Rene is 82 and Clement is 78. They’ve seen better days — Rene as a blacksmith, Clement as a wheelwright.

Image of Christ on old calendar watches over the blacksmith shop

There’s a low fire burning in the shed — wood, ashes and coal are used around the forge. The morning sun is chilly and dim and except for the pale sunlight that streams through the old weatherboard doors, the fire provides the only heat available.

Rene and Clement Serignan stare into the flames, as if it still links them to better days — days when the buggy and horse were as much a part of life as kerosene lamps and visits by the ice man. Days when the slaughterhouse was close by and business was assured.

Days when it meant something to be a blacksmith.

“There are no more horses and wagons, everything is dead,” Rene bemoans. “No one wants to work a trade no more.”

Rene and Clement are brothers. Rene is 82 and Clement is 78, and memory alone links them to better days. Rene was a blacksmith then, Clement was a wheelwright. “He’d build a wagon from bottom to top,” Rene said of his brother.

The Serignan family arrived in Stocklandging, now known as Arabi, in 1869 from Bordeaux, France. They set up a blacksmith’s shop near the old Crescent Historical Landings and Slaughterhouse Co., which later became New Orleans Stockyards.

Located at Angela Street and St. Claude Avenue, the blacksmith’s shop seems anachronistic next to an automobile repair garage.

Their work is their life. But their work has ebbed, victimized by a modern world that has little time for artisans of the Serignan mold.

But the fire still burns in the forge, and the iron manual blower still sends the ashes swirling into the “duck’s nest” — the blacksmith’s phrase for the tapering flame rising above the forge. On this day, it is stoked with “clean” coal recently arrived from the Smokeless Coal Co. in Alabama.

Light shines into window, spotlighting idle tools resting on anvil

Time leaves blacksmith with fire in his heart

By DAVID LESER
St. Bernard/Plaquemines bureau

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As Clement notes bitterly, there are no coalyards in this town — you’ve got to send to Alabama or St. Louis for clean coal, which emits little harmful gas when burned. “Daddy used to buy a ton of coal for $3 back in the 30’s,” Rene said. “Today it costs $400 a ton, cause there ain’t a coalyard here.

Rene’s hands are like clumps of oak, weathered and strong by six decades of using a ball peen hammer — welding, shaping, sharpening and fashioning. “You have to be a good man to use one of them,” he said.

Good men are in short supply today, the Serignans say. “People don’t want to work anymore; they are not like they were yesterday,” Clement said.

On this day, there is no work and Clement leans idly against the ventilator of his shop hoping for a bit of warmth from winter’s timid light.

“Sure I’m angry,” he said in his blustery Gallic way. “Nothing is good anymore, nothing is done right.”

“People are like animals today — they don’t fight with their hands, they fight with a piece of wood or iron...”

They don’t even know how to put two bits of iron together.

“We are tradesmen,” Rene said.

“When a man can weld something in the fire, he calls himself a blacksmith. But no one wants to do that anymore.”

Clement mimics his words less. “You know why people are so bad today?”

And then answering his own question, says, “They don’t know no trade, because all they think about is money. Money, money, money.”

“If you got no money, don’t talk — it’s like that everywhere, from here to hell. It is the same there too.”

Clement waves his hand to signal that he’s had enough talk. He looks at you with a look as though you are from another world.

“Times — they are not like they used to be,” he says. But the fire keeps burning.

Staff photos by Kurt Muschler

Rene Serignan stands next to fire pit with tools he and Clement use when they have some work