

Old Blacksmith Shops

One of the enduring memories of my boyhood in Bedford half a century ago is that of the old blacksmith shops. Bedford had six shops during the time I lived there. The *Bedford City Directory* of 1907 listed ten blacksmiths: Cy Wolverton, N. S. Sawyer, John Hindman, Frank Hindman, Salem Pratt, D. T. Bock, A. C. Bock, L. T. Tracy, Charley Tracy, and G. J. Hughes.

Cy Wolverton, whose shop was located at the present site of the Masonic Temple, retired shortly after the turn of the century, but the others were going full blast when I left Bedford in the fall of 1909 to enter the State University of Iowa in Iowa City.

In addition to its usefulness to the farmers of the area and to every horse owner in town, each shop was a center of attraction to the boys of the community. There, in our bare feet in the summertime, and at a safe distance from the forge, we would watch the sparks fly in all directions as the blacksmith shaped a white-hot shoe to fit the hoof of a horse waiting in the corner to be shod. The song of the anvil, the hiss of steam as the blacksmith dipped the shoe into the slag tub for tempering, and the pungent, scorched odor as he fitted

the still hot shoe to the horse's hoof are sights, sounds, and smells never to be forgotten.

The shops were alike, yet different. Some had hard-packed dirt floors, some had all-over plank floors, and some had dirt floors around the forge and plank flooring in the corner or end of the shop where horses were shod. Sometimes a plank floor near a forge would smolder and catch fire from flying sparks.

Each shop had a brick forge with chimney (some had two), a large overhead bellows, a heavy anvil (or two) mounted on a log block, a slag tub or trough, a rack for horseshoes of different sizes, another rack for tire and strap iron, a coal bin, shovel, poker, an iron cutter, a bolt cutter, anvil and sledge hammers, iron tongs of various shapes and sizes including wire tongs, log chain tongs, plow point tongs, iron pinchers, and punches. (Later the overhead bellows was replaced by a hand-turned fan in a round metal casing on a metal stand.)

In the horseshoeing area, the equipment included a shoeing iron, a hoof stool, frog and hoof trimmers, shoeing hammers, shoe-pulling pinchers, iron rasps, a box with handle for horseshoe nails, pliers, a sweat shaving stick, a twitch, and a horse-tail switch to keep off flies.

In the section for tire setting and wheel repairs would be found a tire bender, a tire shrinker, and wood-working tools including planes, draw

knives, squares, mallets, augers, drills, saws, wood files, brace and bits, a wagon jig, and a wood faller wagon wheel, wagon and buggy wheel hubs and spokes, and a large workbench with iron vise.

A special type of fine coal, free from impurities, was used in the forge. Fanned by air from the bellows, it burned with a blue flame making a bed of white-hot coals. During my boyhood in Bedford, forge coal could be purchased from \$4 to \$5 a ton. In 1958 it cost \$40 per ton in Des Moines and, plus freight and taxes, \$53 a ton, according to L. O. Wilson, a veteran blacksmith at Russell, Iowa.

In those days, too, a blacksmith would reset four horseshoes for 80 cents or, if he furnished new shoes, \$1.60 for four. Today, a traveling blacksmith gets \$4 for resetting four shoes or \$6 for putting on four new ones plus extra charges for toe weights, leather base pads, and other accessories. It may cost a riding club member \$8 or \$10 to get his mount reshod. Likewise the cost of sharpening plowshares has increased from 35 cents, 40 cents, and 50 cents during my boyhood to \$1.75, \$2, and \$2.50 today.

On Fourth of July mornings during my boyhood in Bedford, the local blacksmiths were named as a committee to greet the dawn with ear-splitting anvil salutes. Sometimes they made a two-inch ring out of half-inch iron and placed it on top of an anvil. It was filled with old-fashioned gun-

powder, and a thin line of powder was dribbled out to the end of the anvil for a fuse. Another anvil was placed upside down on top of the ring. A committee member touched off the powder with a six-foot iron rod heated white hot at the end. Everyone ducked behind doors or around corners to avoid the flying ring as the compressed powder exploded with a roar. Sometimes a hole in the lower anvil was filled with powder, a newspaper was used as a fuse, a second anvil was placed on top, and the paper fuse was ignited in the same way with the same resulting cannon-like roar.

A blacksmith's working garb usually consisted of a blue work shirt open at the throat, black or blue denim trousers, heavy work shoes, a leather apron, and a shiny-visored black cap. In summer, he frequently worked in a short-sleeved undershirt which soon became soaked with sweat.

All of the blacksmiths in Bedford during my boyhood were noted for their skill and dexterity in shoeing horses, in repairing farm machinery, in wagon and carriage tire setting and wheel rebuilding, in sharpening plowshares, and in miscellaneous iron work for town and country patrons. Nate Sawyer had made most of his own tools and stamped the name "Sawyer" on them. Charley Tracy learned the trade from his father, L. T. Tracy, a skilled workman. Tom Bock had worked in his younger days at the John Deere Plow Works in Moline, Illinois; and his brother, A. C.

Bock, was a gunsmith and wheelwright. George Hughes, John Hindman, Frank Hindman, and Salem Pratt were experts at general blacksmithing, and wagon and carriage repair work. Cy Wolverton was a skilled workman long remembered. Each was the type of character about whom Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote:

*The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.*

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