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Local Blacksmith, Chuck Robinson, on the art of Blacksmithing

By Jodi Marze, Lifestyles Editor

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PICAYUNE — Local blacksmith, Chuck Robinson, of Sea Robin Forge, is a retired Oceanographer, history buff, and President of The Gulf Coast Blacksmith Association (www.gulfcoastblacksmith.com). To define him as only those things is to greatly understate the complexity and ingenuity that he possesses; he is widely known for his Adjustable Blade Smithing Anvil. It seems that Robinson marches to his own drummer and usually comes out ahead for doing so.

He is the “New World” version of the “Old World” blacksmith. He says he has always been fascinated by the world and life of the blacksmith from years past.

Robinson says, “The Blacksmith was one of the most important people in the communities of long ago. That is because they made everything. The whole village revolved around them, because they played a part in almost everything that was made; from useful household items, transportation and tools and weapons.”

“A lot of the old-time blacksmiths evolved and ended up as industrialists such as Krupp, from Germany, and John Deere.”

He continues, “Today everything is mass produced, and blacksmithing is more of a ‘functional art.’ Usually my pieces are one of a kind, with the exception being the Special Forces knife because of the specialized need.”

Robinson is always working with new materials and new techniques. This leads to him developing tools or procedures that are called for to get the job done, such as the Adjustable Blade Smithing Anvil, blade hammers and other special tools.

He says, “I worked at the test site and they had these heavy steel billets laying around. I wondered how they could be used for something ... when the Ammo Plant closed down I bought some of the surplus billets and designed an anvil for them, based on the design of Japanese blade smith’s anvil. I adjusted and tweaked it to make it more suitable for my needs. It was just about making it work for my needs.”

He continues, “Blacksmithing has led me to many people from all walks of life. I love going to

symposiums, because you will find people with multiple degrees and doctorates hanging out with mountain men and learning from them. I love the Gulf Coast Blacksmith Association because our emphasis is on teaching the history and the craft. Again, it is a situation where you have people of all ages and education levels learning from each other and teaching what they have learned. We have a 16 year old that could be a future teacher. He is really taking off and excelling. That is exciting!”

Robinson explains the parts and pieces of a knife all lend to its beauty, functionality and balance.

“You have the blade, guard, silver spacer, wooden handle, and pommel which go together in that order. If your blade is weak then you have trouble. If your handle, spacer or pommel is off you have instability. Each part is important in the process.”

The process of making the blade just by itself is time-consuming; it requires endurance and watchful eye.

Robinson demonstrates this process. He begins by twisting a wire rope Damascus billet, to make the strands as tight as possible and keep air space to a minimum. He explains that this will help the metal heat evenly throughout. When the metal is ready to take out of the forge the first time, he puts the ends in a vice to flatten and give him an area to grip with the twisting wrench. As he does so, he feels the billet to weld itself.

Before putting back in the forge, he puts a powdery flux mixture over the billet to keep it from oxidizing. Then he carefully repeats the process.

In time, the billet is ready to be hammered. Robinson can tell by the sound of his hammer when it is solid. “The higher the pitch—the more solid it is.”

The next round in the forge shows the flux bubbling on the billet that is beginning to come to shape. “This means that the flux is removing scale, the temperature is around 2200 F.” he says.

He brings the billet to his 1920’s Little Giant Power Hammer and follows up with the 80,000 pound hydraulic press that he designed and built.

Now we are beginning to see the process paying off.

Robinson takes the metal to his polisher and follows that up with etching acid.

“This will show me the pattern and what type of blade will be most suitable,” he says. “A good etching normally takes about two hours.”

The blade is the largest time investment. The better blade makes the better knife.

The same craftsmanship that goes into his blades, goes into his handles. He has a large selection of exotic woods, and uses mosaic pins to attach the handles to the blades

“I started building my Smithy the day that I retired from NAVOCEANO; I put in my time to make my living and then it was time to live my dream,” he says. “I think the neighbors were wondering if I lost my mind, but now they know that this is who I am.”

For more information on Chuck Robinson or Sea Robin Forge call 601-798-0060.

