

The 2013 Western States Blacksmith Conference: A Lively Affair

By Anne Bujold

Blacksmithing is a thriving art in the Northwest, and there was ample evidence of the craft's vitality at The Western States Blacksmith Conference (August 22–25, 2013). Hosted by the Northwest Blacksmith Association (NWBA) and held on Mount Hood in the town of Government Camp, the 4-day regional event brought together smiths from the Pacific Northwest, California, and beyond.

The lively affair showcased the amazing community that has developed around blacksmithing. From the Member Gallery to the benefit auctions, examples of the diverse and proficient work of NWBA members abounded.

The main activity revolved around demonstration tents: four stations in different parts of town featured a variety of metal work including gunsmithing, farrier work, and forging. Presenter Maria Cristalli of Cle Elum, Washington, constructed a beautiful log holder over the course of two days. Using a modern design aesthetic, she utilized traditional joinery with an innovative twist: by forging both ends of a piece of square stock round, the visual element of a single rivet was achieved while locking her connection point securely in place. Friday's demonstrator Rick Smith exhibited steel repoussé design and techniques. Smith is the head of the Metals Department at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale), which is the only program in the country to offer a Blacksmithing MFA. Colombian smith Freddy Rodriguez showed his skill creating animal heads, which he chisels and hammers from solid bars of steel. Hands-on opportunities in the main event area gave new and seasoned metal enthusiasts the chance to try basic tool making, copper repoussé, or bladesmithing.

The Blacksmith Wars was a highlight of the event. Four teams of four contestants competed for renown and a cash prize in an on-site sculpture competition. Judged on a series of points, including such criteria as design, safety, and transformation of mate-

rials by heat (forging), each team completed a table with a lighting element within a 12-hour period over the course of the conference. Teams were subject to a long list of constraints that included a \$300 materials budget, no use of electrical welding, and the possibility to embellish, but not subtract from, their original design, which was on display during the competition. The winning team, Manley Men on Da Mountain, was comprised of Central Oregon smiths Hunter Dhalberg, Kellen Bateham, Joe Elliot, and Mark Manley. Their piece, which took shape over two months of planning and practice, was built from 43 parts including 36 forged elements. They worked with the concept of an infinity table to create a visually stunning and intricate piece. After the judging was completed, all pieces were auctioned off to the attendees, with the income granted to the teams. The winning piece was sold for \$4,000.

Another significant moment was a panel discussion about the future of the blacksmithing craft held at the Timberline Lodge Amphitheater. A dozen panelists weighed in, including National Ornamental Metals Museum founder Jim Wallace, Seattle sculptor and furniture designer Reis Nemi, and Northwest blacksmithing legend Darryl Nelson. Led by moderator Michael Bondi of Richmond, California, also a pioneer in the field, they covered a wide range of topics: the role of ironwork in contemporary art, what makers can or should do to become more engaged with the architecture field, and the conflicts between making a living and making what you love. Although opinions sometimes clashed, what emerged from the discussion was the distinct sense that this is a community deeply committed to its craft. Blacksmithing will continue to evolve, makers will continue to innovate, and discussions, such as this, are part of the process of redefining the role of ironwork in the 21st century.

Those who are interested in the NWBA can find out more at www.blacksmith.org, or



Seattle smith Alair Wells making a tool in the hands-on area, while the Blacksmith Wars rage on behind.

visit the monthly demonstrations held at the Cowlitz Expo Center in Longview, Washington. (The next event will be a special two-day session: Presenter Mark Manley will be demonstrating making handled top tools using an induction forge.) The NWBA hosts its own yearly conference (June 2014), and the next Western States Blacksmith Conference will be held in California in 2015.

Anne Bujold is a full-time metal artist, who operates as Riveted Rabbit Studio. Located in Portland, Oregon, she works primarily in mild steel, creating custom functional work and sculpture. A graduate of the Oregon College of Art and Craft Metals Department (2008), she has also studied at Penland School of Craft, Haystack Mountain School of Craft, and, most recently, the New England School of Metalwork. More of her work can be seen at www.facebook.com/RivetedRabbitStudio.



The table designed and built by Manley Men on Da Mountain.



Detail of the winning Blacksmith Wars piece.



Finished log holder by Maria Cristalli. (Photo by Phillip Baldwin)



A piece by NWBA member Dean Mook in the gallery.