



TAN, TRIM AND TAP
 Clockwise from left: Since the 19th century, Yoakum has been Texas' land of leather; cutting a tanned hide at Carl Ammerman Saddles; Brushy Creek's handcrafted belts, Ammerman's design sketches; embossing a saddle at Circle Y.



xxxxxxxx



A LEGACY IN LEATHER

Scores of skilled artisans in the self-proclaimed 'Leather Capital of the World' still craft saddles the old-fashioned way — one at a time.

Susan L. Ebert browses the artisan workshops of Yoakum, Texas

As I breeze down through rolling, verdant pasturelands south of Austin, the sunrise has just breached the horizon. I take the turnoff from U.S. Highway 183 onto Farm-to-Market Road 111 leading to Yoakum. I glance at my Jeep's clock, hoping I'll complete the two-hour drive in time. You see, my first stop in Yoakum is always the H & H Café & Bakery, and although it stays open through lunch, my goal's to get there before the morning's fresh-baked kolaches run out.

I wheel up to the curb as the local breakfast crowd filters out and breathe a sigh of relief when I step inside, spotting the tray of plump pastry pillows glistening jewel-like behind the glass. Peach? Apple? Cherry? Why decide, I shrug, opting for one of each. Taking my prize, I stroll up Lott Street, munching contentedly.

Yoakum, girdled to the south by Big Brushy Creek, originated as a Spanish land grant in 1835 and served as a gathering ground for cattle drives up the trail later named for Jesse Chisholm. And it might well have just remained as that dusty footnote in history had the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad not come to town in 1887, bringing with it Benjamin



AMAZING SADDLES
 Circle Y Saddles' new facility north of town continues the brand's tradition of crafting beautifully detailed leather goods.

More than a dozen leather companies — many with lineage tracing to the original tanneries through bloodlines, employment or both — dot the town.

Yoakum in the late 1880s, the long cattle drives — swallowing profit margins with cattle mortality, disease and weight loss — ended, replaced by the more cost-effective rail shipping of chilled hanging beef.

Mounds of cowhides grew into mountains on the outskirts of town, piquing the interest of a young saddle-maker, Carl Welhausen, who was searching for the ideal location to start his own saddlery business. In 1919, he opened the doors of his Texas Hide and Leather Co. — the original name of today's Tex Tan brand — later expanding his leather-crafting to include bridles, harnesses, belts, holsters and billfolds. As word spread of his saddle-making prowess, leather artisans looking for both steady work and a steady supply of leather flocked to Yoakum, and its population swelled to 7,500.

Franklin Yoakum, its cracking-with-energy, earnest vice president and general manager.

Heralding the arrival of the rail line, this “wide spot on the trail” would adopt his name as its own. Ben Yoakum, considered a visionary by his colleagues, would later engineer one of Texas’ first roundhouses in his eponymous town and grow what would become the largest railroad system in the country under a single control. By 1896, the flourishing town boasted a population of 3,000 with a school of 700 students, numerous general and specialty stores, and two weekly newspapers.

A massive shift was also underway in railroading at this time. The post-Civil War North’s appetite for beef, spurred by the thousands of cattle driven by Texas cowboys up the Chisholm Trail to the Kansas feedlots, showed no signs of being sated. So when Ben Yoakum ordered the newly patented mechanically chilled refrigerated boxcars to be brought to

Flash-forward nearly a century to today, with more than a dozen leather companies — many with lineage tracing to the original tanneries through bloodlines, employment or both — dotting the town and international sources ranking Yoakum as the third-best place in the world to buy leather, trailing only Milan and Barcelona.

A block up Lott Street, I pass the former offices of Circle Y Saddles, which for years operated out of a cobbled-together network of restored downtown buildings before building its state-of-the-art facility north of town across from the rodeo arena. The old St. Regis Hotel that Circle Y once used as a factory has a new sign, “St. Regis Past & Present.” Intrigued, I step inside to warm greetings from proprietor Dennis Kaiser and his mother, Barbara, along with vistas of antiques and collectibles stretching throughout the early 20th-century hotel’s expansive first floor.

Kaiser, a San Antonio-based architect, purchased the hotel nine years ago, leasing it to Circle Y until its transition to its new headquarters in 2010. “We didn’t open until a couple years ago,” he says, showing me where he’d painstakingly removed plank floors to reveal the hand-laid mosaic tile in the former lobby. Kaiser’s goal is to reveal even more of the three-story, 42-room hotel’s original structure, but the constant influx of consignments and estate sales keeps them well-occupied. I swoon over both the quantity and quality of the antiques — as well as the fact that they’re priced well below the Austin market. I don’t leave empty-handed.

Stashing my finds in the Jeep, I continue up Lott Street to the Double D Ranch outlet store. Since Double D first rocketed to acclaim in 1989, it continually ranks in the upper echelon of Western fashion, earning the McMullen family the prestigious Mary Jane Coulter Award from the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 2015. Since my husband’s not here tapping his foot in the doorway and I’m fueled up on kolaches, I can shop leisurely. A turquoise-hued dress that I fall in love with will need just the perfect accessories to set it off.

Fortunately, I know just where to go, as another spunky set of designing sisters is right down the road. Double J Saddlery may have only launched as its own brand in 1991, but its roots run deep in Yoakum. Owner John DeBord spent nearly two decades learning saddle-making at Circle Y before stepping out on his own with his wife, Nancy, daughter of Circle Y’s founder Leland Tucker. Concentrating on the high-end tack, Double J builds intricately tooled



A COWBOY'S TOUCH
Double J Saddlery builds intricately tooled and embellished, ergonomically precise, handcrafted saddles.

and embellished, ergonomically precise, handcrafted saddles — some in the range of \$5,000 or more.

While sons Josh and Jesse run sales and operations respectively, daughters Chaedrea and Kristyn DeBord design and market the women’s collections, including purses, belts, boot bags, luggage and cellphone cases, many studded with Swarovski crystals in cowhides dyed in signature Double J colors and trimmed with intricate hand-tooling.

Stepping into Double J’s 5,000-square-foot retail store, it’s especially thrilling to know that everything’s made just beyond the showroom doors in the building’s remaining 20,000 square feet. “What began as just a way to use smaller scraps after cutting the leather for saddles has become a robust part of our business, thanks to Chaedrea and Kristyn,” says John DeBord, as he surveys shelves brimming with belts, bags and purses.

A stadium purse in mint chocolate chip-embossed crocodile completes my ensemble, and it’s back in the Jeep for a quick jaunt over to the Yoakum Heritage Museum. Here, I’ll stroll through this restored Victorian antebellum mansion to admire the vintage hand-tooled saddles in the Leather Room and browse among the artifacts from Yoakum’s railroad boomtown days before heading home with my own haul of goods. ✨

YOAKUM: IF YOU GO

SADDLE-MAKERS AND LEATHER GOODS

Circle Y Saddles

1708 N. South St., (800) 531-3600
CIRCLEY.COM

Double J Saddlery

2243 Highway 77A South,
(800) 669-2535
DOUBLEJSADDLERY.COM

Tex Tan

808 U.S. Highway 77A S.,
361-293-2314, TEXTAN.COM

POINTS OF INTEREST

Double D Ranchwear Outlet Store

509 Lott St., (800) 899-3379
DDRANCHWEAR.COM

H & H Café & Bakery

719 Lott St., 361-293-3232

St. Regis Past & Present

612 Lott St., 713-303-6399

Yoakum Heritage Museum

312 Simpson St., 361-293-2309