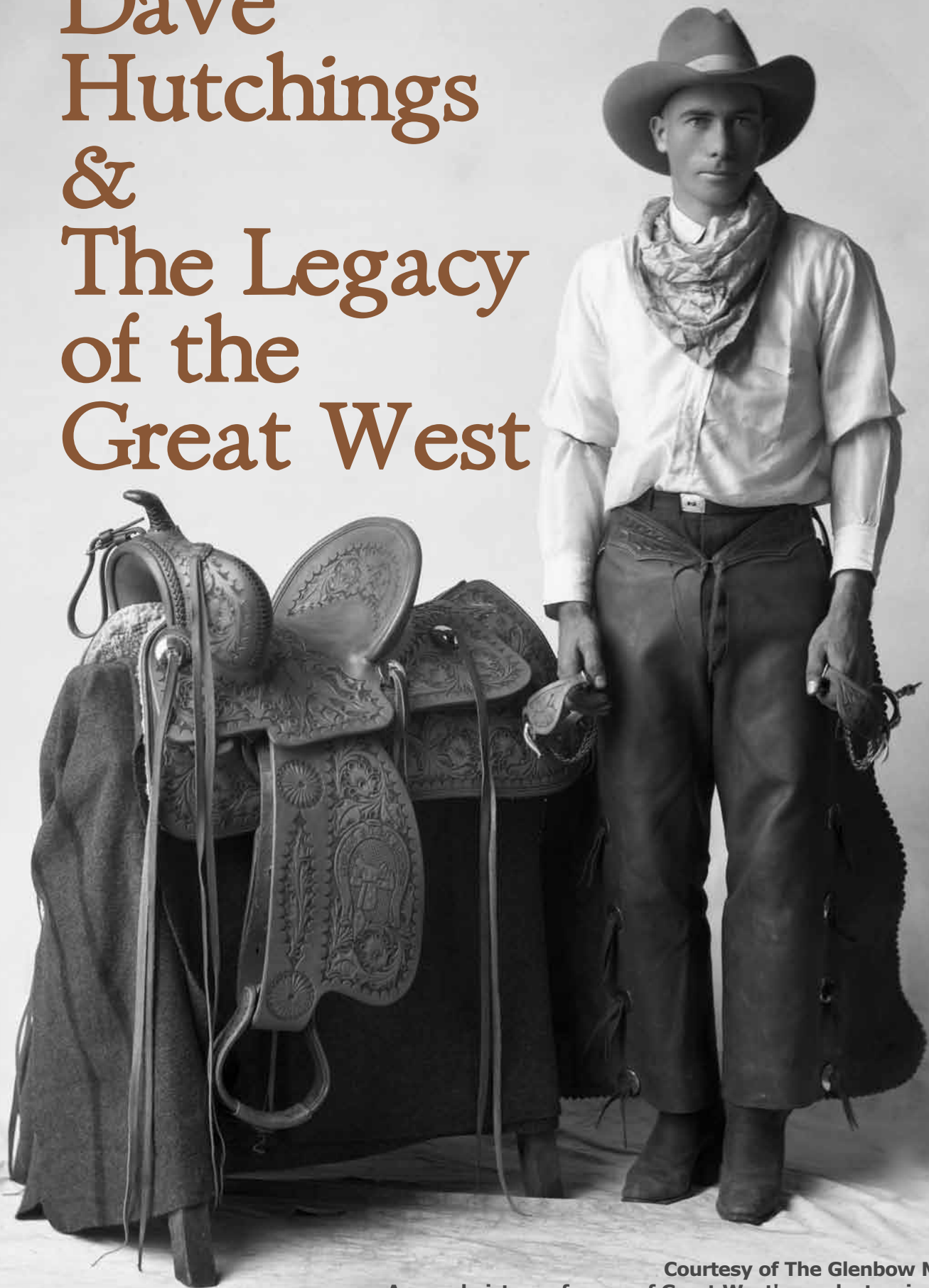


# Dave Hutchings & The Legacy of the Great West



Courtesy of The Glenbow Museum  
A posed picture of some of Great West's products, circa 1925.

**T**oday, Colorado boot maker Dave Hutchings lives in the shadow of the Rockies, but he was born under an even larger one. Dave, a well known craftsman in his own right, is a descendant of the family that once ran "the largest saddlery concern under the British flag." Though this claim was made a century ago, it almost seems like an understatement when you begin sifting through the documentation about Great West Saddlery.

Dave's and Great West's story begins in Ontario, Canada, in the 1840's. His great grandfather, Elijah Hutchings, immigrated to eastern Canada and opened a sawmill. Soon he had changed his occupation to farmer. His two boys, Elisha Frederick and Robert John, learned the value of hard work on the farm. This lesson would serve them well as they became involved in the westward expansion of their country. Elisha would leave for the West as many young men with big dreams were doing.

The twenty-year-old Elisha reached Fort Edmonton in the autumn of 1875. The leaves had turned and the chill in the breeze hinted at the winter to come. Elisha got ready for the cold by building a shack on the riverbank. He then befriended a young Indian boy who taught him to speak Cree. In the spring, he decided to head south to Winnipeg where there was more traffic on the westward trail. He hitched a ride with a southbound freighter and earned his keep by hunting for supper and tending to the camp.

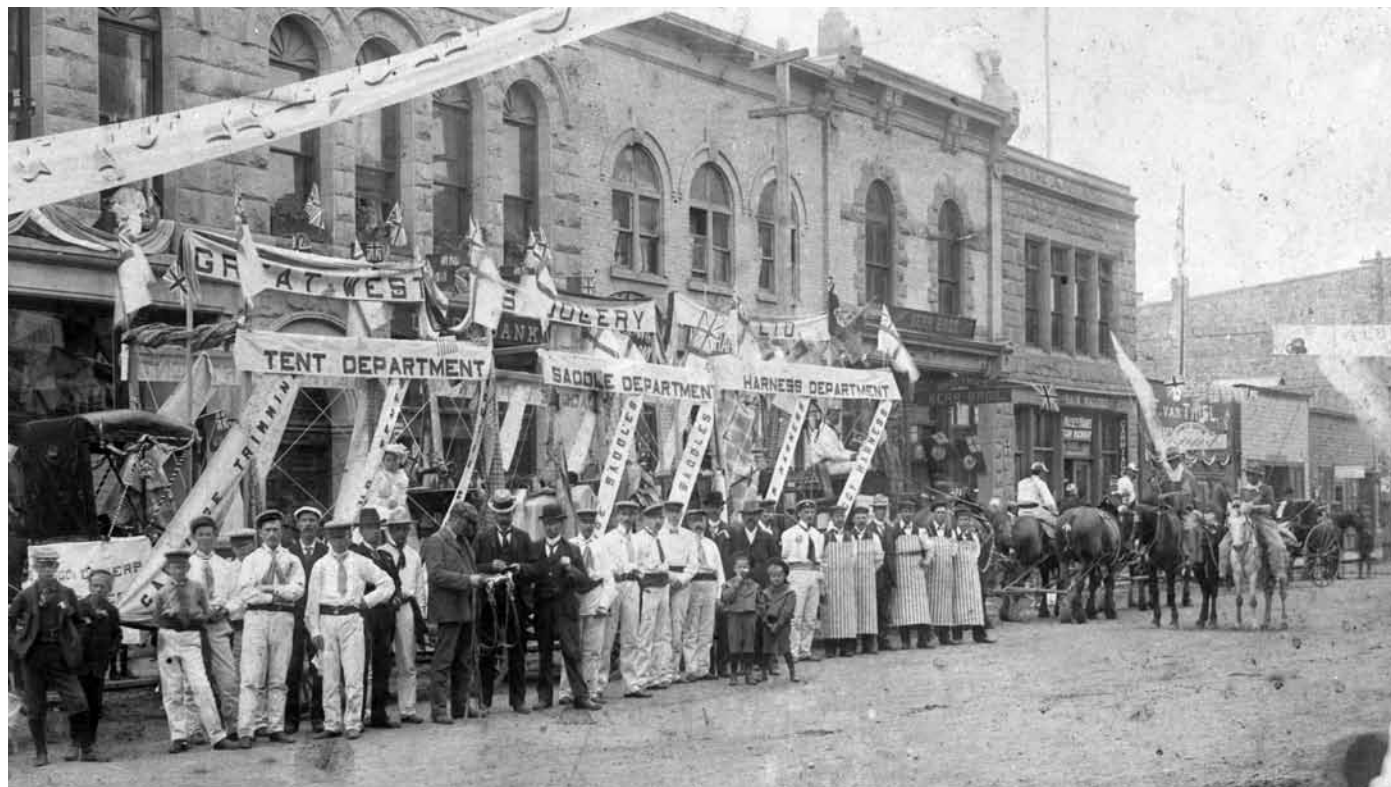
When E.F. (as he became known) arrived in Winnipeg, he noted the heavy trade between the Hudson Bay Company and the Indians at Fort Garry. Although the Company had their own interpreters, many of the smaller traders didn't. For this reason they were at a distinct disadvantage. E.F. approached several of them and offered his services as an interpreter in return for a commission on all the furs that he brought to them. At the end of the season, E.F. had \$1,200.00 in the bank.

E.F. decided to look around for something in which to invest his money. On his frequent visits to the Indian village, he had observed the Indian women sewing wagon tarps for the many wagons that were headed west. E.F. bought some canvas and the wooden hoops to stretch it on. After building one cover, E.F. realized that it was too time consuming so he headed to a local dry goods store where he found sewing machines. The owner had bought twenty of the newly designed Singers but had not been able to sell any. Consequently, he sold all of them to E.F. for \$5.00 each, half of what store owner had paid for them originally. Carrying one of the machines back to the Indian village, E.F. quickly sewed up a wagon cover. He then showed one of the women how to use the machine. Soon a crowd gathered to watch.

The woman was soon proficient with the machine and the envy of the other women. E.F. told her that he would sell the machines for \$25.00 each, and that for every one she sold, she would get \$5.00. If she sold all of them, she would get the last one. The machines sold like hotcakes and soon E.F. had more money to deposit.



A bronze sign befitting the company it represented.



**Great West Saddlery Company float and staff stopped on 8th Avenue, Calgary, Alberta. Circa 1898.  
Courtesy of The Glenbow Museum**

A few days later, while visiting with some friends on the street, E.F. noticed a settler struggling with a wagon harness that had broken. He offered to repair it for him. It was a crude repair job, but the farmer was happy and gave E.F. a dollar for his trouble. The light went on as E.F. looked at the hundreds of sets of harness passing through Winnipeg. He dipped into his funds and purchased a side of leather. Within a year E.F. had a man working for him, and, a couple of years later, he had a shop with a machine.

In 1869, two brothers, R. J. and A. A. Stalker, had opened a saddlery in Winnipeg. They had supplied the Royal Northwest Mounted Police with some of their first saddles. As E.F. grew busier, he purchased the Stalker brother's saddlery. And with that the first link of Great Western had been forged.

In the early 1880's, E.F. was joined by his younger brother, Robert John. Robert served a leather working apprenticeship and then moved up to sales. In 1889, Robert was sent to Calgary to establish a branch of E.F. Hutchins saddlery there.

In 1883, George Murdoch, a cabinet maker from New Brunswick, Canada, had opened the first saddle shop in the frontier town of Calgary. He had been clever enough to arrive before the railroad had and had built a shack in a prime location on the Elbow River. In 1884, Murdoch became the first mayor of Calgary. By 1888, Murdoch's company was housed in a twenty-five by seventy foot, three-story brick building. A journalist of the time said that Murdoch "has the most extensive harness, and saddlery establishment in Calgary, and is unsurpassed by any in the Northwest. They also make as good and as cheap a saddle as can be made in Montana."

This acclaim probably brought the saddlery to the attention of the Hutchings brothers. Fortunately for them, Murdoch was enjoying his burgeoning political career and was ready to sell out to them. Shortly after the purchase of the Calgary shop, Robert partnered with saddle maker W.J. Riley and bought his older brother out. The company name of the Calgary shop became Hutchings and Riley. E.F. continued to operate his business out of Winnipeg.





**An old Great West Saddle. They were called utilitarian. The old Hutchings and Riley name stamp, precursor to Great West. Courtesy of The Glenbow Museum**

**F**or the next decade, the only real competition in Calgary for Hutchings and Riley was Riley's old partner, Carson. Rechristened the Carson and Shore Saddlery, the two firms would divvy up a large portion of the profits from the coming wave of business. In August of 1896, gold was discovered in the Klondike region of the Northwest Territories. Though only lasting a few years, thousands of people passed through Calgary on their way north. In reality, most of them spent more on the journey than what they made, but they spent it in Calgary. Goods of all sorts were needed to outfit prospectors, many of whom had no experience in the harsh conditions that they would face. By 1899, the gold rush had petered out, leaving the Hutchings brothers in a good position and able to help their respec-



**The Great West Saddlery name stamp. Note the location as Northwest Territories.**

▼ **Another old Great West saddle.**



tive communities as they grew into more permanent cities. Robert, for example, helped to found Western Canada College. He served in numerous civic and trade organizations. He had seven children, several of whom would help in the business.

At the turn of the century, Carson and Shore, Hutchings and Riley, and E.F. Hutchings merged to become Great West Saddlery with headquar-



**These boots are on display in the Buffalo Bill Museum on Lookout Mountain in Colorado. They were made by Dave Hutchings, grandson of R.J.Hutchings. Above Right: Dave Hutchings, well known custom boot maker, teacher, and the man who made Buffalo Bill's last boots.**



**Great West Saddlery employees inside the shop, Calgary, Alberta. circa 1900.  
Courtesy of The Glenbow Museum**





**Great West employees inside Calgary shop, circa 1900. Courtesy of The Glenbow Museum**

ters in Winnipeg. Their logo became a horseshoe that was stamped on their leather goods. Great West began to buy up saddle shops in other areas that weren't doing well and reshaped them into Great West franchises. Robert became the vice-president, and his boys, raised in the business, became natural candidates for the managers. One of them was George, Dave Hutching's father. That's Dave Hutching our present day boot maker. In Manitoba, Great West had branches in Winnipeg, Portage La Prairie, Boissevain, McGregor, and Selkirk. In the Northwest Territories, they were in Calgary, Edmonton, Strathcona, and Prince Albert.

**G**reat Western erected a five-story building of brick and sandstone that would become a landmark in Calgary for years to come. On the Canadian & Pacific Railroad line in back of the 9th St. headquarters in Calgary, Great West shipped their products all over Canada. They also received three carloads of leather a week from Ontario tanneries. A carload of sisal, manila rope, and binder twine arrived every week.

Almost every kind of equine equipment was made on the fifth floor, even military harness. Around 1916, Great West was stuck with thousands of sets of unclaimed Russian artillery harness because of the Russian Revolution. On the fourth floor, fifty saddles were turned out a week. They ranged from cowboy saddles to "English-Western" ones bound for Australia. The older saddle makers had apprenticed with the company's British trained experts. One of the prominent leather carvers and saddle makers to have worked there was Ed Lupson. Six hundred horse collars were produced a week in another building a block away. A nearby barn was filled with rye straw to stuff the collars with.

After World War I, Great West was the largest wholesale distributor in the West, and it was the first Canadian company to issue a catalog.

In 1922, a devastating fire in the saddlery building caused the heavy machinery on the top floor to drop down into the third floor.

“It's an old, old friendship, which is what it boils down to.”

In 1929, Robert Hutchings sold his interest for two million dollars and retired. He passed away in 1937. As late as 1940, Great West's catalog boasted of their exports of Horseshoe Brand products to horseman in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. It also emphasized the quality of the Horseshoe Brand, the quality of the materials used, and the uniformity of the finished products.

In the late 1950's, Great West sold to some Eastern interests. In 1959, Great West closed its doors for good. The last saddle maker to work in the Calgary shop was Bill Bryant. On the last day of business, Bill was putting the final touches on the last Great West saddle and his long career.

The saddle was going to be in a window display "back East" and would have a placard attached to it which indicated that it was being the last saddle made. Bill thoughtfully looked at it as he touched up the oil and said, "I think they could have let the body rest in peace. . . ." A poem was tacked to the wall of the shop, an ode to the saddle makers who had worked there. Handwritten by an employee from long ago, the poem wasn't getting to make the trip.

Around 1930, already looking towards the future, Robert J. Hutchings was in the oil business in Alberta. He sent his son, George, down to Montana, to start leasing land. George started leasing land north of Cutbank and became a wildcat driller. That was the end of George's connection with the leather business until his son, Dave, was born in 1940.



**The chaps by Great West were actually made as a rodeo trophy. Below is a close up of the chap pocket shows that they were an award at the 1924 Calgary Stampede.**



The Hutchings lived on an isolated ranch near Cutbank without much to do. When Dave was ten, his dad taught him how to make boots and do leatherwork. As Dave grew older, he got tired of ranch work and enlisted in the Marines. He planned on a career in the service, but injuries in Vietnam ended those dreams. After his discharge, Dave looked for a quiet place to live and ended up in Iredale, Texas, in 1970. He built a house and barn on a hundred acres and opened a boot shop in nearby Hico. He stayed busy retailing Ben Miller Boots and Potts Longhorn saddle "seconds" that he retooled. His boot and saddle work boomed, but still he hadn't found what he was looking for. Two and a half years later he moved to Big Spring, and then to Snyder. Eventually, he made it as far north as Colorado. Today Dave lives in Thornton, Colorado, but builds boots in a shop in Parker. The shop, J B Custom Leather, is owned by Jim Brainard, a former student of Dave's. Jim actually worked for Dave during high school. Later he bought Dave out.

Dave laughs, "Thirty-five years later he comes to me and says I never really taught him to make boots. So we teamed up, and now he's made twenty-three pairs. "Jim also does a lot of saddle repair and the two men help each other out."It's an old, old friendship, which is what it boils down to."

Dave has done well in the boot business. He made Buffalo Bill's "last" pair of boots. Of course, Cody was dead at the time, but they were made on his measurements for the museum at Lookout Mountain, Colorado, where Cody is buried. Dave is on the board of directors and also the judging committee for the Boot Competition at the Roundup in Wichita Falls. He has also judged at the Sheridan show. He has taught boot making at his shop for thirty years and has made custom boots, and a lot of other leatherwork, for fifty years.

His philosophy is, "All you can do is keep going. The boot work has actually been good for my arthritis."

“All you  
can do  
is keep  
going.”

His ancestors must be smiling.

If you'd like to talk to Dave Hutchings, give him a call at 303-289-6726.

**[Editor's Note:** If you're wondering why you haven't heard from our Southwest Correspondent, **Nick Pernokas**, lately, it may be because he's been deep in the piney woods of East Texas on

a movie set of all things. That Nick! Seems that Nick was given a small part in the new gothic Western film, *The Merchant*. The film is scheduled for release in May of 2012. So if you like Westerns, check it out. A word of warning, though. Nick says, "This isn't your grandpa's Western."]



This leather pitcher was made for R.J. Hutchings by his employees. Originally it had cups to match. They were all lined with pitch. It sat on his desk for years.





# Quotable Quotes

**R**obert J. Hutchings was a shrewd business man like his brother. Much of the advice that he gave his son George is still relevant today. The following gems are all taken from the weekly correspondence that R.J. Hutchings sent to his son as George took over The Scott Saddlery Co. in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, in 1924.

"Success, easily won, is not as a rule good for any young man, but a success for which you have had to fight a long and patient battle, means when accomplished that splendid character, as well most of the qualities that make men great have been acquired."

"I would resolve to add to my friends daily. I would be decent and kindly to all. The newsboy of today may be in a position of influence tomorrow."

"I would plan to do a promiscuous amount of advertising. You must not hide your light under a bushel. One must be a pusher to get anything done these days."

"I would clean up all those past due accounts, regardless of the consequences."

"You must often work while the other fellow plays."

"Know what your annual overhead is, divide it by three hundred and you will know what your daily overhead is for every working day."

"For repairs, you should charge for your man's time, and when he is using his machine, another 50 percent of his wage per hour. In addition, you should make a profit of 100 percent on all the small things (materials) charged to the job. You may have to discriminate on this if you have a very big job."

"Be punctual in all of your engagements."

"When a man becomes satisfied, he stops progressing."

"Emphasize the high quality of your leather and where it comes from."

"I always back the STICKER, because you can't beat him."

"Every effort you make towards making friends, increasing your sphere of influence, and knowledge of people are all contributions towards your success."

"Success is only achieved by those who are willing to pay the price in industry, in perseverance, in enterprise, in integrity, and often, in making sacrifices."

"Select friends of the right type."

"This is a long epistle. Read it at least three times and get it under your skin."

