

# Horse-hair Bridles

## Link History

**A**mong the artifacts left at the Hutton house after Harold and Lucille's gift to Audubon of Kansas was an extensive collection of Native American stone arrowheads and a horse-hair bridle. Unfortunately, there is no provenance on many of these materials. The horse-hair bridle is a unique piece of Americana whose history dates back to the Plains Indians and early cowboy or vaquero. The use of horse hair in plaiting as useful horse tack probably originated with the Spaniards, who through their missionaries, would have taught the technique to the Native Americans of Mexico and the Southern plains, much of their work is described as very artistic and beautiful, besides being wonderfully serviceable. It was through contact with the Plains Indians that the skill was passed to the cowboys. Cowboys would have had an abundant supply of horse hair along with time during the winter to create usable pieces of work, often bridles.

In the early 1900s prisons also played a significant role in the history of horsehair art. Prisoners from places like Deer Lodge, Montana; Yuma, Arizona; Rawlins, Wyoming; and Walla Walla, Washington used their time behind bars to develop their skills to an art form. The art was usually passed from prisoner to prisoner. Sometimes the one wishing to learn would have to make some form of payment in exchange for the sharing of knowledge. Many of the most valuable, historic pieces collected today are from these prisons.

The Hutton bridle is likely prison-made early in the last century. On examination, the bit is plain but delicate and small, suggestive of those made in Deer Lodge Prison, Montana. There are two nickel-silver conchas with hand-stamped cross-designs of small squares placed on each end of the brow band.

The brow band is a flat strap of leather covered with a horse-hair design of diamond-in-diamond of red, turquoise and natural colors seen in prison/ penitentiary types.

The throat latch has a zig-zag ( lightning) pattern which is



initially brown, turquoise and white, with the last third red, natural and white, with a large slip knot in black and red, ending in black and white tassels.

There are two bands for the cheeks of the bridle, but with three at the poll including the throatlatch. Each side has a slide for adjusting the length of the bridle, which is described as the "Native American fashion", and ending in two black and white tassels. The mid cheeks are thickened and done in red, brown, and turquoise colors with a diamond-in-diamond pattern. The bit is held by a knot rosette through a terminal loop arrangement that is very finely done again with a slide for adjustment. There are no reins.

This important example of western art will be on display at the Hutton Guesthouse when the "visitor center" section display portion is completed.

– Robert T. McElroy

*"The dog may be man's best friend but the horse wrote history."*

– Unknown.

**Bob McElroy** is a retired general surgeon, and a founder of Tallgrass Surgical in Topeka. He has Tennessee Walkers on his rural farm and ranch property. With friends and family as guests, he has frequently taken them on road trips to destinations including the Niobrara Sanctuary, the Haverfield Ranch, and the Badlands of South Dakota.