Robert Ward is finding new challenges and carrying on the family trade in a fledgling home business repairing boots and saddles.

Located in the forested hills of the Big Cedar area, Crane Hill Boot and Saddle Repair is based out of Robert's barn in a compact room equipped with well-seasoned tools of the trade. They cut, grind, buff and sew materials from fine, thin shoe leather to near-impervious rubber Vibram soles and thick rolls of 15-ounce cowhide.

Robert started the business a year ago—after three years in the making—and his enterprise is still looking to find a name for itself and expand its client base.

Meanwhile, Robert keeps his family fed and housed with income from a day job in floor covering and construction he has had the past 20 years.

He and his wife of 31 years, Cathy—who works as a midwife—have seven children and 15 grandchildren.

“I’ve been doing this repair work in the evenings and on weekends,” Robert says. “I’m trying to keep up with it, and people are pretty understanding.”

Business comes from word of mouth, flyers, business cards and some advertising in Kamiah’s Clearwater Progress newspaper.

“I’m just basically getting started,” Robert says, adding with a laugh, “Let’s just say I’m not quitting my day job.”

Robert Ward in his boot and saddle repair shop. He started his business a year ago as a side vocation to his day jobs in construction and floor covering. He especially enjoys saddle repair.

Robert Ward had his first brush with his unique vocation as a teenager. “I got interested in shoe repair at 14,” he says. “I worked as a shoe-shine boy one whole summer in Nampa.”

His dad, 76, continues to run a shoe repair business in Nampa.

A few years ago, Robert connected with a man who was retiring from the repair business and had no success in selling nearly $10,000 worth of tools and machinery. Robert says the man lamented that no one would offer him even $2,000 for it. So he decided to give the tools and machinery to Robert.

This was welcome news to Robert, who had been interested in starting a home-based business and a new vocation to transition from his construction job, provide new challenges and be easier on his body.

He enjoys horse riding and decided it would be fun to fix his own boots and saddles, as well as offer that service to others.

“It certainly has been a learning process,” Robert says. “Even my dad told me he still learns something new all the time, and he’s been at it for 26 years.”

Robert continues to learn the shoe and boot repair trade from his dad. As far as fixing saddles, he has had a great teacher in Harpster saddlemaker Molly Adams.

A friend also provides him “fixing saddles” to practice on.

“Right now, the biggest part of what I do is saddle repair,” Robert says. “It’s what I enjoy the most, and it has its own set of challenges. It’s fun to take some beat-up saddle and repair it so it doesn’t look like it’s been repaired, and so that it’s comfortable and people enjoy it.”

Robert says each trade has its unique tricks and obstacles.

Saddles are challenging to take apart. First, Robert says he needs to determine whether and how much to disassemble, whether stitching and seat leather need to be replaced, and then hope he doesn’t break the “tree”—basically, a wood or synthetic form all of the leather wraps around—which makes up the heart of a saddle.

Skirts are sometimes stiff and hard from too much exposure and need to be replaced.
Stirrup leather needs to be pretty tough, Robert says. “If it’s too thin it falls off, and that’s not fun,” he says.

Since he works part time, saddle repairs can take Robert a day for minor jobs and two weeks or more for major problems.

It’s a step-by-step process. Depending on the extent of the repair, there is waiting time between each part. Saddle leather requires time to soak in water until it is pliable enough to work with, then it takes time to mold it around the tree. When that is done, it is clamped to dry in that position. Only when is it dry can you move onto the next step.

In boot repair, the first question is whether it can be repaired, then figuring out how to do it, Robert says. One pair of Danner boots he inspected revealed rotten insoles, so he replaced those and repaired the midsole, rebuilding them from the ground up.

“I got them a little tight,” Robert says, “but he was able to wear them and break them in.”

Robert says the challenge for shoe and boot repair is generational. Older people have shoes 20 to 30 years old that they still enjoy and are still repairable. Younger folks are buying shoes and boots with glued-on or molded soles. Without a midsole to attach a sole to, once it’s worn through, it’s done.

Robert says 90 percent of the boots he sees are still repairable, but the number is declining every year. “It’s a dying business because of today’s society buying throwaway shoes,” Robert says. “It’s hard to find shoes today that are good enough to repair.”

Like saddles, boot repair is step by step, with most requiring two steps for the often-needed heels and sole replacement. Thick lugged-rubber Vibram soles require an additional step and time to glue to a midsole, and then secure with screws.

“I enjoy the challenge of doing something new,” says Robert. His goals are simple. “Boots I want to go on comfortable, and not be too loose or too tight,” he says. “Saddles I also want them to be comfortable, and in major repairs I want to get it back to them quick because they want to use it.”

Robert says he has not found an easy repair yet, since he is still learning and has to think through every aspect of the job. But each job is its own puzzle to solve, and he welcomes each one as an opportunity to learn.

“It’s not doing the same thing every day,” Robert says.

Don’t look for the business to move anytime soon. Robert built the shop specifically around a piece of equipment weighing in at 1,500 pounds.

“I’m not moving it again,” he says. “That’s enough.”

If you are doing some sole searching or need a rear-end adjustment for your horse riding, contact Crane Hill Boot and Saddle Repair at 926-7221.