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## Over 50 saddles lost in valley crime spree

He was ugly in appearance, a long scar running down the right cheek of his round, pockmarked face, and he was also ugly in the things he did. There was a picture of him once in a local newspaper at the end of his crime spree. I wonder if he ever realized the pain he caused his victims, if he knew what he put them through when he stole their saddles. Didn't he know how attached a person got to their saddle? He certainly didn't care.

Back in the middle to late 1970s, this scoundrel ran rampant through the Upper Valley. I knew because every person he hit came by my store, The Cowboy Trading Post, or called me to see if I had been sold a saddle lately or to tell me to be on the lookout for theirs that was stolen the night before. By the time he was caught, the count the number of saddles stolen climbed to over 50, and those are just the ones I learned about.

One such report came from John S.A. Martin, a farmer in the Vinton area. One night his dogs were barking and raising such a ruckus that he got up to see. He had saddles out in his barn and was aware of all the thieving that had been going on. He got his gun and walked outside, slowly making his way to the barn. The dogs would not be quiet; he walked on, made the rounds, nothing. So, he quieted the dogs and went back to bed.

The next morning he went out to feed his animals and right away saw the shed door broken open. John walked over and sure enough three of his four saddles were gone; the only one left was an old English saddle.

How could this happen, when did it happen? Did he walk right by the thief while he was hiding there? Was the bandit so cool that he just stepped back into the dark shadows of the big old cottonwood tree alongside the barn? Waiting for John to walk back into his house, so he could go about his thieving? Did he have help or was he loner, how many trips did this cool character make ... how did he do it? These questions plagued John for years.

Another call came from Christi Lama. Her barn was broken into and the thief had to walk across a huge hay field to do

## Taking a Look Back

by John McVey Middagh

the dirty deed.

Christi said, "The police followed his trail through the alfalfa to the back irrigation ditch where they thought the thief had parked his vehicle."

Christi lost her show saddle along with others, again indicating more than one trip. Now it seemed certain: the thief takes only western saddles. He left her English saddles and all her bridles. Some of the bridles were expensive — did he not know that much about the horse business that he would pass up good bridles, or is he so selective that he only wants western saddles?

On another day it was Marsha Moyer on the phone. Her barn was broken into the night before. The thief chipped the mortar away from around the cinder blocks in the wall, removing just enough of them to crawl in and take all of her saddles.

Both the El Paso Police Department and the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Office were called because half the barn was in Texas and the other in New Mexico. They followed the trail to the river levee. Here again the thief walked some distance, and had to have made multiple trips.

More saddles were stolen and the calls and the people kept coming by the store. Then one day the word came that the police task force had arrested a man, and were certain he was the culprit. He must have been the one, because the thieving stopped after the arrest.

He was convicted and sent to a New Mexico state prison. We never heard anymore about the case, but we never forgot about our stolen saddles. Some thought the thief was part of a wholesale operation to import stolen saddles to Mexico. During that time, anyone driving the roads south of Juárez could see a pickup truck at every intersection with saddles lining the truck beds, many selling very cheap.

Of course we will never know, but the stealing stopped and it has never been that bad again.

*John McVey Middagh is a former saddle shop owner. You can reach him at [jmiddagh@yahoo.com](mailto:jmiddagh@yahoo.com).*

### At the Museum

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**Sacramento Mountains Historical Museum** — 1000 U.S. 82, Cloudcroft, N.M. Open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Admission: \$5 (\$3 ages 6 to 12); \$1 military discount. Information: (575) 682-2932 or [cloudcroftmuseum.com](http://cloudcroftmuseum.com).

Haunted Village is 7 to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, **Oct. 21-22**, and **Oct. 28-29**.

**Silver City Museum** — 312 W. Broadway, Silver City. Hours are 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Open until 7 p.m. the first Friday of the month. Admission: \$3.

Information: (575) 538-5921 or [silvercitymuseum.org](http://silvercitymuseum.org).

Showing **through Dec. 10**: "Arte Chicano de San Vicente 2017." featuring area Chicano artists by Dayna Griego, Peter Garcia, and Ruben Gonzales. Artist reception is 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, **Nov. 1**.

Showing **through Dec. 31**: "50 Years Ago in Silver City." A panel discussions is noon to 1 p.m. Thursday, **Oct. 12**, on Local policing in the late 1960s

A 50 Years Ago Program: "Turn On Tune In" digital stories presentation is 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Saturday, **Oct. 14**.

**Toy Train Depot** — 1991 N. White Sands Blvd., Alamogordo. Hours are noon to 4:40 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Admission: \$4. Information: (575) 437-2855.