

MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (MH) Maggie Holtzberg. ()

Accession Numbers:

MH-10-04-FN

Fieldnotes

MH-10-04-D

Audio recordings

MH-10-04-D

Photographic documentation

- - -M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: 3/16/2010 Contact Date: 4/8/2010

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Ava Vettenburg, master English saddler

Address: [REDACTED]

City: Swansea

Zip: 02777

County:

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED]

Evening:

E-mail: [REDACTED]

Website: [REDACTED]

Contact person:

Title:

Location of Interview: Ava's studio, a renovated workspace in former garage of house

Street Address:

City:

Zip:

County: Bristol

Special Needs (including translation):

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): saddle making and leather braiding (Sallang)

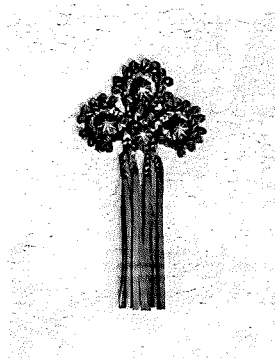
Traditions noted for follow-up: Ava's partner, Paul Duclos -grew up in the area, fishing, guitar picker and singer

Other Possible Contacts: 4th generation apple grower

Summary: MH-10-04-FN Ava Vettenburg

I learned of English saddler Ava Vettenburg from Dan Kahn, a folklorist working in Rhode Island. (Dan discovered Ava from talking with his gym buddy, Paul Duclos. Dan described Ava to me in an email as accomplished at a number of equestrian-related traditional art forms (leather braiding, saddle making, embroidery etc) and having recently moved to South East Massachusetts. Born and raised near Budapest, Hungary. I contacted Ava in mid-March and after a few postponements set a date for me to visit on April 8. It turned out to be a lovely day, after days of rain. (Nearby areas such as Freetown had serious flooding in recent weeks, but Swansea was not affected.) Ava Vettenburg and her partner Paul Duclos live in a shingle-sided house in a suburban neighborhood of Swansea, Massachusetts. Paul had sold the main part of the house to his son, who had recently lived in Japan for many years.

I arrived at 10:00 a.m. and was greeted by Ava, dressed in black jeans and a navy short-sleeved finely-knit pullover sweater. I noticed a slight Hungarian accent. Ava immigrated to the United States in 1997. In Virginia, she built saddles with the renowned saddle designer Tad Coffin, an Olympic gold medal rider in 1976. Tad Coffin Performance saddles are highly regarded throughout the equestrian world. Ava also worked in Florida for approximately ten years. Ava was drawn to leatherwork after coming across a sallang, or Hungarian braided harness. She marveled at the craftsmanship involved in making this decorative item originally intended to swat away flies from horses. Ava found a woman who taught her to braid leather into Sallangs – the Hungarian word for decorative harnesses. In Hungarian tradition, sallangs are used for special occasions to dress the horse – brass hardware and other decorative details identify a specific barn, city, or governmental entity.



Working on her own now, Ava no longer builds English saddles, but concentrates on repairing them. Her clients send her saddles needing repair from all over the country. To do master quality repair work, it is invaluable to have had experience building saddles from scratch. Ava's workshop is outfitted with a 50-year German made sewing machine, supplies, workbenches, and a collection of hand leatherworking tools (awls, hammers, and other leatherworking tools), many of which she inherited from her master teacher in Hungary.

Ava Vettenburg is probably one of eight to ten master saddlers working in the United States today.