

# Kid's KOrner

## Honest forgers help revive blacksmithing as art form

DE PERE, Wis. — David A. Ponsler, 23, of Jacksonville, Fla., watched carefully as Francis Whitaker, 77, a master blacksmith from Aspen, Colo., bent a piece of steel around a bar into a gentle curve.

"Work from the bottom up, not from the top down," Whitaker told Ponsler. "You do it easier that way."

All day, day after day, Whitaker had little bits of guidance for Ponsler and about a dozen fellow smiths chosen to participate in Whitaker's master class. The common thread to all the advice was a basic message he offered Ponsler: "Don't rush it. Take your time."

### An Unhurried Art

There is no way a blacksmith can hurry. There are few ways to speed up the process. That is one of the charms of blacksmithing as practiced here at the conference of the Artist Blacksmith Association of North America.

Whether a smith is making an item as simple as a coathook, or as complex as the huge gates under construction by Whitaker's class and destined for the National Ornamental Metals Museum in Memphis, it is slow, painstaking work, done primarily by hand.

The common wisdom is that blacksmithing is dying out, that there is no more need for hand-forged work in these days of automated farms and the post-industrial economy, where robots and machines can mass-produce items in no time. The evidence of the conference suggests that the common wisdom is wrong. Blacksmithing is surging back.

Some 700 persons attended the conference, most of them working smiths. They came from at least 36

states, from seven Canadian provinces, from England, France, Germany, Israel, and Czechoslovakia.

They were varied in experience, from the youthful crowd that packed demonstrations on basic forging techniques to masters like Whitaker, who has been a smith for 62 years, and England's Antony Robinson, who recently designed and crafted a mammoth set of stainless steel gates for the Great Hall of Winchester.

They ranged from old-time country smiths like Jud Nelson, 73, of Sugar Valley, Ga., showing how to make wagon wheels and fireplace pokers, to Dorothy Stiegler of Rochester, Wash., one of a handful of women smiths, who attended the films, lectures, demonstrations, and discussions with her 10-month-old daughter.

They included Joseph Polocz, 63, of Philadelphia, whose Hungarian father had been a blacksmith, but who turned away from the family trade as a youth "because it was bloody hard work." About 10 years ago, he saw a young smith at work, thought, "My God, I can do this with my eyes closed," and has been smithing as a hobby ever since.

### Youthful Artisans

And they included young artisans like Tom Joyce, 27, of Santa Fe, N.M., who has been smithing for a living since he was 20 and is now recognized as one of the most articulate and creative of the new generation of smiths, a slightly built young man who seems to shape a piece of red-hot solid steel into a floral shape with only a few blows.

Young David Ponsler is in this category. He grew up in his father's metal shop, and began

working over a forge when he was 12 or 13. He creates metal sculpture as well as doing more traditional ornamental work, and is interested in expanding his techniques.

"In Jacksonville, I'm alone in my work," Ponsler said. "To be around others like Whitaker is to learn a great deal."

Not long ago, the idea that anyone Ponsler's age would want to learn from someone of Whitaker's generation would have seemed laughable. Jack Brubaker of Nashville, Ind., president of the blacksmith's association, said that blacksmithing as a profitable business died in the 1920s and by the 1950s and early 1960s it was practiced by only a small, dedicated group of aging craftsmen whose number was dwindling.

"Those few who remained in it had a very steady, reliable local business," Brubaker said. "As long as a man's there, a dependable man that neighbors know, they'll come to him. But once a farmer can't go to a blacksmith to sharpen his plow blades, he'll go to town and buy a plow with throwaway blades."

### Book is the Key

The turning point was a book by Alex W. Bealer of suburban Atlanta. In "The Art of Blacksmithing," published in 1968, he paid homage to the dying craft and passed on some of its techniques.

To Bealer's amazement, he began to get calls and letters from aspiring young smiths, telling him that his book was just what they had been seeking for blacksmithing tips, or that it had

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Wearing headphones to drown out the din, Antony Robinson of Great Britain shapes a super-hot piece of stainless steel into part of a sculptural work. Robinson demonstrated his techniques at a conference of the Artist Blacksmith Association of North America in De Pere, Wis.

# COLOR THIS!

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| 1. BLACK  | 6. ORANGE     |
| 2. RED    | 7. GREEN      |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. LT. BROWN  |
| 4. BLUE   | 9. LT. BLUE   |
| 5. BROWN  | 10. LT. GREEN |

**BADGERS LIVE IN WOODS AND GRASSLANDS OF WESTERN NORTH AMERICA. THEY CAN DIG SO RAPIDLY IT LOOKS LIKE THEY ARE MELTING OUT OF SIGHT. THE BADGER HAS SHORT STRONG LEGS, THEY WADDLE FROM SIDE TO SIDE WHEN THEY WALK, AND LOOK CLUMSY WHEN THEY RUN. THE HAIR OF A BADGER IS USED FOR ARTISTS BRUSHES.**

