



Anvil Iron

by Rick Hemphill

The shop sits quietly by the road, nestled on a corner where Potato Hill meets Route 9 in Hedgesville, WV. The unassuming building resonates with the clang of metal hammers creating works of art from bright yellow steel as the glow from the heat of the forge slowly dims. The shop merges old with new, using plasma cutters and laser tools along with forge and hammer to create the one-of-a-kind stairways, iron furniture, gilded clocks, candelabras and other pieces of metallic art.

"I looked around and you have many potters and flat workers of any kind -painters, drawers, weavers, woodworkers- and very, very few blacksmiths and metal workers," says Lee Badger, the chief artist at Anvil Works who, along with his partner Steve Dykstra, has operated the versatile workshop since 1988. "I like three-dimensional works so I decided to do metal. It is a very good aesthetic choice and it has served me well with trips around the world."

Explaining how he got started in professional metal working, Lee says "In 1975 I took a blacksmithing and horseshoeing course so I could make money out of one of the two. I did the horse shoeing for 10 or 12 years in Denver, Colorado. I moved back here as there was an opportunity for an artisan in a national park near Washington."

"He does all the making and I do all the bragging," says Steve, who manages the business side of things. "We located here because Route 9 is the only east west road in the panhandle and we have gotten three large commissions just from people driving by and seeing our wrought iron sign from the road. Blacksmith tourist groups go by and with the anvil on the side of the building it might as well say 'We break for anvils!'"

"I have spent my lifetime studying ironwork and there is really nothing new under the sun," Lee admits. "Our customers give us direction

as to the designs but if they are not certain we have many books to help them find where their interests lie. We try to give them some quick sketches and see where things go. I did a fence to keep out deer with no horizontal lines at all and it started as a scribble."

"In nature most things are odd numbered," Lee says, trying to convey why a particular piece is appealing. "What makes things right is usually proportion and a subtle agreement with nature. Most plants have an odd number of petals and it is a real comfortable thing. Everything that is lower is darker just as in nature. Look at the beach with the dark water and bright sky. With few exceptions the heaviness is at the bottom which you would expect and that is reflected in my work."

"The exciting part of any project is coming up with a design that [the client] will enjoy and figuring out how to make it work," Lee

"One thing about art is that there are stories connected to it."



states, his enthusiasm rising as he remembers his past projects. "I see something in my mind and to take my imagination and make it real is wonderful. Once I get the idea, whether it is a commission work or one of my own pieces of art, it has to happen."

Lee's largest project was a steel clock tower over 32 feet high when assembled. "The first steel delivery was 26000 pounds," Steve remembers, describing how he had to build it in sections because the building wasn't large enough. "We built it upside down on the base due to the weight and it was assembled on site. The clock face is 20 feet in the air."

Most projects are less massive but require just as much skill. Sitting against the back wall of his workshop is a metal staircase with metal railings that are formed into curling, woven branches rising 14 feet in the air. "This is going into a house near Paw Paw, WV," Lee explains. "I had no idea how to attach that staircase when we started and that is the challenge of new projects - how it will be completed. This project will take two and a half months to finish by hand and it is 45 feet long so that means I will do nine inches of metal a day."

Adorning the walls of his shop are many curved pieces of metal that Lee made for previous works. "All those are jigs on the wall," Lee says, answering the question before it is asked. "If you have a particular job that needs a scroll or curve or something, you make a tool to bend the metal. I save them because I might need them again. This is a piece of two and a half inch pipe that I made into a jig to taper the stair pipe to a cone several inches wide at the bottom for attachment to the floor."

Sometimes the tool is integral to the project. In order to complete a wrought iron fireplace grate to match an 18th century one, he had to make a hammer to match the marks created on the original by a blacksmith's tool over 200 years ago. "You have to be a lot more focused when you are working on [a] good tool in order for it last and last," Lee explains. "Things that I

know I am going to use over and over I am going to make well and, although I can make a hammer in an hour and a half, this one took more work to get the dents in the face correct."

The 30 x 40 shop itself is custom-built with an unconventional ceiling that allows more height inside and gives the shop an open flair. "This is my workspace and it's bigger on the inside," Lee says with a laugh, giving a nod to a favorite British science fiction character. His forge sits on the far end of the shop to allow the most open space possible.

The shop is very tidy, all things considered, but there are pieces of the current project spread out near the trip hammer. Over on an old drill press converted to an artist's lazy Susan is an in-progress sculpture of twisting, windblown, iron leaves. Lee says of the piece, "You have seen the dust devils swirl leaves and debris as they move across the ground and I thought what if there was a person inside that swirl created by the leaves. That is my next sculpture."

"The more people get into the digital revolution, the more they want handmade art and products," Lee says, reflecting on how three-dimensional art is perceived. "People like tangible stuff. I think people connect to my stuff on an emotional level. One thing about art is that there are stories connected to it. They are not buying iron work as such, they are buying the story of the construction and what I do. They like to say, 'I saw him make part of this'. And that connection is really cool."

"In the long run my work is not that much more expensive," Lee argues. "You are getting an article, a product that is made specifically for you and your home. That metalwork has an architectural value that will increase and it will look better than a commercial product because it is made for your house. Yes, you will spend more for a good artist's work but people don't realize that art will appreciate in value."

"Wrought means to work the metal by hand," Lee says. "Most people think that if a piece of steel has a shape to it that it has been wrought, and that is not true. If you cut a piece of metal and stamp it into a shape it is not wrought iron. A car bumper is not wrought iron." Lee goes on to explain his usage of more modern tools along with the traditional ones, "A forge, anvil and a couple of hammers is all you need for traditional metalwork but power tools are not new. I was over in Prague, Czechoslovakia where they have had two original water wheel powered trip hammers since 1520." He says, "I am constantly educating people. I used to teach courses in metalworking but it takes so much time away from the making part of the business."

"The challenge is to make things look good," Steve says, championing Lee's talents. "Lee has been able to bridge all the different types of metal working from the traditional, hand forge to being able to talk really well to the guys with the laser cutters. He can combine the traditional stuff with the modern stuff so that no technology is beyond him. What it takes to get the piece perfect is what Lee can do."

"The Panhandle is a really great place for our business since we are 85 miles from DC and Baltimore and only 150 miles from Philadelphia and Richmond," Lee says, satisfied with the choice to relocate to Hedgesville. "The suppliers here are fantastic, the people are nice and the taxes are relatively low. Everybody gets along fine and I really like the West Virginia attitude of live free or die, and do your own thing and leave me alone."

Lee's journey in metal has broadened his view of art to include creativity in all its forms. "People make the assumption that art is in a museum or hanging on the wall. I say three cheers for the arts in the broadest spectrum of using that word. There is not a single occupation on the planet that does not utilize creativity whether they are ditch diggers or lawyers or what have you. Everyone is an artist at some level."

"It takes a lot of people and input to make our art, not just me," Lee says, acknowledging that it can take many craftsmen to complete his vision. "This is not a dying craft there are great people of all ages out there doing work and yes, you can make a living doing this. Look for good work. I am lucky and I find great joy in doing this work."

"Nationally recognized craftsmanship is happening here at this shop." Steve says proudly.

Anvil Iron, 101 Potato Hill,
Hedgesville, WV -
www.anvilworks.net