

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Sharpening plowshares, repairing wagons, and shoeing horses kept blacksmiths busy. Left: a blacksmith shop in Dubuque, Iowa.



Blacksmithing & Quilting

Blacksmithing and quilting—two very different worlds, it would seem. Consider the elements of one—hammers and tongs, heavy and inert iron, sharpening and pounding. A dark, smoky, dusty domain for wagons and horses. Men's work.

Consider the other—needles and thread, soft and colorful cottons, smoothing and stitching. A corner of the house with good light, kept clean for the quilting frame. Women's work.

This issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* presents a vivid look at these two quite different worlds and their practitioners. What we eventually have come to recog-

nize, however, is their common ground.

Both blacksmiths and quilters are resourceful, often fashioning something useful out of scraps, be they metal or cloth, saved from other tasks.

Both work with materials that "give." Blacksmiths heat iron until it is bendable and malleable. Quilters add dimension with batting, gently stretch the bias, take a discreet tuck.

Both usually begin with the utilitarian but often cross over into the aesthetic. Both are creative. Blacksmiths invent tools and redesign standard objects like gates and hinges. Quilters create new

patterns, or transform traditional ones, to express personal taste and meaning.

Both engage in precise geometry. Quilters painstakingly align stars and hexagons, turn sharp corners in cloth, create ropes, plumes, and fields of diamonds out of tiny, even, endless stitches. Blacksmiths master iron and oak, turning circles and spokes into indestructible, load-hungry wagon wheels.

Both were once essential players. Blacksmiths kept our tools sharp, our wagons rolling, our horses from going lame. Quilters kept our bodies warm despite brutal Iowa winters, our spirits comforted amidst epidemic and injury, our babies tucked in and safe.

In essence, both blacksmithing and quilting once held the power of the everyday. Although both are

still practiced today as art forms, they resonate with the past.

This issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* explores and celebrates these two worlds, or spheres, that once were a part of daily life and livelihood in Iowa.

First, we take you to Matthew Edel's blacksmith shop in Haverhill. Edel was such an experienced, respected, and long-lived blacksmith that his customers even included other blacksmiths!

Next, we send you on a 1905 summer automobile trip from Des Moines to Spirit Lake—with frequent breakdowns, frequent swearing, and frequent repairs at a blacksmith shop.

Then we invite you into the home of Mildred Ross, a Burlington quilter who for 60 years has turned feed sacks and dress scraps into useful, meaningful quilts.

Finally we dazzle you with an astounding collection of quilts, coverlets, counterpanes, and comforters, in cottons, wools, and velvets.

A single issue wasn't nearly big enough for all these wonderful stories and pictures. So we combined the spring and summer issues into one double issue—and still it's filled to the brim!

Oh, and there's something else this issue celebrates—our 80th year as Iowa's history magazine. (Our first 76 years, as many of you will remember, were under the intriguing title *The Palimpsest*.)

Let's see, silver is for 25 years, gold for 50, diamond for 75. For 80 years, given this special issue on blacksmithing and quilting, how about . . . iron and cotton?

Please, no gifts! Instead, we present this issue to *you*, our loyal readers.
—The Editor



Women often worked together to quilt the quilt tops they had made individually. Right: Jesse White Anderson (standing, in plaid dress) hosts a quilting bee in January 1951 at her home near North Liberty, Iowa.



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