



Of Iron & Stagecraft

by Trenton Tye, on the road

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My name is Trenton Tye, and I, like many of you, am an aficionado of steel. For the past 15 years I have made my living not just as a blacksmith but a traveling performer. Now we have all seen demos as they are, but I have a show. I travel to various events and perform in order to educate and enrapture the public.

Now my story winds a bit, but allow me to give you the condensed version. I apprenticed under a man by the name of Jay Reakirt, a master smith who resided in Andersonville, Georgia. I was with Jay until his passing in 2003. They were happy years, and I learned much. Business was scarce, and so we had to turn to other means of financing our beer. That is when I began to travel to show in order to sell a few trinkets.

To draw in extra traffic to the tent, I would do a series of demos in order to make a spectacle of myself. An odd thing happened as we moved through the years; the real interest in what we were became not the selling of

our work but the demo itself. I discovered that there was still a burning hunger for the craft and the mentality that goes with any hands-on work. Suddenly, we were more sought after for the show that we put on than the work that we did. After Jay passed on, I was led down a new sort of path in the craft. Earlier this year, my big break occurred when I was asked to perform at the Los Angeles County Fair. Having never been in a plane or in a taxi before, I boarded the Big ol' jet air-a line-a and came to the West Coast via Hicktown, Georgia. I have been working with Ms. Jill Turman for a month and will, in a few days from the writing of this passage, begin my tenure in LA.

Now let us move on to the important part. If we are to move our craft forward, we must do a better job of bridging the gap to the new generation of smiths. This means that the irritating, text messaging, bad hair do, emo crowd must be courted. With the average age of ABANA members approaching early retirement, it is quite clear that we are missing

some engine parts in our craft. When Bealer and his people first began this little odyssey, there was an effort to target the young twenty somethings. They were enthusiastic, open minded and ready to get their hands dirty. The powers that be did a fine job, as many of our older members are still present in the ranks.

As a stage man, I am a Reverend of Steel, so to speak. My job is to capture a heart and fill it with the desire and interest to pursue this craft that we hold so dear. Again and again, I see where we fall short on courting this new generation, and it is of great concern. This new generation does in fact speak a different language. It is a language of technology. They are on the cutting edge of gadgetry and tuned in to the way our society moves.

For the past 50 years, we as historians have struggled to somehow capture the knowledge that we lost every time one of our great smiths passed on. From the inception of ABANA to the work of Firefox, we took whatever we had on hand to scoop a little knowledge from the river that rushed beside us; the waterfall was not far away. It happened that one day I sat down behind my computer screen and brought up YouTube. One of the videos it suggested I watch was something called Numa Numa. Words cannot describe the hilarity of this clip as it is simply a young portly fellow that is lip syncing a European dance song. Yet it is the gusto

with which this fellow attacks it that really makes for side splitting laughter. This video was one of the first great viral videos of the Internet.

If you are not a tech savvy person, this means that the video was shared by two people, then four, then eight, then a few million. As I wiped the tears from my eyes, I suddenly realized what I was looking at. In 400 years, if we have not blown ourselves up, somebody would sit down and watch the same video. They would see it as I did. Regardless of their taste in humor, they would see the original as it was and draw their own conclusions. That minute and a half of video just made this portly dancer immortal. The very thing that we have been trying to do for the past 50 years appeared in front of me as some sort of celestial fat kid.

In the course of our craft, smiths have always embraced the new technologies that made them able to do better work. Smiths didn't die out. They just evolved. And then, they launched spaceships. So why is it that we have been so slow to embrace these new technologies of preservation? A three minute video of an old master captures him as he was for all generations to see. I never knew Humphrey Bogart but I've watched enough of him on the screen to see him as he was. I feel that I know something about the man and see his ability in a way that no one could ever describe sufficiently to me. This was the premise for my idea.

In the 90s when the first

wails of the Net were to be heard, several smiths embraced it. From AnvilFire and CyberSmiths to IForge, several sites began making an environment for information to be shared. I believe that this was the start of the most important advancement in our work to preserve the craft that has ever been. For the first time, the conversations, the work, in all its reality, could be preserved for all time. The next logical step in the media was to go from the written word to video. Now most all smiths of name have some sort of DVD or such thing. Most have a video or two on the Net, perhaps YouTube, that is a teaser of sorts or a minor home video. Never before has a bulk of work been added to something that was so accessible to a worldwide audience.

After my having filmed a poorly produced video on knife sharpening and Damascus steel in the literal backroom, the writing on the wall appeared to me. People from all over began coming by, asking questions and involving themselves in the discussion. I was able to create a minor tempest with some bad lighting, a flannel shirt and a YouTube video. This would eventually lead into my deciding that I could build a website to reach out to all these people who were so interested in what I had to say. I knew nothing about web design, but I was able to follow a few tutorials and built a rudimentary site. It was called [purgatoryironworks.com](http://www.purgatoryironworks.com). The logistical hurdles were enormous when it came to posting video and other things.

In time though, a few brave souls from around the world joined my merry little band of lunatics and clear progress was made. My current team is comprised of a few Texans and one very talented Dutchman. We communicate through the website through several versions of voice software. The time difference is a little strange to deal with, but it has worked so far.

So what have a few idiots and a video camera managed to do? Since its inception, the site had generated a few million hits with the YouTube counterpart getting about a half a million. The site is self supporting through ten dollar memberships. I post a new video for the membership every week, and then that video is archived. To date, we have about 20 hours of instruction on the website.

I beg the populace to embrace this new language, this new philosophy, of our craft. The way we do things in our work doesn't have to change, but we have been afforded incredible new tools to ensure that it's not just our work that lives on but our personalities as well. It is as much the people who drive us forward as it is our art. I often imagine what it would have been like to meet Mr. Yellin. How much better would I have known him if he were on YouTube?

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<http://www.purgatoryironworks.com>
<http://www.youtube.com/user/purgatoryironworks>