



Stories: Cover Story

Chivalry Is Not Dead

By Geoff Bouvier | Published Wednesday, March 26, 2008

Seemingly everything has been called a “lost art.”

Spelling, conversation, keeping a secret, note taking, listening, and even (why not?) hollering. One string of online text even refers to the lost art of blogging. What constitutes a lost art?

Is it a talent that was once universal but has now grown outmoded and become the practice of specialists? Such as knot tying?

Or is a lost art an activity that Dad used to teach his son or Mom passed down to her daughter but now no moms or dads have time to teach anymore? Such as etiquette?

Is a lost art a capability that has been marginalized by technology, such as wilderness navigation (by GPS and MapQuest) or calligraphy (by the printing press)?

And think about this.

How many millers, tanners, smiths, or coopers do you know? Not people named Miller, Tanner, Smith, or Cooper. Instead, the lowercased practitioners of bygone trades: millers of wheat, tanners of leather, smiths of iron, and makers of barrels. Have you ever met anyone who knows how to mill or tan or smith or coop?

And what ever happened to the art of chivalry? Did it really die?

Where Have All the Blacksmiths Gone?

You come to the door of David Browne’s workshop on Mission Gorge Road in Grantville, and a dog barks at you from behind a screen door. Over the barks, you can hear the hiss of flame and the periodic pounding of metal on metal.

Browne yells for his yellow lab, Hank Williams, to quiet down. Then Browne greets you with goggles and gloves and protective ear covering on. “I’ve got heat going,” he says, motioning over his shoulder, and you follow him inside.

To the untrained eye, Browne's workshop is full of unfamiliar machines, unusual tools, and strangely shaped objects. Objects hang on the walls, objects litter worktables, other objects lean, and still other objects sit in piles on the floor. But the space isn't messy at all. It's a wealth of weird and wonderful visual information.

Browne strides over to his forge — a small, barrel-like cylinder that's humming and spewing orange flame — and pulls out a long, thin steel rod. The last three feet of the rod glow orange.

His face is red and intense as he holds the glowing metal under an eight-foot-high piece of machinery called a power hammer. Browne works the machine's foot treadle, and the power hammer thunders down on the glowing steel. Flecks of metal fly off and cool into silvery dust on the workshop floor. He's honing the rod into an arrow like point, spinning it and hammering.

Next, Browne uses a small, handheld hammer and an anvil to bend a second heated rod into a curve. He's working the two rods at once — flame, mechanical power hammer, handheld hammer, flame, repeat. One rod goes into the forge, and the other comes out. The heated air above each orange rod shimmers.

It's remarkable how flexible the hot steel becomes, almost like butter.

Next, a swift wire brushing, and then he plunges the shaped rod into a vat of cooling water. It hisses. A puff of steam and the piece is solid steel again. But now it's a long metal leaf for the top of a gate. And it's beautiful.

Browne's eyes are bluer than his denim shirt. He has a calm intensity about him that might remind you of a poker player.

"You take one of the strongest materials available, and you heat it up, and now it's soft as clay," he says, shutting off his forge for the morning. "And you can shape it in any way you want. And for me, that's the sculptural part of it. That's the attraction."

Browne's forge operates at a working temperature of around 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. "Yellow heat," he calls it. "That's where steel becomes the most malleable. And I keep two or three bars in the forge at a time, because when one starts to cool down, you have to heat it up again. You have only a certain amount of time, a couple of minutes, maybe, to work this stuff. So you have to be focused. You can't think of anything else."

The forge uses propane and takes about 15 minutes to attain a working temperature. "I was surprised about how much information there was on the Internet about forge building and forge design," Browne says. "Mine's called a pipe forge. It's basically a 12-inch-diameter steel pipe lined with ceramic fiber and coated with high-tech refractory coating, which reflects most of the heat back inside. Then I got off-the-shelf plumbing parts from Home Depot and built some burners. I'm actually in the process now of building a much bigger forge, because I'm starting to work bigger pieces of metal now."

Browne's other main piece of machinery is the power hammer. "It's an industrial forging hammer," he says. "It's probably from the '30s or '40s. I got it for a song. It was sitting in a field, not being used." This 3400-pound machine is driven by a belt and has a motor in the back. When you tap the foot treadle lightly, the hammer hits lightly, and if you step down heavily, then it pounds steel harder than any human could, a 100-pound ram coming down with thousands of pounds of force.

Says Browne, "Back in the '20s, '30s, and '40s, everything was made with a power hammer like that one, by people doing just what I'm doing. Back before we cast everything in big hydraulic machines that can cast stuff out in the thousands."

Browne sounds more straightforward than bitter as he talks about machines replacing people in the blacksmith industry. "What I do in here, you know, there are actually companies now that have machines that just press these things out. Press, it's done. And then guys will take those components that are made by machines and that have no remnant of a guy's hand making it, and they just use an additive method, and they weld it in. So they take all these components, and they arrange them ten different ways, and they say, 'Well, would you like the gate with the scrolls this way, or that way, the leaves this way or that way?' and they weld it together. But anything you can draw, I can make, because I make everything by hand. So I'm not limited to the components available off the shelf. What I do is unique. And there's a segment of the marketplace that still wants that. They want something handmade."

Browne doesn't fit the movie-fueled cliché of the blacksmith: long beard, loincloth, dirt all around him, forging a sword next to a fire pit in a thatched shack.

He laughs. "Back then, they had one guy who was sort of directing the show with his small forging hammer. And where he would hit, and as hard as he would hit, there'd be two other guys with sledgehammers following him. This was called striking. And so, he would hit, and these guys with big hammers would hit, and he'd hold it and direct the show. And that was called hammering with a striker. Well, then they realized quickly that if you're working by yourself, then you need something more, like the mechanical power hammer I have. I mean, that's a four-pound hammer that I'm working with over there. And I can swing that for an hour or two before I get pretty exhausted. But the power hammer is a hundred-pound ram coming down with force, and it can run all day and never get tired. Now, it's not automatic. You still have to direct the show. You have to have the metal positioned to be hit in the right place at the right angle, and so on."

Browne works with steel mainly, but he also shapes copper, brass, and bronze.

"Everybody has a picture of what the blacksmith is," he says, "and I'm not even sure that that's what I am, to be honest. I embrace a lot of the techniques, hot-working metal, and I rivet things together, and I do a lot of things that blacksmiths do, but I also employ modern welders and grinders, and I'm not opposed to making money and making my life easier in some ways too."

Browne says it was a struggle to build a clientele, but now he's booked six months ahead with various metal-crafting jobs.

And he makes all sorts of cool things besides gates. "I think I'm an artist first and a blacksmith second," Browne says, and he has the work all around him to prove it: kung fu weapons, belt buckles, railings, fire screens, and decorative sculptural pieces as well. "The blacksmithing is just the medium for me. You know, it could be clay, it could be painting, but for me, I express my artistic views through steel."