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“You Hurt Yourself a Little Every Day.”

The Healthy Worker Effect Among Farriers

« On se fait mal un peu tous les jours », *l'effet travailleur sain chez les maréchaux-ferrants*

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Translator: Juliette Rogers



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“You Hurt Yourself a Little Every Day.”

The Healthy Worker Effect Among Farriers*

*Olivier Crasset***

This article addresses the health of self-employed people, which statistical data indicates to be superior to that of wage-earners, all things being equal. This relative advantage is interpreted here as the result of a selection process related to the healthy worker effect. This hypothesis is successfully tested on the particular case of farriers, using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and data from a questionnaire survey of 356 farriers-in-training. Using a qualitative approach to give depth to the results of large surveys, the author identifies some social processes that amplify or attenuate the healthy worker effect. At each stage of the farriers' career, selection by health takes different forms relating to professional ethos, the distribution of strain, lifestyle, and the ability to change careers. The healthy worker effect is nevertheless forestalled by the existence of an informal working group.

This article addresses some current concerns in the social sciences on the work-related health of the self-employed (ALGAVA *et al.*, 2012). Researchers' recent interest in the subject runs up against the challenge of interpreting the statistical data. If one is to trust various surveys on workplace health, the self-employed have slightly higher health ratings than employees, all other things being equal. This would be regardless of the fact that the working conditions of the self-employed are in many ways inferior (longer working hours, more stress, less workplace health and safety protection) (ALGAVA *et al.*, 2011). There are lingering doubts as to the precision of this data, which is probably biased by under-declaration of accidents and illnesses and unreliable compilation, especially of work-related accidents (THÉBAUD-MONY *et al.*, 2011; AMOSSÉ *et al.*, 2012). Another obstacle to fully understanding the data is the fact that self-employed workers are a heterogeneous population scattered across several social and health protection programs. Both plumbers and lawyers may be enrolled in the RSI (the Independents' Social Plan, providing health, disability, and retirement

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benefits to the self-employed), despite working under radically different conditions. At the same time, someone making stained glass windows (who, like a plumber, is exposed to solder fumes and lead) would ordinarily be enrolled in the plan reserved for artists (Maison des Artistes). Another approach to the issue is trying to identify the factors of self-employment that work in favour of better health (autonomy, lack of hierarchical pressure, great liberty in decision-making) to determine the balance-point. But this conception of work, based on criteria from KARASEK's model (1979), takes the wage-earning workforce as standard, whereas a self-employed worker is by definition independent and free of hierarchical demands. It furthermore does not account for the challenges in comparing certain aspects of self-employed and wage-earning lifestyles, the separation of professional and private life in particular.

Lastly, statistics do not cover the changes internal to the group of tradesmen and craftsmen. The sector treated here is experiencing great change due to the aging of its population and the arrival of new practitioners. Previously taken up by "traditional tradesmen" (MAZAUD, 2009), meaning people who come from labouring families for whom self-employment represents social ascension, the trades are becoming more diverse and seeing the arrival of middle-class practitioners with more extensive cultural resources.

A recent study comparing the number of long-term illnesses reported to the social plans for the self-employed and for the general population concluded that those enrolled in the RSI demonstrated earlier physical wear and tear and accelerated aging (SAUZE *et al.*, 2011). This data supports the hypothesis that guided our study of farriers, which sought to evaluate the extent of the "healthy worker effect" in this population. The term was initially crafted in a statistical approach to workplace health, but it is also used in other social sciences in a slightly different way. It thus seems helpful to outline the various meanings it holds for different authors to clearly demonstrate its potential utility in qualitative analyses such as the one presented in this article.

The term "healthy worker effect" (HWE) was coined in 1976 (McMICHAEL, 1976). The concept was developed by epidemiologists to explain why the standardised mortality ratio in industrial labour is lower than that of the general population. Indeed, to be employable in industry, workers must be in good health, but the general population includes a proportion of people in poor health, which explains the observed health gap between the populations. This difference also reflects the varying socio-economic statuses and lifestyles between the employed and the general population (WILCOSKY, WING, 1987). The selection process continues after hiring, as those who can no longer tolerate their working conditions leave their jobs early.

Lucy M. CARPENTER (1987) observed that when analysing occupational cohorts, the bias is greater at the beginning of the period of observation because the selection at entry into employment is more recent. Likewise, it is more marked for illnesses that appear gradually than for those appearing suddenly. Epidemiologists also consider the way in which samples (cohorts) are constructed. In most cases, individuals who have irregular employment are not included, even though their work may have a greater effect on their

health. The size of companies can also be a factor of bias. Studies focusing on the largest companies find better worker health there because they have health services that do not exist in smaller businesses. Some solutions have been suggested to lower the bias, such as choosing a control group that is more similar to the sample than the general population (LI, 1999). Epidemiologists hold that the HWE is composed of many phenomena, which together reduce the visibility of exposure to occupational risks and lead to confusion, because the status of “being in a good health” is due in part to the simple fact that their health is being observed (GOLDBERG, LUCE, 2001). From this perspective, the goal is to determine this statistical bias’s consequences to better correct for them.

Other disciplines emphasize the selection aspect when using the concept: “a worker only occupies a position if his health allows it” (GOLLAC, VOLKOFF, 2006, p. 7). The HWE is described as a joint process of job selection and exclusion that is simultaneously psychological and physical (FRIGUL, 2010). There are some social aspects to the selection process. For example, some authors indicate that leaving a job depends not only on a worker’s state of health, but also on his ability to find another job (SIRVEN, SERMET, 2009). Examining the reciprocal influences of work and health through longitudinal studies¹ has shown that the direction of causality between job and good health has not been established (FRIGUL, 2010). For sociologists, the HWE is not merely a statistical bias, it is also a social process that takes many forms through time, including but not limited to selection screening, mid-career expulsion, and earlier career change. Although consideration of the relationship between health and work gives a glimpse of the complexity of the ties that bind them, it is mainly based on quantitative data that sometimes leads to contradictory interpretations (BRUNO, 2008). As is the case for so many issues, attention is given almost exclusively to wage-earners. A qualitative follow-up to the 2006 SIP nonetheless bears some information on how tradesmen change status when their health –and consequently their business– is threatened.

“Tradesmen damaged by work who had not taken out insurance sometimes protect themselves from the failure that work-related health threats and the need to stop working could bring by turning to the wage-earning workforce. It is thus out of concern for managing things, trying to prevent a professionally and personally disastrous situation, that they avoid the wear of their work and try to protect their health.”

(AMOSSÉ *et al.*, 2012, p. 137)

It would thus seem that the HWE of tradesmen is partially determined by the close connection between the health of the tradesman and that of his business. Indeed, the level of social coverage available to them is inadequate for protecting them from the financial consequences of sick leave, so they do everything in their power to avoid it.

1. Such as the survey “Health and Occupational Course” (*Santé et itinéraire professionnel – SIP 2006*) conducted by the Department of Research, Studies, Evaluation, and Statistics (*Direction de la recherche, des études, de l’évaluation et des statistiques – DREES*) and the Department for the Coordination of Research, Studies, and Statistics (*Direction de l’animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques – DARES*), and the survey “Health and Social Protection” (*Santé et protection sociale*) by the Institute for Economics of Health Research and Documentation (*Institut de recherche et documentation en économie de la santé – IRDES*).

Farriers Health at Work: The Data Used and Contextual Review

This article is based on several forms of data. The statistics are drawn in part from a study by the Farrier Institute (*Institut de maréchalerie* – IM) of the Companions of Duty.² Focused on job training, the study also asked questions about health, perceived as one of several problems the occupation has to resolve, along with the excessive number of aspiring farriers and the gap between training and actual needs on the ground. The study's main impetus was to preserve and pass along the skills of the trade. The Companions of Duty's study consisted of visiting farrier schools, meeting with actors in the equine world, and passing out questionnaires, 356 of which were distributed to farriers-in-training. A few questions directly addressed work strain, career plans, and working conditions (for interns and apprentices). Upon conclusion of the study, a book on risk prevention was published in collaboration with a doctor specialised in occupational health (LOURIA, 2011) (see Box 1).

I supplemented this data with fieldwork, over the course of which I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with farriers to try to identify the reciprocal influences of health and work (see Table). I conducted further interviews with other people involved in the farrier's trade (a veterinarian, a doctor, representatives of the occupation, clients). My research materials also include the table of farriers' occupational illnesses, which exists because a minority of them are wage-earning employees.

To give a more precise idea of the materials used, I should also describe my connection with the world of farriers and the trades. Owning and riding two horses, I have had frequent contact with farriers as a client. In addition, my own career path led me to spend two months in farrier training,³ a short period which in no way makes me a member of the profession but which did allow me to observe the extent to which students' physical capacities are tested while learning.⁴ A job offer led me to leave this training to go into artistic blacksmithing, first as an employee then self-employed. Being part of both the milieu of tradesmen and the rural area where the study took place facilitated contact with the farriers, most of whom I already knew. These advantages led to a ready familiarity and complicity, as can be seen in the interviews. For

2. In France there are three organizations for what are called *compagnons* (companions), a network of practitioners of the trades with roots in the Middle Ages; today they oversee a system for the training, apprenticeship, and career development of skilled tradesmen and craftsmen. The Workers' Association of the Companions of Duty of the Tour of France (*Association ouvrière des compagnons du devoir du tour de France*, founded in 1941) has the most members. The other two are the Companionable Union of Companions of the Tour of France of United Duty (*Union compagnonnique des compagnons du tour de France des devoirs unis*, 1889) and the Companionable Federation of Building Trades (*Fédération compagnonnique des métiers du bâtiment*, 1952). The three organizations altogether have only about 40 companions who are farriers, which is less than 2.5% of those in the occupation.

3. In 1995, at the IEPSCF (*Institut d'enseignement de la promotion sociale de la communauté française* – Teaching Institute for Social Promotion of the French Community), a farriers school in Anderlecht, Brussels.

4. Contact with the forge starts at the very beginning of the training. It is immediately apparent that not everyone can meet the necessary conditions of physical engagement. For example, the first shoes students are asked to make are large, requiring less striking precision but greater strength.

Box 1

The Emergence of the Issue of Work Strain among Representatives of the Profession

Several organizations have roles in representing the trade. The French Farrier’s Union (*Union française des maréchaux-ferrants – UFM*) and the National Federation of Rural Tradesmen and Small Businesses (*Fédération nationale des artisans et petites entreprises en milieu rural – FNAR*) are the unions representing farriers, although few farriers are unionised. These organizations focus their efforts on the quality of initial training, limiting access to the trade, and defending their members.¹

A third actor, the Farriery Institute (*Institut de la maréchalerie – IM*) is connected to the Workers’ Association of the Companions of Duty of the Tour of France (*Association ouvrière des compagnons du devoir du tour de France*). It was formed in 2005 to ensure training, the development of new techniques, and preservation of the history of the occupation. Initially concerned with training quality, the organization’s 2006 study (used in this article) revealed that farriers’ careers were short-lived.²

“Experience is very important in this job. But when farriers have gotten experience and become truly good, they have to stop. It’s unacceptable. It presents problems for passing the trade along. And then for the companions, a trade should be practiced for a lifetime, not 20 years.”

(Interview with M. P. Doffémont of the IM)

Consequently, the issue of work-related health grew out of concern for the trade and its transmission. The encounter between the IM and Dr. Philippe Louria, a doctor specialised in workplace medicine who was trying to get his own work known, led to the publication of a book for farriers (LOURIA, 2011). This work met with a degree of success and led to actions raising farrier and student awareness of health issues.

1. For the sake of completion, there is also the Association for the Development of Farriery (*Association pour le développement de la maréchalerie – ADM*), supported by these institutions and businesses that supply farriers, who handle the “competitive” aspect of the trade by organizing the national championship and ranking the competitors.

2. Based on the conclusions of a previous study conducted by the national stud farms in 2002.

TABLE – Interviews with Farriers Conducted by the Author

Name, age	Professional situation	Date, length of recorded interview
Yves, 53	Tradesman, active for 35 years	23 February 2012, 60 minutes
Jean-Yves, 53	Tradesman and instructor, active for 32 years	23 September 2012, 40 minutes
Yann, 41	Tradesman, active for 17 years	19 March 2012, 40 minutes
Luc, 40	Wage earner, formerly self-employed farrier Stopped farriery 2 years previously after 15 years activity	4 April 2012, 50 minutes
Eric, 35	Tradesman, active for 11 years	4 February 2012, 70 minutes
Gil, 34	Tradesman, active for 12 years	23 November 2012, 65 minutes
Maelis, 25	Tradeswoman, active for 2 years	26 September 2012, 60 minutes

Note: Names have been changed to respect the anonymity of interviewees.

example, we nearly always spoke to each other using the more familiar form of “you” in French “*tu*” rather than the more formal “*vous*” used between strangers and the socially differentiated.⁵

I know the life of a self-employed worker from personal experience. My own professional experience gave me a “tradesman’s habitus” (SOULÉ, 2007, p. 133), thus transforming participant observation into observant participation – a research situation where “the priority goes to participation in the field under study, predominating over observation” (SOULÉ, 2007, p. 137). Although I did not work directly on horses’ hooves, I was able to make myself useful by helping in various ways (bringing a horse to pasture, holding down a restive donkey, removing droppings). Direct participation in the work of interviewees helped reduce the distance of the research situation. Instead of being a distraction from the goal of observation, this relationship of confidence allowed me to record conversations, take field notes, and take photographs without having to conceal acts that in other circumstances could have broken the spontaneity of exchange. I presented my study as an academic assignment I had to do because I had “gone back to school.” I behaved in the same way as usual with my interviewees. The interview and/or participant observation were requested as a little favour, as is frequent among tradesmen, as if I were borrowing a tool. Throughout the study, from September 2011 to September 2012, I took every opportunity to expand opportunities to observe farriers, sometimes anonymously and sometimes informing them of my project.

On first view the concept of a HWE might seem weak, if it is considered solely from the angle of selection by health. Indeed any job, regardless of how straining it may or may not be, requires a certain physical condition. However, the intensity with which selection manifests varies considerably with the situation. By observing a professional group where it is quite strong, one sees how the HWE takes shape in the daily life of workers, how aware they are of it, its effect on reproduction of the group, and whether some individuals protect themselves from it. In this article, I will try to understand how selection by health occurs at each stage of the career, by analysing the life-courses of members of a professional group where the HWE manifests itself severely: farriers. The study was confined to the four administrative departments of Brittany (France). The limited size of this professional group made it possible to use both qualitative and quantitative approaches and to truly scrutinise the occupation’s regional employment market. Several reasons justify research of this trade. Firstly, it is comprised of tradesmen who for the most part work alone. If tradesmen as a whole are understudied, this is even more so for those who work alone, given the particularities of their situation. Next, farriers are relatively homogeneous in terms of the specific tasks they perform. All mainly shoe horses, which more readily justifies comparison. It would be trickier with occupations like woodworker, with a large variety of specialties. Homogeneity does not mean uniformity, however, and we shall see that there are two distinct ways to be a farrier, which, here again, justifies comparison. Finally, farriers are

5. Only one interview was conducted using the more formal “*vous*” (you), with a former farrier interviewed at the site of his new job.

used to explaining their work to others –a quality that develops over their career– and do not object to being watched since their clients usually stay with them while they work. Here again, these characteristics are not found equally among all occupations.

To understand why the relationship between work and health among farriers is so rich for study, a few words on changes in the occupation’s working conditions in the 1970s are necessary.⁶ Key figures in rural life until the 1950s, blacksmith-farriers lost their *raison d’être* with the mechanisation of agriculture and the obsolescence of draft horses. At the same time, their trade was falling into abandon, the rise in horseback riding for leisure in the 1970s reversed the trend. Today, there are an estimated 1700 farriers, 1500 self-employed and 200 working for someone else.⁷ The techniques for shoeing have changed considerably, and working conditions have degraded. Farriers used to work with an assistant who held the horse’s foot, or they would shoe it in a horse crush, a sort of restraining cage that held the horse and made it possible to position horses’ feet without needing to hold them; this is called shoeing French-style (“à la française”). The cost of labour has made it impossible to have an assistant today, and clients are not asked to hold feet for insurance reasons. The practice most commonly used today, known as English-style (“à l’anglaise”) and adopted from racing, is quite different. Use of a horse crush is incompatible with the temperament of riding horses, which struggle and hurt themselves. The farrier thus works alone, and without any way to restrain the horse. He has to hold the foot while shoeing it, requiring he be in an uncomfortable position, to say the least. Leaning forward, he clenches the hoof between his thighs, freeing both hands for work. He can feel the horse’s movement, occasional jerks, and weight directly, and if it becomes agitated he is in a poor position to bring it under control. The “English-style” working position became the norm around 1975.

Another significant change is that today’s farriers are itinerant tradesmen who shoe at the clients’ farms, when in the past clients brought their horses to the forge (VERNUS, 2008). Farriers no longer make shoes themselves, opting to fit industrially manufactured shoes instead. These changes have led to a degradation of working conditions due to the position specific to English-style shoeing and because shoeing is currently the farriers’ sole activity. The two ways of shoeing define radically different working conditions and occupational identities.

This study was conducted in Brittany, where farriery has some particular qualities related to the characteristics of the local equine world. It reflects the region, where the economy is heavily reliant on livestock farming and tourism. If horseback riding is enjoyed here to the same extent as nationwide, the region is livestock country and home to the Breton-breed draft horse. In central Brittany raising draft horses is a sideline for many farmers. It is a hobby (harnessing, competitions) that also has a market potential

6. For greater detail on changes in the occupation and their implications in terms of occupational identity, see the doctoral dissertation in Sociology of Monique DOLBEAU (2006).

7. Source: Équi-ressources, Equine Industry Competitivity Pole. Online http://www.equioresources.fr/nc/information/jm-informe-sur-les-metiers/recherche-avancee/index.html?uid_fiche=244 (accessed 31 May 2016).

in meat production. There are equestrian centres along the coast that work with the tourist industry and saddle horse breeders. This situation allows two ways of being a farrier because, unlike saddle horses, draft horses are still shod French-style. Farriers with this speciality are nonetheless in an undisputable minority (see Box 2).

Box 2

A Counter-Example: Yves, a Traditional Farrier

“Like my father used to say, a horse is made to carry a man, a man isn’t made to carry a horse. That’s it! And it’s true! He told me, ‘if you begin English-style, you won’t see your career through to the end.’”

At the age of 53, Yves counts 35 years as a practicing farrier and feels up to working beyond age 60. Having inherited a family tradition of four generations in the occupation, he has always refused to work English-style, despite pressure while at farrier school and from his first clients.

To do the job his way, he specialised in draft horses and built a travelling horse crusher that he hooks up to his truck. To create comfortable working conditions for himself, he built custom tools and customised his truck. For example, the forge and anvil are built on a track that slides out effortlessly. His tools are always impeccably maintained “because if you only need to strike once instead of twice, it makes a difference at the end of the day.”

Brittany’s 93 farriers are an indispensable part of the equine world. A quarter of them also raise and/or sell horses. The average age is 38 (CONSEIL DES ÉQUIDÉS DE BRETAGNE, 2012, p. 16), six years younger than the average French tradesman (44.1 in 2009; RSI, 2009), and nearly all are men. This age difference is explained by the fact that only 11% of active farriers are over age 50. The working conditions are so difficult that the average career lasts less than 20 years (LOURIA, 2011, p. 1). Certain ailments are recognised as occupational illnesses (see Box 3) and there is also a constant threat of accident.

The strain involved in this line of work and its consequences are widely known, and mainly among farriers themselves. One might then wonder what attitudes are toward this rapid and unavoidable wear and tear of the body at work. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of farriers work alone. They have considerable latitude in how they organize their work, safety and health coverage. They receive no hierarchical orders⁸ and are not subject to oversight of their activity by labour inspectors or any other organization, except where it concerns access to the occupation, which is closely guarded by the professional union UFM, which seems no more concerned by work strain than the FNAR.⁹

8. This is, for example, the explanation offered to explain risk-taking in other sectors, such as construction and public works (JOUNIN, 2008).

9. See Box 1 for the definition of these acronyms.

Box 3

**Farriers’ Occupational Illnesses Recognised by the Health Plan
for People Working in Agriculture**

Only a minority of farriers are wage-earners (primarily in large stud farms in Normandy and for the Republican Guard), but thanks to them a table of their professional illnesses was developed:

- RA29: Afflictions caused by vibrations and shocks transmitted by certain machine tools and objects and by repetitive shocks to the heel of the hand on fixed objects;
- RA57b: Chronic afflictions of the lumbar rachis caused by regular manual handling of a heavy load;
- RA46: Auditory damage caused by lesions resulting from noise.

Farriers face several orders of risk. In addition to those cited above (muscle, bone, and hearing problems), there is also chemical risk due to the use of resins, driving risks, the stress of being self-employed, and work accidents (from kicking horses, falls, etc.).¹

1. Source: INRS, *Institut national de recherche et sécurité, Tableaux des maladies professionnelles. Guide d'accès et commentaires*. Online <http://www.inrs-mp.fr/mp/cgi-bin/mppage.pl?state=4&acc=4&rgm=3&doc=1077&str=maréchal-ferrant&edit=maréchal> (accessed 31 May 2016).

Although it is unrealistic to think that someone could be totally free of social relations at work –and indeed we will see that farriers form a work-based group–farriers are as close to this situation as possible: no relationships of subordination, no sub-contracting or dependency on the clientele, and complete independence in how their work is organized. This situation corresponds to what craftsmen call their freedom, which fully justifies sacrifices. In sum, these are self-employed workers who invest minimal economic capital; they put their labour on the market and have to decide how they will manage the physical wear in order to last as long as possible in their occupation, while still earning an income and preparing for the next step in their working life.

To discern the various social processes contributing to the HWE, we will look at the farrier’s career chronologically, broken down into three phases: training and the early years of self-employment, mid-career, and career change.

Learning the Trade and Early Career

Since 1996, a would-be farrier is required to have an educational degree of a ranking of at least level V in the French system, meaning either a Certificate of Agricultural Professional Ability (*Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle agricole* – CAPA) or a Certificate of Professional Agricultural Studies (*Brevet d’études professionnelles agricoles* – BEPA), a low-level qualification that may be obtained by people still in

their teens. The latter makes it possible to pursue training through a level IV Trade Technical Certificate (*Brevet technique des métiers* – BTM). Training can be obtained through school (lasting two years), alternation between school and apprenticeship (two or three years), or continuing education (six to sixteen months). Among young people aspiring to become farriers, 92% have already had contact with horses and many choose the job because they love horses. We lack statistics on their social backgrounds, but based on the fieldwork they seem to come predominantly from the working classes, with a stronger presence of people from farming families.

Students learn forging and shoeing along with other things during their training. At the same time they learn how to hold the working position. In so doing, they acquire a specific musculature.¹⁰ The forge occupies a major place in training, although it is rarely used in farriers' daily life. This might be seen as a technical necessity or a sign of attachment to a tradition or the productive equipment of a professional elite (DOLBEAU, 2006, 2007, 2011), but whatever the case, this forge training also acts as a first filter that eliminates all those who are unable to tolerate intense efforts or adapt to them quickly. Certain work sequences are quite trying for beginners, particularly learning to be a striker, which consists of wielding a heavy sledgehammer to forge a shoe with a partner, a situation that will never recur in professional practice. Starting out at the forge, the students learn to endure working in pain and sticking with it despite cramps, chafed hands, little burns, backache, and all the signals the body sends as it is shaped by work. Beyond being physical, selection requires acquiring a mindset that will help students to hold on throughout their careers. "A farrier who tells you he doesn't hurt is a liar,"¹¹ and you have to be able to get past this stage to do the job. School fulfills this function of socialisation to pain, which probably explains why the success rate in CAPA farrier exams is among the lowest: in 2007, the average success rate for the CAPA-Farriery was only 41.7%, as compared to 84.6% for all CAPA categories together.¹² At the end of this training, the farrier will have accepted that work and physical suffering go together. He thus develops an ethos associating physical strength with a capacity for resistance. As Olivier SCHWARTZ (2011, p. 356) indicates, "emphasizing the strength required by one's job is clearly building a self-image as someone gifted with strength, since the work one does demands it."

Their training completed, young graduates often have a string of short working experiences that prepare them for setting up a business –tending vineyards with horses for a few months, working as an employee in greater Paris, or, for some born before 1979, fulfilling their military service obligations as farrier for the Republican Guard. This early job experience is complementary to their training because it puts them in real work situations, but without their being on their own. This kind of early career is the norm among tradesmen (ZARCA, 1986).

10. See LOURIA (2011), « Le statut musculaire particulier du maréchal-ferrant » (the farrier's particular muscular status), pp. 28-30.

11. From an interview quoted in DOLBEAU, 2009, p. 1.

12. Average success rate for CAPA exams in all subjects for the year 2007. Source: Ministry of Agriculture.

After training and rounding off their knowledge of the occupation, young farriers start their own businesses. They have to invest in a vehicle and tools, which can be done with limited funds.

“The investment is minimal, y’know. My wheels, a toolbox, a supply of shoes, and you’re good to go! But after, you gotta, like, snag a clientele.”

(Yann, 41)

They arrive on the market and have to find their first clients. Custom has it that a young farrier starting out in the business contacts his local colleagues to introduce himself. At the outset the priority is to have enough work to start earning an income rapidly. In this first phase, they have to accept any work that is offered to them. They travel far from home, which reduces profit since vehicular costs are their main expense. They unreservedly agree to shoe dangerous horses to show their mettle to clients and their peers. They grapple with deadbeat clients that other farriers will not take any more. Early in their careers, around age 25, they are young adults with all their physical abilities. They give everything they have to build a reputation. Well-established farriers follow their work when the opportunity arises, like when visiting an equestrian centre where a beginner comes to work or in conversation with veterinarians. If the newcomer works well, an overwhelmed farrier will soon send his surplus clients to “the kid who’s set up in Plougovel¹³ –it looks like his work’s not bad.” Those without enough tenacity or strength to stick it out the first two years leave the profession.

“But a lot of young people who start out, who’ll do two years, three years, but who in order to build up a clientele have to take the horses that are hard to shoe, that the others don’t want, or clients who don’t pay, the deadbeats, or even some small riding clubs, little centres, especially in the summer on the coast, that –so long as the farrier is cheaper than his neighbour– [...] don’t give a damn, it’s all about money. [...] They’ll start with a clientele that isn’t great, where they’ll get run through the wringer. And so some, after two, three years, they’re fed up and poof, they’re gone.”

(Yves, 53)

“Yeah, and then, I was doing everything, I mean everything... at the beginning you take everything there is, you do anything and everything. You can very well take a donkey to trim in Morlaix then go take a pony to shoe in Saint-Brieuc,¹⁴ another in Guingamp on your way home. You just take everything there is. And since you don’t really know, you have trouble getting organized because it’s the beginning, you can’t turn clients down, so you tend to take everything and run all over the place. And then later, it is calmer. You are organized. Since people know you, people are a little more patient because they want you. So you manage to cluster your horses and zones, the days you pass through. So it goes a lot better, and that’s that.”

(Luc, 40)

13. Other than city names, names of people and places have been changed to preserve anonymity.

14. These towns are 80 km apart.

One notes that in the first years in practice, which go from training through starting out in business, a number of young people leave the occupation because of its strenuousness, either because their bodies cannot get used to it or because they refuse to adhere to an ethos connecting work to suffering. Along with risks related to inexperience is added the fact that the most dangerous working situations fall to them (see Box 4). There are parallels with forestry work, which is also mainly done by people who work alone; Florent SCHEPENS (2005, p. 5) notes that 40% of work accidents in lumbering concern “individuals with less than a year of seniority in business, the proportion falling to 10% after one year, and then to 6% after two years.”

Farriers’ physical and psychological capacities are tested, since they are exposed to a high-risk, strenuous job that forces them to stop working occasionally for health reasons, and in addition, they have to accept living in such a situation without getting discouraged. Once they are set up in business, other criteria become relevant, related to the ability to develop a client and peer network that will improve working conditions. In the first phase of the career, the HWE works on the basis of physical strain, psychological criteria, and the possible occurrence of an accident at work.¹⁵

Box 4

Apprenticeship in Occupational Risk

All of the interviewed farriers say that they have never had a serious accident, but they can all recount what they call “little accidents” that they do not make much of (broken finger, crushed by a hoof, a kick in the ribs, nail passing through a hoof into a finger).

Question: “You must have had to stop working then [when you broke your finger]?”

Yves (53): [amused] “No, because I went to see the doc that night. [...] ‘Well, it’s easy,’ he said, ‘I’m going to have to put a splint on it. [...] You aren’t going to work for three weeks.’ I go, ‘You’re right, three weeks without working, in August, and just how am I supposed to manage that?’ But I say, ‘No, don’t put anything on it. Anyway, at my age it’s not a big deal even if it’s a little twisted.’ And it stayed like that. But I did have a big bandage on it. [...] But my finger stayed all twisted, it’s a little crooked. But oh well, it’s not like accidents are common, y’know.”

Question: “And you went back to work the next day?”

Yves: “Well yeah!”

Yann (41): “It was a young colt that wasn’t trained. Same, when you’re young you take too many risks. Like, today I don’t even do it at all. [...] I started working on his hindquarter, to take his foot, and then at a given moment, he... he ripped his foot away and, like, struck me as he took off. I, like, flew. I took it in the ribs.”

15. One could add other qualities determining the success of any business, like the ability to manage accounts or organize one’s work, but I focus on health-related aspects here.

Éric (35): “Because once, I had a chunk of meat taken off just where you’d wear a wedding ring. If I’d had a ring... So the horse had kicked, the nail that was still sticking out went through the meat and ripped it out, and luckily... if I’d had a ring I would surely have lost the finger.”

It is not the work accident that’s feared, but having to stop working, for whatever reason. The accident is downplayed, as what is important is being able to resume work as soon as possible.

Yann (41): “A mare that struck my tibia, my knee was like this for a week. I stopped working for four days, in the busy season, so I couldn’t stop longer [...] Oh, I was dead, I kept going. I’ve never stopped. I even had lumbago once. No, I had moments when I struggled. A lumbago. Someone else put my socks on me in the morning, I couldn’t put them on any more [...] but I didn’t stop. It took me five minutes to bend over, then I’d shoe, I’d keep going.”

When a health problem forces them to stop (by making them temporarily disabled), they resume work early, “paying attention” and “taking it easy.” The reasons given for not taking sick leave are financial loss, client pressure, and the need to make up for lost time when they resume work. There is also a possibility that the clients will meet another farrier that they like better.

Éric (35): “I didn’t stop because, for one thing, if I stop, afterward I have really long days; the times after that I have to recuperate. I don’t stop because... I might have stopped once, one afternoon, because then, really, I was exhausted, but it’s maybe once I did that. I called, I say ‘OK, we’ll reschedule that for two days from now,’ but otherwise I have to be really really really tired, that my body can’t move, for me not to go.”

Maelis (25): “If the substitute farrier [...] kind of badmouths the [regular] farrier, to get his clients [...] Like, there’s a great stable right next door, and your injured colleague goes there. That client calls you, in my opinion you’ll do anything to get him for yourself. Personally I wouldn’t go do that, but there are some who that wouldn’t bother. It’s wartime nerve, there’s a lot of competition, so... that’s why sick leave scares everyone.”¹

Taking time off work because of illness is more acceptable in the winter, a season when work is less intense. When they resume, farriers have to take on twice as much to catch up.

Question: “You had to work a lot when you went back to work, then?”

Gil (34): “Well yeah, you hope you’ll still have work. And me, I was lucky, it happened on 4 December² and I resumed five months later, right in the rush when there’s a lot of work.”

1. This sentence takes on a particular meaning coming from a woman. One can easily see what maternity leave might represent for her.

2. He fell from a horse while vaulting; see below.

Mid-Career

After this first phase, if everything goes well, the farrier will arrive at a point where he will no longer have to accept every job he's offered and he starts to choose the clients he agrees to work for. This choice of "good clients" includes their mutual affinities and the quality of working conditions (see Box 5). They gradually move away from slow-paying clients and dangerous horses. Another important issue is reducing the zone served to limit transportation costs.

"I sorted over the years, y'know. All my clients that were kinda, um, a pain in the ass, I told them to go see the young ones, I'm beyond the age to be bothered. [...] I used to travel within a 50km perimeter, but now I don't go past 25-30km."

(Yves, 53)

Box 5

What is a "Good" or "Bad" Client?

During a day of participant observation, I accompanied Gil (34) on his rounds of clients. We came across highly contrasting working situations, of which the following are two examples.

A "Bad Client"

Early in the afternoon we pull into the courtyard of a farm where four horses are tied to posts in a large shed. This owner's horses are usually shod in a paved courtyard, but today they are in this uncustomary place. The owner would excuse herself later ("I was overwhelmed this week. Next time, we'll do it in the stable"). The ground, uneven and dusty, is covered in old straw. Two horses are going out on a ride, and the other two should be shod.

The first horse to be shod is a filly. It is skittish because it is only the second time it has been shod. The owner had tied a second horse to the same post to comfort it, and I also stand by the filly's head to calm it.

As Gil starts to work, the owner and her 11-year-old daughter are saddling their horses, one being the horse tied with the filly. The filly shows signs of stress, struggles, then goes around the hitching post, which provokes a reaction from the horse being saddled by the little girl. Twice the saddle falls to the ground, still attached to the horse by a strap,¹ creating agitation and confusion. It is a dangerous situation, but the mother, busy saddling her own horse, does not notice. Gil keeps working through it all. Once their horses are harnessed, the riders finally leave for their ride and the situation quiets down. Gil will go on to tell me that he is shocked that the client left her child in such a dangerous situation. He had not missed anything that had happened, despite the fact he kept working uninterrupted.

1. Specifically, the crupper, which is a strap down a horse's back, tying the saddle to its tail.

“Good Clients”

At the end of the day we go to the home of a retired couple that loves endurance riding. The owner holds his horses by the reins and speaks to them while they are being shod, all the while discussing the latest developments in horseshoeing with the farrier. The workspace is sheltered and the ground in concrete. The horses are well trained, lifting each foot when told to, so the farrier does not need to support their weight. The farrier’s truck is directly in front of the horse. The owner pays in cash when the work is done. Regardless of these good working conditions, Gil shows signs of fatigue as he starts work on his tenth horse of the day. He says it is “a long day” that will have kept him away from home about 12 hours.²

While shoeing the last horses of the day, Gil says outright that he is tired, and makes several mistakes. He messes up the preparation of a hoof and burns himself with a hot horseshoe.³ He has become less cautious than earlier in the day, not wearing his goggles when using the grinder. It’s clear that he wants to finish as soon as possible, without the quality of his work suffering. The owner is as vigilant as he is friendly, and before we got there Gil had warned me that he would inspect the conformation of the legs. In this situation, Gil is taking a risk on an accident, but he took care to end this long day with “easy” horses instead of a filly.

2. Calculating the working time of tradesmen presents the challenges comparable to those in measuring their income (see below). Here it was measured in the time when the farrier is away from home.

3. When he burned himself, he chose to put up with the pain without mentioning it to the client. Generally, clients are left unaware of all the little mistakes and many adaptations necessitated by working situations.

Being more confident, a farrier is also able to ask his clients to arrange for good working conditions –good flat ground in a covered location so he does not have to work in the mud, which also allows better quality shoeing. Good working conditions benefit both parties: the owner also profits when he takes care of his horse.

“If they have a shelter, it’s a place for them to saddle and brush their horse, which is quite nice, too, huh, so it’s as much for them as for me.”

(Éric, 35)

Choosing clients who train their horses well is also an important criterion in reducing risk of accident and work strain.

Yann (41): “And then when you feel like the client isn’t making any effort to train [his horse]... As a rule, I tell him to hold the feet, and he understands fast that it has to be dressed [laughs].”

Question: “Really? You also dress the client! [laughs].”

Yann: “That’s it –nicely.”

Éric (35): “A poorly trained horse [...] I suggest to people that they send them to a professional and I’ll come back when [it’s been trained], if I think there’s too much

training to be done and I run a chance of getting kicked or knocked around... Well, I can do that today because I have a client base. At the very beginning of my work I took all comers. There's that too. But since I wasn't young anymore and in a way, umm... better prepared. With time you get a little creaky, you're a little less... And then you have a family life, you don't want to take a chance on problems. So that's it, my way of doing things."

With time, the stress stemming from the need to prove oneself tends to ease up. A farrier who works well is recognised by his peers and becomes part of the social network in the zone where he is based. Farriers have many opportunities to see each other. In addition to the workmen's restaurants that are places of sociability for all local tradesmen, they see each other while riding for fun, during equine competitions and fairs, or at Saint-Éloi.

"Saint-Éloi is the festival for blacksmiths and [farriers]. We usually try to have a good meal [...], we forge all day and have a good dinner at night, it's nice. It lets you vent all the problems you had all year long."

(Maelis, 25)

At riding centres, where each horse owner is free to call on the farrier of his or her choice, farriers are sure to be able to see shoeing done by his peers. Through numerous everyday discussions farriers constantly hear about their farrier colleagues and eventually come to know all of them, including those they have never met. Their participation in this informal working group has some benefits, like being forewarned against bad clients.

Question: "Between farriers, do you tell each other the names of bad clients, people you shouldn't work for?"

Éric (35): "Yes, of course. Well, 'bad clients'... First you have to define what a bad client is. [...] For me a bad client is someone who makes you work in really bad conditions and in a way that's dangerous, so, he has you shoe a horse that's dangerous, that doesn't give its feet, that kicks, and [he] tells you 'go ahead, he's gentle.' Now that's a bad client because he puts your health, even your life, in danger. And then there's quite simply [...] a bad payer, quite simply. So that for me, those are the two kinds of bad clients, and then sometimes it's both together. [...] Either you don't like your colleagues, so you tell them 'go to his place!' [...] Here we're lucky that we all get along relatively well, so you say 'watch out, this guy's like this, he's like that.'"

The farrier gradually builds up an ideal clientele, meaning individual owners who have well-trained horses, offer good working conditions, and connect in some way with the farrier. He might also like to work for a few riding clubs for financial reasons, but refuses to feel captive of a major client. Farriers claim to keep relationships with their clients that border on friendship; as Jean-Yves (53) declared, "I can't work for someone I don't get along with." A farrier and his clientele are a good match and share the same approach to horses. Entrusting a farrier with your horse is an act to be taken seriously. You need to have faith in his technical abilities because the horse's health and performance

depend on them, but there is more to it than that. The farrier and owner also must have the same view of the relationship between humans and horses, a sensitive subject fraught with emotion. In a way, the farrier selects, and is selected by, a clientele similar to himself.

“... those little capitalists, petty bourgeois that had saddle horses. [...] What I’d noticed with saddle horses is that it was really show-offy. [...] It was pretentious little twits who did riding, it was the daughters of Mr. Somebody or the doctor and all them, and they were really condescending to people. But with draft horses I’ve always seen farmers who are serious people, who love horses, and who know that no matter what, they have 800 kilos to a ton in their hands, that you shouldn’t fool around with that, you’re sure to lose.”

(Yves, 53)

For Yves, a traditional farrier, the bourgeois, feminine, and sophisticated world of horseback riding for leisure is the opposite of the masculine agricultural world of the farmers he prefers. His relationships with his clientele are based on the codes of rural conviviality. When Yves invites a client to come into his house, he always offers two drinks, no more, no less. “It’s two at my house!” he says while pouring another glass of pastis to his guest, who vainly tries to justify his refusal on the grounds of a possible police stop.

To the contrary, Yann began shoeing draft horses to build up his client base, but he let them go to devote his work to saddle horses, despite admitting that they are more difficult to shoe. He feels that the criteria of the kind of horse he likes to shoe and the social relations with clients that suit him best are more important than the strain of the work.

“When I first got started, [...] I did a lot of draft horses. [...] I was booked through late September. But in the winter I had nothing to do. I worked awful hours in season. I could come home at midnight and leave at like five in the morning. Because I was going to Timbuktu, I’d cross three quarters of Brittany, like Yves does. I think he must work horrible hours. That’s why I chose riding horses, and plus it’s also a clientele I find nicer. [...] Everything that’s pure-bred and leisure, you do them English-style like that. I prefer that technique. [...] The problem is that you hurt your back more that way, so I like a technique that hurts my back, it’s kind of [inaudible] [...] It’s like, much more fiddly.”

After a few years of practice, the farrier builds up a clientele he likes and has a vehicle set up for his convenience. He enjoys great autonomy in how he organizes his work, although he has to live with the seasonal pace of his work, which varies widely and has a marked lull in the winter. Between April and July, however, the days are especially full and they work weekends. The rest of the year, the interviewed farriers say they only work weekends in emergencies. Clients call the farrier, who gives them an appointment for the next time he will be in their area. They may need to wait up to ten days. Farriers are attached to a lifestyle that leaves them organizational freedom, allows them to reconcile family and work life, and lets them feel free, meaning without any hierarchical superiors.

Despite the difficulties in measuring tradesmen's incomes¹⁶ (MAZAUD, 2011), the interviewed farriers' incomes are in the upper tier of tradesmen working alone, which is between €1,000 and €2,500 transferred monthly from their business account.¹⁷ With a shoeing costing about €65, an average of seven horses a day, and one hour of work per horse,¹⁸ a farrier's income depends directly on the number of horses he agrees to shoe. He has to constantly balance managing his exhaustion with his need to earn a living.

"I always work it so I don't overload my days, I mean, I always work it so I never have two over-booked days [...] in a row, which keeps fatigue from building up. When I'm going to do seven or eight horses in a day, the next day I'll have a max of five or six. The seventh is always kind of a killer for me, I wake up with more aches the next day. Whenever I do less than six, it's really easy."

(Éric, 35)

After several years of practice, the farrier begins feeling the first signs of physical wear and tear. The choice of clients henceforth includes consideration of the strain factor.

Question: "Can you turn away certain horses?"

Gil (34): "Everything that's heavy [draft horses], yes. And for my back, too, for me physically. It's too hard - English-style is too hard [...]"

Question: "After 12 years, you're starting to feel some wear and tear?"

Gil: "Yes. And it's worse when I don't work, or I do something other than my job. Yesterday we did something else and I hurt."

Yann (41): "There's a ton of people who have herniated discs, all that. Very few make it to 60, y'know. And then, farriers, people, they're really worn down at 60 candles, it cools down. After, the risk is getting your head cracked open by a horse, basically. If I had any sense I'd change jobs right now [...]"

Question: "So you feel wear and tear after [17 years of practice]?"

Yann: "I'm stiff, I'm super-stiff. But I also don't do any stretching. I'm not a wreck, my [physical] structure isn't damaged, because, well, I am careful... but there's no saying I won't have a sudden accident."

16. This difficulty stems from the fact that private and professional worth is interconnected, as much from a legal perspective on privately owned businesses as from a practical perspective. The fringe benefits are many. For example, tradesmen often have only one vehicle and telephone line, which are counted as business expenses; they benefit from "trade prices" when they buy materials for themselves from their suppliers; meals eaten on the road are also considered professional expenses. Moreover, the underground economy should also be considered, be it in the form of illegal employment or something like using business equipment to personal ends. The question of professional income was raised by asking interviewees: "How much do you take out of the business account every month?," which leaves tradesmen's "invisible income" unknown.

17. In the survey *Santé et itinéraire professionnel* (SIP 2006), the average income of tradesmen working solo is €1,121 a month (field: self-employed workers in the PCS 21 that have no employees; calculations by the author). The PCS (Professions and Socio-professional Categories) is the French national census's system for categorising occupations, and group 21 corresponds to Tradesmen.

18. It takes about an hour to shoe four hooves. Other kinds of work are also commonly requested, such as trimming or shoeing the hind feet. Less frequently farriers are asked to correct flaws in the conformation of legs or treat hoof ailments.

Confronted with wear that is unavoidable (or at least experienced that way), farriers adopt a wide range of approaches to preserving their health. It may take the form of making custom-adapted tools, like Yves who built himself equipment that reduces strain.

As for Éric, he tries to keep himself in good physical condition through healthy living and the practice of sports that are compatible with his job.

“It’s impossible to go out on a weeknight when you work the next day. Gotta have your quota of sleep, gotta be in shape the next day so you’ll have a day that goes better than otherwise. [...] After that, physically, I like to get some exercise. I like to run. I used to do vaulting, I stopped. Now I do rock-climbing. So it’s like physical, [...] I also do some –for my back– some swimming, some kayaking. That gives me still some activity that isn’t very restrictive. Rock climbing is really good, it lets you stretch, get more flexible, and I like it, too. It helps the body last longer.”

(Éric, 35)

Yann learned to keep his composure and he can feel the result in his back pain.

“Maybe it doesn’t show but I’m really tense, and when I first started, the first years, as soon as there [was] a horse that acted up like that, I’d like, blow up right away. When you’re young, you’re raring to go, and actually that was behind my biggest problems, actually, the most harm. As soon as I got upset, I had cervical spine problems, got dizzy, then it spread to the rest of the back. Goes to show you, stress, tension, they have a big influence. I learned how to calm myself down, and it is better since.”

(Yann, 41)

Gil (34) is the most physically worn of the interviewed farriers, although, with the exception of Maelis, he has the fewest years of experience (twelve). His equipment is dilapidated and his truck poorly set up, but even he is looking to improve his comfort at work. Although every hoof is different, shoeing consists of identical movements that are repeated over the course of work. Improving the technique of such a movement is even more beneficial if it concerns a gesture that is repeated hundreds of times. Farriers all look for ways to husband their strength, but not all are in the position to pay attention to the most essential questions. Gil thus focuses his attention on a minor detail instead of thinking of overhauling his habits in general. He explained to me that he had recently changed the direction in which he hammers nails on horses’ hooves to avoid needing to change tools. While others lay their tools out in a toolbox, a raised case with little compartments allowing them to grab them without even looking, Gil leaves his tools on the ground and picks them up as he needs them. Sometimes horses even trample them. Not needing to change tools as often is real progress for him. The progress would be even greater if he started using a well-designed toolbox, but when asked about it, he says he is not interested.

In Gil’s case, there seem to be several mutually exacerbating factors. Firstly, he says his short-term training in a small private school was of poor quality. It did not allow him to appropriate the techniques being taught. In addition, the first two years

of his working life as an employee were very trying. He says he learned well, but in a bad working environment, where the boss made his three employees work too fast. Gil's physical condition declined. After falling from a horse while vaulting, he missed five months of work (instead of the twelve months of prescribed sick leave). He resumed work early and limped for four years. He also has a herniated disk, but only stopped for one week to care for it, and he is still receiving osteopathic treatment. At only 34 years of age, Gil is in a situation where a career change is becoming urgent. In the opposite situation, Éric (35) had a longer training program (eighteen months) in a respected Apprenticeship Centre (CFA), and his first work experience was with the Republican Guard, where the working conditions were closely controlled. He maintains his physical condition through a healthy lifestyle and physical activities that are compatible with his job.

From working-class social backgrounds,¹⁹ farriers are not predisposed to give particular attention to the morbid sensations sent by their bodies (BOLTANSKI, 1971, p. 222). Preservation strategies only appear when wear or accidents, either experienced personally or vicariously through someone else's misfortune, give rise to the "awareness of a responsibility for the body," to borrow Pierre-Emmanuel SORIGNET's expression in reference to dancers.

"This change in how one's body is comprehended should also be related to the wider but more fragile resources that are at the disposal of an experienced dancer who is getting older."

(SORIGNET, 2006, p. 59)

In addition to the age factor, the quality of their initial training and work experience prior to setting out on their own is crucial to how they understand occupational risk. In addition to needing to be in good physical condition, they have to be able to maintain it, which requires access to sufficient cultural resources. For instance, I observed quite variable use of the tripod, a support holding a horse's hind foot during some procedures so the farrier does not need to; it is recommended by LOURIA (2011) in his text on preventing occupational injury. The only farriers who used it were those that learned to use it early, either during their initial training or their first experience working for someone else.

In order to continue working in their field, farriers improve their working conditions over the years. Their conception of risk is quite different from that of the wild animal trainers studied by Marie CAUDAL (2009), who trivialise risk but do not seem to try to modify their working conditions. In contrast, farriers redefine what they consider acceptable working conditions over the course of their careers, although they, too, tend to downplay risk. They try to minimise risk of accident while managing the effort put into their work.

Farriers modify their methods as they get older. The youngest demonstrate their strength, and their work lets off steam. But among the oldest, economising effort is

19. Farming and the trades, for the people interviewed.

the rule, what Richard SENNETT (2008, p. 178) calls “the application of minimum force,” which shows control of one’s body and fosters precision in its actions. Applying minimal force makes it possible to conserve the energy that lessens with advancing age, felt through the wear and tear on the body (POMMIER *et al.*, 2006).

In the second phase of the career, selection through health takes place directly through work accidents (disability) or indirectly from an accident’s consequences on the business’s financial stability. In a less visible but equally significant way, this second phase is marked by differences in how farriers manage to preserve their bodies, consequently precipitating or delaying the moment that they change careers.

Career Change

From the time of his training, a young farrier knows that he will have to change careers. Of the 319 students and apprentices questioned, only 11% planned on continuing the occupation until retirement (IM, 2008). A little under half (46%) plan on practicing farriery as long as possible, and the rest for a period of 20 to 25 years.

“So I give myself until 45 years old. So that will be in 11 years, for –maybe before, it’ll depend on my body– to tell myself... I’ll be able to anticipate a career change around that age, for sure. [...] When you see others like Gil [...], they have the same age as me, and see, they are always subject to pain. So they are already thinking about changing jobs because they are already physically bad off. Gil hurts everywhere.”

(Éric, 35)

Being in this occupation, in the “rural tradesmen” category, is clearly an advantage for farriers changing careers because it facilitates the purchase of land and farm buildings. This is because the nature of their work means they are enrolled in the MSA (the health and social plans for agriculturally related jobs), and members of the MSA have pre-emptive rights on the purchase of farmland.²⁰ For Gil, who is planning on opening a horse farm, this status authorised access to several hectares of pasture without local farmers getting priority.

Question: “And you have plans for that?”

Gil (34): “Well, here, actually. We bought [our house] here in relation to it. [...] It would let me work part-time as farrier and have horses here for breaking in or training, or boarding. To take care of myself at that level, but always staying in horses, for sure. The goal is to not wear myself out completely in farriery to be able to continue doing it.”

The stakes are high, and the decision to change careers is hard to take because farriers are fond of their occupation, which is closely tied to their lifestyle, as we can see with Yann, who usually takes Wednesdays off.

20. Rural tradesmen are affiliated with two health and social plans, the MSA (for people in the agricultural sector) and the RSI (for individually-owned businesses).

“Finding an occupation where I can earn a reasonable living while having so much free time, so much freedom, doesn’t happen overnight. It’ll soon be 20 years that I work for myself, and I worked for that, too. You don’t just build up a client base like that, with a magic wand. If I start out in something else tomorrow, [I’m], like, starting from nothing.”

(Yann, 41)

In Luc’s case, he had been planning a career change for a while, since an opportunity arose for him. An acquaintance offered him a job in a company that recycles construction materials. His upper-crust clientele was a resource for his career change, and speaking openly of his intentions proved fruitful.

“The idea had been stewing for a while –I talked about it, y’know. I didn’t hide it from anyone, people knew. It simmered away for a while and then, look out! But also it’s the... how’s that, it’s the opportunity that made it happen, too. Here I had this guy come looking for me, and who said to me, ‘here, I’ve got a position to offer you in Saint-Malo, with middle-management status and all that.’”

(Luc, 40)

Considered unavoidable, changing lines of work is the conclusion of a process where the farrier gradually balances his declining physical strength with his technical experience and the development of social and economic capital –in other words, resources from his client and peer relational networks. Career change is the final phase of selection by health, conditioned by the options available to the potential career-changer (SIRVEN, SERMET, 2009). Many put it off for just this reason, running the chance that their exhausted bodies might fail them before they can prepare the next period of their working life. A veterinarian I interviewed gave a snapshot of a chaotic end to a farrier’s career: he described a farrier who stopped working because of back problems, resumed it for a short time, and had to stop again. Without crediting the health problems that he himself had mentioned, the veterinarian passed negative judgment on this man, describing him as an indecisive and grumpy person. Poor health can drain social capital. This brief story, which is not an isolated case, also shows that some farriers keep practicing their occupation until they run out of strength.

The factors that condition a career change –the final phase of the HWE– are the ability to change lifestyles and the possibility of finding another job. Farriers’ specific advantages come from their status as rural tradesmen, the social capital they were able to accumulate, and the relationships they developed with their clients. A health problem can suddenly put an end to farriers’ activity at any point in their career, but for those at the end of their career it will more likely be due to physical wear and tear than to an accident.



As the statistical data shows, selection by health is salient to this occupation. It begins at training and continues at every step of the career. Everyone knows from the outset that wear and tear is unavoidable for those who agree to work English-style. Analysis of farriers' careers makes it possible to identify some of the social aspects of the HWE, though the list is certainly not exhaustive. The strain is visible from the first year of training. It is marked by the acquisition of an occupational culture that connects work with pain, and those who do not identify with this ethos leave quickly. In the first years of working for themselves, farriers are more exposed to work accidents due to their inexperience and the delegation of the worst jobs to newcomers. In the second phase of their careers they begin to feel the physical wear. This happens sooner or later to the extent that farriers manage to improve their working conditions through access to good clients. The quality of their training and first work experiences as employee determine whether or not they will adopt technical procedures that reduce strain. Lifestyle, particularly the kind of exercise they get, also has an effect on how soon wear appears. Unless an accident interrupts it suddenly, the end of farrier work is related to the career-change opportunities that arise for each farrier. They have some advantages due to their proximity to the farming world, accumulated social capital, and relationships they built with their clientele.

The HWE is attenuated by certain phenomena. The impact of tradesmen's networks of sociability has been proven so far as business profitability is concerned (COMET, 2007; ROY, 1995). Their role is not merely economic, however; they also assure their members' mutual protection. After the ordeal of the first years of work, farriers join an informal but effective group whose organization forestalls the consequences of sick leave. Should someone need to stop work for health reasons, his colleagues will take care of the urgent work to keep the business afloat. This necessitates an environment of confidence and integrity to avoid the theft of good clients. And since reciprocity is expected, one must be sure to build one's peer supportive network with colleagues who are reliable and will not ask for help until they reach the limit of what their bodies can bear, people who “don't listen to themselves too much,” as a frequently heard expression puts it. The judgment of others combines moral qualities and physical capacities. As Nicolas DODIER (1986, p. 620) notes, “the social construction of people's corporeal reality in the course of their everyday working relations is inseparable from the construction of their moral characteristics.” So, to integrate risks related to their job, the occupational culture creates solidarity among the strongest.

The results observed for the occupation of farrier cannot be generalised for all trades, but they may be extended to occupations with permanent postural constraints and repetitive movements. I have observed similar situations in hairdressing²¹ and masonry, and other authors have observed them in ceramicists (BAJARD *et al.*, 2011). Given this troubling situation, perhaps some traditional farrier practices should be

21. “It's not physically hard but you have to be in good physical shape because you wouldn't hold up [otherwise]. I see the little apprentice I had before –after three months she was already really worn out, hurt everywhere. Give up, gotta change, because at 16, it's not worth it, she won't last until 60” (Hairdresser, 60, with one employee and one apprentice).

reconsidered, such as combining farriery with another job, which is a good way to slow occupational wear and tear while laying the groundwork for a possible shift toward metal-working or farming. Observing the careers of those who have left farriery would certainly provide food for thought on the long-term consequences of being a farrier.

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