

“Everything by Hand”

A community remembers its blacksmith

by Donna Walker

Matthew Edel shod their horses, fixed their wagons, mended their farm implements, and made their tools.

“Years ago, a community couldn’t exist without blacksmiths,” said Eugene Pippin, docent and resident blacksmith at the Matthew Edel Blacksmith Shop, now a historic site in Haverhill, Iowa, owned by the State Historical So-

ciety of Iowa. “We had no hardware stores. Oh, there were a few entrepreneurs—we were fortunate in Marshalltown to have some. But in communities like this, if you needed a butcher knife, you went to a blacksmith.”

“There used to be a blacksmith shop every five miles, back in the Thirties,” William C. Roads, of Marshalltown, recalled. “There was one in Albion, one in Liscomb, and one in-between. Every little town had a blacksmith shop.”

“He used to shoe a lot of horses,” said Ambrose Rosemeier, a Haverhill resident who remembers Matthew Edel. Rosemeier was 13 when he first brought his pony to Edel’s shop for shoeing. “I lived north of Haverhill and went to school at St. Joseph’s. I rode a pony to school and in the fall we’d bring it to the shop to get shoes on, then in the summer he’d take them off. They’re still hanging there today.”

Along the ceiling of Edel’s shop, on taut wires separated about every two feet by ceiling joists, hung the shoes. Each section was for a different customer, noted on a small piece of paper (*see above*). “Edel put a tag on it with a man’s name,” Rosemeier explained. “My dad’s name was there.”

In fact, “the names up there



PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER

are a ‘Who’s Who of Marshall County’ for the Haverhill area at that time,” said Eugene Pippin. Tags bear familiar names like Neuroth, Krier, Kunkel, Pille, Kopel, Stalzer, Dankbar, and so on.

In giving tours of the Edel blacksmith shop, Pippin believes he has “come to have a feel for Matthew and for his contribution to the community of Haverhill both as a skilled smith and as a member of the community.”

“He was a success in business,” Pippin continued, noting that Edel’s shop “grew from a single room to the size it is now. He branched out to woodworking, farm wagons, buggies, sleds, and wheels.”

Another lifelong Haverhill resident, the late Ed Kopel, remembered the man. “Every kid had his own sled,” said Kopel. “We’d break runners and that stuff and he’d fix it.”

Edel, Kopel said, was “strictly shop.” “He didn’t go very much. He was always a doing something.” That included general



Matthew Edel, in the late 1930s. He was Haverhill’s blacksmith for 57 years.

SHSI (DES MOINES); COURTESY EVELYN BLUM

blacksmithing, said Kopel, like sharpening plowshares and disc blades in the spring of each year.

"He used to do everything by hand," Kopel remembered. "If he was doing something and needed a wrench, he'd just stop and make one. He had very few tools like we have today."

Eugene Pippin also admires Edel's ability to make just about anything. "He was efficient enough that if someone brought in a farm implement that didn't work, he'd look at it, evaluate how to make repairs, and spend a half a day making jigs and fixtures to enable him to do a repeat job. This, to me, is the epitome of resourcefulness, preparation, planning, and foresight."

Edel, a master of organization,

set up the shop for efficiency right down to placing the anvil and forge, the heart of it all, in the southeastern corner, where the sun's heat would not intensify the ambient temperature of the room. This, of course, was in the newer section of the shop, which also had a hard-packed dirt floor, to reduce the chance of fire.

"I remember it had the nicest, softest, finest dirt to sit there and play in," granddaughter Evelyn Blum said, "if Grandpa would let me—if he wasn't busy and there weren't pieces of metal flying. He didn't want me to get hurt."

The soft side of Matthew Edel emerged when Blum got to talking about her grandpa. "He liked to have fun," she remembered.

"The family played instruments,

they all did. Grandpa played the violin, I think. They enjoyed music and made their own good time."

In 1940, when Matthew Edel died, his son Louis kept the shop open for another dozen years only to support his auto garage or to help out a neighbor. Later, Louis sold his own belongings from the garage, but he left everything in the blacksmith shop just as it was—just as his father, Matthew, had left it.

It's all there still. Some say it's as if Matthew just stepped out for a moment. ❖

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SHSI (DES MOINES); COURTESY EVELYN BLUM



The Edel family, about 1903. Front: Maria holding Leo, Louis, Albert, Matthew. Back: Martin, John, Joseph, Tony, and Mary. The nine-room house was built in the early 1890s. The sons took care of a huge family garden, according to Edel's granddaughter Evelyn Blum, while his wife and daughter did the housework—"the washing, laundry, cleaning, canning, cooking, and sewing." When Edel's wife died in 1915, daughter Mary (or "Mayme") assumed all the housekeeping for her father and brothers.