretty soon Windy was selling a lot of roping saddles for Price.** **Lunch at Atkins-Burnett Saddlery circa 1949: Left to right- A.W.Atkins (owner), Theodore Bullinger (later owner), Price, O.B. McCampbell (rancher), Stormy Mangrum (pilot), Bob Burnett of Burnett Ranches (owner), unknown man. The shop was formerly the Edelbrock Saddlery and was located in the building across the street from where Leddys Saddle Shop still is.

By 1957, Price had four children. He also was working all the time and not getting to spend the time with them that he wanted to. He and Joyce decided that a move was in order. Outside of East Saint Louis, in Cahokia, Illinois, lived a horse trader named Cletus Hulling. Cletus was sitting on the crossroads of a nation that was prosperous and, with the postwar boom, had leisure time. Through the movies, television and comic books, America had rediscovered the Cowboy and, more importantly, the horse. Cletus had the largest horse supermarket in the country and they weren’t just cowhorses. They were also backyard horses and horse show horses for the rapidly growing, family-oriented “horses for pleasure industry.” Cletus was shipping hundreds of authentic Quarter Horses from the West to an enthusiastic East.

Cletus also had a Western store in the stockyards of East Saint Louis, and he had started selling some of Price’s saddles. The McLauchlins visited him while on vacation and fell in love with western Illinois. The green trees and grass were a sharp contrast to the drought that Texas was in that year. They found a seven-acre place with a barn, an arena, and a shop on it. They went back to Texas and sold their place.

By October 1957, the McLauchlins were in Cahokia. Price had his own shop in Illinois but because he was so close to Hulling’s operation, he had a steady stream of horse buyers from the East coming through his shop. These were the people whom he never would have met in Fort Worth. Hulling tried to hire Price to build saddles at his shop but eventually gave up.** **Price’s other love, cutting.

After the McLauchlins had been in Cahokia for several years they received a call from Windy Ryon. He had taken out a ninety–nine year lease on an old building in the exchange area of Fort Worth. Windy wanted to talk to Price about his plans for a large Western store so he flew up to Illinois. Over dinner he asked Price to go in as a partner in Ryon’s. Windy’s idea was for Price to run the saddle shop and he would handle the hats and clothes.

Price thought it over and said, “I don’t think it would work with you and I being partners, Windy. I think the world of you and we’re good friends but you’re a workaholic and I’m not. You’ll end up dying of a heart attack and I intend to live to be a ripe old age.”

At the time Joyce had wanted Price to take Windy up on his offer. She was homesick for Texas and it seemed like a great opportunity. Looking back on it in later years, however, she thought that they made the right decision. Ryon’s became a very successful Western store with a catalog business for saddles, tack, and clothing. Price continued to grow his own business by word of mouth and catering to the newly expanding horse show world.** **Three great saddlemakers together at the 1976 NCHA awards party: (L-R) Price, Bud Cannella, and Daryl Tidwell.

Eventually he became friends with a man named Monte Foreman who was dissecting the way horses worked. Monte was ahead of his time and was one of the first horsemen to film a horse at work in order to understand how to train one better. At a time when a lot of cowboys just got on and rode, Monte was putting on clinics and teaching people about lead changes and flexion. Price and Monte agreed that the Western saddle had to change with the times and become current for this new level of horsemanship. It had to become lighter and more flexible. Price was always one who could change with the times and he incorporated these ideas into his saddles for Western pleasure and reining. Monte also tried to get Price to go into a partnership on his new line of saddles but again Price declined. Price always thought that a partnership started out with friends and ended up with enemies.

While Price was in Illinois, he put away his ropes and began cutting. Cletus was a cutter and he traded a lot of cutting horses. Price had already been building the old time cutting saddles in the days before the flat seat cutter. Now he began reading everything he could on cutting and studying it. By 1961 he was winning in the local cuttings on horses that he trained.

Soon he was accumulating trophies, buckles and saddles from his cutting career. Price also gave back though. The McLauchlins established the NCHA Youth Championship and donated a saddle for twelve years.

In 1964 the pull of home became too great and the McLauchlins moved back to Saginaw, Texas. His brother, Earl, went to work for him at about the same time.

In April 1966, the McLauchlins took a trip to Vernal, Utah, to the Standard Saddletree Company. Lawrence Fox owned it at that time. Price designed three saddletrees that were to be his mainstays. They were “The Saginaw Special,” “The WP All Around”(for Wesley Price), and “The Price Special.” Price began marketing these tree styles in his first brochure and the Price Special became the most popular. The three styles were on the same bar that Price liked and that he had thinned down. The swells and cantles were different. The original trees and service were great and helped establish Price’s reputation for a good fitting saddle with an excellent feel. In later years as things changed it became increasingly difficult for Price to match the original trees as well. Price eventually became frustrated with the difficulty in reproducing an identical saddle for previous customers when the trees would be slightly different.

The three styles were cosmetically different too. The WP and the Saginaw were primarily Western pleasure saddles and the Price was an all- around that was popular with cutters and reiners. Reiners like Dale Wilkinson and Bill Horn popularized Price’s innovative designs. Price began donating a saddle to the NRHA Futurity every year for the Limited Open Champion. This continued until big business stepped in; a large production saddle company became a major sponsor of the Futurity and didn’t want any other brands of saddles given at the event.** **The Price Special had a round swell similar to an Olin Young that leaned slightly forward.** **The WP All-Around had a swell that had a slight leg cut at the base of the swell. Note the braided horn, inskirt front and rear riggings, and buckstitching which was popular in the late sixties.** **The Saginaw Special was similar to the WP but had a half inch taller swell which gave the leg cuts more definition. Many of these had comfort cantles.** **The Flat Seat Cutter demonstrates how Price changed with the times.If you look close you can see the customer’s initials he hid in the carving on the backhousing.

At one time Price had as many as fourteen people in his shop. Most were family members; some were talented local craftsmen like Tink Odell. In spite of all the help, he never made the jump to a production type saddle. Usually the saddles were shipped the day they were finished and rarely were there very many stock saddles built for inventory. Word of mouth through horse trainers was Price’s best advertising. In addition to the horsemen from the show world, Price built saddles for such notables as Tanya Tucker, Lynn Anderson, President Lyndon Johnson, Wild Bill Elliot, The (Original) Lone Ranger and even two for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.

Price sold his saddles several times through other dealers so he wouldn’t always have to market them himself. They always had his name stamp on them though. After Windy and Cletus, Denny Seargent sold them in the Midwest. When that ended in the early seventies, Price needed someone to take his saddles to the Quarter Horse Congress in Columbus, Ohio. At the time it was the largest horse show and equine trade show in the world. An Illinois store called S Bar H took twelve of Prices saddles to the Congress and sold all of them in three days. This became another way for Price to get his saddles to the eastern market. It continued for several years until S Bar H went bankrupt. Due to the complications that can arise in this type of situation, Price was left with a bad taste in his mouth and decided that he wouldn’t sell saddles through another dealer again.

Occasionally rumors got back to Price about things that saddle salesmen in other parts of the country would say when customers came in and asked if they carried his saddles. He heard that his shop had burned down, that he’d died, and that he had moved his operation to Mexico. One year the McLauchlins took six of their flat seat cutters to a large cutting in Illinois. Price had a booth there but his ulterior motive was to get to visit with a lot of old friends. Price stepped out to get a barbecue sandwich with a friend, leaving Joyce in the booth. Three couples walked up and stopped to look at the saddles. One of them was a horse shoer who also felt he was very knowledgeable about saddles. He looked at the sign over the booth that said “Price McLauchlin” and looked at the name stamps on the saddles. He loudly proclaimed to his friends, “Now these are not Price McLauchlinsaddles. I’ve seen a bunch of them and I know one when I see one.”

“You see,” he continued, “the old man died and his family sold the name to a Mexican company and now these are all made in Mexico.”

Joyce listened to him as long as she could and then tried to tell him that they were indeed Price’s saddles. He just kept telling her that they weren’t. She went outside and brought Price back in with his sandwich and a beer. Price had a nametag on and, as the man read it, Price asked him if he wanted to see his driver’s license. The shoer’s jaw dropped as he turned beet red.** **Price and Joyce. Joyce also competed in the cutting.

In the 1970’s there was a teamster’s strike. To Fort Worth saddlemakers that meant that leather and time were running out. With no leather to fill custom orders, the work would run out on the North side where a lot of the saddle shops were located. Price knew the owners of a large tannery in Saint Louis personally from his years of living up there. The man who owned the tannery agreed to help the Fort Worth saddleshops. In the middle of the night he smuggled ten rolls of leather out of the tannery in his motorhome. He met a cutting horse friend of Price’s on I–70 in western Missouri and transferred the load to his horse trailer. When the load arrived at Price’s shop, he called everyone and the leather was distributed to those shops in need, with names like Ryon’s and Leddy’s. The Fort Worth saddle industry was able to pull through until the end of the strike.

This was an example of how well Price got along with his competitors in the saddle business. Bud Cannella (Cajun) was a good friend that he cut with. Joey Jemison frequently borrowed Price’s clicker when he was starting out. Gene Bader was known to share a box of woolskins with Price from time to time. Once when Price was finishing a saddle, he realized that he was out of a particular set of silver that he needed. At the time, Leddy’s used the same silversmith and style of corner plates. Not wanting to disappoint his customer, he sent Joyce down to Leddy’s to see if they had any of that style in stock. Wilson Franklin rummaged around in the saddle shop at Leddy’s but was unable to find a matching set. Wilson did have a finished saddle in the window of the showroom though and it was mounted with that type of silver. He pulled it out of the display, took it upstairs to the shop and removed the silver, corner plates and all, for Joyce.

Price’s rugged good looks led to an interesting life in addition to saddlemaking. He modeled for Justin Boots in their catalog, on billboards and on television in the late sixties. He also modeled for Bandera Hats in 1969.

Price was a successful competitor in cutting competitions. The NCHA Futurity is the measuring stick for cutters; it’s the “Big Show.” He made the finals in the Futurity several times in the non-pro division. He also made the semi-finals in the open division several times and all of this was on horses that he’d trained. While he never hauled down the road like many of his competitors, he loved the horses and the training of them himself.

In 1985 Earl McLauchlin passed away and many people again thought that Price had died until the Quarter Horse News published a picture of him at work with the caption paraphrasing Mark Twain’s, ”The rumors of my demise are greatly exaggerated.”

In 1985 Price had a blood clot in his leg and couldn’t show horses any more. The clot also broke loose and traveled to his lungs, which resulted in chronic lung problems for Price. He developed asthma and emphysema. He sold his place in Saginaw and moved his shop up the road a few miles to his horse barn in Boyd.** **Price and one of his sons, Lee in 1983.

Price kept working even when he had to start using an oxygen bottle. On New Year’s Day 2002 he was working in the shop alone. His grandsons were outside riding. He tripped over his oxygen hose and fell. He knew that he’d dislocated his shoulder but he couldn’t get up. Price was trying to crawl to the phone when a passerby stopped by the shop. Price asked him to go out to the arena and get the boys. When they got to the shop, they helped him up. One of them, Matt Fanning, was a football player and strong so Price asked him to pull on his arm. Matt didn’t want to but Price knew his shoulder was swelling. Matt tugged and Price said, ”That’s not pulling, boy. Now pull.”

They were able to put the shoulder back in place and, when Joyce got home, they took him to the emergency room in Decatur. By the time a doctor could look at him, a couple of hours had passed and the doctor told them that they were lucky to have gotten the shoulder back in place when they did. If they had waited, surgery would have been required, and Price was not a good candidate because he was on oxygen. He did have a horizontal fracture of his upper arm and two broken ribs but they healed and he was back tooling in six weeks.

His back began to bother him after the accident and he had to take pain medication to relieve it. One evening in July, the doctor gave him some strong painkillers so he could sleep. When he woke, Price took his oxygen hoses in both hands like bridle reins and said that he felt great. Then he told Joyce, ”I feel like I could just ride off into the sunset.”

A few hours later, on the morning of July 11, his heart gave out and he did just that.

The McLauchlins had four children. Donna was Miss Rodeo USA as well as an accomplished cutter. David was a top bullrider and had begun training cutting horses when he passed away in 1986. Lee is a top cutting horse trainer and NCHA judge. Although all of the children worked in the business, only Steve has continued making saddles. Steve, of Decatur, Texas, used to ride bulls, rope calves, and compete in cutting. He’s also an excellent saddlemaker. He specializes in roping saddles and has a long list of customers waiting for them. Steve has also followed in Price’s footsteps in another way. When his kids need to go to a youth rodeo, he locks the front gate and goes.

According to Joyce, Price was not a “church going man but he lived his life in a fashion that was an example for young people. He was a devoted husband and father and his integrity carried over into his business.” A close friend of his who is a cutter and an AQHA judge said that “wife and family came first with Price, ahead of business and showing, fame and fortune.”

As Joyce looked back over the years, she reminisced, “You know, we made a good living, sent four kids to college, got braces on their teeth when they needed it, provided for our family, and showed horses a limited amount. Maybe a more driven personality would have marketed themselves better and made it into a large factory but Price didn’t want that. He wanted a small family business and most of our customers were our friends.

“To Price, leatherwork was an art; he did it because he enjoyed it, it was like painting a picture. He did it for his own satisfaction and he was fortunate to make a living at it.”

Looking back at Price’s life, you can be certain of one thing: Sometimes little girls can be wrong.**