

The Unused Smithy

By Brent Bates

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STUTTGART – The fire burned hot as the old blacksmith, G.E. Woodard, pulled a glowing piece of rod from the fire and placed it on an anvil. Sounds of metal striking metal resounded throughout the town, as the smith—a hulk of a man with broad shoulders and huge, muscled hands—pounded the rod, shaping it into a tool.

But the blaze no longer burns in the blacksmith shop's forge. The hammer lies where it was dropped years ago. Snow, blown through holes in the rotten wooden wall, is piled in drifts beneath a workbench cluttered with abandoned tools.

The blacksmith, once a pillar of this community, has become a legend. But his craft has not died. It is kept alive in the stories and memories of Norman Kellerman.

Growing up in Stuttgart, Kellerman, now 52, was intrigued with the blacksmith and his trade, and spent all his spare time watching and learning from “the old gentleman,” as Woodard was known. So when he died in the '60s, Kellerman bought the smithy and its equipment.

The old shop, a weathered red barn, is stocked with original blacksmithing equipment dating to the late 1800s. Business is scarce these days and Kellerman rarely practices the nearly lost craft.

Stuttgart is a village tucked along the banks of Deer Creek just west of Phillipsburg. It is a small community where the German heritage of the people living in the town shows up in their speech. When asked about the population of the quiet village, residents stop to count the number of neighbors.

“It won't take long to count,” said Lois Kellerman, Norman's wife, as she mentally figured the number of residents. “About 50--we lose a few every year.”

Kellerman's father ran a filling station in town, right across the road from the blacksmith shop. Every time the young boy got a chance, Kellerman said he would skip across the street to the smithy.

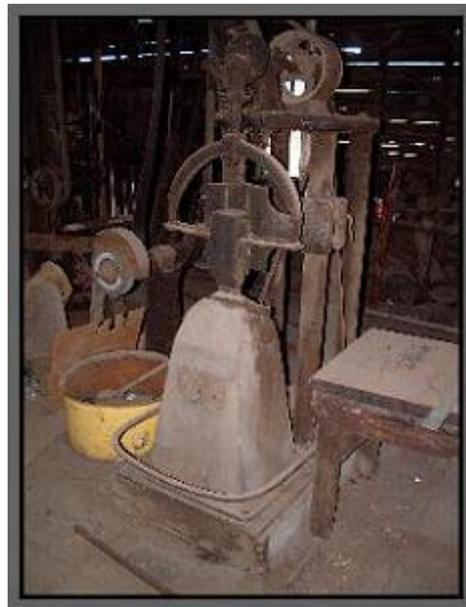
“I would be over here all the time,” Kellerman said as he pulled open the double-wide doors on the building. “It was fascinating how he could take iron and work with it. He could do anything with iron.”

Woodard learned his trade in the late 1800s and opened his shop—a red barn with “G.E. Woodard & Son Blacksmith” painted in big yellow letters across the front.

During the early years, Woodard shod horses, banded wagon wheels and crafted everything from the heaviest axle to the smallest rivet. In summer, area farmers would flock to the shop with plowshares that required resharpening every 3 to 4 days.

The old blacksmith worked hard, Kellerman said. In the summertime, Woodard would get up before 5 a.m. so he could get his work done before the summer sun and heat of the red hot forge drove him from the building.

The blacksmith also labored for hours at a time at the trip hammer—a ponderous Rube Goldberg-type contraption that used a maze of wide belts, pulleys and shafts connected to a motor to mechanically stamp metal flat—heating and pounding a sharp edge on plowshares.



Kellerman watched and learned. Soon he was sharpening disks and pounding out plowshares on his own.

“He taught me all I know,” Kellerman said as he flipped the switch on the trip hammer to demonstrate his blacksmithing technique on a plowshare. “Each blacksmith has his own way of doing things, and he always thinks his way is best. He was willing to share his secrets with me.

“It was hard work, but I liked to do it. The only thing I didn’t like was standing in front of the forge, with the wind blowing and stirring up the smoke. You could spit black after standing in front of the forge all day. It was like working in a coal mine.”

The yellow lettering on the outside of the building has outlived G.E. Woodard, who worked in the shop until he was more than 90 years old. The “Son” of the sign has long

since left the small community. That left Kellerman to carry on the blacksmithing tradition.

The now-neglected blacksmith shop is still stocked with the same equipment used by Woodard at the turn of the century. A 1950 price-list hangs on the wall, and several metalwork catalogs dating back to 1904 gather dust on an old desk. In the top desk drawer a long-empty whiskey bottle is tucked away from public view.

Hammers and tongs, which Woodard had crafted from pieces of scrap iron, are poised for action within an arm's reach of the two forges. Pieces of coal, most of their energy already spent, lie in the firebox, waiting to be rekindled.

But the blacksmith business in Stuttgart has dwindled away. Occasionally in the summertime, Kellerman is asked to sharpen a mower blade. But the rest of the year the smithy remains unused.

Kellerman says several factors have contributed to the demise of blacksmithing. New technology has made the trade nearly obsolete, Kellerman said. The automobile replaced the horse-and-buggy, taking away the need for horseshoes and wagon wheel bands. High quality steel is now used on plowshares, and the edges are reinforced with a material that prevents dulling. The acetylene and electric welders in machine shops have replaced the blacksmith's forge. Tools and parts are mass produced.

"I think the real, old blacksmiths went out when the automobile came in. It used to be nothing to sharpen 150 plowshares in a summer's time. Business started dwindling in the late '60s. Now, when they wear out a plowshare, they just throw the whole blade away."

Kellerman also said good blacksmith's coal is hard to find. For a good, hot fire in the forge, blacksmiths prefer Pennsylvania coal--a hard coal that produces a lot of heat. But today, soft coal is most common. Pennsylvania coal is hard to come by. If hard coal can be found, shipping cost makes it prohibitive, Kellerman said.

"You could starve to death in a place like this anymore," Kellerman said. "There's just not any demand."

Kellerman also took over the service station after his father died in 1965. Without blacksmithing, he relies on the single pump filling station to make a living. A bulk fuel service and a chain saw business also occupy his time.



But, every chance he gets, he leads school children and visitors through the old wood building, keeping the craft alive in tales of “the old gentleman” and his trade.

“I’m afraid I would burn the whole thing down if I started a fire in the forge,” Kellerman said, standing with one foot on an anvil. “I guess I should turn the building over to the historical society.”

