Tucked away in a remote corner of eastern Oregon, rawhide braider Bill Black is a legend in a time-honored art. He came by his craft honestly, and as writer Andy Rieber discovered, there’s life in every hackamore that comes out of his shop.

“A small quiet drinking town with a cattle problem.”

So says the sign over the Plush (Ore.) store where this fall afternoon, local cowboys—or “buckaroos” as they are often called here in the Great Basin—are thawing out after weaning calves all day among the greasewood, rabbit brush, and sage.

Forget Buckaroo Bonzai. The word “buckaroo” comes from vaquero, Spanish for “cowboy.” It refers to the style of cowboying that over two centuries trickled north from the old Spanish land grant ranchos of California into eastern Oregon, northern Nevada, and southern Idaho, and is marked by its distinctive Spanish aesthetic: flat-brimmed, Amish-looking hats, silver bits and conchos with swirling hand engraved flowers and scroll work, and painstakingly braided horse gear fashioned from what the Spanish called cuero crudo: rawhide.

On a corner next to the Plush Store sits a mint green and pink house with a low-slung cinderblock shop in the yard. There’s no storefront and no sign. But a search for superlative specimens of cowboy rawhiding is likely to lead you here. This is the shop of Bill Black, generally understood by buckaroos, horse trainers, and collectors of Western folk art to be one of the greatest rawhiders of a generation.

Walk into Black’s shop on any given afternoon, and you’re likely to find him perched upon a vinyl-covered stool intently tying the complex rawhide knots on a hackamore. SiriusXM radio chatters in the background, tuned to a classic radio station—Gunsmoke is on.

At 60, Black has the look of an inveterate outlaw bronc—sinewy and hardened, with a canny way of sizing you up. Five-foot-ten, pale and lanky with a thinning yellow-blond thatch, his hands are big, coarse, and calloused. As he threads the final passes through the knot, a one-eyed dog watches him from the corner. Around the shop, piles of haphazardly stacked rawhide cores and carefully organized carousels of leather-working tools compete with an anarchy of faded postcards, out-of-date calendars, cowboy art, framed articles, toy horses, and headless Barbie dolls (these last items belonging to Black’s daughter, Montana). A stunning collection of bridles hangs from hand-carved hangers circling the shop on three of its four walls. All are well used.

Even among Western artists, Black is a unique specimen—what many would call the “real deal.” Black has lived the cowboy life about as thoroughly as anyone today can claim to have done: as an itinerant cowboy, buckaroo boss, and cow boss on some of the most storied ranches in the Great Basin. Though his fulltime cowboying days are behind him, Black still spins a hell of a good yarn, recites poetry, and day works for local ranchers when the mood strikes him, which is often enough. On first impression, Black comes across gruff, his speech clipped. But hang around a bit, and it doesn't take much to get Black started telling stories.
SO LONG, COLORADO

Black’s first efforts at cowboy braiding were modest, but they came at an early age.

“I made my own horse gear for my stick horses,” says Black, with a shade of a smile. “I remember, they was some tough ones—I rode ‘em.”

Black grew up just south of Fowler, Colo., a typical ranch kid—doing chores on the family place, helping work cattle. Like a lot of ranch youngsters, Black could hold his own as a cowboy before he got his first driver’s license. As a kid, his father taught him how to braid four strands of sisal twine to make pigging strings. “All of ‘em eight foot, ’cause that way, if you tied something down, you had enough rope to tie ‘em down with,” Black says.

Three days after his high school graduation, Black rolled his bed and left home to work as a full-time cowboy on a ranch south of La Junta. The next couple years found him working for various outfits around Colorado, even doing a short stint in the Oklahoma Panhandle. But Black’s cowboy career took a formative—and permanent—turn when his friend Mike Martin got a job on the Spanish Ranch out of remote Tuscarorra, Nev., and urged Black to apply. The Spanish Ranch came by this reputation honestly, thanks to its rank horses, horizon-to-horizon circles, and Bill Kane, the uncompromising cow boss who inspired a blend of hero worship and trepidation in his cowboy crew.

On April 15, 1976, Black strolled into the Spanish Ranch headquarters toting a modified association saddle with a 2 ½-inch horn wrapped in inner tube rubber. Black learned quickly that Great Basin cowboying has its own peculiar style and code. For example, rubber horn wraps, common in many parts of the West, were considered a faux pas. The cowboys on the Spanish Ranch were using ropes that were 50 feet, at least, and wrapped the post horns of their slick fork saddles in smooth mule hide, an arrangement that required them to take multiple turns, or “dallys” around the horn to stop a cow. Dallying on a slick horn requires more technique than on rubber, but the slipping of the rope around the horn makes the stop easier on the cow. Plus, it was tra-
dition. Rubber horn wraps—or worse, tying the end of the rope “hard and fast” to the saddle horn—were forbidden.

For Black, this was all new.

“I was 16 before I ever learned to dally,” says Black. Growing up in Colorado, Black’s early efforts at dallying were discouraged by proponents of the Texas-based tie hard and fast method. “I asked my neighbor Emmet Jacobs how to dally,” recalls Black. “He looked me right in the eye and said, ‘Dally? Hell, kid, tie that son-of-a-bitch!’

But the blond-haired kid from Colorado didn’t crumble in Nevada. In fact, he was thriving, soaking up the Great Basin traditions like parched alkali dirt. The young Black quietly made a study of Bill Kane, who, despite his terse manner, had a knowledge of cowboy craft and cattle that bordered on the encyclopedic.

“Bill taught me a lot,” says Black. “He didn’t tell you much, but he’d tell you a little bit, and if you’d listen, you could learn a lot.”

Bill Kane wasn’t the only one who took part in Black’s education. The Spanish Ranch horses had a reputation for being rank, big boned, long-legged, and cold backed. Most horses in a buckaroo’s string were likely to buck when he first stepped on in the morning, or anytime they became irritated with a cowboy’s demands. According to Black, these horses taught him a valuable lesson in how to just “get along” with his partner for that day.

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When winter 1978 rolled around, Bill Black was just another out-of-work cowboy slumming around Arizona looking for a job. He and buddy Dean Tobias left Nevada hoping to pick up some winter cowboying work down south where it was warmer, but in January, the only employment they could find involved wrangling a roll of barbed wire.

“We was too proud of ourselves to build fence,” says Black. “So we went to a slaughterhouse and we bought us two hides. They were fat and greasy, five bucks apiece.”

Black had been dabbling in braiding, copying figures out of books and such, but Dean really knew the craft of working rawhide. Over the course of a few weeks that winter, Black learned how to turn a wet, smelly hide into stiff rawhide, cut it into strings, and tie the basic knots. After that, says Black, the two went their separate ways. Black headed back to Nevada, and kept rawhiding on his own.

“I braided at night,” says Black. “I didn’t need a lot of sleep back in them days.”

Black picked up new ideas through trial and error, or here and there from other rawhiders he met up with. They were out there, sure enough, just scattered across the interminable ocean of blue-green sagebrush of Nevada, Idaho, and Oregon on far-flung ranches. Over time, Black buckarooed on some of the most famous of these Great Basin outfits—Squaw Valley, the TS, the IL, the Gamble—all the while tap-
Ping into an underground network of cowboy braiders who traded techniques and swapped secrets when they happened to cross paths.

On March 5, 1984, Black rolled in to the MC Ranch in Adel, Ore. In its day, the MC had been part of a great cattle empire. Owned from 1936 to 1967 by William Kittredge and his family, at its peak in the late ’50s the MC and Kittredge’s other holdings in Oregon and California were running a combined 19,000 head of one-iron cattle. By the mid-’80s, the MC had changed hands and been scaled back considerably, but with some 7,500 mother cows was still among the biggest outfits in Oregon.

Black had shown up in the middle of a crisis—the entire cowboy crew (save one) had just quit and the shorthanded MC cow boss was hastily patching together a replacement crew. Black had worked on the MC the previous year, so he was assigned the job of buckaroo boss (sometimes known as “jigger boss” or “lead-off man”)—basically the cow boss’s right-hand man. All that season, Black and the buckaroo crew moved cows out on the vast MC desert, a half-million acre expanse of sagebrush and tumble-down rim rock. Being tapped for buckaroo boss was—in a sense—a small promotion out of the cowboy rank and file, not to mention a recognition of Black’s ability to lead a crew. But by the time a year had rolled around, Black’s fortunes were due for an even bigger change.

Valentine’s Day, 1985 started out on a sour note for Black.

“I drove a pickup off into a canal that day, got it stuck,” he recalls. “Had to pull it out late that afternoon. Fifty-five gallons of water on the floorboards by then. I got called into the office that night—didn’t know what for. And they told me that the guy I was workin’ under, they let him go. And I was the cow boss. Just like that.”

For the seven years that he was the MC cow boss, Black was in charge of the entire cow operation. His no-nonsense, get-the-work-done-and-do-it right-attitude gained him plenty of respect, but prima donnas weren’t tolerated.

“People who thought they were too good to work hard, they didn’t do very good around him,” says Jim Hiatt, a cowboy on Black’s crew. “If you were goin’ somewhere, you should be trotting.”

Never one to do his managing from an office chair, Black also made a point of working side-by-side with his crew, who couldn’t fail to notice that Black was a top notch cowboy.

“He was as good as he thought he was,” Hiatt recalls. “You know how some people talk the talk, but can’t walk it? Bill could do everything he said he could.”

For Black, though, working with his crew was a matter of principle. “You can’t ask your man to do something if you ain’t going to do it with him,” insists Black. “The same as you don’t ask a man to ride a horse you won’t ride yourself.”

Black had risen through the ranks to cow boss, but even that didn’t make him immune to being uprooted. Heavily mortgaged by its owners, the MC was finally sold out in 1992 and Black was out of a job—cut loose to wander once again. He went south, working for a time on the Quien Sabe Ranch in San Benito County, California, and then down to Los Angeles to equine dental school. Finally, Black headed for Idaho, where he picked up a job working for some horse traders. It was in Idaho, Black says, that his skills as a rawhider began to emerge in earnest, though he prefers not to be specific about where the inspiration came from.

“It takes something bad in a person’s life to bring out their artistic ability,” says Black. “I was in Idaho for a little while and had some bad luck. And that’s where I got good at my braiding.”
Whatever the reason, Black was kegged up in Idaho for two years, unable to legally leave the state without permission. “They liked me pretty well, to keep me there,” says Black grimly. But being stuck had an upside to it—a chance for Black to finally train his energies on his lifelong hobby. For Black, those years in Idaho were a turning point. “That’s how this all happened,” he remarks, gesturing at the shop walls draped with hackamores, reins, and McCartys.

Come 1996, Black was out of Idaho and making better money with his rawhide hackamores and reins than he ever had from the back of a horse. Assisted by friend Dave Hack, a well-known chap maker, Black was selling his work at horse events and trade shows. Impressed by Black’s superlative craftsmanship, horse enthusiasts were snapping it up.

“I started making so much more money [than at cowboying],” says Black, “I kept at it.”

Now 40, Black figured it was as good a time as any to wind down his cowboy career and start rawhiding full time. For his headquarters, he scraped together a down payment on the pink and green house in Plush, Ore.—a short 16 miles from Adel and the old MC.

THE BILL BLACK HACKAMORE

On a recent morning in Plush, Black was busy making rawhide. He had skinned out a dead cow in a rancher’s field and stretched the wet hide to dry on a frame outside. When the hide is dry and stiff as cardboard, he will scrape off the hair with a handheld blade and cut the hide into one long, continuous curling strip. Black will then refine this strip into multiple strings, gradually narrowing and beveling each string by drawing it repeatedly through a knife-edged “puller.” When this process is complete, the strings are typically more than 20 feet long, but just a couple millimeters wide and maybe a millimeter thick. The whole cowhide will be effectively rendered into linguini. No motorized equipment or chemicals are used in this process—just copious quantities of elbow grease.

Once the strings are finished, the braiding and tying of intricate knots and buttons begins.

From his cinderblock shop in Plush, Black braids the gamut of traditional rawhide horse gear—romal reins, reatas, quirts—all of exceptional quality and beauty. But his signature accomplishment is the Bill Black rawhide hackamore, a design Black has taken years to perfect with the help of some of the world’s best hackamore trainers.

A hackamore—or “bosal” as they are sometimes called—is a loop-shaped rawhide noseband which, combined with a small headstall and a horsehair mecate rein, functions much like a bridle without a bit—guiding a horse by applying pressure to the band around its nose and jaw as opposed to a piece of steel in its mouth. Training a horse in the hackamore is a critical beginning stage in the development of the traditional bridle horse—a horse trained according to the old time vaquero methods to carry a heavy, high-powered spade bit and respond with extreme lightness and maneuverability through subtle movement of the reins. The California vaqueros developed this jaquima to freno—or hackamore to bridle—system to train horses with exceptional agility and responsiveness for the purpose of working and roping cattle.

According to Bobby Ingersoll, traditional hackamore trainer and three-time winner of the National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity, the tradition of training horses in the hackamore is a craft that’s on the verge of disappearing.

“You talk about the art of the hackamore—it’s about to become a lost art,” says Ingersoll, who, with a few other trainers like Benny Gutiron, is making efforts to pass the tradition on to a new generation.

Integral to keeping the hackamore tradition alive is having rawhiders who are able to build the tools of the trade. Although they can be found at Western stores and trade shows, not all hackamores are created equal.

“There are a lot of ’em out there that a horse has no use for,” Ingersoll insists. “They’re not made right. They’re not balanced right.”

A superior hackamore requires correct shape, perfect balance, and an illusive quality trainers call “life” or “feel,” which describes the slight springiness a hackamore gets from a firm but flexible core. Through his collaboration with Ingersoll and other trainers, Black has developed a hackamore that embodies these properties, and is a physical amalgam of wisdom from the best hackamore reinsmen living today. Black’s hackamore cores in particular have benefited from Ingersoll’s input.

“That’s really the heart of the hackamore, the core,” Ingersoll says. Cores made of inorganic materials, like metal cable, are generally thought to be “lifeless.” All of Black’s cores (and he has developed several types with Ingersoll) are made of rawhide.

“Every time I’ve got an idea, I take it to him, and we work it out to where he builds it, and we try it out and see how it works,” says Ingersoll. “With his help,
and me helping him, well, I think he probably makes one of the best hackamores.”

For some trainers, there is simply no substitute. Garrick Pasini, a young up-and-coming hackamore trainer who has been mentored by Ingersoll, is one example.

“When finally I picked up a Bill Black hackamore, it was obvious to me,” says Pasini. “I didn’t have to be sold. He puts the shape of a muzzle of a horse in every bosal that he makes.”

**MASTER AND MENTOR**

“Rawhide” suggests a rough-hewn, unfinished product, but Black’s creations are studies in geometrical complexity. The subtle, multicolored weave of the rawhide knots is suggestive of Hopi Indian baskets or the warp and weft of African textiles. Like these folk crafts, rawhide horse gear also has a use, embodying what Black calls “workable art.”

Black’s artistry doesn’t come cheap. Some working cowboys will save up their wages to buy Black’s work, but more commonly, Black’s hackamores and reins are purchased by horse trainers—professional and amateur—who can better afford the investment. He regularly receives orders from trainers across the United States and Canada, and has sent his hackamores and reins as far afield as Switzerland, Germany, and Australia.

As Black’s reputation has grown, so too have the orders he receives from collectors of Western folk art. “They flat tell me, ‘I’m buying this as an investment,’” says Black.

Collectors gravitate toward Black’s rawhide pieces, but also covet the elaborate headstalls, reins, and belts Black fashions out of colorful hitched horsehair—yet another cowboy craft in which Black is an established master. An intricately woven headstall and reins can fetch many thousands of dollars, depending on the amount of labor required to execute the design. Some collectors even playfully speculate that speeding Black’s demise would increase the value of their investment considerably, which Black doesn’t dispute.

“If you do that, just make sure you hit me in the heart,” Black says. “Don’t gut shoot me so I lay around on the floor for three days, kickin’ my belly.”

Given that his work has achieved such distinction, you’d think that a master artisan like Black would carefully guard his trade secrets. But Black is extraordinarily generous with his knowledge. If you want to learn the craft, chances are Black will just teach you. The most noteworthy example of Black’s mentorship is his wife Teresa, who over time has established a reputation as an outstanding rawhider and horsehair hitcher in her own right. But Black has also been known to mentor any number of aspiring rawheaders who appear on the doorstep of the cinderblock shop, and typically asks little more in payment than labor—scraping hides in the hair-strewn chicken coop out back.

“There are certainly a lot of people out there who aren’t willing to give young folks a lot of information, because they worked so hard to get it themselves,” observes Pasini. “He’s been an invaluable library of information. If it hadn’t been for Bill, I’d still be trying to figure things out.”

“I still believe in sharing,” Black says simply. Though Black’s artisanship has few peers, he is ever mindful of what he owes to those who took the time to teach him the fundamentals. Black maintains that his rawhide work still resembles Dean Tobias’s, and that he still works hides the way Dean showed him in Arizona back in ’78. Black isn’t the type of man to forget a debt.

“You should never take it away from the guy that taught you.”

Black’s done for the day. He has a school board meeting to go to. He shuts off the radio, snaps off the fluorescent shop light, and settles his black, flat-brimmed O’Farrell hat on his head. He strides out the door and heads for Plush Elementary around the corner, his wiry frame loping down the sidewalk.

Black has ridden a wide circle—from cowboy and cow boss to rawhider to husband and father. He has also cast a wide loop of influence around the world of traditional vaquero-style horsemanship. Through his hackamores and other rawhide creations, Black is helping trainers like Ingersoll and Pasini breathe new life into the hackamore tradition. In return, they and others have been putting Bill Black hackamores into the hands of their students—horse trainers and enthusiasts who are eager to keep the old vaquero ways from extinction.

“It’s like they’re holding gold,” says Pasini. “You can kind of see them thinking: ‘This isn’t just a tool, it’s a work of art.’”