

FORGE AHEAD: BLACKSMITHS AND METAL ARTISTS

Lisa L. Higgins, Director, Missouri of Folk Arts Program



Don Asbee and David Williams with an ornate iron and glass table made during the apprenticeship.

Anyone associated with the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP) knows how vital the tradition of fiddling has been to the state and to our Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP). Over twenty fiddlers, from old-time and bluegrass to Irish and jazz, have served in the program as master artists who pass their skills on to newer generations. During the most recent year of the TAAP, however, we have been reminded, almost with surprise, how prevalent blacksmiths have been in the program since 1984.

Perhaps one reason we tend to forget the high level of participation by blacksmiths is that they produce such diverse products. The basic process is the same, especially to the uninformed eye: heat coal; heat metal; hammer heated metal to form object. However, the results vary widely. Over the years, TAAP's eleven master blacksmiths and their apprentices have yielded tools and utensils, knives and wheels, fishing gigs and architectural hardware, ornamental furniture and ornate objects. All are functional; all are artistically excellent.

In only the second year of the apprenticeship program, Robert Patrick, who then lived in tiny historic Bethel, Mo., and now resides in Arkansas, served as one of our first master blacksmiths, along with Darold Rinedollar of Augusta, Mo. The previous year, Patrick and eleven fellow smiths founded the Blacksmith Association of Missouri (BAM!), an organization that has been strategic in preserving and advancing the traditions of blacksmithing. BAM members offer great resources to each other: tips and lessons for newcomers

and old-timers, a cooperative to purchase bulk supplies like coal and a robust social outlet. By 1989, ninety members had joined BAM. Today, there are nearly four hundred members in Missouri and beyond, and BAM bestows the *Bob Patrick Founder's Award* each year at its annual conference.

Preston Williams, an active member of BAM since 1988, is TAAP's latest blacksmith and hails from rural Madison County, Mo. Williams started working a forge at age sixteen. He gives most of the credit for his skills and interest in metalwork to his father, John B. Williams, Jr., a farmer, tool and die journeyman, welder, woodworker and blacksmith. The elder Williams learned many of his skills in the Navy during World War II. Father and son joined forces in the 1970s to work as wheelwrights for local farmers, including the local Amish community, and a rising number of horse and buggy enthusiasts. Today, Preston Williams makes time for his forge between farming four hundred acres and working a full-time job. He considers himself a "practical blacksmith" and says, "If you can't use it, I don't make it." Williams takes pride in making tools, like hammers, chisels and tongs, as well as forges, anvils and power hammers, larger items that he tells us many blacksmiths no longer make.

Back in 1986, Darold Rinedollar lamented, "Nowadays we have wrought-iron plastic" (McCarty 18). In a throw-away society, one might conclude that the need for hand-forged products has waned. Skilled blacksmiths, however, are highly sought after, and they easily find outlets for their works. Nearly all TAAP master blacksmiths have some blacksmith training through their own or their teachers' military service. Some, like John Glenn of St. Joseph, Mo., assist historical preservationists with period gates and fences. Others provide repair services for small and big businesses. Most blacksmiths find the occasion to fashion unique pieces of furniture and ornamental items for the home. Like Darold Rinedollar, they may turn from function to whimsy and find a new occupation. He has now relocated to Clarksville, Mo., an artistic community in northeast Missouri along the Great River Road, where he makes and sells custom ironworks and garden furnishings.



Detail of Damascus knife blade made by Guy McConnell.

Similarly, Hartsburg, Mo., metal artist Don Asbee* started out producing tools, equipment and other functional items. Eventually, Asbee apprenticed with renowned *National Heritage Fellow*, Francis Whitaker, and is now widely recognized as an accomplished metal artist. In 2005, Asbee served as a TAAP master artist, and he recently won a *Percent for Art* contract with the City of Columbia.

Yet another style of blacksmithing is practiced by Guy McConnell, also a BAM member. The north Missouri native apprenticed with master bladesmith Ward Westbrook in 1993. Later, in 2001, our panel of folk arts specialists selected McConnell to teach the art of Damascus knife making, a technique that strikes us as a perfect symbol that forges both the functional and the artistic. The technique involves an elaborate process of heating, folding and forge-welding the metal into increasing layers.

After hammering out a blade, McConnell grinds, sands, etches, polishes, hardens and sharpens it. The finished product is a highly functional, and prized, knife with stunning patterns in the blade.

Not surprisingly, McConnell tells the MFAP staff that he sees his work as "far more art than craft." Whether they identify as metal artists or blacksmiths, these masters have added as many layers to the apprenticeship program and the culture of Missouri as one finds in their works.

McCarty, Jim. "Artistry in Iron." *Rural Missouri*. March 1986, Volume 39, No. 3, pp. 10-11, 18.

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Tools made by Preston Williams.

*For more about Don Asbee, please join us for his gallery talk on Wednesday, September 6, 2006 at 12:15 in the Museum of Art and Archaeology.