



*Vulcan, the Roman god of the forge, would be most comfortable here. And magnets. They would feast to bursting in this room. They would rush in and suck up every last iron molecule from the air. Here, hammers and tongs await to be put to work.*

## Pound it down, Daddy!

### Retro forge rocks Hot Shops

Story and Photos by Craig Pugh

Back in The Day, as the expression goes, the clash, clang and bang of sledgehammers against iron rang loudly, literally, throughout the land. Then the Information Age came along and threw the Industrial Age with all its trademark dirty ironwork under the bus, and the village blacksmith—that burley guy with a beard, leather apron and tongs—trudged into the history books, stuck a fork in himself (because he was done) and struck a reluctant pose of antiquity.

By 1900 the forge flames were extinguished, doused by the mighty Bessemer Steel of Birmingham, Ala.; the roaring furnaces of Youngstown, Ohio; and the sprawling mill towns up and down the Mahoning River Valley all the way over to Weirton, W.Va. Less than a century later, it was big steel's turn to die. Everyone knows the story. Ross Perot was right years ago when he said that giant sucking sound we all heard was the sound of jobs leaving the country.

But remember the saying: The old ways die hard? Forge work – blacksmithing – turns out to be one of those “old ways” that refused to die. A couple of thousand of blacksmiths operate forges now across the country, and here in Omaha the Loken Forge is keeping the ancient craft alive at the Hot Shops Art Center, 1301 Nicholas St. There workers not only produce iron products for commercial and private customers, they also give lessons.

What a contrast the forge presents amidst the color and cheer of an art combine. Like all art centers, the Hot Shops are stereotypically visual: The paintings are bright and colorful; the pottery is vibrant; the glass art sparkles. Then one comes to the Loken Forge corner of the building and modern and colorful give way to ancient and gray. Even the air is different. It's not dirty, necessarily, nor sooty like chimney exhaust; rather, it's filled with near-microscopic iron particles cast into the shop by

hammer blows against the mother piece of iron, blows necessary to shape the piece. These tiny iron molecules are so numerous they almost glitter like finely twinkling snow on certain winter days.

Certainly, anyone who pounds on iron in a forge has not progressed into the modern electronic age. No, a forge is ancient, pre-medieval. And nothing's changed, really. Don't look for Forge 2.0 or 3.4 or any other software upgrades in that market: They don't have any - don't need 'em. People at the forge still create ironwork the same way its always been done: Iron is heated to white-hot, then pounded into shape. As they say at the forge, it all comes down to hitting a piece of white-hot steel with a hammer. If that doesn't turn you on they can't help you.

Elmo Diaz, an instructor at the forge, explained an important difference. Almost all shops, he says, do what's called piece work. It's prefabricated iron that can be put together. Loken Forge chooses to work with iron the old-fashioned way. It is a working blacksmith shop, the only one regionally Elmo knows of.

“We do not stamp out iron like you see in catalogues,” Elmo explains. “We do everything by hand on an anvil.” These would include items such as church furnishing: candelabras, crucifixes, chandeliers, window grills, altars and gates, for example. Loken Forge craftsmen can make items for churches that look just like they were made hundreds of years ago. For those who live and move and have their being in churches, this is an appealing proposition, as one may

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## QUICK SCOOP

### LOKEN FORGE

Water people – crabs, scorpions and the two fish in pisces – navigate the emotional currents of human experience while those stable earth signs – taurus, virgo and capricorn – prefer keeping both feet firmly planted on terra madre.

Gemini, librans and aquarians, then, take to the air in intellectual pursuits, while fire – and fire alone – creates and transforms.

Fire is life. Think not? Pull the light switch on the Earth's source of heat – the sun – and see how long it takes to die hurling through space on a cold, dead planet.

Fire is also a gift. Remember Prometheus, poor fellow? Got chained to a rock: eagle flew down every day, tore open his abdomen and ate his liver. Man, did Prometheus ever pay the price. For what? He brought fire from heaven to the mortals on Earth. Zeus was not happy. Fire, he reckoned, was for gods only – not mankind.

Fire, of course, is the principal element of blacksmithing. At least a thousand years before the birth of Christ, Egyptian and Asian forges were hammering out spears, axes, plow blades, chariot wheels, knives and swords. Later, when the Romans sailed across the English channel and colonized Britain, they discovered an already established iron industry among the Angles and Saxons producing armor, tools, weapons, chain mail and even nails, all handmade from forges, naturally. So great was the craft that its practitioners formed an early guild, The Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths, in 1325.

A few hundred years later, by the time the Age of Discovery rolled around, no self-respecting explorer would have dared set off on a voyage without a blacksmith on board the ship. They were simply too essential. After all, something had to hold all the wood that went into shipbuilding together. Those “somethings” would have been products from the blacksmith's forge: clasps, rivets, nails, anchors and chain links, to name a few of the items.

Come prairie times and the manifest destiny principle of the white man and all of a sudden every crossroads hamlet and dusty village in America had a forge and a blacksmith banging out metal wheels, plows, barrel hoops, horseshoes and all related draught gear implements for the horse and buggy days.

Then the demise. But now, forge work – blacksmithing – is enjoying a renaissance, which is paradoxical because ironwork is such a dirty craft in a new and very clean age; after all, what sooty footprint does the binary code leave behind save for an electronic cipher as it heads off into the pristine cleanliness of cyberspace?

Still, fire delights and amazes. Who does not like to sit in front of a warm fire and stare at the flames. Fire: ancient ... primeval ... soothing. Transforming.

– Craig Pugh





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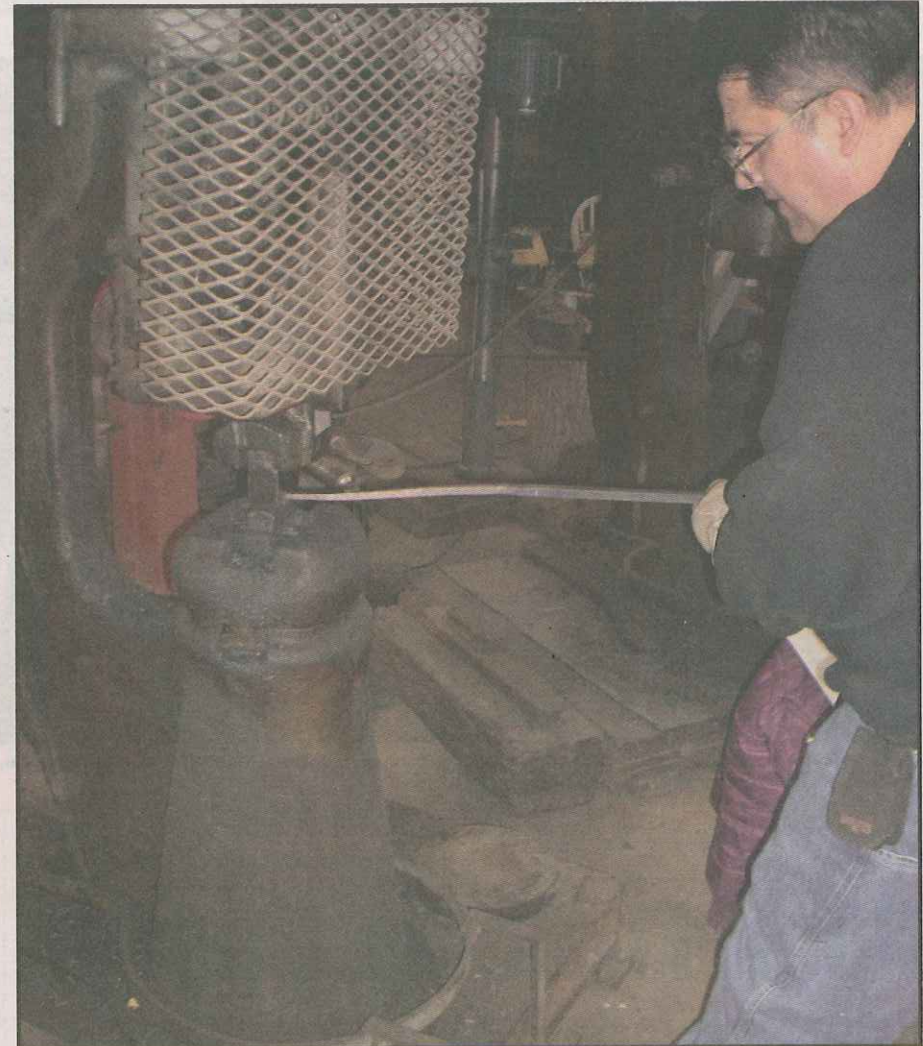
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Loken Forge instructor Elmo Diaz tames a piece of iron under a machine that beats it down into shape.

*Continued from previous page*  
 imagine.

Area homeowners and businesses have also discovered the forge. It is, after all, a working forge. We are talking tables, chairs, candle holders, wall sconces, lamps, fire screens, fire place tools, pot racks, chandeliers, stair railings, driveway gates, trellises, arbors, door hardware and exterior lighting – all handmade the old-fashioned way. Built to last for generations.

Speaking of generations, Diaz says people in their 60s and 70s come in and marvel at the forge. "It connects them with their childhood," he said. "They get to talking about the blacksmith in whatever little town they grew up in, and we stand there and share a moment. It's just really neat."

Some of the guys actually end up taking the classes Diaz and others teach. Diaz particularly enjoys teaching students from Blackburn, an alternative high school for OPS students. He is grateful and excited about the prospect of breathing viability into the ancient yet enduring craft of blacksmithing. Therefore it is not unusual to visit the forge and see over in one corner a worker pounding out a gate or scone

for a customer and over in another corner some high school students heating iron to white-hot.

"We try to give them a little self-esteem and self-reliance," Diaz explained. "We do this by guiding them through the processes and showing the kids that they can actually create something of value and beauty with their own hands. That's what this craft will give you," he said. To Diaz, the reward is picking something up at the end of the process and saying: "I made this." There must be something to what he's saying because 50 percent of the Blackburn students who take the Loken Forge course return to the mainline high schools, Diaz said.

Every trade and profession has words of its own. Check out the words in use at the Loken Forge: anvil, compressor, bead blaster, grinder, welder, torch, tongs, hammer and punch. Old words, to be sure, for an old and ancient product, but one that nevertheless continues to endure somehow throughout the ages.

*The author's sun and ascendant are in a fire sign: leo, making him a "super" fire sign. We figured Craig was the right man for this forge feature.*