

NYPD Farrier

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

New York has a reputation for being a city in which the only constant thing is rapid change. Yet even in the fast-paced, high-tech city, ancient trades, crafts, and skills find niches where they can survive—and sometimes even thrive. In my new column, I will select old-time activities that are, well, still going strong in New York City and discuss the roles they serve in the modern world.

Probably I should admit to some of my biases up front: I'm not a big fan of technology for its own sake, but I'm not a complete luddite either. As a professional photographer, I use digital cameras for most of my small-format work, but I still shoot black-and-white film, often in old-fashioned mechanical cameras.

For this first column, I set out to feature a farrier—a blacksmith who shoes horses—as an example of a trade that's emblematic of olden times. I was intrigued when I heard that the New York Police Department had several full-time farriers on staff. I began my research by walking into the headquarters of Mounted Troop A in Lower Manhattan and asking the desk officer if he could point me in the right direction to do a story on New York Police Department farriers. He gave me the phone number of the public affairs office. After several calls and e-mail messages, I was invited to the stables of one of the five NYPD mounted troops.

That's where I met Jimmy Murtagh. Murtagh, a native of Carrick-on-Shannon, Ireland, has been a farrier for seventeen years and has worked for the NYPD for three years. He is one of three full-time farriers—the official job title is horse shoer—that the city employs to take care of the more than one hundred twenty NYPD mounts. Police horses spend their working lives on city pavements and need to have shoes replaced every four to six weeks.

Murtagh showed me around the stables of NYPD Mounted Troop B, a bright, modern facility housed in what was once a cruise ship terminal on the Hudson River at West 34th Street. Troop B has about thirty horses

in the stable at any given time. He needed to replace the shoes on two horses and do a consultation about some hoof tenderness for another. Murtagh's usual rounds take him to three stables in Manhattan and the Bronx; his two colleagues cover the other boroughs. Farriers are also frequently stationed at events where NYPD horses are being used for crowd control or in parades.

When a new position opens up, the word goes around that the city is looking for a farrier. Farriers need at least five years of experience and have to provide references and do a demonstration of their skills in order to be hired. The benefits, of course, include steady employment and access to the city's health and pension plans.

While today's farriers get from stable to stable by truck, the tools and techniques of the trade haven't changed much in hundreds of years. The large pliers-like tool used to remove old shoes and the curve-bladed implement for cleaning and trimming hooves are of ancient design. And certainly the most dramatic part of the process—the cloud of smoke that's released when the heated shoe comes in contact with the hoof—is an image from time immemorial. Hooves, incidentally, are similar to our fingernails and have no nerves, so the animal feels no pain when the heated shoe is being fitted.

There have, of course, been changes over time: horseshoes are now factory-made in various sizes and heated and pounded over



an anvil for final sizing, rather than custom-made from bar stock. Forges are fired by gas rather than coal and are portable. A hard metallic alloy called borium is added to the shoes at three bearing points to improve traction on city streets. But the essence of the farrier's craft—man, horse, and glowing metal—has remained largely unchanged over the centuries. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the NYPD that uses cutting-edge technology to fight crime and thwart terrorism still needs the farrier's ancient skills. ▼

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