

Well-harnessed energy

A lot of leather has passed through the hands of the Ruhlmann family at the more than century old St. Paul Saddlery

BY REGAN SMITH

It started with a streetcar, a stranger and a handshake more than a century ago.

"My grandfather was kind of a daredevil," said Garry Ruhlmann, a Highland Park native and third-generation owner of the custom-made leather goods factory, St. Paul Saddlery. "He came from a big family of farmers in Detroit, decided he didn't want to do farming, left on his own, came to the Twin Cities and got a job as a leather cutter at one of the factories on the East Side of St. Paul."

While riding the streetcar to work one morning, a man approached Michael Ruhlmann Sr. with a proposition. He had been looking for a certain type of show harness for his horses and could not find anyone willing to make it for him. The man promised Ruhlmann Sr. that if he opened his own business, he would give him all the work he could handle.

The two men shook hands, Michael Ruhlmann Harness opened for business soon after in 1908, and the stranger on the streetcar kept his word. "That's how the whole thing started," Garry Ruhlmann said.

Four location changes and a lot of leather later, the Saddlery is still chugging along. Ruhlmann, now the sole employee of the business, works six days a week cutting, dyeing and assembling custom leather goods in the small shop at 953 W. 7th St. Though he still has some regular walk-in customers, most of Ruhlmann's orders come from out of state, many from as far as away as Texas and New York.

"We still put out about 100 or so harnesses a year, but many of the old-timers who used to come in have died and the new folks moving into the area don't have horses."

Despite the changing demographics, working with his customers remains Ruhlmann's favorite part of the job. "The best part of my day is when someone walks in the door and I get a chance to socialize," he said. "It used to be actually making the stuff, but I've been doing it so long now that I don't even think about it.

"Sometimes I have to stop myself and make



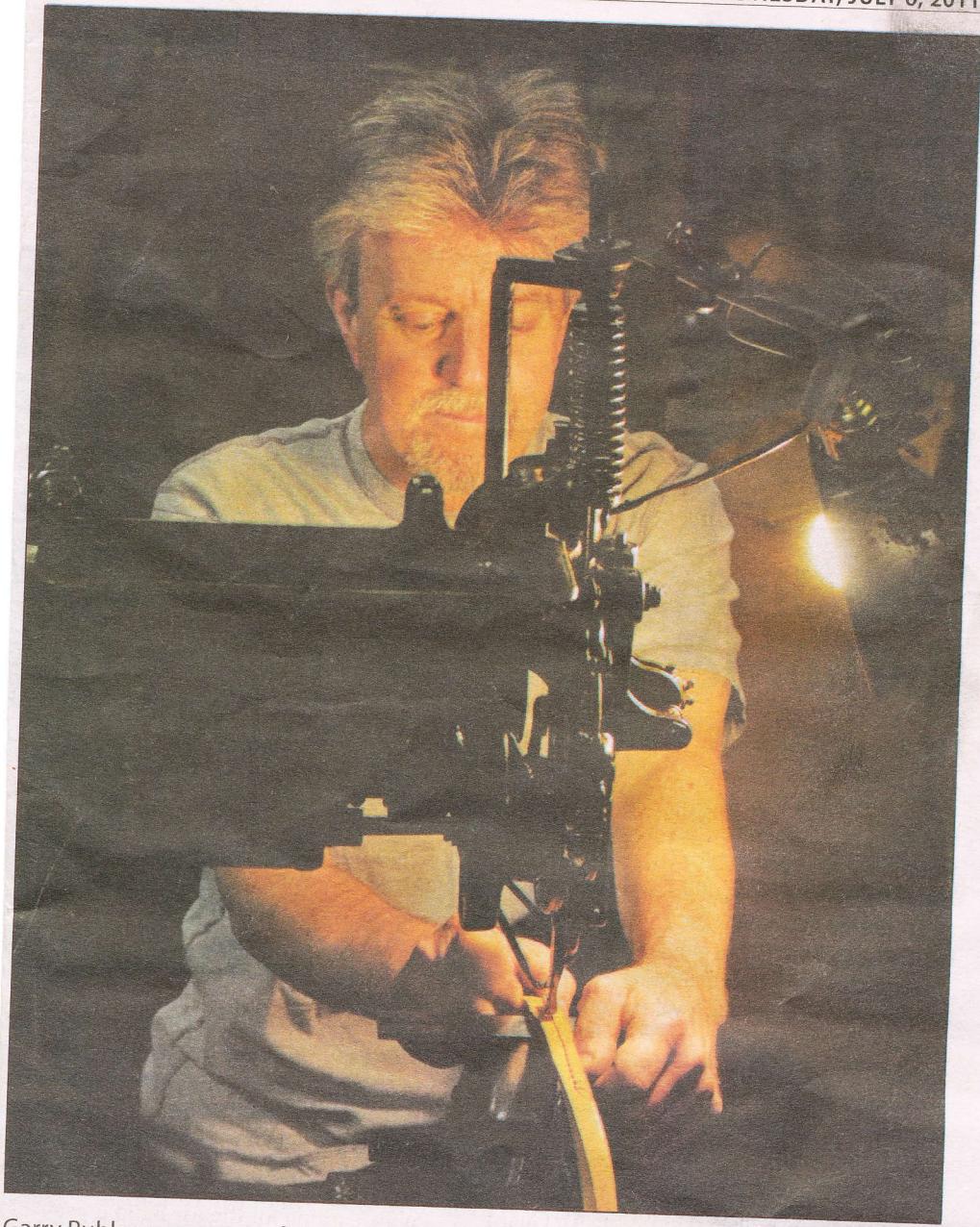
A custom leather saddle at the St. Paul Saddlery on West 7th. PHOTOS BY ANNE BRANDRUD

sure I'm still doing it right," he said with a laugh.

Ruhlmann began working at the shop when he was 10 years old. He slowly learned the tricks of the trade—dyeing leather, attaching buckles to straps and riveting harnesses—under the guidance of his father, Michael Ruhlmann Jr.

After World War II ended, farming with tractors became more popular and the demand for work horse harnesses dropped significantly. To keep the business going after he took over in the 1950s, Ruhlmann Jr. started offering custom-made saddles and changed the name from Ruhlmann and Son Harness to St. Paul Saddlery. The name change was not made for strictly business reasons, however.

"Having his personal name as part of the company name meant that people could call him at home," Ruhlmann said. "My dad got



Garry Ruhlmann, owner of the St. Paul Saddlery, sews a piece for a leather halter.

sick of having people calling him at 2:00 a.m. on a Sunday looking for a special harness, so he changed the name.”

When the saddle and harness market took another dip in the 1980s, Ruhlmann, who had taken over and incorporated the business, decided to start making custom leather motorcycle bags as well. Over the years, he has handled requests for everything from specially designed leather dog harnesses to leather motorcycle chaps. One year, he even made a leather elephant saddle for a circus that was passing through town. Still, he said, more than half of his business continues to be crafting the double-team work harnesses like his grandfather started out making.

Ruhlmann, 56, now of Mendota Heights, does not have plans to retire anytime soon.

However, with most saddles now being made overseas and the demand for harnesses dwindling, it is likely that there will not be a fourth generation of Ruhlmanns running St. Paul Saddlery.

“I don’t think I’d even want my sons to take it over, to be honest,” Ruhlmann said. “I’ll just keep going as long as I can, but this will be it as far as I know. It’s been with me for so long, it’d be like cutting off my right arm. But the market is dwindling, so what are you going to do?”

Despite his realistic approach, Ruhlmann still harbors hopes that the market might pick up and his little factory will keep going.

“Who knows? There might be another boom at some point,” he said. “It happened with my father after World War II. You never know.”