



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Fieldworker(s): (MH) Maggie Holtzberg, (GB) Gabrielle Berlinger

Interviewee(s): Anthony Cooper, saddler

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Brief summary of tape contents: How Tony Cooper came into leatherwork and moved to England to study saddlery; the physical structures of, the prices of, and the materials used to make English saddles and side saddles; how saddle quality has changed over last 20 years; who his clients are today and what they request; differences between Western and English saddles, riders; discussion of his tools and displaying of Tony's first handstitching; comparison of the trade guilds in England.

Counter/ABS	Contents
	<p>Maggie Holtzberg (MH): Today's October, what, 12th? And we are in Sudbury, and why don't we just start by you telling us your name and where you were born.</p> <p>Anthony Cooper (AC): Uh, my name is Tony Cooper. I was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1945. Uh, I actually grew up mostly in England and went to school in England, so I'm more, even though I have an Irish passport, I grew up in England and I'm more English than Irish.</p> <p>MH: And were your parents English or Irish?</p> <p>AC: All my family's Irish - they're all from Dublin.</p> <p>MH: Ah, ok, wow. But your accent, you don't sound it.</p> <p>AC: Well, I've been here since 1969 and uh, I'm a citizen now, so I have two passports.</p> <p>MH: Dual citizenship (AC & MH chuckle), that's great. And tell us what you do for a living.</p> <p>AC: I'm a saddler, I make saddles and I specialize specifically in fitting them to horses. I contour the bottom of the English saddle to fit the horse's shape and make the horse comfortable, put the rider in the best position, and that's basically what I do.</p> <p>MH: And uh, it seems like not a very common trade, so tell us, how did you get into this trade?</p>

AC: Well I, when I came to the States, I was working for my uncle in New York in the restaurant business, and then I got into leatherwork. It was that whole era where people were doing crafts and such, and I was a hippie, so I was doing leathercraft. And I did that, I had my own business for about 15 years or so, and I'd always wanted to do saddlery, so I went home to England and found a place where I could study saddlery, which I did. And then I came back here and knocked on barn doors.

MH: Was it an apprenticeship, or..

AC: There is actually a college in London which is called Cordwainers College. Cordwainers are people who make shoes, so they basically do shoemaking and leatherwork there, but they had a small course in rural saddlery, which is the one that I took.

MH: Great, so they're English saddles. Um, so the transition from the leatherwork to the saddlery..

AC: I'm working in the same medium really, you know, it's just something I wanted to do. And I had actually been around some horses and done some saddlery work before I actually did my training, so it wasn't really that much of a change, I just had to learn some different things.

MH: Can you describe the basic steps in making an English saddle, or does it take, like, all day?

AC: (Laughing) I was gonna say, do you have a couple of years?

MH: OK, bad question.

AC: Well, basically, there's a wooden framework called a "tree" and they build the saddle around that framework. You need that framework to hold it steady and to support the rider. If you just have leather, you might as well be riding bareback. So, what the saddle does is support you a little more and bring you off the horse's body little bit more so that the pressure on the horse is more even.

MH: Like a shock absorber sort of?

AC: Eh, yeah, if you're sitting, then your cheeks are the only things that are sitting on the horse; when you put a saddle on, it distributes your weight more so that the horse is more comfortable, so that's basically what a saddle does - it distributes the weight so, you know, that the horse doesn't get sore in one area or another. And it gives support to the rider so they can sit properly, cause when you're on a horse, you're being bounced up and down if you're riding bareback and uh..

MH: Yeah, so that the whole fitting process is just as much an art as making a saddle, right?

AC: Yeah, and that's really what I do all the time now because there's a great need for it. In England, there's saddlers in every town, so there are a lot of people going out and fitting saddles to the horses. Over here, there is an abundance of saddle pads which try to accommodate the fit of the saddle for the horses but it's a problem because if the saddle isn't fitting the horse in the first place, you put pads on and it can make it worse - sometimes it works fine but generally it's not a good thing. That's why there are so many different pads out there, because there's nobody who knows how to fix them - fix the saddles.

MH: Yeah, so who would your clients be? Who are your customers?

AC: Oh, everybody. You wouldn't believe how many people have horses in their backyards in New England. It's a huge area between here and New York, it's enormous, everyone's got horses. I mean, even you ride.

MH: Yeah, I'm riding, but I don't have a horse

AC: But you could rent one

MH: Yeah, I could rent one - can you rent them?

AC: Yeah, quite often barns will have a horses that they will lease out - you know, someone has a horse they're not riding as much and they will half lease to you, or something, so you can ride the horse with them, and that way you don't bear the cost of all the vet bills and, you know, instead of going each time and getting on a different horse.

MH: Exactly, yeah.

AC: So some barns will do that, you have to call around and see..

MH: Because I had a lot of trouble even finding a place to take lessons. It was not that easy to find.

AC: Yeah.

MH: So you also mentioned repairing saddles.

AC: Yeah, obviously seeing as I know how to make a saddle from scratch, I do repair saddles and refurbish them. People come to me with saddles they've had for 15-20 years that they can't give up, so I rebuild them and make them new again. So that's one of the other services I offer. And also, I restore side saddles, and there's nobody around who does that. My teacher in England was a side saddle person who worked for a champion in Wilton - there were three manufacturers in England who made side saddles and that was one of the last ones that was still around, so he was an apprentice with them, and went through the whole thing and then was the Foreman. So I did my regular saddlery training with him at Cordwainers and then he came over here and taught me about side saddles and we did a lot of side saddle work together. So, I picked his brain and made sure I got all the information I could get from him (chuckle).

MH: What's his name?

AC: His name is Michael Dickens.

MH: Michael Dickens, OK. Tell us more about what a side saddle is.

AC: A side saddle is the one over there. And that's traditionally the way women would ride because it's unlady-like for a woman to straddle a horse. It's not correct, so you would sit sideways on the horse and there are a couple of supports called Heads, a Fixed Head and a Leaping Head, that you put your legs around and support yourself so you can sit sideways on the horse, and it's very secure; and people who ride side saddle really like it, they really like it, and they do competition and they hunt and everything.

MH: Really? I can't imagine how you could balance.

AC: Well, it's kind of like sitting like this (crosses his legs), just like this, got your legs like that, sitting on a chair, and if you feel comfortable like this, I can put you on a horse and make you feel comfortable like that. So that's the scoop.

MH: But you can't post, and you can't..

AC: Uh, yeah, you can do everything.

MH: So people actually do that here?

AC: Yeah, there are quite a few people who ride side saddle. There's a woman in New Hampshire - Rhonda Watts (sp?) - who, I do stuff for her all the time, and she has straight saddles but she doesn't ride them much, she rides side saddle. And a lot of people hunt still in side saddle.

MH: Are there hunts around here?

AC: Yeah, there's the Shoburg (?) Valley Hunt and there's one out of Concord, what's that one called? I can't remember but my wife is part of that..don't remember that, but there are 3 or 4 hunts and some in New Hampshire and Vermont, of course - they're all over the place. There used to be more but some of them have closed up because there's no access on the land anymore, it's getting more difficult.

MH: That's right, yeah. Um, what would you say are the most challenging aspects of making saddles?

AC: Um, well, you know, if you can do it, it's not that challenging, really. You have to have a knack for making things, you have to be that kind of person and someone with the ability to make things and construct things and pull things apart and put them back together can probably learn to make a saddle. Um, uh, it's just that there's no one around who does it in the States so it would be hard to learn that here obviously. But once you've done it, there are some parts that are more difficult - making the bottom part of the saddle has always been more difficult for me, I mean, obviously I can do it, but that's more difficult.

MH: The tree? that part or do you mean..

AC: The bottom part that actually has the padding, the cushion that goes in the saddle between you and the horse. That's one of the more difficult parts to make. Putting a seat on, and stuff like that, that's more straightforward.

MH: And what is that padded with?

AC: Well, usually it's wool. This actually has air bladders in it - it's like the Nike pump for saddles, and this has come out actually, it's been out for 6 or 8 years. I've been putting it in saddles for that long. And when I started doing it, a woman who's a side saddle person had sent me a copy of a patent that was applied for from 1885 for side saddle bladders; so, people who think that air is a new thing, have got it all wrong. People have been thinking about this stuff for years and years and finally someone came out with a system that actually works. People have tried it and it didn't work and it disappeared for a while.

MH: Yeah, cause I would think that it would lose air..

AC: Well, it does, it's got little sealing things here. It does seep very minutely, and so you just have to take care of it like anything that has air in it - have to keep an eye on it.

MH: Like tires, that makes sense.

AC: Yeah, but the horses love that. It's comparable to an old backpack that has tiny little straps on to the new ones that are wide with a big foam thing in them, some have air in there, that's the difference. You suddenly can carry your 90 lbs up the mountain without any problem.

MH: Right - and what you said earlier about distributing the weight..

AC: It's much better and it's eventhe horse as the horse is moving so there's never a moment where it's uncomfortable for the horse and the pressure is here or there - it's always even. It's a real improvement.

MH: Do you ride yourself?

AC: I don't ride. I know which way to face when I'm up on a horse, but that's the limit of my skill. Um, I got on my wife's horse and I was thinking, "Woah! That's a long way down!" (laughing), so, but yeah, I mean, I can go around the ring but my skills are somewhat limited.

[phone call interruption]

MH: What do you think is the most satisfying or rewarding thing about doing this work?

AC: Um, well, the thing that I like about it the most is that the integrity of saddlery is always the same - it hasn't changed in years, so that I'm still doing the same stuff that people did two, three hundred years ago; and it'll always be that way cause there are certain things within the saddle-making process that will always be the same - you can't do them with a machine. You can produce some of the things with a machine and do machine-stitching, but there's still a lot of handwork that you have to do, and there'll always be saddlers - maybe not many

of them, but there will be saddlers. And that's it, it has its own integrity and it's something that I've always enjoyed being part of, that carrying on of the tradition, so..

MH: Do you think it would be possible to find an apprentice?

AC: Well, I actually have a person that I have had working with me for a couple of years, so he's been learning the basics, but obviously it's hard to have enough money and time to keep them on all the time, and that's the real problem. But there are people, you know - I did have, when I started saddlery some 20 yrs ago, I had a guy call me every week who wanted me to train him, but I said I can't, you know, I just can't do it. I had just come back from England and was just starting up and I had enough business but you know, I didn't do that.

MH: Uh huh. Um, what is the cost, if you're starting from scratch and making a custom saddle - what would that cost?

AC: If someone's buying a custom saddle, you're paying \$3,000 or something like that. You can buy saddles for two or three hundred bucks from Pakistan and they come with bridle and stirrup leathers and stirrup irons, and a dead pony probably, and um, it would cost you more to repair them once they're broken than to buy a new saddle - they're pretty bad. And then there's the medium range that about six to eight hundred dollars or nine hundred dollars and that's what most people get. And then you can get a nice saddle for under \$2,000 and then you can spend a lot of money for namebrand saddles that aren't that much better than the ones are less expensive..the same old thing, people will just buy it for the name, and people will just buy it because it costs a lot of money and that's the way it goes, you know.

MH: Like a car.

AC: Yeah, people will spend the Hermes saddle is \$4600- and then because it's not a wool-stuffed saddle which you can adjust the bottom of to the horse, people will have to come to me to fix it, fit it to their horse. For that much money, I wouldn't only want only want it to fit the horse properly, but I'd want to get blue ribbons every time I rode, right? But that's the way it is.

MH: Is that Hermes the same that makes the clothing..

AC: The scarves and all that stuff.

MH: Now the French make different saddles, right? It starts with an R, some saddle that's used in Europe that's different, or not?

AC: Well, there are a lot of different brands, uh, the French aren't any different than some of the German or northern European or you know..

MH: Where do you get your materials, your leather?

AC: I was buying my leather from England and then I found a tannery in Canada that was doing English leather and then they moved to Pennsylvania which makes it even better, so I buy some stuff from that. Hardware, and things like that, I usually get from England - the furnishings, the nails and stirrup irons and buck irons..

MH: So over the last 20 yrs, do you think the quality of saddles, not your own but the ones that are out there, has the quality changed?

AC: Yeah, I think it's gotten a little better. There's still low-end saddles that make it affordable for someone to ride - the synthetic saddles for 3 or 4 hundred bucks - and they're great, they're very functional. They're making them much better, they fit the horses ok, and it's great. If you're not really sure if you're gonna be a rider your whole life, then if you want to spend 4 or 5 hundred bucks, you can ride for a year and throw the saddle away.

MH: Otherwise it would last how long?

AC: Uh, the synthetics..

MH: No, no, your kind of saddle, from you.

AC: Oh, you can hand it down to your kids. You should be able to.

MH: What about size? Well, I'm actually riding a pony and the saddle's very petite, um, and she doesn't need a pad.

AC: Well, you may need a bigger saddle - does it feel tight for you? Where you riding?

MH: I'm riding at it's called Rising Star, in Medway, right near Holliston.

AC: Is that near 126?

MH: Yeah.

AC: Yeah, sure, it used to be called something else.

MH: Oh ok. But I mean, I don't know enough to know, I mean I feel very secure in it.

AC: Yeah, well, anyway. Saddles are much better quality now, so it's good because people are competing and they want the quality of the name brand and there are some very nicely made saddles out there, and I've probably seen all of them, worked on all of them.

MH: Now are there different types of saddles? You mentioned the side saddle, but what other kinds of English saddles?

AC: Well, the English saddle, there's Dressage, and then an all purpose saddle which you could use for Dressage or jumping, and then a jumping saddle which would obviously have the flap more forward because you're gonna have your legs short and like that, like a jockey, with your legs up. People who do eventing would ride in a jumping saddle because they're up in the saddle all the time and need their knees up front to jump. And basically, those are the three styles, it's Dressage and jumping and all-purpose which would encompass both disciplines.

MH: Um, the little I've been in this world of horses, you pick up very quickly that there's an incredible difference between Western and English, not only saddles but riders, um, can you comment on that at all? Have had nothing to do with the Western world or ..

AC: Well, the thing with Western saddles is that they're not set up so that you can adjust the bottom part of the saddle that sits on the horse. It's basically a fairly primitive system like the old pack saddles that have a couple of boards on either side of the horse and it'll strap over the top part of the horse and you'll put your guns and stuff on it. It's basically the same thing - there are two pieces of wood or fiberglass on each side of the horse and an arched horn at the front and an arched thing at the back to sit in and they don't put anything on the bottom of the flat pieces that go along the body of the horse so there's no way to adjust it to the horse's shape. So usually when I go out and see people with Western horses, usually I'm rearranging their pads so that it's more comfortable for the horse. But it's amazing that people are riding in those things, to be quite honest, I'm always quite amazed (chuckling).

MH: Well it's like people compare it to slouching back in a big ol' couch.

AC: Yeah, the armchair thing.

MH: But you don't feel as if you have as much contact with the animal.

AC: You know, I don't know, not being a rider and I've been on -- have I been in a Western saddle? I'm sure I've gone pleasure riding, I don't remember -- but I would think you have the same kind of contact because the side of the saddle doesn't go down as far, you don't have these big flaps, so your leg is actually more on the horse. And I've seen some Western people who can ride and do everything with just reigning, just reigning the horse in, bitless bridles and the whole thing,

they're just using their legs and hands and their seat. So the skill level is the same, they're just doing different things; I'm just surprised they haven't changed the way the saddle fits the horse.

MH: That's interesting, yeah. I mean, supposedly it's more comfortable for the rider because they're in it all day - it's a working situation.

AC: Well that's the difference - the Western saddle's a working saddle, the English saddle's a sport saddle - it's a sport um..

MH: Right. Now back to that shaping of the saddle that fits the contour of the horse -- how do you make that measurement? Do you make a mold? Do you actually take a measurement of the horse's line? What do you do?

AC: No, no. I look at the saddle and I look at the horse and I make them fit.

MH: You just do it intuitively?

AC: Yeah, it's a very visceral thing. You look at it, you look at the saddle, see where it's sitting on the horse level and you can adjust the shapes. After you've done it for a while, you know that it needs a little more puffiness here or less there so that it's gonna sit properly on the horse. There are machines out there, pads, that you can put on the horse and see where the pressure is and everything - the problem is that you still have to come to me to make it fit and I don't need any of that stuff.

MH: So do you go to the people? You have to see the horse?

AC: Yeah, I go to the barn and I look at the saddle and the horse and I adjust it right there - put the rider up and make sure it's OK and that's it.

MH: That's great.

AC: Yeah, it's pretty straightforward.

MH: Do you have to work hard for customers or do they come to you and you have more than you can handle?

AC: I have a large clientel now that's been cycling around for years and I see people every couple of years, some people every six months cause they're more concerned, some people call me and say their saddle's not working. They say, "Well, you know, you did it recently and it's not working now," and I say, "When did you see me?" And "Oh, I think it was seven years ago," and I'm thinking, OK, that's a little too long to be waiting and saying the saddle's not working. So I have people calling me all the time. And I have an ad that runs continually in "The Horseman's Yankee Peddler." So new people come through that or it's word of mouth. My first year, I had ads in the Yankee Peddler - I had a whole year's worth of ads and I got two phone calls.

MH: Wow.

AC: Um, but, so after that I stopped that and I was knocking on barn doors. And then about four, five years later I thought, well, I'll redo my ad and at that point, people had heard about me and I got more calls in the first week than I had for ages, I mean, it was amazing. So people knew I was around there but needed to know how to get in touch with me.

MH: So it's word of mouth probably.

AC: Yes, it's definitely word of mouth. If you go to someone and they love the way you've worked on their saddle, they're gonna tell their friends you should have Tony Cooper do your saddle or whatever.

MH: And is there anyone else in the state of Massachusetts doing this?

AC: Uh, there's another person called, what is he called? He calls himself The English Saddler, but he's not, he wasn't trained to make saddles, he was trained to do bridles and stuff, and I met him early on but he does fit saddles and everything - you can learn how to do it.

MH: Do you do bridles too?

AC: I used to make bridles but I just don't have enough time to do it, to do bridles and do this and make saddles and there are lots of people out there who make bridles, so it's not worth my trying to do.

MH: More like making a belt, right?

AC: It is, but there's a lot of hand-stitching involved and it takes forever, and you can't really charge enough for the hand-stitching. The people who make them in England, in Walsall, you know which is kind of the saddle-capital of the world there, they can stitch 10 stitches to the inch and they can do an inch in like 5 or 6 seconds.

MH: In leather? That's amazing.

AC: Yeah, you know, they're stitching like this, in out in out in out, so why should I do that when I'm doing (makes grunting noises), like, so I'm not super slow but it takes a long time. And these people who do that, it's all they do, they're very good at it, so let them do it.

MH: Your fingers..

AC: Well, you make holes, you make holes..

MH: You have to make holes, I know from just putting a new hole in a belt, yeah. Um, do you have anything you want to ask (to Gabrielle)?

AC: Tea break?

MH: Oh yes, we didn't have tea, let's put this on pause.

AC: Well, come on downstairs.

[Tea break - 1/2 hr. Then return to examine some of Tony's equipment, tools, materials:]

AC: This is a modular saddle, it comes in pieces. And this is that the air goes in, when you're moving, it moves with the horse. But this one, you put different styles of flaps on, jumping or dressage or whatever, and you can assemble the saddle. I can build the saddle at a barn for someone who's looking for one. This is made actually by the people doing the air bladders - they're making their own saddle now. Very interesting concept. I like it, I think it's great.

MH: Wait, so show me the tree.

AC: This is what a tree looks like, and it's like plywood - see it's laminated like plywood? See they put layer and layer, they crossover the layers and make this thing, so with it being laminated like that, it's very strong. The older ones would be solid wood, a rigid tree, and they tend to break; but these are very flexible, it bends with the horse and rider. It doesn't move so much this way but..and anyway, that's the inside frame of a tree.

MH: And what is that made out of?

AC: Well this is wood too, but they just covered it with a cheesecloth and it's a brown stain they put on it so it looks..but if you look at it, it looks like a cheesecloth right there. See? They coat it with the stain..

MH: And this is like seatbealt.

AC: Yeah, it's exactly that.

MH: And this is the pummel?

AC: This is the pummel, this is the waist, or the twist - I mean, it's called a waist because it looks like someone's hips. And Western saddles have a much wider twist part, so you kind of have to sit back and go like this, so that's why cowboys walk like this - because they're sitting on the saddle and it spreads their pelvic bones, it kind of turns their hips out. Whereas with English saddles, you can have a narrow twist or a wider twist depending on how the person is built. Most people prefer the narrow twist - even big women who I thought would be wider, actually

the way the pelvis is set is narrow, so it just depends. But you do have a choice with English saddles. But people ask me if I make trees and I'm like, "Oh god, you know.." (chuckling)

MH: So you purchase the tree..

AC: I buy the trees from England and I usually, sometimes I buy the naked tree - it doesn't have the webbing on it, and sometimes I buy them already dressed they call it - they dress it up for me. Um, I made a saddle for Sturbridge Village and they actually made a tree for me because it was an 1830s saddle so they had their woodworking shop make it a saddle and I brought them a wooden tree that I had around and they made a copy of that, so .. but that was an interesting project because they sent me to The Smithsonian to copy a saddle in The Smithsonian.

MH: Oh, ok. Is it still there in Sturbridge Village?

AC: Uh, yeah, I'm not sure if they use it, I think they kind of have it tucked away somewhere, but yeah, it should still be there..(chuckle). It was interesting, when I was down there in The Smithsonian I did some work for them -- I restored some bicycle leathers and things like that.

MH: Yeah, that is neat. Ok, so that's the tree. Then what.

AC: Ok, let me show you..

MH: Is that for the air?

AC: Yeah, this is for the air. See, I'm gonna redo this..

[Side A of tape ends, Side B begins]

MH: Are these the saddle pads?

AC: This part of the saddle is called the panel, the bottom part is called the panel. This is a sweatflap and it's called a sweatflap because it's goes closest to the horse and takes all the sweat of the horse, and then there's another flap on top of this - the main flap - that your leg goes against. So this prevents the sweat from coming through onto the flap that you're using and getting wet and all the rest of that, so that's why it's called the sweatflap - it takes away some of the moisture. And actually I was working on the tree on this one. I was gonna adjust it and lace it back together. But this is made by a guy in Toronto I think, a German guy who makes saddles in Toronto.

MH: Uh huh, OK. And these little cushy things in the back?

AC: Well, you see this is the panel and the old fashioned ones - this is a gusset, you know it's like you have gussets in skirts and pants and stuff and it makes them wider? That's what this does - it makes the panel more full. The older ones were just one piece of leather, they tend to be very tight and there's not enough room in them to make their shape fit the horses. You want these as wide and big as possible because then it allows for more adjustment when you're fitting it to the horse. If you've got a horse that's high in the front and low in the back, this needs to be really big to put it up. So when I'm looking at the saddle, I would say that this could be bigger, I would make this like this, so that you just have more adjustment. What else can I show you?

MH: Do you have one that you've made?

AC: [shuffling around to find one] This is actually a saddle that I've made and I was going to change the flaps on this. You see this part of the saddle is fairly straightforward to do, to make these and put the seat on. You have to do everything inside out to get it on here, and I made some simple panels for this one rather than this style here which has a sweatflap and all that..I made them

separate. So this little baby, this goes, this goes up in here like this and then the panel goes like this..

MH: Oh yeah. Nice.

AC: And that's what this one's like when it's together. And I molded this to make it, that's the sweatflap, but I'm actually gonna put a kneepad, a foam kneepad that's softer. But this is what a saddle looks like when it's first going together.

MH: When did you first make that?

AC: Uh, this one is probably 4, 5 yrs old. Now when I did my first saddle at Corwainers, we had to handstitch everything and we would do 12 stitches to the inch. In fact I have a little piece here - it's very fine work.

MH: Oh it's beautiful, yeah.

AC: And this here, has less stitches to the inch, I think this is 9 or 10 to the inch, but that's all handstitched. I kept this from when I was in training.

MH: It stands by itself [taking photos now of materials]. What are you punching the holes with?

AC: Well, there's a pricking iron, but you see these little things that are at 45 degrees? You make the imprint with a pricking iron and then you make the hole with an awl. So you just prick the pattern and the pricking iron is this long-an inch or inch and a half-and it got a little crooked there. I got better. The trick to handstitching is to make the back exactly the same as the front. I mean that's a pretty thick piece of leather. It's pretty nice.

MH: Yeah, and that's a halter?

AC: Yeah, yeah. And then when I was doing bridles I did this stuff.

MH: Nice leather, oh it's beautiful.

AC: Handstitched.

MH: So thick, it looks like a lot of work, you need a lot of strength, yeah?

AC: Yeah, but if you've got a sharp awl, it's like everything. If you've got the right tool and it's sharp, then you're fine. If you're struggling, it means the tools aren't sharp enough. I should probably take down a side saddle for you.

MH: Oh yeah, I want to see that..

[shuffling around]

MH: So is the Guild of Master Craftsmen in England?

AC: That's in England and I'm a member of the Guild of Master Craftsmen. It's a juried position, or it was, I think you can just pay them money and get into them now but I was juried to get into the Guild of Master Craftsmen. There's also the Guild of Master Saddlers which I didn't want to join because you can just pay to get into them and you know, what's the point. And usually it's mostly merchants who have it on their door.

MH: So it doesn't mean anything..

AC: It doesn't really mean that much, it used to.

MH: Tell me the name of that wooden tool right there - is that used for pounding?

AC: Actually, I bought that in Mexico - it's just a little mallet.

MH: A mallet, ok.

AC: Just hard wood - it's when I have customers who are not being kind to me..(laughing)

MH: Yeah, we have a baseball bat in our office (laughing)..

AC: This is actually one that I'm restoring. This one is American. Let me see if I can find the bottom and I'll show you what I did to make that one work. See they usually come to me like this.

MH: Oh what a mess!

AC: You see, and they come to me and say, "Oh, I just bought myself a side saddle, can you fix it?" And they come in like this, and then I change it from this to this.

MH: [taking photos of before and after] And what is that stuffed with?

AC: That's wool.

MH: Is that what goes on the horse?

AC: Yeah, right on the horse. And traditionally in England, specifically with side saddles, they don't use pads. So when I'm adjusting these, it's an interesting thing with these -- normally, with a regular saddle, there are little stuffing holes underneath here and you use a tool to go inside and put the wool in. With this, you use an awl - is there one lying around? Ah, ok..should be one..

MH: This isn't an awl?

AC: It's bent..but what you do..

MH: It's the one tool I know what it looks like..

AC: Isn't that weird, it should be lying around somewhere. Not a problem, well, the way you do this one, is you would have an awl that's finer than this - you do it by poking the wool around.

MH: Shifting it around.

AC: Yeah, it's called regulating. I've got a big needle here, this'll do it. You can do it with a big needle like this, see you regulate by doing this. And I can make the shape any that I want. And with side saddles, this side of the saddle has to be bigger than this side because you're sitting on this side and you have to have a little more support so that when you're sitting on it, you don't fall off the horse. So it's an interesting thing - you have to make this part full so that the front of the horse holds it over that way in the front and in the back you want the other side up, so you kind of do these opposite corners on the side saddle to make it work. But you would just regulate this, usually I would cut a slot in here, put more wool in, stitch it up, regulate it, and then you cover this with linen. You wet the linen and iron it on. I think I've got some linens somewhere..

MH: So the final coat is linen?

AC: Yeah, so this is one that I took off. And with a linen, this is kind of dirty, you don't want to take a picture of this, but when you sew this down, you wet this with really hot water, boiling water, and then you iron it, iron it with like an agat stone and it comes out super smooth. It's absolutely like glass, and that's why it's so shiny.

MH: Yeah, I was wondering why.

AC: And also from years of being rubbed on the horse's body.

MH: Sure, oil cloth or something.

AC: That's what linen looks like.

MH: Wouldn't a side saddle be hard on the horse's back because it's not evenly distributed, the weight..or not?

AC: Well, the thing is that you make this fit the horse's shape so when the rider's sitting here..well, you know, I imagine that it's good that they weight is pressing all over, but what you're most interested in is having the rider sit straight, cause if the rider's not sitting straight or upwards or tilting sideways or is backwards like this, you end up with a terrible back, really crippling. So if the rider's sitting upright, then the weight is going to be coming directly down on the horse and with these bigger panels, you see how big these are compared to that other one over there, the weight is distributed much better. And..

MH: And these things are called again..what are these called?

AC: These? These guys are billets or girthpulls is what they're called in England.

MH: Well, they pull your girth, that's easy to remember.

AC: But this is a nicer one, this is actually smaller one. You wanna see how it goes? You can take a picture of me on my side saddle..and the way you get on a side saddle is that someone lifts you like this, and you put your leg like that..[taking photos, maggie gets on saddle after]

AC: And people like this because if there's an accident then you can just jump right off.

MH: Yes, I can understand. It makes total sense.

[some more discussion about side saddle riding / positioning - sound quieter - then to tool table]

AC: This is the [?] that I've made, and it's a suede leather and you put tallow on it and then you put carbon and power.

MH: Say those two things again?

AC: Tallow, which is the renderings from cows and pigs and stuff, right? Kind of a waxy thing, so you put that on the leather and then you put carbon powder (?) which are metal filings that you'd have in a file, so this is a file really, but with a piece you can make a really nice edge. What it does is sharpen the edge and it's just like when you go to the barber shop [making sharpening noises with knife, then dings it].

MH: It's really sharp.

AC: You can tell it's a nice piece of metal [by sound of ding].

MH: And what's that tool called?

AC: It's called a headknife, the round knife. It's just cuts like that.

MH: And where is this made?

AC: This is actually American, it's actually a nice knife. It's hard to get good quality. The thing about this is when this is really sharp, I can cut a beautiful curve with this when it's really sharp..oh let's see what we've got for..

MH: What's that?

AC: When you're making a strap, let me just cut a strap. If you wanna make the edges nicer, it's called a beveler. It makes the edge rounder and then you take .. I need some liquid.

MH: Oh to dye it.

AC: Yes, to burnish, to stain and then burnish. Here we go, this'll do.

MH: There must be a whole vocabulary that one has to learn.

AC: Yeah, something like that. This is the easy part [applying stain]..and then there must be something I can use..yeah, this old piece of linen - every saddleryshop has these greasy pieces of cloth lying around [starts to burnish]

MH: Yeah, oh yeah.

AC: I would probably put a little more liquid on there and then the grains would set down. You see it's getting looking like glass, ideally you want this super smooth.

MH: Oh yeah, feels nice.

AC: You can even use paper, just paper works really nicely for burnishing.

MH: Oh look at the shine on that.

AC: Yeah. In England when we were doing this, we made our dye with powder and hot water and animal glue and you do it in double boiling and you put it on and then it hardens and you can burnish it and the glue binds the fibers together. But I just use a regular dye now. But see that's not bad for just now. See that halter there? Take that off, let me show you that.

MH: This? OK.

AC: You see? This piece here, it's rounded. And what you do, you see there's no stitching. What you do is fold it over and stitch the edge and then you hem the edge down and burnish the edge so that it covers the stitching and it's rounded like this. I've made bridles like this and they take a long time.

MH: Oh I imagine. What's the name for this kind of work?

AC: Oh, rounding, just rounding. But that's nice.

MH: That's beautiful yeah.

AC: It's nice to have the stitches covered up like that. You see it's been around for a while.

MH: Was it ever used?

AC: No, I kept all the stuff I ever made and my other workshop has a bunch of stuff I made from when I studied. So I've kept and rekept my first saddle..

MH: Ok, and the cord that you use, it's waxed..

AC: Some of it's waxed, some of it's just linen. This is a braided thread for lacing in the back of the panel..everyone used to use linen hemp..I have linen hemp at the other shop and you wind them together and wax them and make a thread and they tend to..eventually water would get into them and they would rot. So I use a waxed polyester or nylon now and it's braided and you can't break this stuff.

MH: And are there names for different kinds of leathers?

AC: That's probably Military Brown. Yeah, this is Black. This would be Havannah. The yellow color that you see is London Color and then there would be Chestnut - it's got a red color to it, it's not dark brown but it's got a reddness in it. There's a bunch of different colors.

MH: And you see the grain a lot on this panel.

AC: It's embossed. They run it through - it's supposed to be like pig, you know, they press it on a big plate, yeah. A lot of leather has been embossed so that you think it's pig skin because it's very expensive to get big pieces of pig skin like this, so they would just emboss it. There's lots of cowskin, cowskin's easy to get a hold of.

MH: That's interesting, I would not have known that.

AC: Yeah.

[wrapping up]

MH: You've been doing this how many years?

AC: Over 20 yrs, and then I had a leather goods business for 15, or something like that.

MH: Ok. This is a release form ..