Farrier. Usually the local blacksmith in a community was a man who had all of these skills. To most people, blacksmithing and horseshoeing are synonymous terms. Horseshoeing is a distinct and separate trade. There were thousands of smiths who never nailed on or made a horseshoe and there were a large number of horseshoers who could not be termed “smiths” since their knowledge of blacksmithing was limited to the fitting of horseshoes. Sometimes you could find a horseshoer who was good blacksmith, but in the smaller towns and country shops the smith practiced both trades out of necessity.

Today, blacksmithing has continued primarily as an art form. The traditional tool and repair shops are no longer a part of a community. The Industrial Revolution, internal combustion engines and new tool making methods and plants began the decline of the profession. The beginning of the 20th Century saw a boom in the use of architectural blacksmithing in the creation of wrought iron gates, staircases, railings, grills and decorative pieces. The Great Depression ended that boom when few could afford the iron flourishes. Iron drives in World War II decimated the supply of raw materials, and the art of blacksmithing dwindled until it was almost a lost art form from the 1950s to the 1970s.

In the last 40 years, blacksmithing has made a comeback. It exists at theme parks, restoration villages, craft fairs and craft shops. Today’s blacksmith is more of an artist who creates artistic work rather than common tools or weapons. Today’s blacksmith uses many of the same traditional techniques and methods, but the physical effort of modern blacksmithing can be greatly reduced by the use of the electric drill, electric grinder, power hammer, ox-acetylene torch and electric blowers for the forge.
"A man may work for a lifetime at a blacksmith's forge and still have more to learn. Also true that the essentials of the trade consist of only a few comparatively simple operations, which may be acquired by any one who has mechanical ability and will give a little time and attention to the work. After this is done, skill will come with practice." — Farm Blacksmithing by J.M. Drew 1901

Resources
In 1973, The Artist-Blacksmith's Association of North America, Inc. (ABANA) began with only 27 blacksmiths. Their membership has grown and now boasts nearly 4,000 members. More and more interested people are finding the "lost" art of blacksmithing.

Anvil's Ring is ABANA's primary member publication and is filled with 60 pages of articles, tips, historical notes, photos of members' work, supplier ads, book reviews and event information.

The Hammer's Blow is mailed quarterly with the Anvil's Ring and has 20 pages of how-to articles from the editor, notices and classified ads.

Other blacksmithing periodicals have closed shop. Anvil Magazine was discontinued in 2006 and exists now only as an online archive: www.blacksmithsgazette.com/
The Blacksmith's Journal's last issue was in April of 2010 but is available in an online archive: www.blacksmithsjournal.com/

Books from the 1900s are available in a PDF format for free download at www.books.google.com and include titles like Standard Blacksmithing, Horseshoeing and Wagon Making, Practical Blacksmithing, Farm Blacksmithing and Basic Blacksmithing.

Tools
Below is a list of basic tools and equipment appropriate to the needs of the rural blacksmith with a brief description of their use. Most tools are available through online blacksmith suppliers.

Bellows: Drives air into the fire so that the fuel will burn at the high temperatures needed for forging steel.

Hearth: The place where the blacksmith's fire is made.

Anvil: A block of hard metal (or stone) on which the blacksmith hammers metal into shape.

Forge: The work area of the blacksmith. This word can be used to describe the whole workshop or just the hearth and bellows.

Sledgehammer: A heavy hammer, normally used two-handed by the blacksmith's assistant

Cross-peen hammer: The hammer used by the blacksmith for most forging operations. It has one flat face and a peen.

Round punch: Used instead of a drill to make holes in metal.

Hot chisel: Used to cut hot metal. This tool is not hardened in any way and should never be used to cut cold metal.

Cold chisel: Used to cut cold, mild steel. This tool is hardened and tempered and should never be used on hot metal.

Hot set: A type of hot chisel with a long handle, usually struck with a sledgehammer. This tool is not hardened in any way and should never be used to cut cold metal.

The majority of today's blacksmiths are "hobby" smiths who create items with a forge and anvil for the fun of it. Bill Printy of Iron and Lace in Bentonsport, Iowa, is one of the few professional and full-time blacksmiths you will be able to find. Bill also offers blacksmithing classes several times a year through the Villages Folk School Classes. He offers Beginning Blacksmithing, Tool and Tong Making and Forge Welding several times a year at his shop, where four workstations, complete with forge, anvil and tools, are available for the students.

Traditionally, a blacksmith learned his craft by apprenticing himself to a skilled blacksmith. Today, becoming an apprentice could prove difficult because of the scarcity of professional smiths. Besides being able to participate in a class, Bill says a person interested in blacksmithing can learn from the many book and video resources available but it is hard to get started as a profession. He recommends buying the necessary tools and references as well as attending outdoor festivals, Buckskinner Rendezvous, Renaissance Fairs, tractor and small engine shows, where a blacksmith might be working. For him, largely self-taught, Bill said it took a lot of "stubbornness and hard work." As a testament to tenacity, Bill's blacksmith shop has been a feature of Bentonsport for more than 30 years. To find a schedule of his upcoming classes, visit his website at www.ironandlace.com.

An iron candlestick holder is an example of some of the items Printy creates at Iron and Lace.

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A cascade of iron leaves wait for their place on a decorative creation.
Cold set: A type of cold chisel with a long handle for heavy cutting. This tool is hardened and tempered and should never be used on hot metal. The cold set looks the same as the hot set except that the blade is considerably thicker and is ground to a different angle.

Tongs: Used to hold hot metal while it is being worked.

Top fuller: Used to make grooves in hot metal. A round-section piece of mild steel bar can be used as a simple top fuller.

Bottom fuller: Normally used with a top fuller, the bottom fuller rests on the anvil and is used to form a groove on the underside of the hot metal.

File: Used to clean up and sharpen many of the products of the blacksmith. Old files should be kept and used for hot-filing.

Water trough: Used for quenching metal during the hardening and tempering process. For most jobs, a bucket can be used.

Charcoal is the most common fuel used. Charcoal is a clean burning fuel, and blacksmiths traditionally favor charcoal from hardwood. Coke is sometimes available as a fuel but needs a stronger air blast to burn and quickly extinguishes without continued bellows air. Some modern blacksmiths use propane because it burns clean with fewer odors.

Sources for raw material can be iron scrap from vehicle parts or scrap from construction sites. Look for a steel yard in your area as a source for dimensional steel.

Handles, drawer pulls, hooks, candle holders, wine racks, coat racks, decorative flowers and animals, knives, hinges, gates and railings, and fireplace tools are just a few of the popular items created by the blacksmith today. Our modern conveniences were built upon the skills of the blacksmith, while the drama of molten metal and hammer blows still draw artisans to create unique and beautiful handcrafted work.

Bethany Caskey can be found at www.caskeystudios.com.