

An Old Art Made New Again



Van Killems employs blacksmithing skills to forge useful and decorative creations from iron

By Jeanie Senior

Blacksmith Van Killems, working in his west Klickitat County shop, takes designs from nature to make beautifully crafted pieces in wrought iron—from dogwood blossoms to ginkgo leaves to salmon.

Van is inspired by the spare, but elegant, aesthetic of the arts and crafts movement and craftsman design for other items, such as a stair rail executed in crafted wrought iron. He makes door pulls and other cabinet hardware, fireplace tools, and architectural pieces—doors, railings, gates, fences and chandeliers.

In short, Van is a blacksmith in the tradition of the Depression-era artists whose work ornaments Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood.

He calls his business Lonely Mountain LLC, not because of the remote location of his shop. Rather, it's a place in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit."

Van sells his forged iron cabinet hardware at Red Feather in Hood River. It's also marketed by Chown Hardware, the oldest family owned architecture hardware company in North America, with showrooms in Portland and Bellevue.

Mount Adams Chamber of Commerce Manager Marsha Holliston says Van's work is on display locally and in use at the chamber office. He made the cabinet pulls there.

Van also did the bar footrail and a coat rack for the Double Mountain Brew Pub in Hood River, as well as

Van Killems wields a hammer to shape hot metal in his Klickitat County blacksmith shop. Van makes many unique pieces in wrought iron, including specialty architectural pieces.

pieces for two other brew pubs, Everybodys in White Salmon and Big Horse in Hood River.

The architectural pieces, mostly commissioned after clients hear about him by word-of-mouth “are definitely the biggest bang” in terms of major sales, he says. “But it isn’t consistent enough. Without the cabinet hardware I wouldn’t make it.”

Van is on a schedule that involves blacksmithing one week, then spending one week building a new house close to his workshop, where he will live with wife, Sarah, and their 3-year-old son, Angus.

Other than that, he calls his schedule “pretty chaotic.”

“I’m not sure I could break it down,” says Van. “If I have an order, I must work on it until completion.”

Blacksmithing is an occupation that has evolved for Van. He didn’t start out to be a blacksmith. After he graduated from high school in Coupeville, a small town on Whidbey Island, he went to college to be a chemical engineer.

“I just couldn’t hack it,” he says.

Instead, he graduated from Lewis and Clark College in Portland with a degree in German, spending his junior year in Munich and taking two breaks to travel around Europe.

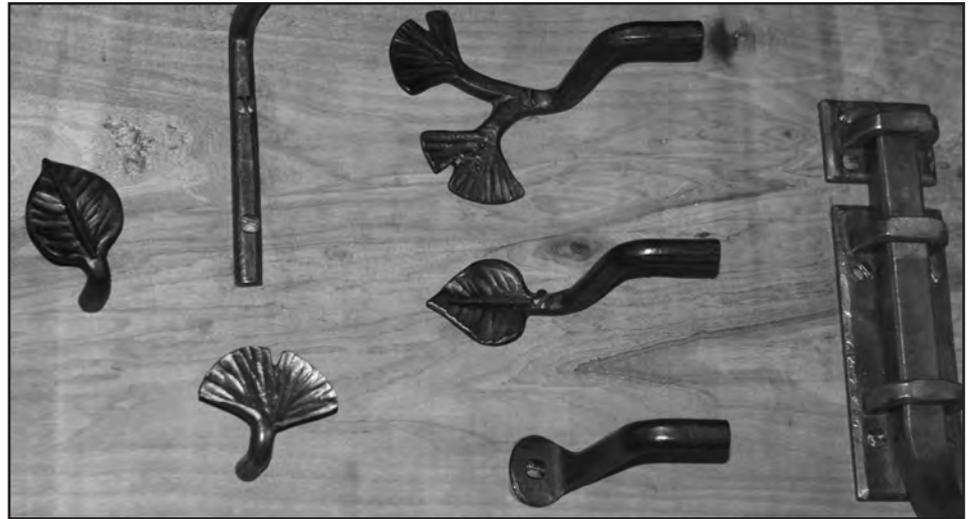
After that, Van says, “you name it. I worked in construction and just prior to 2000 I was working at a cobbler’s shop.”

In 2000, he moved to Bozeman, Montana, where he met Marcus Angler at a street art festival. Marcus needed help so Van worked for him for two years.

Was it an apprenticeship?

“If you take the pay into account, probably,” he says, joking. “There was no formal apprenticeship. It’s one of those Old World trades. I was just his grunt labor.”

In 2002, Van and Sarah moved to the Columbia River Gorge, where several of their friends lived. They found a private piece of wooded land to call home.



Above, among iron items Van forges are these cabinet knobs and handles. Below, Van’s blacksmith shop. Bottom, the 500-pound anvil he found at a foundry in Wyoming.

Van’s blacksmith shop includes a 500-pound anvil from a foundry in Wyoming, forges and an array of tools, including racks of hammers and tongs.

He added quite a few items when he bought a shop from the estate of a Willamette Valley man.

He also inherited shop tools from his grandfather, who was a machinist, “so I grew up around

that, but not blacksmithing.”

Van says, however, that for some of his work, machining and blacksmithing go hand in hand.

Most of Van’s custom architectural pieces go into houses in the Portland area.

Sometimes, people come to talk about jobs, go away and come back “after looking at all the crappy stuff in stores.”

“I like it when that happens,” he says.

Demonstrating his craft, Van heats an iron rod in the forge until it’s cherry red, shapes it with a hammer until it’s too cool to work and puts it back in the forge to reheat.

Forging—the process of shaping iron and steel with heat and hammering—also is referred to as sculpting.

He flattens the rod into a square, then shapes it around a pointed end of the anvil.

It is feel, more than color, which alerts him that it’s time for more heat, Van says. It is knowledge that comes from experience. “You feel it in your arm and shoulder.”

Metal at the right temperature to work feels softer. “Like lead,” he says. “You can feel the difference.” ■

