

The Road Less Traveled Leads To Blue Moon Farm

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HUNTINGDON (Huntingdon Co.)—Every once in a blue moon, someone chooses the road less traveled.

My assignment was to interview a woman blacksmith. Nice twist to a not-so-common hobby. Just jot down the tool names and describe procedures. Simple.

But the road less traveled is often more extraordinary than simple. Abundant with a natural richness seldom seen by those in the fast lane, the road less traveled led me to the Blue Moon Farm where Judy Berger practices an endangered trade, blacksmithing, and where giving and sharing far exceed taking.

"We're stewards of this particular piece of land. It's ours to share," Judy says of the 181-acre farm she and her husband, Winfried, an orthopedic doctor, purchased last year. Nestled among the ridges and rolling fields and pastures just outside Huntingdon, the Bergers share their respite from the rat race with exchange students, a farm manager, tenant farmers, family, friends, visitors, and of course, oodles of animals.

"We've come full circle," Judy said of her and her husband's being raised on farms, she near Allentown and he in Germany. They've raised four children, the youngest of whom is a fulltime blacksmith in Texas. "It was always a dream of ours, to move back to the land."

The soul-soothing sounds of

nature on this scantily-mechanized farm are interrupted on occasion when Judy, a juried blacksmith, fires the forge or turns on the power hammer in her blacksmith shop.

"Iron is a wonderful material to work with," Judy says, sprinkling water on surrounding chunks of coke to prevent its spread and to encourage a hotter fire in the center.

"Coke is to coal as charcoal is to wood," she informs me as she prepares to weld two iron pieces together. When the irons turn red hot, she spoons on a compound called flux, which could be borax or sand or a commercial flux. With a trained eye, Judy pulls the irons from the fire with tongs, spatters sparks of residue flux across the cemented floor, quickly places the iron on the anvil, and strikes the top and bottom making them one. Grasping a steel brush, she scrapes off any residue flux she doesn't want pounded into the finish. To taper the end and draw out the piece further, Judy turns to her latest purchase, a power hammer. The heavy, thumping hammer pounds the still glowing iron. This particular piece will become a twisted basket from which will hang an iron chandelier.

"I make chandeliers, candle holders, sign brackets, hinges, inside railings for kitchens, outside railings for steps or for security purposes, ornamentals, reproduction hardware, fireplace tools, and kitchen tools such as ladles and forks."

Ornamentals include one of her



Judy Berger uses a kitchen stove to steam thin pieces of wood to make oval Shaker boxes, another hobby of hers.

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current projects, creating from iron a miniature representative of each type of animal on their farm—goats, sheep, pigs, geese, wild turkeys, ducks, chickens, horses, one cow, one milking goat, peacocks and peahens—all of which will be worked into a railing for the patio with a wood top on which to sit.

Her most ambitious project hangs above the blacksmith shop door.

"It's a spit jack or a clock jack. It runs with a rope and drum. The weight is wound up and slowly falls down turning the meat on the spit in front of the early kitchen hearths. The idea for this design came from different places, museums. I finally found the one I wanted in Williamsburg," she said.

Judy learned filing and finishing from Peter Ross, the master blacksmith at Williamsburg. She studied advanced blacksmithing with her mentor Francis Whitaker in North Carolina. It was Whitaker who encouraged her to share blacksmithing with others before it becomes lost.

"If we don't share it, it's not going to be around," Judy explains. "There were so many blacksmiths in the past, but there



Welding within the forge takes a practiced eye. Flux is added to help fuse two pieces of iron.



Shown here with her latest purchase, a power hammer, blacksmith Judy Berger pounds two pieces of hot iron to ensure a good weld.

was also secretism, to protect their trademark. Now there are not enough blacksmiths to go around, and we need to share the trade."

Judy will be going just that when she leaves for North Carolina this month to teach a blacksmithing course. She loves to meet older blacksmiths who still have, so to speak, an iron in the fire or who remember how their fathers practiced what was once an integral part of their lives. She is a member of the Artist Blacksmiths of North America, a 25-year-old organization devoted to demonstrating, showing, and sharing the trade.

Judy's blacksmith shop houses

most of what a smith would need—a forge with bellows, an anvil, treadle hammer, tongs, and hammers.

"This is a swage we used for shaping the sections of a large rosette for the dining room ceiling," Judy says pointing to a three-foot high tree trunk with the figure of a leaf carved in the top. "If I were making leaves, they would all be the same shape and size. Nearby is a more traditional swage block."

Lined along the walls are more handmade swages of all shapes and sizes whose main purpose is to mold hot iron. One in particular

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Part of farm manager Sean Fowler's job on the 181 acre farm is to care for the sheep herd. His latest addition to the farm is the movable solar powered electric fence. The white strands alert deer to keep fire and sheep to stay in.