

Strike While The Iron Is Hot

by Lynne Belluscio

On Friday afternoon I had the opportunity to try my hand at blacksmithing while I was attending a museum conference at the Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown. Although I was an industrial arts student at SUNY Oswego many years ago, I never enrolled in metal shop so this was my first encounter with a forge.

My first task was to make a nail. As simple as it might appear, there are techniques that have to be learned to make a nail. And it takes practice -- lots of practice. I have since read that apprentices at Colonial Williamsburg aren't allowed to make nails until well into their internship.

You start with a long square piece of iron stock. It has to be heated in the forge, pulling two or three times on the overhead bellows. Only experience makes it possible to know if the red-orange glow of the iron is right. Overheating the iron creates white sparks and the iron actually burns. (Not good!) Grasping the glowing iron with the tongs, which I found to be the most difficult part of the project, you have to bring it to the anvil and hammer it to draw the iron to a point. In the process, the nail will be ½ again as long as the original piece of iron. You only have to hammer on two sides, and this must be done quickly before the iron cools.

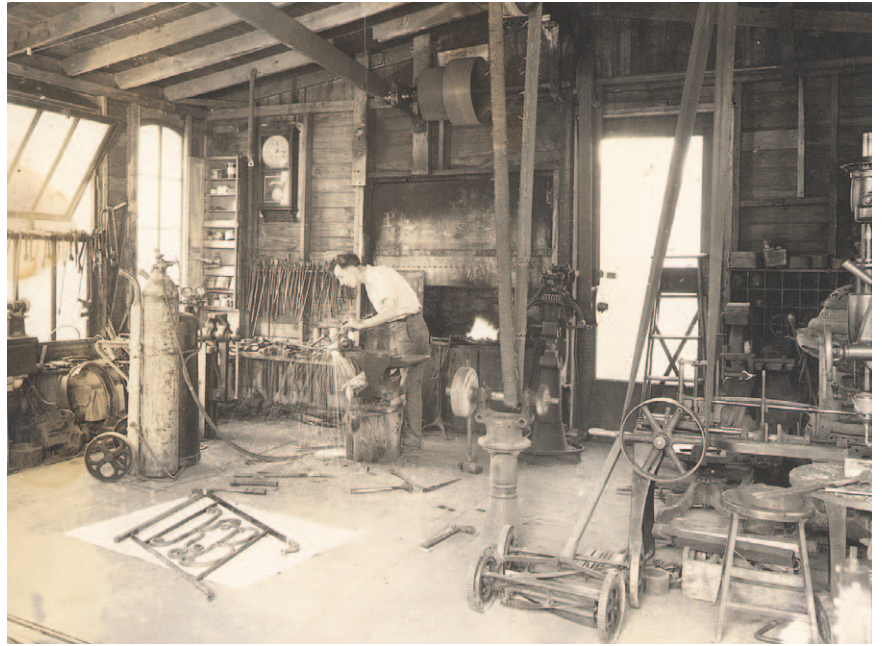
In the winter the iron cools faster on the cold anvil. A couple of pulls on the bellows and you can hammer a bit more to create the point of the nail. Then heat it up again, and narrow down the shank of the nail until it fits through the gauge. Then heat the iron up again, and bring it

to the anvil, and form a "shoulder" just below where the head will be. Heat it again, and put it on the anvil and score about a quarter of an inch above the shoulder. Put it in the heading tool and if you're lucky you haven't made it too small, or it will fall out and you have to start again. Twist off the nail. Put it quickly into the pritchet hole on the anvil and hammer the head.

To create a "rosehead" nail, you form the head with three or four facets. As soon as the head is formed, you flip the heading tool and tap the nail into a small bucket of water to cool. Then, you start again. Proficient "nailers" could make a nail with very few strokes and one heating. One nailer that I read about made 260 nails in an hour. He certainly must have had more than one iron in the fire. I learned that the term "dead as a door nail" comes from the practice of cinching nails to build a strong, secure door. Once the nail was bent over, it became "dead" and couldn't be used again.

Blacksmiths made more than nails. Each early community needed a blacksmith to make and repair tools, plows, cooking tools, wagon parts, wheels, horse shoes, hinges, chains, locks, latches, bolts -- and the list goes on. According to *Beers Gazetteer*, Richard Wait was the first blacksmith in LeRoy, but elsewhere in the book it mentions that Mr. Brown was the first blacksmith. There certainly was enough work for more than one blacksmith in a town the size of LeRoy.

Soon after the War of 1812, John Gilbert, a blacksmith and ax maker arrived in town and built a shop on the hill on West Main Street, where Gilbert Street is now. Thomas C. Ladd apprenticed with Gilbert and then



moved to the east side of town where "his hospital for disabled and broken down vehicles was a conspicuous ornament."

The 1866 *Atlas* mentions J.B. Entrican who did custom blacksmithing. *Beers* mentions that Thomas Murnan, born in 1856, attended the LeRoy Academy and then at the age of 17 learned the blacksmiths' trade at the carriage shop of W.S. Brown. Murnan worked for Brown for 10 years before he moved to Brockport. Many other manufactories employed blacksmiths, such as LeRoy Plow Company, the Upham Carriage Shop and the limestone quarries. Many of these blacksmiths called themselves "mechanics".

Sam Arrington, born in 1890, was one of LeRoy's blacksmiths. He worked almost 50 years in the limestone quarry and his son, Kermit, told me that Sam sharpened the teeth on the huge Marion steam shovel on the Gulf Road. In the front parlor of LeRoy House is a finely crafted fireplace fork made by Sam Arrington. Other blacksmiths in LeRoy included: Schimley & Fox at 11 Bank Street; B.F. Faher at 19 Bank Street; Thomas Heaman also worked from the shop at 19 Bank Street. Walter Parmelee had a blacksmith shop on the "flatiron" on Lake Road. William Scott was located on South Street. Carmichael and Nichols were located at 18 Mill Street.

C.W. Doyle, known for custom

blacksmithing was mentioned in the 1866 *Atlas* on Bank Street. M. D. Halstead was at the rear of the Ross Block and advertised for general shoeing and blacksmithing. Many blacksmiths shod horses, but those who only shod horses called themselves ferriers. At that time you drove your horse to the ferrier. Today the ferrier comes to the horse in a pickup truck. With the introduction of the small hand-crank forge, many farmers did their own simple repairs.

Blacksmithing was just another chore that the farmer acquired. One of the last blacksmiths in LeRoy was Arthur Thompkins on North Street. He was photographed in his shop for the 1940 *LeRoy Book*. Arthur is working at the forge with part of a wrought iron railing on the floor in the foreground. Apparently he sharpened lawn mowers and did some welding. An overhead belt is connected to a grinding machine and on the right a large machine that I can't identify. It might be a lathe or milling machine.

After my brief time at the forge I am taking a new look at the wrought iron collection at the Historical Society. One obscure piece is a four-inch latch hook that holds the roof hatch in place on the top floor of LeRoy House. I'd like to think that this finely wrought piece with a twisted shank was made by one of the earliest LeRoy blacksmiths.

