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A TRADITION
OF CREATING

The Smithy

SHAPING A NEW FUTURE IN METAL

Article by Meghan Smith / Photography by Josianne Masseur

Sparks dance, flying from the edges of the metal while smoke curls and fills the air. A hammer clangs, ringing out across the yard and a high-pitched whirring permeates the background. While these sights and sounds may seem reminiscent of a scene with knights and jousting from a movie or television series, in this case, the scene is a blacksmith's shop in Glen Orchard.

Blacksmithing has a long history, featuring in mythology and records across many cultures and time periods. While there are several professions that work with metals,

such as farriers, who specialize in equine hoof care, or whitesmiths, who specialize in precious metals like gold or silver, blacksmiths are known for having the general knowledge of how to make or repair a wide array of items from armour to hooks and nails.

In a smithy or a forge, blacksmiths work by heating pieces of metal, usually steel or wrought iron, until the metal becomes soft enough to shape. Achieving the proper temperature for the iron is indicated by colour. As iron heats, it glows first red, then to orange, to yellow and finally, to white

when at its hottest.

Blacksmithing can be classified into four general stages: forging, welding, heat-treating and finishing. The heat of the metal required may be different, depending on each stage. In forging or welding, unlike machining, no materials are removed from the item. Even if a hole is being punched into the metal, the metal is redistributed and hammered into the shape, rather than removed. The end result of the blacksmithing process is a strong, durable item with function and form.

"There isn't much we make that doesn't have some function to it," says Ryan Church, welder-fitter and co-manager of The Smithy Ltd.

For over 75 years, the Church family has owned and operated The Smithy, forging handmade wrought iron products. Ryan Church is the third generation of the Church family to operate the business, currently co-managing with longtime employee Christopher "Fur" Hodgkinson, although many Church relatives have been involved over the years.

Ted Church opened The Smithy in 1945, having relocated to Muskoka from Hamilton. After working in the steel mills, Ted chose to practice his trade as the village blacksmith. As Muskoka continued to develop as a tourist destination and a summer escape, more decorative wrought-iron work was added to the repertoire.

"I really don't know what it was like for my grandfather back then," shares Church. "I believe he did work on the snow ploughs. I know he used to help make some items for the roads for when they redid the highway. I do remember hearing him talk about that."

At one point, Ted and all three of his sons worked at the shop, including Ryan's father, Tom.

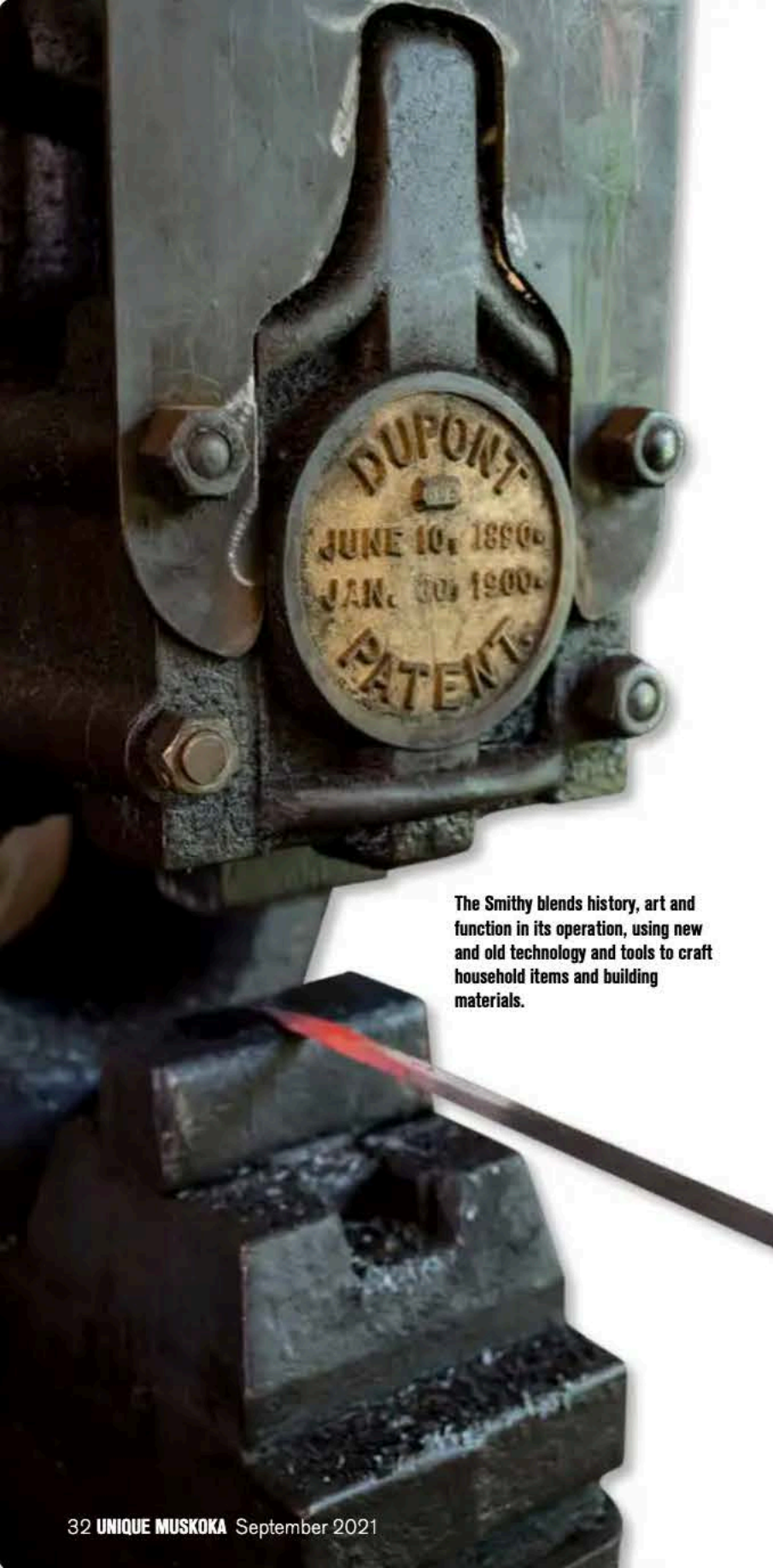
Tom moved to Toronto as a young man, working in welding and blacksmithing but not yet with his father at the family business.

"He worked on CN Rail and things like that," says Church. "He worked at a few different places for a few years and then he came back to Muskoka."

As Tom Church began to take over the operation of The Smithy from his father in the late 1970s, his vision included the scaled production of goods. While not a mass



Top: The colour of iron is important in a blacksmith's shaping process. A bright yellow-orange is the best for forging and welding. Above: When the shop originally opened, The Smithy used a coal forge to heat metals, sometimes taking all day to reach the appropriate temperature. Now, it's gas-fired.



The Smithy blends history, art and function in its operation, using new and old technology and tools to craft household items and building materials.

production facility, the focus became on having in-demand handmade items in stock and available to sell, in addition to any custom commissioned work.

In the 1990s, Ryan's sister, Catherine Foreman, known as Cathy, joined their father at The Smithy, managing administration, assisting customers and, overall, putting her heart into the family business. She continued to run the operation as Ryan joined the business around 2000, after attending college and deciding to return home. In 2001, Tom Church passed away, leaving Cathy to continue running the business, with Ryan's support.

"There was a pretty big family draw for me," explains Church in his decision to join the family business. "My father never pushed me to do it. He definitely said, 'do whatever you want.'"

"Once you get into it, it is unique and it's not even just the work," says Church. "The people that you meet are so cool."

Hodgkinson was hired in 2005. He had been working for eight years in the food and beverage industry and deciding it was not a career he wanted forever. Hodgkinson joined the crew at The Smithy, knowing only what he had learned in his high school trades classes but eager to learn more. Now, 16 years later, Hodgkinson is co-managing the business with Church.

"I call myself the adopted one because this job turned out really well," laughs Hodgkinson. "When I started, I thought, 'these people are amazing.' Ryan turned into my best friend. Cathy was like a sister to me. Gary is sort of a father figure. As the years went on, we progressed together and learned off of each other."

Gary Church, Ryan's cousin and a master blacksmith, has worked at The Smithy since he was a young teenager of about 13. Now 70 years old, Gary has spent over 55 years working in the family-owned and operated business. His son, Jake, also spent a number of years working at the business before moving on.

"The family dynamic, it's interesting because Cathy and Ryan worked so well together," shares Hodgkinson. "I never met their dad but at one point all of them were working together."

Marking 75 years in operation, 2020 was a landmark year for the family business. However, it was a difficult year for the Church family. Cathy was diagnosed with cancer and battled the disease, before passing away in early January 2021.

"It's been such a change since Cathy passed," says Church. "We're navigating a lot and it's been an absolute learning experience. We're shifting around and doing different jobs and different responsibilities."

"Since she's been gone, I can tell you I have a new appreciation for what she was doing on a daily basis," explains Hodgkinson.

Clients often arrive with photos in hand or their own ideas of what they'd like. For Church and Hodgkinson, they have to manage expectations and often present a compromise that meets their client's expectations and meets building code. Hodgkinson and Church both maintain certifications as welder-fitters, or welder fabricators, meaning their work meets all Ontario building code requirements.

"The certification we need for the structural stuff," says Church. "For the more artistic or decorative pieces, you don't necessarily need to be certified."

"With building code now, there seems to be a lot less people doing interior railings," comments Hodgkinson. "Not only do you have to make sure you build the design right but you have to make sure you know the building code for spacings and all that stuff."

While interior railings have definitive restrictions, having to conform to Ontario



Christopher "Fur" Hodgkinson has worked at The Smithy for over 16 years and still considers himself the "rookie."

building code, landscape railings can follow the natural landscape. For many clients, they require a railing for safety and function, but they want it to fit with the scenic beauty of their Muskoka property.

"There's a certain connection to an organic feel, along with a structural feel, along with

an artistic feel," explains Church. "I like it because you get to form the railing and use the trees. You've got to follow the rock. I just feel my way through it, melding all of the different elements together."

Where wood might be big and bulky, welded structures, whether railings, lighting



Ryan Church, centre, grandson of the original owner Ted Church, is pleased to continue the family business, currently co-managing the operation with Chris Hodgkinson, right. Dan McPhedran is their newest team member and is assisting in building their online presence.



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Viewing blacksmiths at work gives just a hint of the time and effort that goes into every piece of work they craft. The shop at The Smithy is open for clients and visitors.

or other fixtures, are smaller, stronger and more durable, especially outdoors. Handmade items, custom or not, involve significant investment of time for measuring, planning and crafting, unlike mass-produced metal products.

"These days people are used to instant gratification," says Hodgkinson. "They want to order an item and they want to get it now. But when you order custom, now you have to wait for us to make it. That's where it's tricky."

People are often so removed from the craftsmanship involved in production, small

or large scale, that a lack of understanding exists around the process. While an automated system can produce volumes of the same item, it cannot necessarily provide custom details or ensure longevity.

"You have to see how much work goes into it," explains Church. "It's very difficult to justify and understand why does that cost so much but there's a reason behind it. We have to make each individual one."

With a new online presence on Instagram, thanks to their youngest employee Dan Mcphedran, and a new website in the works, Church and Hodgkinson hope to showcase



Custom goods crafted at The Smithy are often the client's ideas melded with the function and requirements of building code.

the smithing process along with their finished products. They'll be sharing online the steps the team must go through to produce their work and can provide the clientele with a greater understanding of the craft and the techniques.

"Items are made right here, with the equipment here," shares Hodgkinson. "When we do railings, and fireplace doors, and lights, everybody likes little tweaks here and there, so it's never doing the exact same thing over again."

"The basic welding principles really are the same since the business opened," says Church. "I don't want to say it hasn't changed. Welding is just heated metal fused together but it certainly has improved and evolved."


The concept may not have changed significantly since The Smithy opened over 75 years ago but new technology and new techniques for achieving the end results more efficiently have been developed. A coal forge was the main source of heat in the original shop building, sometimes taking the whole day to heat to the required temperatures. Utilizing gas or propane, rather than coal, to fuel the machinery makes heating to temperature much quicker. The addition of new tools, such as plasma cutters, is balanced by maintaining the use of tried and true tools, such as the pedal hammer.

"Some of the equipment we use is still from back when it first opened," says Hodgkinson. "The pedal hammer still works great, for both function and art. Our work is a mixture of both."

Honouring the history of the business and the family is important to Church and Hodgkinson. While several articles and honourable mentions are posted in the shop, they're looking forward to honouring Cathy's impact and dedication as they continue to operate.

"Cathy lived for this place," explains Church. "She loved it and she did her best to make it as successful as possible. We'd like to pay tribute as much as we can to Cathy."

"We hope, as things settle, we'll be able to keep the business going for many more generations," comments Hodgkinson.

The Smithy has and will continue to bend and mould with the times and the people who work there. 

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