

Escapes

Iron Maiden

In Charlottesville, Blacksmithing Class Leaves One Woman A Bit Overwrought

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

I've always liked to think that if I woke up tomorrow and wanted to switch professions, I could do anything. Now, I think I could do anything except blacksmithing. That's what I learned at a recent Saturday workshop in Charlottesville. Sometime between the first thrill at holding a piece of glowing, raspberry-colored metal in tongs and the near-weeping state of exhaustion at day's end, I decided I will never, ever become a blacksmith.

In an age when build-it-yourself and back-to-basics are more appealing than buying prefab, it's easy to forget that such bygone trades as metalworking and woodworking are hard-core. But when that hammer is in your hand, there's no forgetting — and no lack of appreciation for — the Industrial Revolution.

The blacksmithing class was recommended to me by an architect friend, so I signed up and planned a weekend in one of my favorite college towns. (C'ville, with a number of craft and hobby stores and galleries along the downtown pedestrian mall, has turned into a hub for old trades.) I imagined learning to forge and later bragging about bending metal with my bare hands. The upshot: Taking on steel challenged me physically as much as nearly anything in my life.

Our teacher was Dale Morse, owner of Clay Hill Forge, who ekes out a living making fireplace screens, driveway gates and other custom pieces. In recent years, as forging has picked up as a hobby, Morse has held monthly workshops in his warehouse studio.

My introductory class ran about 10 hours, which was barely enough time to forge two items. Morse began at 8:30 a.m., offering us cinnamon twists, coffee, earplugs and safety goggles. The other students were a high school sophomore working on a school project and a technical writer who once built a forge at home. Morse wore a belt buckle stamped with the word "Vulkan." His right arm was visibly brawnier than his left from three decades of pounding out metal. He had dirt under his nails and deep in the lines of his hands before he even picked up a hammer.

"I started when I was 9, because I was mesmerized by fire," Morse said. "Then in my teens I was more attracted to sharp and

pointy things."

I am not particularly drawn to either flames or weapons, but I was curious about the trade. Morse said that although some students advance to his intermediate class, most fall into my camp: One day is plenty.

We began by addressing safety issues. Inside the first-aid box was a bottle of vanilla extract, which Morse said takes the sting out of a burn, and a tube of Chinese burn ointment that smelled like soy and ginger. Morse told us to hold the back of our hand over a piece of metal to tell if it's still hot. And he warned us not to stare into the fire, which can damage one's eyes over time (this surprised us all and spoiled my lifelong fondness for gazing into campfires).

The chilly studio was filled with equipment worth about \$50,000, including two giant turn-of-the-20th-century power hammers (the hammers themselves weighed 200 and 75 pounds), a drill press and a band saw. Our primary appliance was the coal forge, and our workbench was the anvil. Behind the forge were buckets of coal and shovels, and Morse showed us how to clean out the clinker (clumps of ash that remain after coal is burned) and how to start a new fire.

"A big part of beginning blacksmithing is getting over the fear of fire and heat," Morse told us. He said that the temperature of the fire is 3,500 to 4,000 degrees, and that the metal begins to burn around 2,000 degrees. The hotter the metal, the easier it is to shape, so the trick is to pull the steel out just before it burns, after which it turns into a sparkler and becomes too brittle for forging. In my mind, it wasn't much different than making s'mores: You want the marshmallow hot, gooey and dark on the outside, but leave it a moment too long and it oozes off, tragically, into the flames.

Morse showed us a decorative wall hook with a twist and curlicue, the kind he would have once sold at a craft show for a measly \$8. "You'll have one of these by lunchtime," he said.

We started by heating a quarter-inch rod of steel and hammering out the tip into a rattail taper. Morse demonstrated how to put the hot metal in a vise and twist it like a piece of licorice. The studio heated up quickly as we all stepped back and forth between forge and anvils, hammering out the red metal (which cooled by 1,000 degrees in about 20 seconds) before we had to heat it again. While Morse could make an entire hook in 10 minutes, heating the metal



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE GROSS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Charlottesville blacksmith Dale Morse forges metal during one of his monthly public workshops. Below, the author exhausts herself fashioning a wrought iron candleholder (bottom left).



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KEFISO — THE WASHINGTON POST

that clear as mud?"

We hammered away the afternoon, the studio heavy with heat, clinging and clanging. Morse said to me more than once, "Hit it like you mean it!" We wrapped early-stage blisters with green tape and tended to minor burns. My right arm was beat.

All day, Morse had been patient and thoughtful, but hands-off when it came to our work. So I was relieved when — at last — he offered to help me. By late in the day, I was getting sloppy filing down a piece of the metal. Morse said, "Okay, I think you got the hang of filing," and took over for a few minutes. Without his help, I might have been working all night, but we got through the final drilling, torching, hammering and quenching, and I walked away weary but with a candleholder in tow.

I won't be signing up for Morse's next class, but I now have an awesome appreciation for people who work with metal, and I have a centerpiece that reminds me to keep my day job. Next time I want the experience of holding something in a flaming mass and heating it to perfection, I think I'll track down one of Morse's fancy fire screens, unwrap some chocolate bars and spend an evening melting marshmallows, sculpting them over graham crackers and not gazing into the fire.

ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: Charlottesville is about 120 miles from Washington. Take I-66 west to Route 29 south (Gainesville-Warrenton exit) to Charlottesville.

BLACKSMITHING CLASSES: Introductory blacksmithing is held at **Clay Hill Forge** (1304 E. Market St., 434-244-7833) on the second and fourth Saturdays of the month, from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Cost is \$100 and includes lunch. For more information or to reserve a spot in the class, call Dale Morse or e-mail him at vulkanschmiede@yahoo.com.

STAYING THERE: The Inn at Court Square (410 E. Jefferson St., 866-466-2877, www.innatcourtsquare.com) is a couple of blocks from the downtown pedestrian mall. The inn has free WiFi and is filled with beautiful antiques, most for sale. Weekend rates are \$159 to \$299. **Red Roof Inn** (1309 W. Main St., 434-295-4333, www.redroof.com) is close to the U-Va. campus and student haunts. Weekend rates range from \$95 to \$110.

EATING THERE: You can't go wrong at **Mas** (501 Monticello Rd., 434-979-0990), a trendy Spanish tapas restaurant southeast of downtown; dinner is served daily, with brunch on Sundays. Along the downtown mall area, try **Blue Light Grill & Raw Bar** (120 E. Main St., 434-295-1223), known for its raw bar; entrees \$13 to \$20. Dinner daily; reservations are advisable. At the more casual **Bizou** (119 W. Main St., 434-977-1818), you can order down-home dishes, such as a catfish quesadilla, for lunch or dinner (Sundays are dinner-only) for \$15 to \$25.

OTHER OLD TRADE WORKSHOPS AROUND CHARLOTTESVILLE:

Joan Griffin (434-979-4402, www.joangriffintapestry.com) teaches tapestry weaving in an introductory two-day weekend workshop. The next one is June 3-4. \$175 includes loom use and materials. **Noon Whistle Pottery** (328 Main St., Stanardsville, 434-985-6500, www.noonwhistlepottery.com) offers a number of weekend workshops, including silk papermaking, lampwork glass beadmaking and polymer clay jewelry-making. Sessions average \$50 for a three- or four-hour class, including materials.

Ash Lawn-Highland (1000 James Monroe Pkwy., 434-293-9539, www.ashlawnhighland.org), home of President James Monroe, offers several workshops to help young visitors learn how to make hand-dipped beeswax candles, hand-punched tin lanterns and corn husk dolls. Children \$9, adults \$15. Call ahead to schedule a workshop.

INFO: Charlottesville-Albemarle County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 877-386-1103, www.charlottesville-tourism.org.