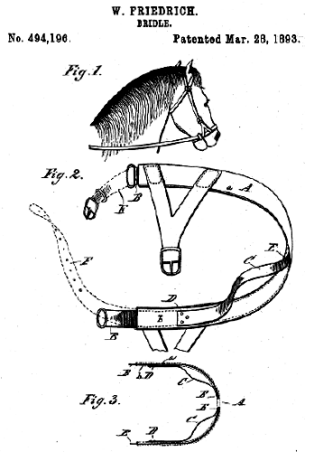
The Bitless Horse

Part 1: A History of the Bitless Bridle

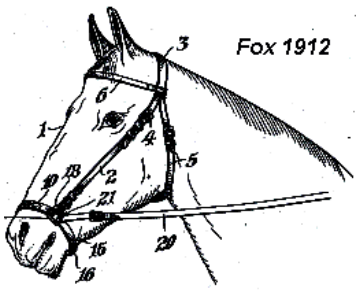
By Wendy Wainwright

This is the first part in a series of articles looking at bitless bridles. Over the coming issues topics covered will include: types of bitless bridles and how they work, reasons for choosing to use a bitless bridle, training the bitless horse (and rider) and the bitless bridle in sport and competition.

There are two main parts in the history of bitless bridles (BB). The origins, when horses were domesticated over 5000 years ago, and a more recent history of the last 120 years in which we see the development of the BB as we know it today.

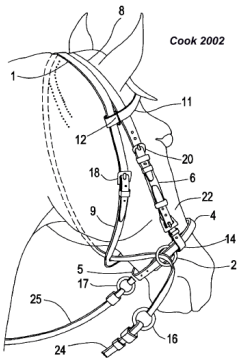


The earliest patent for a bitless safety bridle was registered in the USA in 1893 by W.Friedrich. It could be assumed that the design of BBs existed prior to this patent as Friedrich's describes his bridle as a "useful improvement" to the design but doesn't refer to any previous patents. His design employed a leather noseband lined with a metal strip on each side. This sat just behind the mouth and exerted pressure to close the nostrils, when the reins were pulled. Whilst Friedrich's design is disconcerting, in that it relied on depriving an animal of its oxygen supply, it does demonstrate a willingness to avoid the use of mouth discomfort to guide the horse.



Improvements were soon made on this design, resulting in patents by I.Fox (1912) and N.Duehr (1915) where the metal strips were removed and replaced with a leather-covered metal noseband which transferred pressure to the crest of the nasal bone (in Fox's design) and to the lower sides of the mouth (in Duehr's design). Both patents describe the designs as being more humane on account of them not cutting or damaging the mouth or by restricting breathing and could be seen as an early record of attempting to reduce the amount of discomfort used to guide and control horses.

Over the next 70 years, the design of BBs was focussed very much on mechanical hackamores, the next BB patent being registered in France in 1982. During the 1980's, three important developments occurred. Le Tixerant (1982) registered a system of pulleys which regulated pressure around the horses head, reducing pressure on any one particular point of contact – a principle used in the Equibridle. Meroth (1988) produced a design which used reins attached to the opposite sides of the noseband and crossed under the chin, a principle most commonly used today in the Indian Bosal. A design of major significance in the development of today's BBs occurred in 1984 with the patenting of Woodruff's "Be Nice" halter. This employed straps which crossed from below the ears, under the jaw, to the noseband and was designed to reduce pressure around the whole head. From this



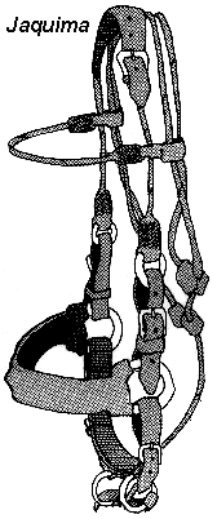
concept, Alan Buck developed the Spirit Bridle (1988) which was further adapted to become the Dr Cook Bitless Bridle (2002). Other BBs that make use of this crossunder concept include the Nurtural (2007) and the Be Kind (pat.).

It is often assumed that BBs naturally preceded bitted bridles and were then abandoned in favour of the bit, however, this is not necessarily true.
Horses were domesticated around 50000 years ago and were kept primarily for meat and milk until they began to be used in agriculture and for transport approximately 5000 years ago. As horses were domesticated relatively late compared to other animals how they were controlled depended upon the methods used in controlling previously domesticated animals.

In areas where the ox was widely used, control was obtained by a ring through the nose. There is some debate over whether this method was ever adopted for horses or not, based on a frieze of Sumerian horses. Some believe that the frieze shows an Onager (a type of Asiatic ass) rather than horses and the rings are part of a muzzle as the Onagers were renowned for biting. Whether or not the ring was used through the horses nose, it would have been abandoned as an ineffective control method for horses, due to the ring ripping through the nasal cartilage, and was probably developed to a ring round the bottom jaw and then to a bit in the mouth. This would have been the method adopted throughout the majority of the globe with rawhide bits giving way to metal ones. However, there are two exceptions that are worth mentioning.

Firstly, the Numidians of Africa rode asses with the aid of a simple neck strap and transferred this technique to horse riding when horses were introduced to them approximately 3000 years ago. The Numidians became mercenary cavalry and adopted the tack and techniques of their employers and abandoned their own method of riding. In recent years this technique has been revived and will be discussed in a later article.

The second, and very influential, were the Berber Arabs who had a great deal of experience in camel riding. For similar reasons, the nose ring would have been of as little use on the camel as on the horse and a rope halter, reins and lead rope combination, called an Al Hakma, was the method used and transferred to horse riding. The Al Hakma was adopted by the Spanish Vaqueros after the Moorish invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century AD, the bridle noseband was thickened, rawhide replaced rope and was referred to by the Spanish as the Jaquima. During the Moorish occupancy, the use of bits begins to occur across the Moorish empire, as riding techniques and equipment were traded throughout the empire.


Jaquima

During the next 800 years, some Vaqueros continued to ride using the Jaquima and its use was transported to South America during the Spanish conquest. The convenience and availability of rawhide, as opposed to the arduous process of mining, smelting and forging metals ensured that the Jaquima continued to be used in South and Central America and the Southern United States where it developed into the Hackamore, or Bosal as it is known today.

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