

Matthew Edel and his Blacksmith Shop

Artisan and Inventor in Haverhill, Iowa

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For half a century, Edel was the blacksmith for Haverhill (a small German-Catholic town in Marshall County) and the surrounding farms. He sharpened sickles and shovels, mended hinges and chains, repaired wagons and plowshares, shod horses and oxen. He worked in both wood and metal, over hot forges and around skittish horses. A skilled artisan, Edel was also an inventor, creating and marketing at least a half-dozen tools.

Artisans like Matthew Edel were not unique in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of America relied on blacksmiths like Edel to manufacture and repair items of everyday use. Nearly every town had at least one blacksmith. In 1895, Iowa had more blacksmiths than it had doctors or clergy, barbers or butchers. In Marshall County alone, there were 89 blacksmiths. Perhaps what was special about Matthew Edel, however, was his ability to adapt to changing times, thereby keeping his business viable into the mid-20th century.

Born in 1856 in Stuttgart, Germany, Matthew Edel immigrated to the United States with his family when he was a teenager.

Edel and his family lived in central Illinois for about a decade before moving to the Iowa City area. There Edel met Maria Hofman. They married in 1883.

That February, when Edel was 26, he traveled to the newly platted town of Haverhill (about five miles southwest of Marshalltown) and purchased three lots. One lot already had a 30'x50' wood frame building on it. This would be the blacksmith shop and living quarters.

In April 1883, Matthew and Maria moved to Haverhill. Over the next several years, they began to raise a family (eventually

Matthew and Maria Edel's wedding portrait, taken in Iowa City in 1883.

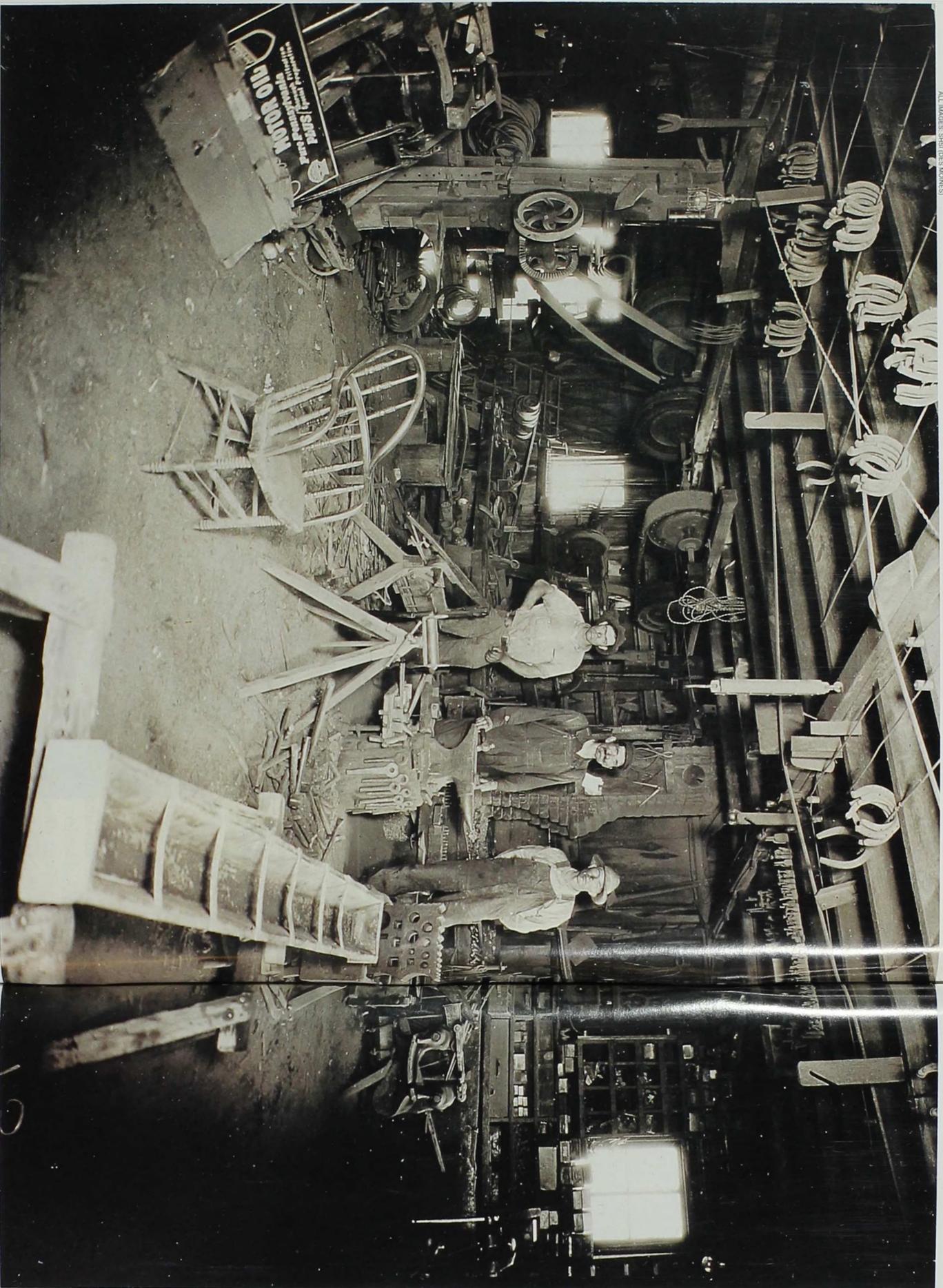


SHSI (DES MOINES); COURTESY EVELYN BLUM



text by
Michael W. Vogt

photos by
Chuck Greiner



Matthew Edelman is flanked by his son Louis and a local farmer, John Stalzer (on right), in this early 1930s photo of Edelman's blacksmith shop in Haverhill, Iowa. In the front half of the shop, Edelman did general forging and horseshoeing. General wood-working, wagon work, and manufacturing of tools were done in the rear half. A space under the stairway was used for plow grinding, and the half-story attic was used for storing wagon parts and other inventory. Of Edelman's eight children, Louis was most involved in his father's shop.

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SHS (OES MONIES) COURTESY EVELYN BLUM

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Edel's blacksmith shop would soon be among a handful of new businesses in the thriving village, including a lumber yard, implement dealer, railroad depot, grain elevator, saloon, and general store.

As Edel set up his workspace—including a leather bellows and a coal-fired forge for iron work—he probably had no idea that his shop would outlast him. After he died in 1940, the blacksmith shop was seldom used and essentially left unchanged until the 1980s, when the Edel family undertook steps to protect and preserve it. In

Little has changed in Matthew Edel's blacksmith shop in the half-century since he died. Its layout and arrangement are essentially the same (compare photo at right to previous page). In front of the forge, rows of letter and number punches are ready for stamping. Left of the forge, a built-in drawer with a secret latch stored tobacco and other comforts. Various sized bolt headers and anvil tools are clustered around the anvil stump. The large hoop (far right) is an iron tire for a wagon wheel, set in a device called a tire shrinker. Below: Matthew and Maria Edel (holding Joseph) pose outside their small structure that eventually doubled in size.



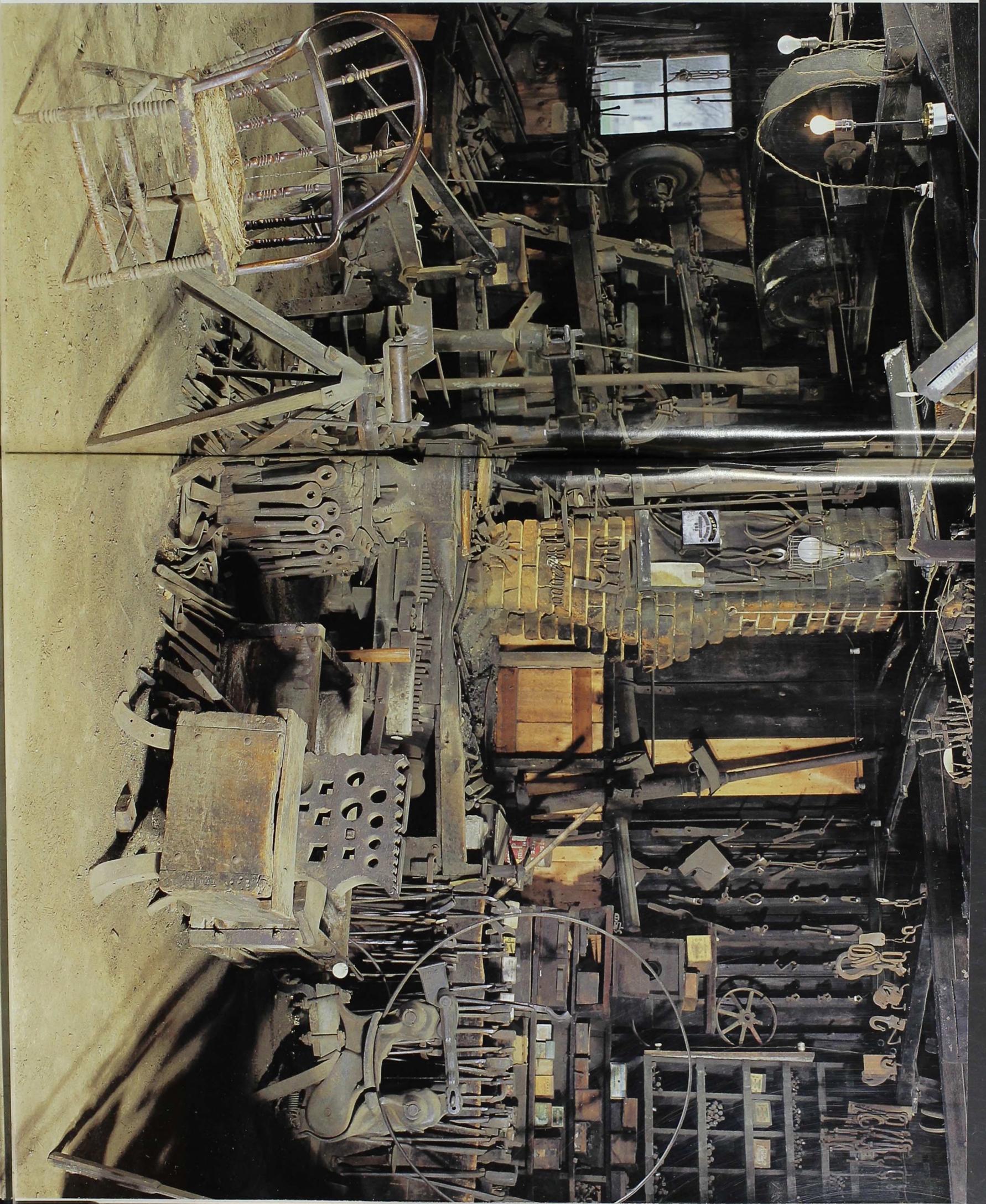


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Edel's rack for horseshoes still stores the variety of shoes a blacksmith or farrier would have on hand. Each shoe was custom made to fit each hoof of each draft animal and to serve different uses and situations—from keg shoes for traction of draft horses (bottom left), to bar shoes to protect a split hoof or correct an orthopedic defect (center column, second from bottom), to smaller shoes for ponies (right column, two down) and mules (right column, four down). To the far left of the shoes, Edel hung a supply of handmade clevises with handmade bolts, for use on doubletrees and singletrees.

1983 it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1986 the family, led by Edel's granddaughter Laura Murphy, donated it to the State of Iowa. The State Historical Society of Iowa preserves it as one of the state's historic sites.

To walk through Edel's shop today is to enter the atmosphere of a blacksmith shop a century ago—when the nation was largely powered and transported by horses, not automobiles; when everyday items were routinely repaired, not replaced; and when blacksmithing was an essential community service, not a vanishing skill. In this space, our imaginations quickly conjure up the clang of hammer against horseshoe, the zing of saw into oak, and the smell of white-hot iron over fire.

Like all blacksmiths, Matthew Edel spent a significant amount of his time working as a farrier—making, repairing, and mounting horseshoes. The horse was the primary source of transportation and agricultural power throughout the country. Horses were essential to America, and so farriers were essential to horses. Horseshoes protected a horse's hooves from hard roadways, from slipping on ice and snow, and from rotting in wet weather, which would have caused the horse to go lame.

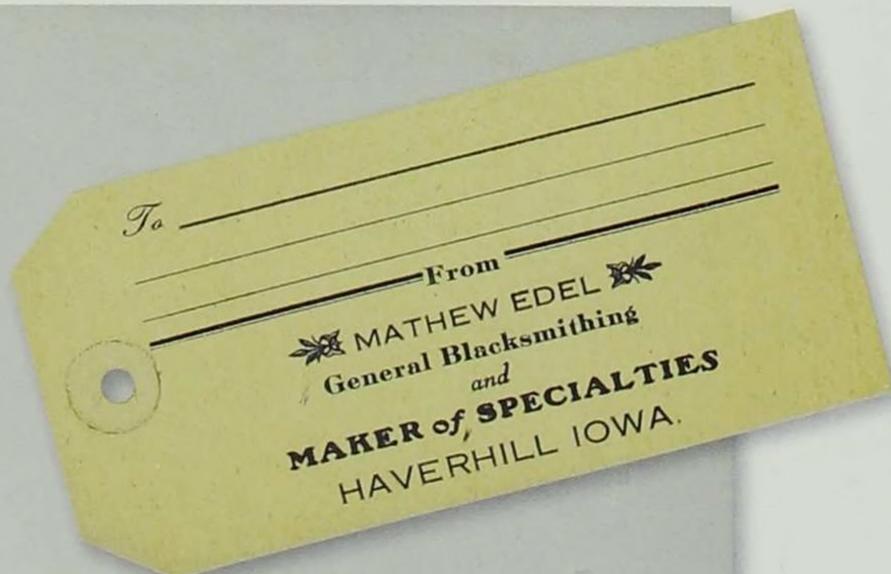
As Edel's business grew (he sometimes shod as many as 40 horses in one day), he built an addition to the south with a special area for his farrier work. In another part of the shop, he repaired carriages and wagons.

Farmers also relied on blacksmiths like Edel to manufacture, repair, and sharpen agricultural machinery, implements, and tools. Edel certainly was not a novice to agricultural equipment design

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MATTHEW EDEL
Blacksmithing and Repairing
Haverhill, Iowa.





A portion of the shop was used for wagon repair and general woodworking, with a wide variety of hand tools nearby—braces and bits, hand saws and draw knives, planes and spoke shaves, chisels and gouges. The band saw, built into the rafters and floor, was fashioned from two custom-made wooden wheels. It could be treadled for small jobs, or line-shaft driven.



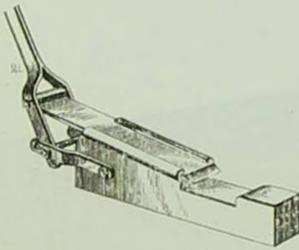
and repair. In Illinois, he had designed and patented a wire grain binder. In Haverhill, he continued to invent tools, often fashioned from scrap materials around the shop. In 1895, for instance, he patented the "Perfection Dehorning Clipper" for dehorning cattle. In 1899 he invented a fence stretcher, and in 1901 he produced and marketed through mail order his "Perfection Wedge Cutter" for "wagon and carriage makers and repairers."

His advertising flyer for the wedge cutter is filled with glowing testimonials. A Massachusetts customer wrote: "Any blacksmith or wheelwright that does not purchase one of your wedge cutters... must be ready to retire from business, for a man cannot afford to do the work by hand when he can get a machine to do it for such a small price." A Washington, D.C., patent lawyer praised its "many superior features of novelty as well as simplicity and practicability," calling it "by far the best wedge cutter on the market." In nearby Marshalltown, Lennox Machine Company considered it the "neatest little machine in our factory."

He also invented and marketed "Edel's Nut Pliers," which did the work "of a small monkey wrench and five socket wrenches." With no advertising, Edel quickly sold 280 pairs of the nut pliers to farmers direct from his shop. In 1924, he patented a "Garden

Edel's wedge cutter (left) speeded up the process of cutting wedges, needed in fitting wagon spokes snugly into wagon wheels. As Edel's advertising flier claimed, with Perfection Wedge Cutters, "pocket knife wedges are a thing of the past." The cutter was so easy to operate, the flyer said, that "a boy 13 years old made 650 wedges in one hour."

Edel's Perfection Wedge Cutter
 PATENTED OCT. 8, 1901
 For Wagon and Carriage Makers
 and Repairers
 M. EDEL, PATENTEE AND MAKER
 HAVERHILL, IOWA



**EDEL'S
 PERFECTION
 WEDGE CUTTER**

PATENTED OCT. 8, 1901.

For Wagon and Carriage
 Makers and Repairers

**Don't Waste Your Time Making Wedges
 With a Jack Knife.**

Edel's Patent Wedge Cutter in the hands of a person with no experience will make from 500 to 1,000 perfect wedges per hour, with no other power than the hand, and so easy to operate that a boy 13 years old made 650 per hour.

The machine is so simple, durable and economical, that pocket knife making is a thing of the past.

One-half the ready made wedges you buy are not fit to use and you have leisure time from your work when a supply can be made of oak or hickory blocks in your own shop.

The machine makes uniform wedges from 3 inches long by 1 3-4 inches wide to other smaller required size.

Directions for Operating.

Insert the forked lever to the knife; fasten machine to work bench through the hole in bed of machine; take straight grained oak or hickory blocks to the desired length of wedges, splitting these blocks to the desired widths; stand so the edge of the knife is towards you and with your left hand on the back, then with the other hand insert wood block; bring

M. Edel
 General Blacksmithing
 Maker of Specialties
 Haverhill - - Iowa.

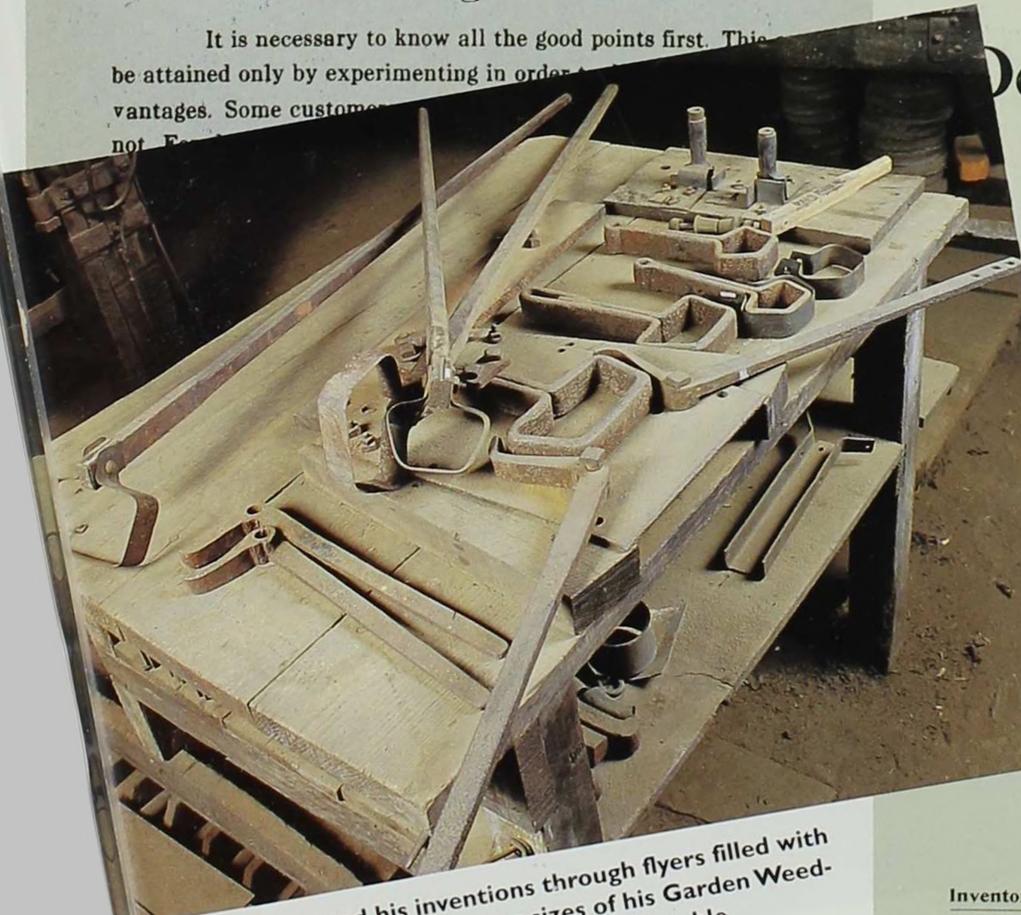
Directions For Making and Selling

M. Edel's Nut Pliers

A piece of three fourths inch mild steel, four inches long drawn out according to pattern will make one handle and bit complete. After making a quantity of these, select the two best fitting handles in shape and size, ream out the seat and holes, then fasten them together with a rivet made of seven-sixteenths inch mild steel rod.

For Selling The Tool

It is necessary to know all the good points first. This can be attained only by experimenting in order to know the advantages. Some customers will not buy a tool unless they know its value.

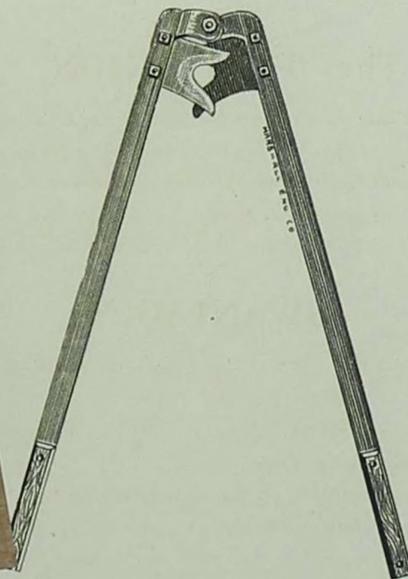


Edel marketed his inventions through flyers filled with testimonials. Above: various sizes of his Garden Weeding and Cultivating Hoes rest on a work table.

**M. EDEL'S
 "PERFECTION"**

Dehorning Clipper.

(PATENT APPLIED FOR.)



Clipper one-half open

Ready to cut the horn on all sides

MANUFACTURED BY

M. EDEL,

Inventor and Manufacturer.

HAVERHILL, IOWA.

HAROLD B. WELLS, PRINTER, HAVERHILL, IOWA.

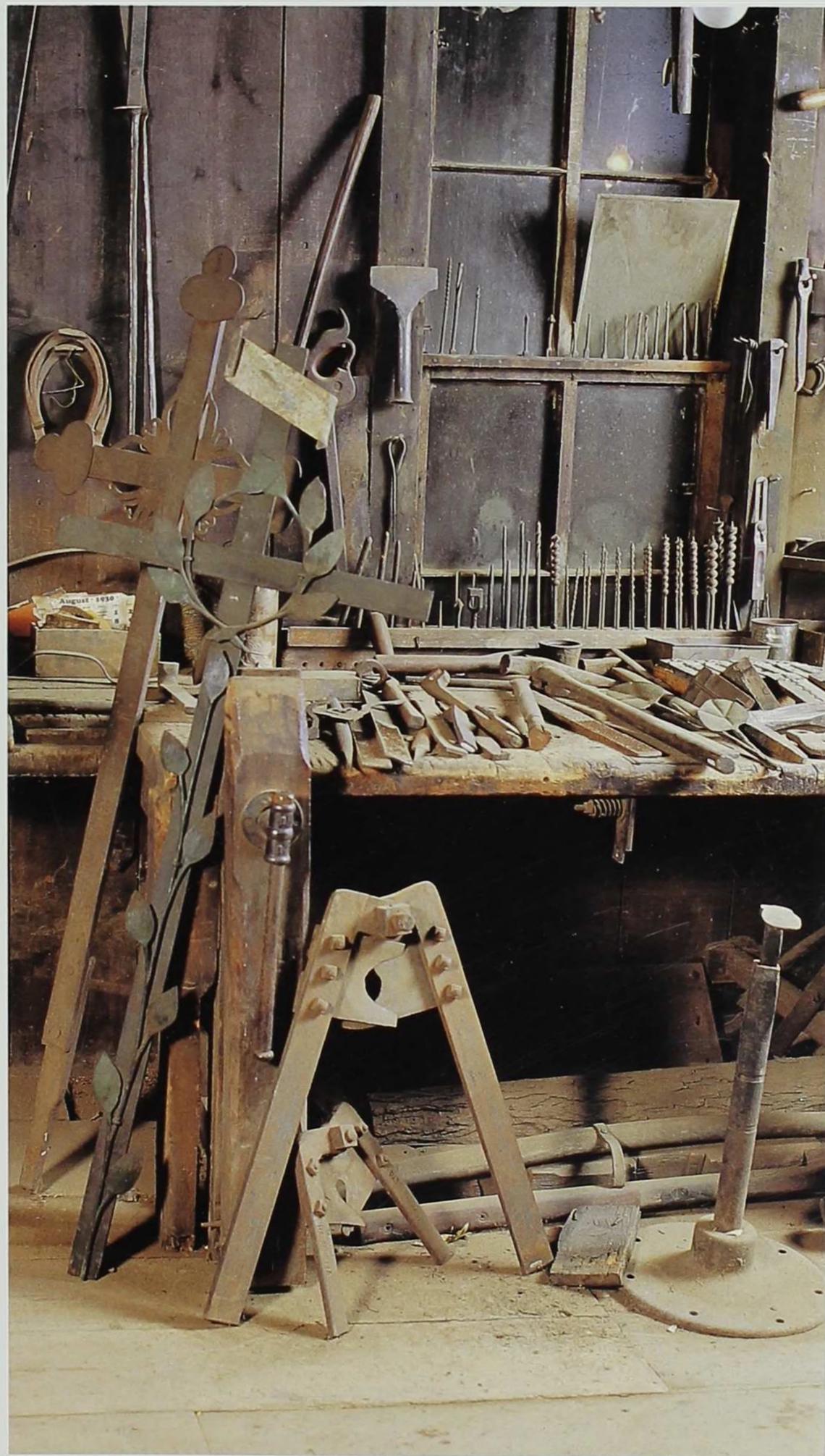


Weeding and Cultivating Hoe," available in three sizes.

Edel also designed, manufactured, and sold grave marker crosses. This became a major portion of his business, especially in later years. The style of his crosses evolved over the years—from a very plain staff in the early 1900s, to welded leaves, climbing vines, and ornamental wreaths and corners in later years.

Although Edel's crosses appear to be unique in Iowa, similar crosses appear in the southern part of Germany, Edel's native land. Yet it is uncertain whether he learned blacksmithing in Germany; he emigrated when he was 13, probably still too young to have completed a blacksmithing apprenticeship.

Earlier in the 19th century, blacksmiths often made items that were ornamental as well as utilitarian—trivets and fireplace tools, brackets and locks, gates and hasps. But by Edel's era, blacksmiths were more likely repairing factory-made items than making useful and beautiful objects themselves. Edel's cemetery crosses, however, show that he used his



Two metal cemetery crosses lean against a vise. On one, leaves twine up the shaft and circle into a wreath. (Note the two pairs of long-handled cattle dehorning tools in the foreground, and in the background, other tools of Edel's craft.)

Left: From these eight woodcuts, Edel printed advertising flyers to show the variety of cemetery cross designs available. Metal leaves on a stalk lie nearby. Below: one of Edel's crosses at the Haverhill Cemetery.



SHS (DES MOINES); COURTESY EVELYN BLUM

artistic talents well into the 20th century.

Edel's long-term success as an inventor, businessman, and blacksmith lay in his ability to change with the times and use new technologies. His shop is a mosaic of old methods and techniques meshed with the new. As new sources of power became available, Edel harnessed them for his own use.

Around 1912, he redesigned the shop to accommodate a six-horsepower Sandow single-piston oil lines gasoline engine manufactured in Waterloo. A leather belt connected the engine's belt pulley to a line shaft suspended from the ceiling on the shop's east side. Several pulleys mounted on the shaft transferred the turning power to a handmade band saw, table saw, and a swing cut-off saw. The engine also powered a grinder, trip hammer, and drillpress.

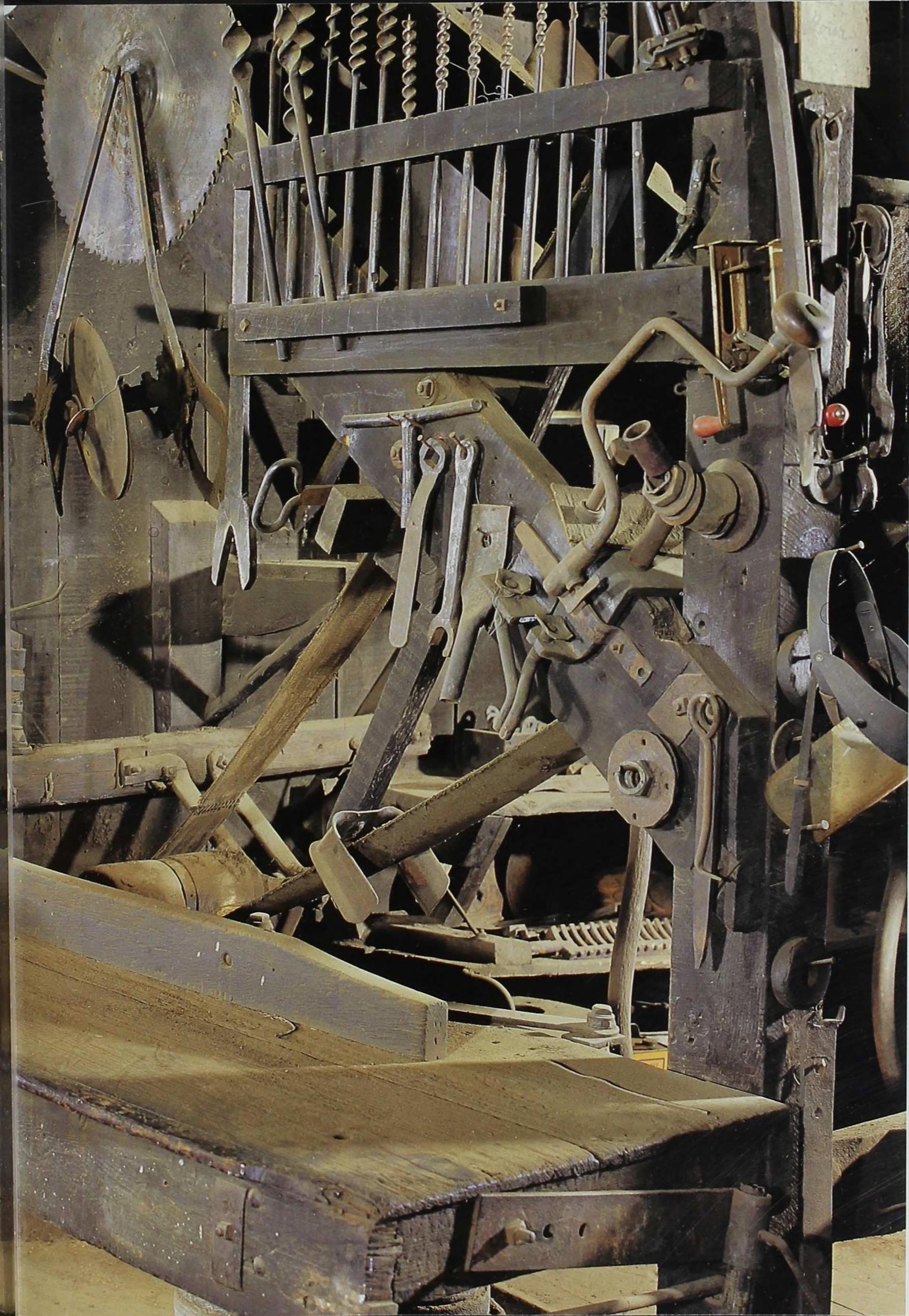
When electricity arrived in Haverhill in 1912, Edel harnessed its power as well, installing incandescent lights and replacing a hand-cranked, cast-iron blower for the forge with a forced-air electric blower.

With the arrival of gasoline engines and electricity, sharpening, grinding, boring, and drilling—as well as manufacturing wooden wagon parts and other jobs previously performed by hand—were now completed in less time and with less sheer muscle power.

In 1915, Edel and his seventh son, Louis, built an automobile

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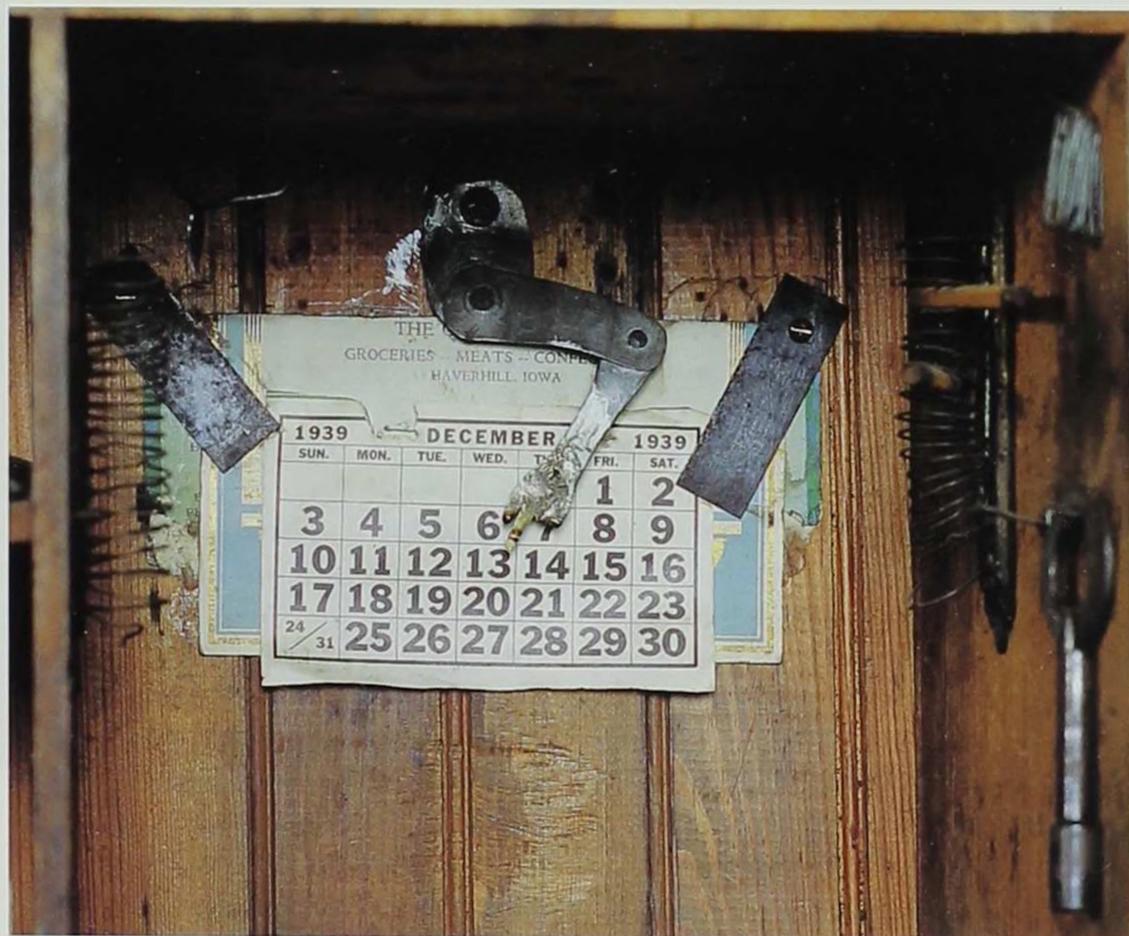
Edel was an orderly man as well as an inventive one. Behind his farrier workspace, his folding desk is divided into pigeonholes labeled with the letters of the alphabet. A December 1939 calendar still hangs in the recesses of the desk. A metal arm with a pointed finger can be adjusted at the elbow to point to a specific date (see detail on opposite page).

repair garage onto the west side of the blacksmith shop, perhaps motivated by the building of the Lincoln Highway about eight miles to the north. The garage was operated by Louis, who at age 17 went to Des Moines for training in automotive repair. Edel's second son, Anton (or "Tony"), also worked in the garage for a short time.

Yet even as his shop began serving automobile owners, Matthew Edel continued to shoe horses and do general blacksmithing. But as the 20th century advanced, the traditional role of the blacksmith waned. On farms, the power of draft horses gradually shifted to gasoline-powered tractors, which required the skilled hands of a mechanic, rather than a blacksmith, to keep their many cylinders operating smoothly. Between 1880 and 1940 in Marshall County, the number of draft horses on farms plummeted from almost 12,000 to 7,700. By mid-century, most American blacksmith shops had evolved into acetylene or carbon arc welding shops. In nearby Marshalltown, for example, the 1903 city directory listed eight different blacksmith shops. By 1939 only two were listed, and in actuality both were machine shops:

When Matthew Edel died in 1940, his son Louis left the blacksmith shop largely untouched. Louis's own auto garage business, which eventually included gasoline and tire sales, flourished until 1952, when he moved to Waterloo. In 1964, Louis returned to Haverhill and reopened the garage.

Then, after Louis's death in 1978, the blacksmith shop sat undisturbed and the grounds became overgrown. The Edel family's efforts to preserve the blacksmith shop, the house, and the summer kitchen eventually



led to its current status as a well-maintained historic site, open to the public.

For Iowa's older farmers the familiar ring of the blacksmith's anvil still lives in their memories. But for younger Iowans, blacksmithing has become the substance of legend and nostalgia, a skill occasionally demonstrated at craft fairs and at historical reenactments.

In 1940, the year of Matthew Edel's death, the U.S. Department of Agriculture published its annual yearbook. It described the role of gasoline-powered machinery, electricity, tractors, and other technologies in rural life. Certainly

the title of the yearbook—*Farmers in a Changing World*—would not have come as a surprise to Matthew Edel, whose own career spanned both the glory days and the twilight of blacksmithing in America. During 57 years as a rural blacksmith, he had witnessed the changes, one hammer-strike at a time. ❖

The author, Michael W. Vogt, is a curator and museum technician at the Iowa Gold Star Museum at Camp Dodge in Johnston, and was formerly the museum director of the Historical Society of Marshall County.

Photographer Chuck Greiner lives in Nevada, Iowa. His photographs have appeared frequently in this magazine.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Major sources used include city and county histories and city directories for Haverhill, Marshalltown, and Marshall County; historical records and account books from Edel's business; the teachers' guide for the Edel Blacksmith Shop (State Historical Society of Iowa, 1996); the site's National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, prepared in 1982 by Ralph Christian; and interviews with Eugene Pippin, the resident blacksmith at Edel Blacksmith Shop, and Steven Ohrn, historic sites manager for the State Historical Society of Iowa.