

MCKINNEY

Neighbors

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Local man keeps tradition alive through

Savvy Smithing

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SUBMITTED PHOTO BY LYNNE WEINBERGER

A CENTURY AGO: Blacksmith Jay Silber and apprentice Evan Weinberger demonstrate smithing techniques for students at Dillingham.

McKinney resident keeps old craft alive

By **CHERAMY RUSBULDT**
Neighbors Editor

There isn't a "spreading chestnut tree" for miles and miles, but the smithy toils over his forge nonetheless. And not just in his shop in the pastures near Farmersville, but at schools and fairs and history re-creations all over Texas.

Jay Silber, married to wife April, "father" of two cats — a girl and a boy — and a McKinney resident for 16 years, is a full-time, professional blacksmith. In a day when most everything comes from a computer-directed factory, Silber's creations are truly one-of-a-kind.

"I got into smithing when I was about 15," he recalled. "I went with my dad to look at a wood lathe for sale; he bought the upstairs lathe, and I bought the entire downstairs blacksmith shop. At the time, my allowance was \$1 per week, so the \$75 price tag was a real commitment for me.

"We took the whole thing home, put a

hole in the garage roof for the smokestack, and I started learning," he said. "Until about 2002, I was just doing smithing part-time. (He was a geophysicist and an information technology specialist in corporate America). Since then, it is my full-time profession."

When he isn't dressed in colonial garb demonstrating to youngsters what early blacksmiths did for American settlers, Silber is in his shop creating his signature designs for sale at art shows or creating custom works for his diverse clientele.

His catalog book is a collection of photographs of some of his work. It ranges from candlesticks to horse-barn hardware to large farm and patio gates. He makes coat hooks, fireplace screens, patio "wineries" and outdoor decorative pieces. On the day of this interview, he unloaded a footless "Dumbo" salvaged from an old amusement park ride.

"For a client, I made her a base for a carousel horse a couple of weeks ago, and

she now has this piece that also needs a base," he said with a grin.

Silber is not shy about his passion for education, but he is modest about his skills. Almost gingerly, he tells how a custom curved window curtain rod he made for another client several years ago is being featured in this fall's *New Jersey Home & Style* magazine and on the cover of November's *Window Fashions Magazine*.

From a cold beginning, life begins to leap in the massive forge of his shop. First crumpled papers, then wooden starter sticks are placed in the cast-iron fire hole. Match-strike. Then coke (partially cooked, purified coal) is gradually heaped on the flickering flame. Fanned by a manual blower, the flame quickly becomes hot enough to turn the steel bar a brilliant red-orange.

Then the hammering begins. On the anvil, Silber pounds — almost coaxes — shape from the material. (He wears ear plugs most of the time; hearing damage is an occupational hazard.) What was straight

is now curved. What was curved is now circular. What is still straight has now been given an artistic twist from end to end.

The process seems straightforward enough, but there are obviously many hours of practice in those sinewy hands. And to keep everything moving along, there are repeated re-heatings in the forge fire.

Silber explained on his Web site that "most 'wrought iron' fences, gates, railing, fireplace sets, etc. that are made today are made from steel. Usually a mild or low carbon steel. Steel is cheaper to make and plentiful. Real wrought iron is iron, has almost no carbon and has been wrought or worked. It has a grain, like wood, made of silica that runs through the metal. It is seven times more rust resistant than steel. And it's very expensive in addition to being difficult to find. To that end, most of my work is done with mild steel. I did bring a cache of wrought iron back from the Iron Bridge Gorge Museum in Birmingham, England.



STAFF PHOTO BY CHERAMY RUSBULT

HEAVY HAMMER: The 100-pound hammer works on thick material for Jay Silber. Dating to about 1900, the retrofitted machine now runs on a gasoline engine, though it was originally powered by steam

"Tools and methods have been gathered over the years. I spent numerous days at the Farmers Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y. (better know for the baseball museum) learning techniques from Jim Porteus and Harvey Brotman. Since the early '70s, blacksmithing has seen quite a revival in this country. There are some really talented artists doing some really beautiful work."

"Most of my weekends are spent out at events, especially this time of year. And as the holidays get closer, the custom work really picks up," said Silber.

When asked if there is still time to put in a custom order for Christmas delivery, he said, "Well, let's just say the calendar is getting pretty full."

"I'm currently working on an

outdoor Chinese wok for a patio," he said as he showed off the general design, "and that is a pretty interesting job, but I could probably take on some additional small work before the holidays."

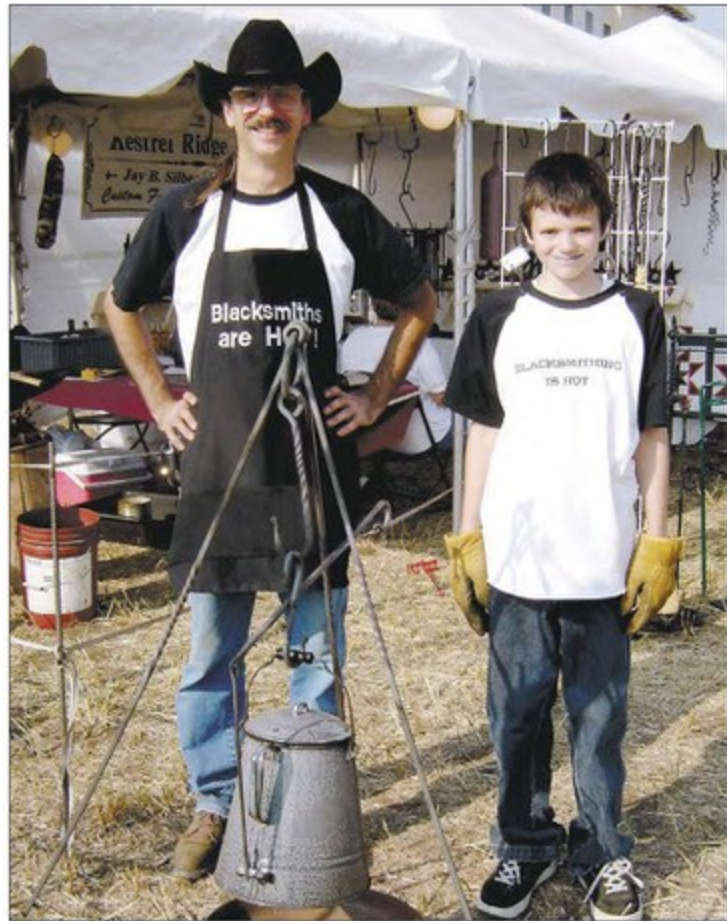
For his road trips, he has assembled an entire blacksmith shop in miniature, compared to the huge elements in his permanent shop. They fit into his truck and trailer, and he and his apprentice, 13-year-old Evan Weinberger of McKinney, set up for their appearances.

It is a demonstration worth watching. Saturday, Nov. 12, and Sunday, Nov. 13, he is selling his wares at the White Rock Art Festival (a show to raise funds for the art program at Hexter Elementary). Next weekend, he will be at his usual spot at Third Monday

Trade Days in McKinney. The weekend following Thanksgiving, he will be at work for The Chestnut Square Prairie Adventure Camp and Living History Day, and during the Dec. 3-4 Holiday Tour of Homes, he will again be demonstrating at Chestnut Square.

So don't look for the chestnut tree. Look for the Kestrel Ridge Forge logo and the tall, lanky, quiet-natured gentleman in his smithing outfit. And, if you get the chance, offer your hand. The return handshake is — well, strong as steel.

Jay Silber can be reached via his Web site kestrelridgeforge.com or at 972-839-9294. Cheramy Rusbuldt is editor of McKinney Neighbors. Contact her at crusbuldt@dallasnews.com.



SUBMITTED PHOTO BY LYNNE WEINBERGER

READY FOR JAVA: Blacksmith Jay Silber and apprentice Evan Weinberger set up their coffee cradle demonstration at the Great Steak of Texas event.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

IT'S NOT CURTAINS: The custom curtain rod in this photo was handmade by Jay Silber and is featured on the November cover of Windows Fashion Magazine.