



Episode 901, Story 3 – Canutt Saddle

Wes Cowan: This case asks if this saddle helped carry the all-American cowboy onto the silver screen.

Archival film: "C'mon, get in your saddle. We gotta go tell this chief!"

Wes: In 1930s Hollywood, audiences thrilled to death defying stunts. Rhett Butler leading Scarlett O'Hara out of a burning Atlanta in "Gone with the Wind," angry Indians attacking the Ringo Kid in "Stagecoach," and the cowboys who leaped, punched and tumbled in scores of films. What part did one man play in all these iconic action scenes? Now, Terry Garber from McCall, Idaho wonders if this saddle was ridden by a man who may have created the Hollywood stuntman. I've got a few questions for Terry.

Wes: Hey, Terry.

Terry Garber: Hi, Wes.

Wes: Oh, wow. let me help you there.

Terry: I got it out of a bar in Weiser, Idaho.

Wes: Now, are you a saddle collector then? Do you collect Western memorabilia?

Terry: Yeah, I do. I collect lots of Western things.



Wes: So, what attracted you to this saddle?

Terry: I bought it because of the name on the cantle.

Wes: So, CANN-UTT. And then there's a Y-A-K in the middle. Yak Canutt. Who's Yak Canutt?

Terry: Yakima was a world champion rodeoer. I heard he'd moved to Hollywood and did stunt work.

Wes: Terry's done some digging, and he believes Yakima Canutt was a stuntman in Hollywood movies, but I have to admit, I've never heard of him

Wes: So you think this was Yakima Canutt's saddle then?

Terry: I hope so.

Wes: Cool, but you're not sure?

Terry: No, I'm not sure.

Wes: So, did you ever consider that the saddle might be a fake?

Terry: Oh, sure. In this collection field, there's a lot of fakes out there.



Wes: Okay, well, it's a great saddle, and I see it's got a brand here from the maker.

Terry: Yeah, that's Hamley's brand. Hamley out of Pendleton, Oregon.

Wes: Alright, Terry, so what do you want me to help you with?

Terry: Well, Wes, I'd like to know if it's actually Yakima Canutt's saddle.

Wes: I'm going to have to take it with me, though, is that all right?

Terry: Okay.

Wes: Terrific.

Wes: Well, let's take a look at this. You know, the first thing I want to tell you is that I'm not an expert on saddles. I mean, I know enough to be dangerous. It's probably a late nineteenth or early twentieth century model. But whether it's from 1890 or 1920, I don't know. So, I'm going have to find someone that can help me date this saddle. Somebody's really ridden this saddle and ridden it pretty hard. See the basket weave stamping, and how it's worn off here? I mean, this saddle was well used. It's, frankly, worn out. Look at this. The saddle is stamped "special", and then there's sets of numbers on either side. So, those numbers have to mean something. I want to find out more about this guy, Yakima Canutt.

Born 1895. Died 1986. American rodeo rider, actor, stuntman and action director. "Stagecoach." "Old Yeller." "Cat Ballou." "A Man Called Horse." This guy was in



practically every famous Western movie that you can imagine. Take a look at this. Yak getting on a bucking bronc. Take a look at the saddle. Sure looks a lot like Terry's saddle. I'd guess Yak probably had more than one saddle, but is it possible we have the one in the photo? Bingo, the Autry Museum has one of Yak Canutt's saddles. Looks like I'm heading to Los Angeles. The Autry National Center in Hollywood's Griffith Park is a museum about the American West. Jeffrey Richardson is one of their curators.

Jeffrey Richardson: So, here is our Yakima Canutt saddle.

Wes: This is so spectacular. It doesn't look anything like the saddle I brought in. Is this the kind of saddle that he would have used as a stuntman then?

Jeffrey: No. This particular saddle was presented to him in 1923, when he won his fourth and final all around championship at the Pendleton Roundup.

Wes: Beginning in 1910, the Pendleton Roundup was one of the great rodeo events of the West, attracting elite riders and cowboys.

Jeffrey: Rodeo was one of the most popular spectator sports in the first half of the twentieth century, and this was across America. You had rodeos in New York City, you had rodeos out West in Pendleton, and everywhere in-between.

Wes: So when I look at this world trophy saddle, I have to think of it on par with like the world series trophy?



Jeffrey: Right, and from the rodeo, where he became very, very successful, he made the transition to Hollywood rodeo and the Hollywood industry, which were very connected at this time. And as a result of that, he came to know a lot of the early Western stars such as Tom Mix, John Wayne.

Wes: Jeffery explains that Yak wasn't exactly a Hollywood celebrity. His contribution was as an anonymous stuntman for the stars.

Jeffrey: He really perfected a lot of the techniques that are still used in the motion picture industry today.

Wes: Yak even doubled for John Wayne in the era's greatest Western, "Stagecoach."

Jeffrey: And we're not only talking about Westerns, we're talking about a variety of films in the first half of the twentieth century.

Wes: That was Yak Canutt, not Clark Gable, who drove Scarlett O'Hara through a burning Atlanta. Over decades of doing stunts, Yak injured his diaphragm, a kidney and his intestines, and he broke his shoulder blade, his nose, his ribs and both ankles. He became an advocate for safer working conditions.

Jeffrey: During the 1920's and 1930's, there was a peak period when about ten people a year were dying as a result of doing stunts for the motion picture industry. One of the things that he really tried to make sure was that the stunts were safe not only for the stuntmen, but also for the animals. It became a modern industry as the result of someone like Canutt.



Wes: Well, here it is. This is the saddle I was telling you about.

Jeffrey: It's quite beautiful.

Wes: Now, is this the kind of saddle that he would have used as a stuntman then?

Jeffrey: The saddles that he would have used in the motion picture industry were all specifically designed for a variety of different tricks. This would not have been something that he would have used in the motion picture industry. This would have been a working saddle. This is something that he would have used during his time in the rodeo.

Wes: Looks like my next stop is cowboy country. I'm stopping by the Pendleton Roundup arena where Yakima won four world championships.

Randy: Hello, Wes.

Wes: Hey!

Randy Severe: I'm president of the Pendleton Roundup.

Wes: Hi, Randy. Thank you very much for meeting me out here. Boy, who's your buddy here?

Randy: Well, this is Dex. This is my favorite mount.



Wes: Randy, here's the saddle I was telling you about.

Randy: Oh, that's a beauty, isn't it? Oh, great saddle. You can tell a lot by a saddle; the way it was made, when it was made. This saddle is pre-1920, that's for sure.

Wes: Randy explains before 1920, there were no standards or requirements for saddles when a cowboy entered a rodeo.

Randy: If you entered the bronc riding you showed up and rode what you owned, and some saddles gave you a better advantage over another guy. This is called the swells of the saddle.

Wes: Randy says a rider could tuck his legs under the swells and stay on the horse longer. but in 1920, the rodeo decided to even the playing field. Randy thinks Terry's saddle, with the larger swells, is a pre-association saddle, so earlier than-1920. And if this was Yak's saddle, he can narrow the timeframe further.

Randy: Well, this great name on the back. Yakima got his name in 1914. So we know that it was after that.

Wes: And how'd he get his name?

Randy: That happened right here in this arena. Yakima attended the roundup that year, in the company of a couple of good friends from Yakima, Washington, and



the common joke around the local folks was that them Yakima boys can't ride nothing. They called him Yak from then on. His real name was Enos Edward. How would you like to hang that on your shingle?

Wes: Yeah, I agree. Enos Edward is not a real cowboy name.

Randy: You got that right.

Wes: Well, Randy is that common for a bronc rider to wear a saddle out like that?

Randy explains how in Yak's day, a horse and saddle were used more like a cowboy's pickup truck is used today. They were his primary transportation, and the main tool of his livelihood.

Randy: Well, I'll tell you what, if you've got time to see it, I'd just love to show you how these saddles are really used. These are the BMCC College Rodeo Team. They're a nationally ranked team of good kids, every one of them.

Wes: So, the roundup today, how different is it from when Yak Canutt was participating?

Randy: Well, there was some differences. One of the biggest changes is these chutes you see are now housed with the individual animal is in there by himself. and that's a great assistance to the cowboy. In Yaks' day, the horse was let out. They didn't have them chutes. Two horses would sandwich the bronc in-between., and he had to saddle and get on that way, with no artificial----



Wes: Oh, my god. you're kidding!

Randy: ...No artificial restrictions, and it made a quite a challenge.

Wes: I'll bet it was.

Randy: ...And not a lot of people understand the abuse and the stress on the saddle.

Wes: Well, I'll tell you, after watching these kids do this, I can understand why a saddle would get worn out.

Randy doesn't know if we have Yak's saddle, or where it was used, but I think I may have found someone who does. I'm headed to a saddle shop in Post Falls, Idaho. The *History Detectives* office has tracked down a distant cousin of Yak Canutt's, Bob Hickman, who just happens to be a saddle maker.

Wes: Hey, Bob!

Bob Hickman: Hey, Wes.

Wes: Got a saddle for you.

Bob: Yeah, let's take a look at it. Well, that's an old one.

Wes: What do you think?



Bob: Well, I can see these fenders aren't original, or the stirrup leathers. The stirrups have had a little bit of work done to them. Sheepskin's different. It's new sheepskin. It looks like they stitched back over the old stitch line. It's had a lot of work done on it, a lot of work.

Wes: You know, here's one thing that's always sort of bothered me about this saddle, the carving behind the cantle here. It looks really crude though you're a saddle maker. What do you think?

Bob: I've got something I want to show you. Here's a picture, take a look at his boots. It's from 1923.

Wes: Wow, look at that. Y-A-K on the boots and Y-A-K on the cantle of the saddle. Well, you know, it's not exactly the same. So, what do you make of this then?

Bob explains how the Western tradition of branding isn't just for use on animals. It's also used on equipment and gear setting each cowboy apart, a form of early cowboy PR.

Bob: I think this is one of Yakima's earlier attempts at making the Y-A-K as one of his trademarks.

Wes: Wow. So you think that this is Yak Canutt's saddle?

Bob: The Canutt and the Y-A-K in the center of it looks authentic.



Wes: And Bob has a hunch who can tell me where Yak might have used it. He says the word “special” stamped into the leather means it was made to order. Parley Pearce is Hamley and company’s co-owner.

Parley Pearce: Wes, welcome.

Wes: Here’s that saddle.

Parley: Let’s look at that thing.

Wes: Well, take a look at the back.

Parley: Oh, yeah, oh boy.

Wes: So you have any records at all that Yakima Canutt bought this saddle?

Parley: Unfortunately, we had a basement fire around 1919 and lost the records.

Wes: So you have no records for it?

Parley: No records.

Wes: But Parley explains how the numbers on the back of the saddle can help.

Parley: That’s an 1850 number. Hamley’s numbered every saddle that came out of the shop. Pretty much all the saddles between the number 1600 and 2100



were built during 1917. That's going to put an 1850 number at about May of 1917.

Wes: So that's just a few months before September, when the Pendleton Roundup is held.

Parley: That's correct.

Wes: And that means that that saddle could be the saddle that Yakima Canutt won the bronco riding championship on?

Parley: That's correct.

Wes: What Parley shows me next is certainly going to interest Terry Garber .

Terry, I got to tell you, if this saddle could talk, it could tell a lot of stories.

I tell Terry about all the amateur repairs on his saddle, but that Bob Hickman had been convinced it was not a fake.

Terry: Oh, wow.

Wes: Now, you know, there's more.

Parley: Wes, I've got something else to show you. Knowing you guys were coming, I did a little homework. I have in front of me the 1919 Hamley Catalog.



the script says, “the Canutt special on which Yakima Canutt won the bucking contest at the 1917 Pendleton Roundup.”

Wes: So this was the prototype for the Hamley saddle that was called the Canutt saddle?

Parley: It is the prototype for it. I think it’s a great saddle. We would love to put that saddle on display.

Terry: Wow, that’s amazing! I can’t believe it. That’s really neat. I’m glad there’s a lot of historical significance to it too. Neat.

Wes: After fifteen years as a stuntman, Yak Canutt became a second unit director. In 1966, the safety gear and techniques he invented won him an Oscar. He remains the only movie stuntman ever to receive this honor.