

# Texas Living

## PEOPLE & PLACES®



## Cowgirl Chic

Leisha Ashley and Alamo Saddlery give tack a makeover. BY RICHARD BANKS

By adding a little bling and a lot of style, Leisha Ashley helped revolutionize saddle design.



“This is our little slice of heaven,” says Leisha about her family’s ranch along the banks of Pinto Creek.

**BELOW:** Alamo Saddlery’s “Jewelry on Tack” includes stylish enhancements such as conchas, rhinestones, colored stones, crosses, and dyed alligator hide.



The blue-green waters of Pinto Creek lure living things, wild and otherwise—those needing to quench a thirst or take a cooling dip and those, like Leisha Ashley, who are returning home with big ideas.

“Sometimes you have to go away to realize what you want, and I wanted this,” says Leisha of her decision to move back home along the banks of the Pinto, a ribbon of oasis running to the Rio Grande, near the West Texas town of Brackettville. “This is where my family lives and where I spent my childhood. I came back because I wanted my children to have the same things I had growing up.”

Leisha, however, came packing more than household goods and a family. She brought with her an idea that would not only alter the direction of one of her family’s companies, Alamo Saddlery, but also that of the tackmaking industry as a whole.

**How She Got Started** Typically, saddles and other tack have been styled in a sort of unisex fashion that was more masculine than feminine. In 1996, when Leisha started working at Alamo Saddlery, she hatched a plan to change all that.

“I wanted to add jewels and bright colors to some of our products. Women are a big segment of our industry, so why not add a line of tack that’s marketed specifically for them?”

The company was then owned by Leisha’s father, Hadley Wardlaw, who ran the business with the late Roy Martin. “This is a male-dominated industry, and I wasn’t sure how they

would accept my ideas,” she says now, remembering her initial trepidation. The two men, however, actively supported and encouraged Leisha. “It’s all about timing, and we were able to come out with things for women at what seemed like just the right time, and they took off like crazy.”

**Fashionably Tough** Much of Alamo Saddlery’s tack sports brightly colored leather, colored stones, rhinestones, and a more feminine cut. “Cowgirls are tough,” says Leisha, “but that doesn’t mean we don’t like a few fashionable touches.”

Leisha scours the marketplace looking for those stylish details, keeping abreast of trends in the fashion industry and the art world. “We travel some and get ideas from watching what colors are being used in clothing and accessories. I may not get too many ideas directly from art, but it inspires me to get creative, which helps in this business.”

Leisha also finds inspiration right at home, where she and her family share a 200-acre ranch with her parents. She lives just down the road from her 93-year-old grandmother, Virginia Shahan, who runs the Alamo Village—the movie-set-cum-tourist-attraction that put Brackettville on the international map (see below for more on the village).

“It’s a tough but beautiful country out here, just like the people,” says Leisha. “A saddle has to work, because the people sure do.” We’d add that it doesn’t hurt for them to look good too. ●



**Alamo Village**

There are few things more closely associated with Texas than The Alamo and the saddle. Leisha Ashley and her family remade both.

While Leisha gave tack a makeover, her grandfather Happy Shahan partnered with John Wayne to build Alamo Village, a model of the Texas mission, as a set where the famed actor filmed *The Alamo*.

Since then, Alamo Village has been the site of some 100 movies, TV shows, music videos, and commercials and is open to the public for tours. Music shows and re-enacted gunfights are performed several times a day, and special events are held throughout the year. *For more information visit <http://thealamovillage.homestead.com/alamovillage.html>.*