Blacksmithing renaissance

Art of farrier practiced by increasing number of people

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BROUSSARD — Without the skill of blacksmiths, the homesteaders who settled the West in the 1800s never would have survived. But it’s not a dying art.

Jerry Baker, a Lafayette resident who’s worked as a farrier and blacksmith for more than 25 years, says the art of smithing is actually on the increase. People who build upscale homes sometimes want details that reflect the work of early artisans, and historic buildings being restored sometimes need reproductions of old, handmade artifacts.

Baker’s work is intricate and detailed. He can make anything from metal, from the blacksmith’s tongs and hammers he uses to a tiny hummingbird perched on a 6-inch flower to decorate a garden gate. Even the shovel he made to use in his coal fire has delicate scrolling on the handle.

The tools of a blacksmith are simple and haven’t changed for hundreds of years: A coal fire, tongs, hammer, anvil and vise are the implements of the craft.

Baker said he’s been blacksmithing for as long as he can remember, originally as a necessity, since he grew up on a ranch in Montana, but now as an art.

“I make architectural hardware for people who love history,” he said. “I like to make items that are functional and beautiful — and with simple elegance.”

One recent project is a reproduction of a floor-mounted door latch he’s making for a house in the River Ranch subdivision. A simple foot pedal releases the latch, but the curving design suggests more than mere function — it’s pure sculpture. He also created an elliptical arch for another home, a reproduction of a Colonial lamp for another and makes one-of-a-kind chandeliers and mantelpieces.

“If you can imagine it or sketch it, I can make it,” he said.

“Jerry Baker works Friday at his studio in Broussard. Baker, who has worked as a farrier and blacksmith for more than 25 years, says the art of smithing is on the increase. Many people who want details in their new homes that reflect the work of early artisans and the restoration of historic buildings contribute to keep blacksmiths busy.

“Blacksmithing has been practiced for thousands of years, but the modern anvil was first standardized in the 1800s. Before that, blacksmiths used hard volcanic rock or natural metals to pound on.

But old anvils are the best, and Baker has about 20 in the large barn in Broussard he calls his studio, each weighing between 100 and 200 pounds, and most over 100 years old.

“There are companies that make them now, but I don’t think they are as good,” he said. “I like the old stuff because the rebound is so good.” Rebound refers to how the hammer bounces when it hits, and Baker restores old anvils to make them usable again. One of his favorites is a Fisher anvil, made in 1897, that his grandfather brought with him when he homesteaded in Montana in 1912.

“When the Western movement started, people took corn, wheat, gunpowder — coffee and sugar if they could afford it — and they took steel,” he said.

“Every small town had a blacksmith. He made the nails for the houses, the shoes, shovels, cooking pots, pieces for water wheels, stonemason’s tools, parts

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Farrier

for the gristmills, cobbler’s nail, wagon wheels and axles,” he said. “The blacksmith was the hardware store of the day.”

The first car was made in a blacksmith shop, but the machine age took away that necessity, Baker said, with a touch of irony and sadness in his voice.

“The first machines were made by a blacksmith,” he said.

But as an art, blacksmithing is growing, Baker said, and every month, new members join the Louisiana Metalsmiths Association, of which he is a member. He said he also sees a lot of interest when he gives demonstrations of the ancient skill at Girard Park at Festivals Acadiens in September, or Pyromania, the fire-generated art festival in April.

For Baker, though, blacksmithing has modern uses that defy antiquity. After Hurricane Lili, when he needed to haul down some damaged trees, he simply spent a couple of hours making a length of chain that was strong enough. And then on New Year’s Day, blacksmithing helped solve a dilemma when one of his apprentices showed up with a bottle of wine.

“I didn’t have a corkscrew, so she just made one,” he said.