

The LAKER home

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— BLACKSMITH —



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Striking While the Iron's Hot

By Leigh Sharps

Normand Pinette says he believes he is not a true blacksmith because, "I am learning something new about it every day."

But while the 87-year-young ironsmith is admittedly learning new aspects of his craft daily, his body of work speaks loudly for itself, as does the praise from his hundreds of extremely satisfied clients. One need only look at the innovative and original 'products' on his website and there is little doubt this hard-working man is indeed an expert blacksmith.

Many know Longfellow's famous poem 'Under The Spreading Chestnut Street the Village Smithy Stands' but an even better saying to

describe this respected ancient profession is an old Native American proverb: 'A single blow of a blacksmith is equal to a hundred blows of a goldsmith!'

A blacksmith is defined as a craftsman who fabricates objects out of iron, hot or cold, forging on an anvil. The blacksmith term derives from iron that was formerly called 'black metal'. A farrier is a specialty blacksmith who specializes in shoeing horses (Latin term Ferrum also meaning 'iron').

The smithy, ironsmith, forger, metalworker has a long and varied history harking back to medieval times, as well as being prominent

in mythology. It's believed to have started in 1500 BC by the Hittites who invented the process of forging and tempering iron ore with communities needing to have tools to build, forage, cook, etc. During the Iron Age the method to produce wrought iron came about by reducing the natural ore with heat. This newer substance was much easier to fashion into tools stronger and sharper than stone.

During the medieval period, it was a part of every township. The 'Village Blacksmith' was greatly respected. Blacksmithing techniques continued through the mid-19th century until the Industrial Era. But due to modern machinery and mass production, demand for individual blacksmithing products greatly declined. Most of the work shifted to farrier work. In the early 20th century, blacksmiths trended into doing architectural work but during the Great Depression and industrialization, blacksmithing became a little-known trade.

Thanks to a resurgence in the 1970s, people who wanted to 'return to the land' found the lost art of blacksmithing and it began to be popular once again. Now there are many famed blacksmiths and there is even a TV show titled 'Forged in Fire', featuring blacksmiths making weaponry.

Forges were once fired by coal for thousands of years but today they're run by gas. The 'pounding' process to change the shapes of metals is also now done mostly by a 'pounding' machine although some intricate work is still done with hammers. Pinette's forge is hand-made partly using varying sizes of wheel drums. Many of these methods create perils for the blacksmith as Pinette can attest by the loss of a fingertip (by a hammer) and countless burns. "Just part of the work," he says.

There are other tools, forges, machinery and 'ovens' which have greatly changed over time as well. Welders are smaller and handier, anvils are shaped differently, ovens are much smaller, and heating machinery is much more advanced.

He says he never "dreamed I'd end up being a blacksmith as my life's

work. I'm not educated. I went through the eighth grade and then had to go to work." Though most of his varied life-long job experiences somehow all involved 'metal or iron', there was one exception and this was his first job: a pin boy. Raised in a family that was enduring tough times, Pinette was one of six children forced into labor to help support his family as soon as he turned 14. "I was a pin boy in a 'duckpin' alley." For those who may not know what a 'pin boy' is, it is a person, generally a youth, whose job was to place bowling pins back into their spots after they were knocked down by a bowler. "There were exact spots drawn on the floor and they had to be placed back on those spots for the bowler." ('Duckpins' are shorter and squatter pins than conventional 'tenpins' and the balls are also smaller than tenpins. Pin boys were used until automatic machines replaced them in the late 1950s). Pinette made 60 cents a day and walked the eight miles home from work rather than give up a dime for a bus ride!

Pinette spent years in the military, serving in Korea, and upon his return he joined his brother who had a fencing company in Massachusetts. This was his first business working with metal products and installations as well. Eventually, the two built a profitable business which included selling wood stoves, but due to changing circumstances, the business was dissolved.

It was then Pinette and his wife moved to New Hampton where they purchased a motel and 16 cottages on Lake Pemigewasset on Rte. 104 between New Hampton and Meredith. They raised two daughters and a son, working hard to run and maintain all the cottages as well as the motel. He kept his hand in working with metal, becoming more and more adept at it, but it wasn't his sole occupation.





Normand Pinette works on his latest project; a platform for a vintage coffee table.

He did, however, gain some fame when three of his products were featured in the movie 'Housesitters' starring Goldie Hawn and Steve Martin, filmed in Concord. "I had some items in a store on Newbury St. in Boston and they chose a hat rack, a coat rack and a candelabra for the piano." He also sold items from the same store to Disneyland.

When his wife suffered a heart attack and could no longer work running the cot-

tages and motel, he found he was unable to keep up with the work alone and they sold the motel (now private residences) and all the cottages and it became a condominium development. Then he turned to blacksmithing full-time and never stopped.

The work ethic that began with his 'pin boy' employment is still part of his life today and though he doesn't have to walk eight miles back and forth to work, he still goes out to the workshop across his yard every single day. He is always working on something, large or small from door handles to pokers, 'Moroccan twist' railing supports to bedsteads and fancy lamp posts.

He also installs all his own work (now with the help of his apprentice). He estimates he creates about 100 projects each year for customers who know him by word-of-mouth or through his website for folks looking for a metal fabricator.

He is currently working on a base a lady intends to make into a coffee table by placing an antique 'box' atop. He hides all his welding spots so there are no joint markings that can be seen. He also invents many items for others to use like the original iron tool he produced to help contractors take walls down. He has also created his own styles of railing supports with different types of decorative twists.

Although he says he has not fabricated "my favorite project yet", the ones he currently works on "are always my favorites until they're done". He does everything from king size bedsteads to unique table bases made from iron wheels, etc., and a railing incorporating a wagon wheel. A specialty are fireplace screens. He has one with a cattail design, one with a three-foot owl, one with twining ivy and one with a squirrel and pine cones (he superimposes drawings onto plywood which he uses for a base template to bend the metal around).

All his metal comes from a firm in Connecticut. "He has the best prices and he drives right up here when I need something," notes Pinette. He works in various metals: 'mild iron', copper, brass, steel and wood (when he adds tabletops, etc.). His inspirations come from drawings, mainly, that his customers bring to him. "If they can draw it, I can make it," is his motto. He cites creativity as his strongest point. Not all his projects are made from 'hot' metal, some are 'cold' as well.

There are several steps and terms in making an item, which include forging, drawing down (lengthening), upsetting (making metal thicker), bending, swaging, punching, pounding and welding. These all require the use of a hammer, or pounding machine, and an anvil, but there are many other tools, techniques and terms depending on the different types of jobs or odd pieces made.

Though he resisted for a long time accepting an apprentice, Pinette said he finally broke down after many requests by a young man he had come to know from Pinette doing projects for him in the past. He told him: "You can learn but just don't get in my way!"

Now Pinette said it's "one of the best decisions I ever made. He's a quick learner and is very good". Although he knows most craftsmen don't pay their apprentices, Pinette pays him as he knows he's "well worth it; he deserves it, and I know my craft and creativity will go on."

Pinette plans to hand down his large workshop, once he retires, to the apprentice but he doesn't plan on that anytime soon. "When asked if I'll retire soon, I just tell people 'I'll retire three days before my funeral!'"

To contact Normand Pinette, visit www.nhblacksmith.com or call 603-744-2295 and remember his go-to phrase is "If you can draw it, I can make it".

