

Blacksmith Interview: by Vince Nakovics

Well let me tell you. I had the good fortune to meet, chat and check out some of this month's interviewee's work at the Blacksmith Guild of Virginia's Annual Hammer In back in Feb. He was chock full of information and more than willing to share it with me about building cannon carriages and a few other items that we both make fairly often. Jymm Hoffman and I discussed bending a 4" x 4" axle to accommodate the correct dishing angle of some carriages that I have at work and came up with several really viable ideas on how to do so. It was a great experience to meet him and take advantage of his tremendous skills. And now...

Jymm Hoffman

Blacksmith

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Jymm's Reproduction Traveling Forge



In the beginning:

My first blacksmithing experience I tried to make a knife with a Hibachi grill, charcoal briquettes, and a hair blow-dryer for a forge with a railroad track as an anvil, spring of 1975. I did not try any forging again until volunteering at Ohio Village in the spring of 1979. The blacksmith, Paul Browning, taught me the proper way to stand at the anvil and swing a hammer, making round stock, square, then round again, and lots of hooks. Later that summer and fall I spent most of my time volunteering in the gun shop, as I wanted to be a gunsmith.

I'm not exactly sure, but I think I decided that I wanted to be a Blacksmith in 1980, I know it was while I was going to Salem College, Salem, WV in a program they called Heritage Arts, later to become Museum Studies. Craft program was at a small log village called Fort New Salem. They did not have a gunsmith there, but had a blacksmith and a wood shop. While working with the blacksmith Tom Goodson, the bug bit me. I knew there were some museums that would pay a reasonable wage to their craftsmen at that time. Then as I decided to pursue the career of a blacksmith, I went to the Blacksmith's Guild of the Potomac's first (I think) Blacksmithing Days at Colvin Run Mill Park in the spring of 1981. They organized a trip to the National Episcopal Cathedral the Friday before the event. That was my introduction to Samuel Yellin's work. The hook was set

on that trip. Then I attended my First Quad State Round Up at Emmert Studebakers Homestead in Tipp City, Ohio, September of 1981. The two demonstrators that kept my attention were Peter Ross and Francis Whitaker. There was no turning back at that point.

Traditional vs. Modern Techniques:

While I do use gas (propane) forges and power hammers, most of my techniques are considered traditional. To me the primary difference is electric welders, torches and plasma vs. forge welding, cutting and splitting with hammer and chisels. While I learned and still take advantage of every chance to learn "the old ways," I have

found it necessary to balance the old ways with the new in order to make a living. However, I do not electric weld where there should be forge welding. I still do a lot of hot punching and cutting as well as use a band saw, drill press etc. I firmly believe that some traditional techniques are faster than modern, depending on timing, etc. The bottom line is the finished product, if you can not tell what methods are used and the craftsmanship is good, it should not matter.

[Favorite Tools:](#)

Ones I have made, probably because I made them, especially when I get the balance just right. They are cross peens with the peen on the bottom line of the hammer. I prefer many early (18th. century) style tools that I make for historic demonstrations. Sometimes they feel really good, so why not use them every day?

[How much does it weigh?](#) My primary hammer weighs about 2 pounds, and I prefer long handles, the length of my inside of my forearm to my extended finger tips, rounded with a swell about 2/3 towards the end and a flair on the end.

[How big is the anvil that you use most?](#) 335 pound Euroanvil. I hope to replace it within a year with one of my variation on this design. My secondary anvil is a continental (double horn) made to my specifications.

[What special tools do you use on a regular basis?](#) My own design of gas forges running on propane, some might consider these a special tool. I have not burnt coal in my shop since 1993. I have a Say-Mak SPH-50 Air Hammer and SPH-60 Air Hammer. For certain production items, tent stakes and large headed short shank nails for cannon wheels (called strake nails,) I had custom dies made to my specifications and made nail headers and top tools to make the nails completely under the power hammer.

[Surgeon's Tools](#)



[On starting one's own Blacksmith Shop:](#)

Be ready to go hungry for a long time, unless you have some other form of financial support. Even if you have mastered the craft, give yourself several years, not the one or two that most new businesses consider as the normal time to get off the ground. Be ready to do some sort of production line that you might not have ever considered or wanted to do, or be ready to work part time for someone else. I started doing tent stakes and jack hammer bit re-sharpening as a way to pay the rent while doing some of the other projects I wanted to do. Be ready to do craft shows and reenactments for people to learn about you and what you do or can do. However, do pick the better quality shows, and take the time to look at a show to see if the other crafts are of the quality you want to be set up with and associated. Take the time to make some of the things you really want to make, especially when starting out when you don't have orders. Do the best quality work that you can and don't expect everyone to appreciate it nor want to pay the price you think it is worth. Try to do a simple website and brochure as references.

[Gate Element](#)



[Howitzer on a Sled](#)



What do you get out of being a Blacksmith:

Callused hands and upper body strength. Oh, uh, a satisfaction of being able to make some really neat things out of a hunk of metal. I get the satisfaction of setting my own work schedule, the frustration of customers that do not pay in a timely manner and the smiles from customers that love your work and pay immediately.

Influences: There is a list of great blacksmiths that inspired me to do good work, whether it was more modern art works or historically accurate stuff. The list is in order of when I took classes from them or hung out and rubbed elbows, even once or twice, they still influence what I do today;

Paul Browning, Mark Bokenkamp, Tom Goodson, Peter Minier, Peter Ross, Rick Guthrie, Ken Schwarz and the other smiths at Colonial Williamsburg.

Andirons with rotisserie



Reproduction of a 16th. Century Bullet Extractor, used in Warriors series "The Last Crusaders" episode on the History Channel, 4-16-2009.



Hoffman Colonial Anvil



Jymm Hoffman Pre 1840's Hammers



Note: Be sure to check out Jymm Hoffman's website to see more of the depth of his impressive abilities. You will be impressed. Jymm has his Anvils and Hammers for sale there.

<http://www.hoffmansforge.com>

Vince Nakovics

