

# What the World Needs Now – Is a Few More Blacksmiths

*“A lament for wrought iron.”*

By Peter Worden Photos Neville Palmer



These days, blacksmithing seems akin in antiquarianism to a job in the fur trade or a car dealership selling only Model Ts. But for one of the last remaining master blacksmiths in the country, it says we are truly a people disconnected from the elements – earth, water, wind, fire – and our past.

**M**artin Reinhard cups a few handfuls of damp coke, pushing a pile around the edge of a small flame. The forge feeds voraciously on vented air and is soon ablaze, rising to a near-instant 4,000°F.

“Beats any acetylene torch,” he announces. Seconds later a steel rod inside the heat is orange-hot, or in blacksmith language, warm. “We never say hot.” He strikes it. When it starts to cool (though, still warm enough to sear third-degree burns), Martin continues with the natural rhythm of a blacksmith, musically tinging the hammer twice against the anvil face in-between each heavier metallic clang of the rod. Clang. Ting, ting.

Clang. Ting, ting. “Heat it and hammer it, heat it and hammer it, tempering it,” he says, and places the rod back in the fire for a second heat.

While his storefront is located on Nanton’s Main Street, Martin’s workshop is located in a non-descript back-alley entrance way off Hwy 2. For all its modesty, it’s the only one of its kind in the province and there are three (maybe) like it in Canada. Likewise, Martin himself is equally modest and rare. He’s a master blacksmith of which fewer and fewer remain (none in Canada, to his knowledge). He’s a sculptor of art in which “each piece is one of one.” He’s an inventor of a wall-mounted kindling-splitter called Mr. Quicksplit. And he’s a

chemist or – chemistry’s medieval precursor – an alchemist, possessing knowledge of elements’ properties with an ability to meld them into wrought iron – something stronger and just as historically significant as gold.

“Material gets 10-times stronger after it’s been forged,” he says. The rod he’s forging now begins to take shape with a twisted loop at one end and a hook at the other. “I make my own tools,” Martin continues, explaining how he petitioned the Government of Alberta once in a letter to advocate at least 14 different trades that could benefit from a day in his shop. “I can work with no electricity,” he says, “you show me a trade that can do that.”

There was a time when a town couldn’t survive without a blacksmith. But today, a one-man shop working with the four elements, fire, water, earth and air, is quaint, parochial. If ‘humans’ – traditionally held as the fifth element – are shapers and tinkerers, then Janet Rose, Martin’s partner at their Willowcreek Forge storefront is the sixth, tirelessly promoting Martin and blacksmithing in general.

“Martin has no apprentice,” she says, explaining that when the blacksmithing world loses Martin, a lifetime of master blacksmithing experience will be lost with him.

What does it say about a generation with no understanding of wrought iron? Either Janet or Martin will tell you, it says something about the world’s “Walmart mentality” and explains in a nutshell how society popularly defines value. Martin knows first-hand the hard balance between blacksmith-as-artist and blacksmith-as-knickknack-maker.

“It’s tomorrow’s antiques, my stuff,” he says. “The stuff that comes from China ...” he says, trailing off to insinuate the obvious. “This,” showing a previously forged work, “is like having an original oil painting.”

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One measure of a blacksmith’s work is how many times it has been placed in the fire or “heats” it took. Like this, Martin has undergone several heats. He grew up in Lucerne, Switzerland, the son of a long line of hard-working oven builders. He passed his master blacksmith exam, which requires six types of welding know-how. “It’s not multiple choice,

believe me,” he says. In 1976, he moved to Alberta, welding in the oil patch, doing stainless steel work at the Calgary airport, helping restore the Banff Springs Hotel, and more recently, from his shop in Nanton, forging gates for luxury homes in Canmore and Bears paw and other works, which like everything in blacksmithing: “You have to start from scratch. Nothing will be identical.”

With all the tools, knowledge, shop space and patience (his blacksmith course is open to anyone) all Martin needs is to find an apprentice. The job isn’t perfect, “Oh you get burned,” he says. But there’s a need for more and more of it, and importantly, money to be made.

“I got a call this morning,” he says. “Well-spoken man. Wants a window basket made by a real blacksmith; like what you would see in England,” his steely blue eyes, gunmetal in the reflection of the anvil as he continues to work. “I’m the guy for you.”