

Prison inmates revive  
horsehair hitching as a way  
to pass the time and make  
a better life for themselves

# PRISON BREAK

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY JEREMY LURGIO



Facing page: Many of the inmates who pursue horsehair hitching sell their work at the Montana Correctional Enterprises' Prison Hobby Store. One of Curtis Christianson's belts, middle, is next to four other belts hitched at the Montana State Prison. This page: Joe Paoni's hands move quickly while he hitches together another part of a bridle. 'It's a way of building yourself up,' Paoni says about horsehair hitching.



*In Lewistown there's a gent livin' that's one of the leadin' citizens. I ain't . . . mentionin' no names, but if I'd ever told what I know about him he'd be makin' hair bridles to-day*

Charles M Russell, *Trails Plowed Under*

**M**aking hair bridles." It was a common term in Russell's day for prison. Where does it come from? For more than a century, men have practiced a craft linked to both cowboy life and western prison culture. It's tradition. It's art. It kills time. It's called horsehair hitching. And it's alive at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge.

Officially, horsehair hitching is classified as a hobby. That means inmates can do it during free time with materials they buy themselves. Akin to macramé or weaving, it consists of a series of knots, or hitches, made with horsehair along a cotton or nylon string. The string wraps around a dowel, which is later slipped out, leaving a stiff yet flexible, glossy, durable tube. The tube might become a keychain, quirt, or rein, or if flattened, a belt or part of a bridle. Tack and horse-related gear predominate. Dyed horsehair is worked in to make colorful designs, though work from the mid-1800s and also the World War II era is usually muted.

In the minimum-security prison work dorm, three inmates demonstrate their craft. Neither Joe Paoni, Dennis Valcourt, or Curtis Christianson had hitched horsehair before landing in prison, though Christianson, who grew up in Great Falls, had seen hitching before. Fellow inmates taught them the craft. The main reason inmates hitch is to make money; while work-dorm inmates hold jobs inside the prison, pay is minimal. By selling hitching through the hobby shop that the prison runs in downtown Deer ▶



‘Hitching  
gives me  
peace of  
mind.’

Dennis Valcourt



Lodge or by sending items to family or friends to sell, inmates can earn \$70 for a hatband, \$1,200 and up for a bridle. Montana State Prison hobby director Tim Mueller explains, "In prison, you're a burden on your family. Horsehair is a way to support them."

A tall, pony-tailed 40-year-old with a barbed-wire tattoo around his neck, Paoni holds what looks like a frayed cord. It's one end of a horsehair bridle in process, with numerous "pulls" (strands made of several long tail hairs twisted together) sticking out, waiting to be hitched in. Paoni is excited about his three small daughters visiting from Illinois the next day. He was able to pay for their plane tickets with money from horsehair. Running from problems with cocaine, Paoni left Illinois for Montana in 2002 and bought a house in the Bitterroot. A year later, still dogged by addiction, he beat his pregnant girlfriend and assaulted his brother. After six years in Deer Lodge, he will soon attend boot camp, a tough alternative available to some inmates. If he makes it through, he might win early parole.

This page: Curtis Christianson hitches in his room at the work dorm. 'You are in your own head a lot,' said Christianson about his time in prison. Facing page, top: Dennis Valcourt says hitching 'gets me away from here and thinking about my future.' Below: The board in Joe Paoni's room at the work dorm is plastered with photos of his kids and horsehair products he his working on. Paoni used some of his earnings from selling horsehair products to fly his three daughters out to see him.

Paoni hitches feverishly. He wants to make seven bridles before boot camp so that, if he graduates, there will be money in the bank. "This is not a living I want to do outside. I've got kids; they play ball; there's church," he says. Few inmates continue hitching when they leave prison.

"Joe can hitch forever," acknowledges Dennis Valcourt, a New Hampshire native who, like Paoni, lived in Montana one year before landing in Deer Lodge. He has spent 16 of his 47 years in the state prison. "I'm a resident now," he jokes grimly. In regulation denims and blue cap, he hitches the old-fashioned way, sitting on the end of his string to maintain tension. Each inmate hitches differently. Paoni and Christianson use jigs, devices attached to a table edge that feed out fresh string and hold it tense. Perhaps like generations of men, all three run the string around a bedpost before grasping it to hitch. Valcourt is making cheek pieces for a bridle. Matching reins—a continuous spiral of off-white and brown stripes—are already done; they and other finished parts hang among pictures on his bulletin board. Valcourt is single; the pictures are of cars and mountain lakes.

"Hitching gives me peace of mind," says Valcourt. "Look at the work I've designed. It's art. It's not like we throw these things together. When I'm doing this, I think of things in my past; my family; my girl. Hitching keeps me out of trouble and makes me money I can use for my ▶



future. I wouldn't have much of one if it weren't for this," he says, nodding toward his work.

When Curtis Christianson, 39, hitches, he thinks about "anything but prison. Prison is not a natural place. It's stressful and violent. You're with who you have to be with, people who don't think about changing." Christianson "fell," as he puts it, in 1996 when he killed a family member. As soon as he entered the prison system, he took up hitching. "Twelve, fourteen hours go by," he says. "It feels like three."

Christianson and his wife and son strive to be a family in the present, not the past or future. His wife sends him blueprints of houses to renovate and resell. He talks regularly with his son by phone. "I'm lucky," he says. "I have people who love me. There's a lot of lonely men in here. It'd rip your guts out if you care." For his job, Christianson delivers prison-made furniture around the state. Sometimes he gets out for up to two days in a row. While he feels guilty being away from his hitching, he values glimpses of life outside, "people just going about their business, having fun. There's a light feeling. Life here is very, very heavy."

Valcourt and Paoni are vaguely aware that prisoners at Deer Lodge have always hitched, but Christianson actually researched the art. He recounts what historians say—that the Moors introduced hitching to the Spanish, who brought it to Mexico. Like so many facets of cowboy culture, hitching traveled north with vaqueros and

shepherders, who shared it with interested companions during long winter months or in jail. Traditionally, native people used animal hair to make rope and other things, but hitching was something they picked up in prisons. Today, true cowboy culture is gone—or at least, it's different. But hitching lives on in Deer Lodge, as well as in prisons in several other Western states.

Cowboys and prisoners: two populations with notoriously little to their names. By hitching a beautiful bridle or novelty item (one dealer mentions a gavel made for a judge), a man could raise significant money, enough to hire a lawyer or feed a family, express gratitude or pay debts. Most western prisons have always had an official like Mueller, the prison hobby director, who sends out finished items to be sold. In the old days, the work might have been auctioned off at the prisoner's favorite saloon. Today, eBay comes in handy.

In addition, as inmates choose colors and designs, hitching becomes a small bastion of individual expression in a world of flatly limited personal choice. Says Valcourt, "If they took this away, I'd do it with dental floss."

In 1987, a time when interest in rehabilitating prisoners was high, the prison hired Ron Maulding to start a hobby program. Maulding recalls the first time he saw hitching. "I thought, I don't understand it, but it's gorgeous, and we can't lose that art." At the time, only two Montana prisoners still hitched. Maulding talked them into teaching other inmates. For six years, until the 1991 riot,

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Maulding ran classes and encouraged the hobby. Not everyone was thrilled, he remembers. "Prison guards were the lowest-paid state employees. To them, everything is black and white. Here were these guys having fun and making money. They detested their jobs, they detested the prisoners. Some detested me."

When Maulding's wife, Shoni, couldn't find a job, he taught her basic hitching. During Ron's long shifts at Deer Lodge and subsequent prisons in Washington state, Shoni hitched and studied the art, learning in part from old pieces people sent her to restore. Now she's an artist whose medium is horsehair. She has innovated the use of graph paper for design (several inmates used the method) and, with Ron, inlaying hitching into silver. One of her bridles, graced by Monarch butterflies, was so complicated Shoni accomplished only one inch per day (versus her usual three), and was excited at that. The Mauldings added opals, turquoise, coral, and silver to the bridle; it sold to a collector for \$17,900. Today, the Mauldings teach hitching to students from around the world; they've also written how-to books on the subject. Despite hitching's widening appeal, the Mauldings keep their books at a seventh-grade reading level and mention alternatives for people with limitations because many inmates use their books.

Shoni Maulding feels awed by her chosen art, that "something so unique can come from something so simple." Linda Kohn, co-owner of High Noon Western Americana in Los Angeles and a long-time admirer of hitching, agrees, though the simple raw materials she has in mind are more than string, dowels, and hair from dead horses. "Out of a hell hole—terrible conditions, fear and darkness—comes beauty. That's the amazing thing about hitching." **M**

Beth Judy has written about Milltown Dam, wild mushrooms and the Daly Mansion in recent issues of *Montana Magazine*.

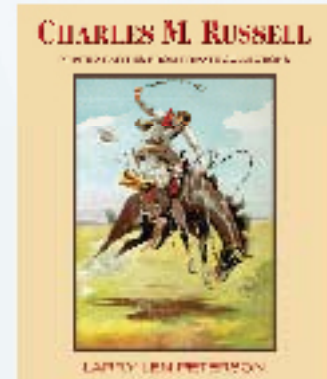
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