

Art with a Hitch

A Montana state prison shows what their inmates can do with HORSE HAIR

It's assumed that the Spaniards brought the art of hitching horse hair with them to the New World. A craftsman creates a series of knots with horse hair, guiding a growing pattern of colors along a string wrapped around a dowel. Over the years, cowboys, Indians, Mexicans and prison inmates have taken horsehair hitching to a new level.

"But I'd be surprised if there's anyone still doing it in 20 years," says Zach Stenberg, an inmate at Montana's Deer Lodge State Prison and an employee at the prison's retail hobby shop store, one of the world's last great repositories of hitched horsehair. "It's a dying art."

Hitching horse hair began at the Deer Lodge State Prison when Montana was still a territory. Other prisons, like Yuma, Arizona, Rawlins, Wyoming, and Walla Walla, Wash., also built a reputation

shapes the ultimate development of his talent and, typically, inmates stop hitching once their term has been served. Despite an uncertain future for the art form, the Deer Lodge State Prison's hobby shop is filled with inventory.

"People from all over the world come and buy our stuff," says Stenberg with a smile. Visitors who are accustomed to astronomical hitched horsehair values back home are elated to get an elaborately detailed Deer Lodge bridal for \$2,500. Finely crafted belts range from \$200 to \$400 at the prison store, and simple pieces, such as bracelets, key fobs and earrings can start as inexpensively as 10 bucks. The inmate who hitches the piece is allowed to set his own price, and most of that price comes back to him after a sale. If a buyer isn't able to visit Deer



for twisting and pulling horse hair into distinctive designs. Today, the Deer Lodge State Prison is the only one of those facilities still producing the much sought-after hitched horsehair belts, hatbands and headstalls.

"It takes about two hours to make one inch of hitched horsehair," says Stenberg. Techniques for creating these one-of-a-kind pieces are passed down from inmate to inmate. Often, there is an informal apprenticeship established, where beginners are mentored to start with easier projects – like key fobs or hatbands before stepping up to belts and bridals. The length of the convict's prison term often

Lodge and shop in person, it's not unheard of for the prison to take your credit card number and then ship you several items from which you can select a keeper.

Demand for the works coming out of Deer Lodge is increasing and so are their prices. Enough so that Stenberg says there are now "fakes" out there. Indisputable provenance proving the piece came from this Montana State Prison makes the hitching more valuable. Deer Lodge State Prison: 406.846.1320 ext. 2515, Cor.Mt.gov; Airport: Bert Mooney (BTM), 406.494.6694, ButteAirport.com.

