

## Action Urged To Prevent Saddle Thefts

If there's a horse in the corral, the saddle in the barn is a likely target. Saddle thefts are evidently in an epidemic stage throughout the Midwest.

Personal saddle and tack burglaries are reported in daily and weekly newspapers on a regular basis. Now, large amounts of riding gear are being stolen from boarding stables.

As one person said, the saddle is sometimes worth more than the horse, and it doesn't have to be fed and watered, plus there's noth-

ing to clean up afterwards. Consequently, those looking for a quick turn of cash often seek out places with a horse, slip into an unlocked storage area, take the riding gear and turn the cache into money within a few days.

However, the larger-quantity thefts are believed to be the effort of a large-scale crime ring, according to Gerald Schmidt, a detective at the Pottawatomie County Sheriff's Office in Westmoreland.

"There has been more than \$300,000 worth of

horse-riding equipment taken from stables and tack shops in several states during the past few months," said Schmidt, who started his investigation after 66 saddles were stolen from two area stables last summer.

The thefts have sounded an alarm from those in the horse business, and the

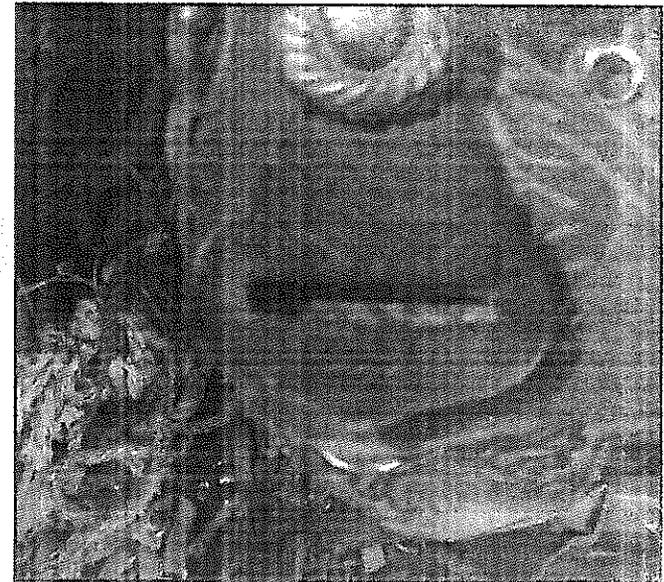
Federal Bureau of Investigation is working with local law enforcement agencies to stop the rampant crimes.

After Schmidt began inquiring about the western Pottawatomie County crimes at Timber Creek and High Horse Stables, he learned of similar crimes around the state, including some in Jackson County.

Burglaries have also been reported in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma and Wisconsin. Crime scene evidence indicates that they are all related, Schmidt verified.

"The thieves hit locations near major highways and interstates, and they possibly use telephone book yellow pages to locate potential targets," Schmidt explained.

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Manufacturer's name, model and production numbers are often marked on the cinch strap keeper and should be noted in personal inventory data and recorded on saddle insurance coverage. This aids in recovery of stolen saddles and is documentation for complete compensation when collecting insurance.

Bandits have torn down fences and gates and broken locks and storage areas to collect the tack, he noted. Crimes are usually committed in the middle of the night.

It is suspected that the riding equipment may be sold to large vendors of horse tack.

Schmidt urged anybody with horses and equipment to be suspicious of strange people and vehicles around their property. He said that in one case the thieves did not appear to be horse people.

Horse owners were encouraged to add yard lights and security systems as well as put locks on equipment storage. Schmidt recommended personal identification on all saddles and tack. A watch dog could be an added benefit.

Brandon Greenwood, owner of Timber Creek Stables at Manhattan, said that during the June robbery at his place there were 16 western saddles along with bridles and bits stolen between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m.

"They were mostly

owned by our boarders and weren't marked or insured to cover the loss," Greenwood related.

Recording serial numbers on equipment and identifying by other means

such as branding or numbering with leather stamps were recommended by Greenwood. In some instances, it has been reported that burglars left clearly identified equip-

ment behind to eliminate the possibility of being traced.

"Saddles are valuable enough now that theft insurance can be justified, but owners need to make sure the coverage is sufficient to replace the equipment," Greenwood added.

Theft of 40 English saddles and related tack happened in June between midnight and 4:30 a.m., at Ann Lenhart's High Horse Stables, northeast of Manhattan. "All of our equipment was locked up, and the padlocks were cut. It is typical of what these gangs have done across the country," she said.

Getaway vehicles of the

robbers were parked away from the stables, and barn carts were used to haul the stolen gear to them. "They didn't take any pads or blankets unless they were attached to the saddles," Lenhart noted.

"Anybody with horse equipment needs to have pictures of the items and save the receipts of purchases so that the loss can be verified," Lenhart urged. Unique features and wear marks on saddles make them more identifiable.

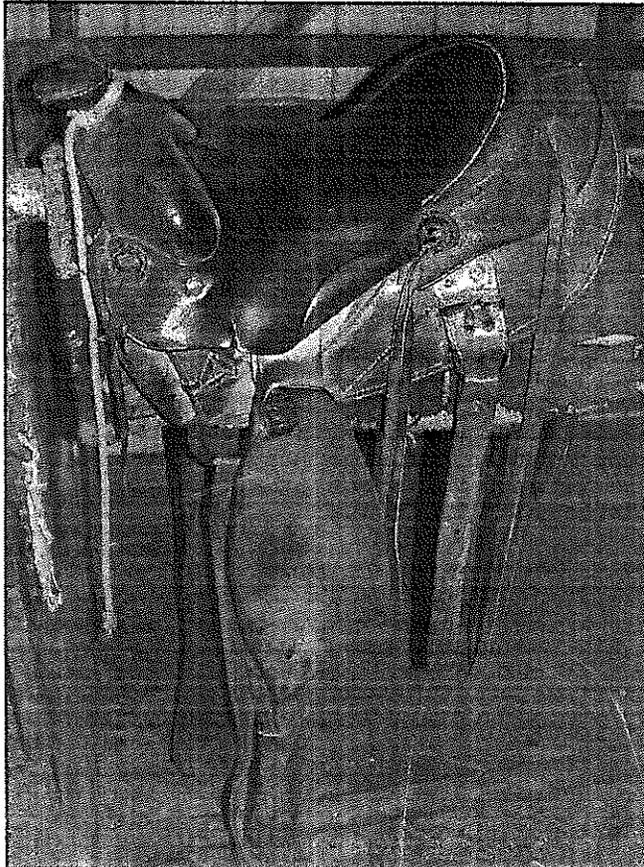
"Microchipping is now also available to identify saddles," she added.

Carolyn Levin at Ispy Systems in Lebanon, N.J.,

said microchips can readily be installed into saddles and connected to that firm's database in case of theft. The procedure will eventually be available through tack stores at a cost of less than \$50. Information is available from Levin at 908-875-4765 or ([www.ispysystem.com](http://www.ispysystem.com)).

It has also been pointed out that saddles left in horse trailers at the farm as well as at shows and sales are ready targets for thieves.

Anyone who has been a victim of horse equipment thefts or with information concerning such robberies is requested to contact Schmidt at (785) 457-3353.



File photographs of saddles, clearly showing unique features and wear marks, aid investigators when a theft occurs.

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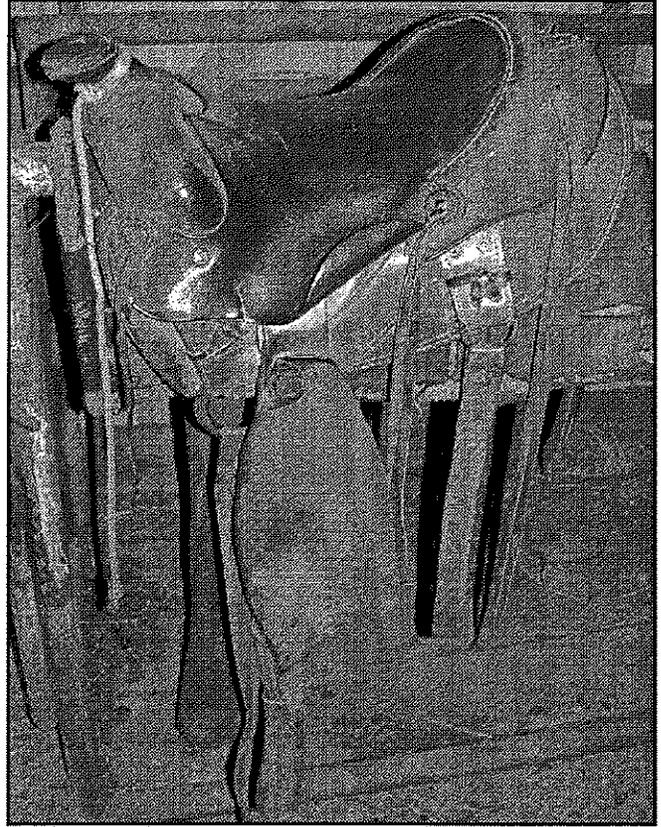
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