Life as ex-con has drawbacks...

He can’t be around guns, 
get insurance 
or vote in elections...

Johnny Richard repairs saddles and is creating his first one from scratch.
By Chris Segura
Staff Writer

ABBEVILLE — Their day begins early, with a trip to Mass. That's seven days a week.

On Fridays, they spend an hour starting at 2:30 a.m. as part of their perpetual adoration in the chapel of St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church. Often, she goes with him.

They say they do it for peace of mind. They seem to work a lot on peace of mind, and they see to achieve it.

They are Kathy and Johnny Richard. He's 47 and she's 38.

She does scrimshaw on alligator teeth, calling it "swamp ivory," fashioning imaginative jewelry from the mouths of various species. She paints alligator skulls with attractive maroon and swamp scenes.

He repairs saddles and is creating his first saddle "from scratch," after a long, self-imposed apprenticeship. Until it's finished, he won't allow himself to be called a saddle-maker.

On a typical day, after the early-morning religious rites, she goes into the niche she has carved for a studio from their one-bedroom house. There, she meticulously works on the carvings, necklaces, etc. It's a quiet, gentle business.

He goes next door to his saddle shop borrowed from his father and operates an old livestock farm. He's been busy making saddles, blankets, and reins from the slabs of leather he purchases in bulk.

People bring him their broken bridles, frayed head-stalls, rotted spur straps. He pounds and cuts, stitches and molds, visiting with the customers while he works. He says he'll only slow down on a day when it belongs to whomver's taking up his time.

It seems to say, "Life's a simple thing.

But what he says out loud is that life's never a cinch, and that's no news at all. And life was a lot tougher, too.

He served a year and a day in a federal penitentiary in Texas. He was convicted of conspiracy to smuggle marijuana. In other words, he was a "dumb off-loder.

That meant he helped unload two boats of South American marijuana. He had been promised $10,000 from a "silver-tongued devil" who had paid the price. But the smuggling ring had over-extended itself. However, if he would unload another boat, he'd get a total of $20,000.

When this chore was done, a rendezvous was arranged at a remote spot and he actually saw the money in an envelope. But before he could get the cash into his pocket, his benefactor had bowed down to the other boat.

"I never saw the money," he said.

The criminal activity occurred in 1976. On his own admission, he had been a bad boy for quite some time.

"My mother used to tell me, 'Your reputation's going to catch up with you.' It did," he said.

"When that judge sentenced me, he didn't say anything about smuggling. He looked at the record and he said, 'Mr. Richard, you like to drink and you like to fight. And you like to drive a car when you drink.' That was over by then, but it was still there.

"In fact, although he wasn't the roughest, toughest Cajun cowboy in those parts, some of his antics did approach the apocryphal.

"For instance, one of the alterations involved sheriff's deputies. This was the famous Cattle Day Showdown when Richard and seven friends and kin defied the law on horses other than the Sheriff's Posse in the big parade. That attracted attention.

"This was before he and Kathy got together. He was married to his first wife. They had no children at the time.

"He and Kathy knew each other for some time, as friends.

"Interestingly, he doesn't credit them for the obvious close relationship of the system as turning him around.

"He says the birth of his first daughter in 1983 started setting his head straight. He has two daughters by his first marriage.

"He and Kathy had been married for a short time when he was convicted and sentenced. They had already been the recipient of lots of support from the Family Life organization of their church.

"In the two or three days before the judge gave him his affairs in order, they visited the people who had recently become close.

"One of the very activist organizations is the Wren's Nest. It was starting to work on the project. Wasn't just an outpouring of support from the community.

Kathy said. She was sitting on a porch with the big bed. He was playing piano, and they were teaching the children the art of playing their own music. That they both smiled at the thought.

"I never realized he changed," she said.

For that year and-a-day, Kathy made weekly trips to Texarkana.

"Things changed while he was away. The feed store he had in partnership failed. Several friends went to jail. Other friendships were strained.

"Life was an ex-con has it's drawbacks. Because they've chose to make their own way with their hands, he doesn't tell that worn ex-con story about not being able to get a job.

"But consider that as a convicted felon he can't "even be around a gun." That's not an easy thing for someone who grew up in a culture that likes guns and hunting and at a time when guns were as much a part of growing up as video games are today.

"He can't get insurance and can't vote. He says not being able to vote hurts the most, claiming he voted at every opportunity.

"When I first came back, a lot of people told me I would never be able to live in this town. That I'd have to get out of the parish.

But he found the support of the community was greater than its resistance to an ex-dumb off-loder.

He and Kathy decided to stick it out. Their lifestyle is definitely off-beat, but in a sort of traditional Cajun way.

He habitually wears western clothes complete with hat and boots. He looks like an actor on the set of a movie.

Partly because of Kathy's work and because of his family's traditional closeness to nature and to cattle, their house and workshops are littered with bones and teeth like a dream paintor Georgia O'Keefe might once have had after eating too much crawfish.

But in the middle of all that, Kathy and Johnny just try to make it peaceful.