

Keep the Blacksmith Shop Fire Going!

The Blacksmith Shop Museum first opened to the public on July 16, 1994 as part of the Lacombe Days celebration. As the oldest operational blacksmith shop in its original location in Alberta, the Blacksmith Shop Museum strives to preserve the unique occupation of blacksmithing.

The Lacombe & District Historical Society was created in 1971 (then the Maski-Pitoun Historical Society) and took on the Blacksmith Shop Museum as its second museum. The Society strives to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit the history of Lacombe and district.

It takes skill to operate a fully-functioning blacksmith museum. Volunteers are needed to man the fire and provide live demonstrations to the public. Learn this unique art form from other skilled volunteers and a heritage blacksmith! Email info@lacombemuseum.com for more information or to apply.

The blacksmiths are always hard at work creating items for the gift shop! Stop by and support the Lacombe & District Historical Society by purchasing handmade home decor items, jewelry, or branded cedar signs, all made by volunteers at the Blacksmith Shop Museum!

Admission is free, donations are gratefully accepted and help operate the museums in Lacombe. Donations can be made to:

Lacombe & District Historical Society

5036 51 Street

Lacombe, Alberta

T4L 1W2

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General History of Blacksmithing



Thomas Norish outside his shop circa. 1905

Blacksmithing dates back to the Iron Age (1200 - 1000 BCE). Iron was typically fashioned into arrowheads. The most famous blacksmith of the Age was Hephaestus, the Greek God of blacksmiths. By the Medieval Period, there was a village smithy in every town who made weapons, tools, and hardware for the townsfolk and sometimes the army.

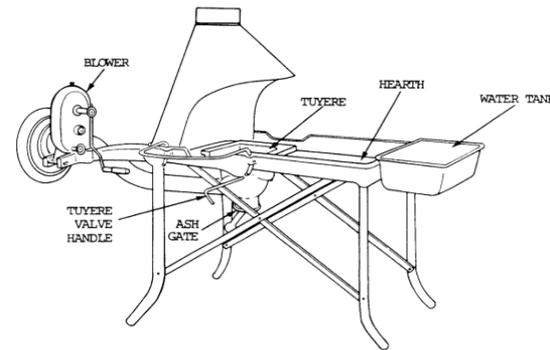
In Canada, the first blacksmiths worked out of trading posts for the Hudson's Bay Company as early as the 1670s. They mainly repaired guns or tools and shod horses. Blacksmiths also set up shops in towns and in the countryside to service the colonial population.

Starting around the 1850s, blacksmithing like it is presented in the Museum came about. Shops around Canada featured a single smith capable of performing all kinds of ironwork; including nailsmithing, culling, tool making, ferrying, and machinery repair. These all-purpose blacksmiths were especially important in prairie towns that sprang up along the railway line. On average, there would be one blacksmith per 100 families.

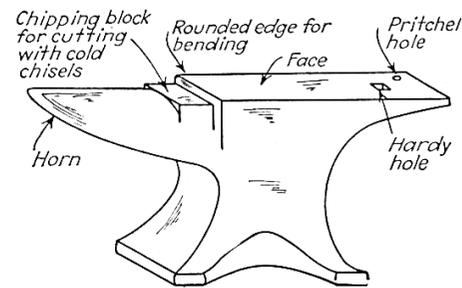
Tools of the Trade

The forge is one of the most important tools that a blacksmith has. This is where the metal is heated so that it can be hammered and bent into different shapes.

The forge can be made out of different materials, such as steel, cast iron, brick or stone. The forge in the Blacksmith Shop Museum is a railway forge made out of cast iron. It sits on three legs and has a hand-cranked blower.



The anvil is where the blacksmith pounds the metal into different shapes. Different parts of the anvil produce different shapes in the metal. The horn can be used to make bends in the metal while the heel of the anvil has two holes that can be used for punching holes in metal.

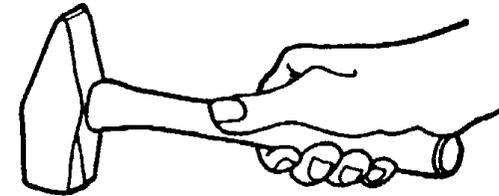


Parts of the anvil.

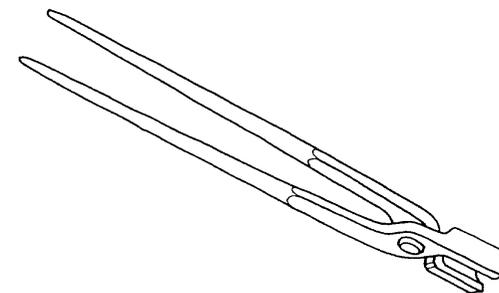
Tools of the Trade

Hammers are used to pound metal into different shapes. Blacksmiths can make different shapes in the metal based on where they place the metal on the anvil.

Typical hammer strikes are full-face blows, half-face blows, and edge blows. The ringing sounds of the hammers striking metal is the stereotypical sound of a blacksmith shop!



Tongs are a blacksmith's best friend! They allow smiths to pick up hot pieces of metal without burning themselves. The tongs have a smooth jaws that do not mark up the hot metal unlike pliers and vice grips. Additionally, the jaws of the tongs can be made bigger or smaller to fit any piece of metal.



Restoration & Heritage Designations

In 1991, the Lacombe & District Historical Society (then the Maski-Pitoun Historical Society) began discussions about purchasing the Selvais blacksmith shop and restoring it for use as a museum.

The next two years were spent raising money and the shop was officially purchased in Spring 1993. Restorations began that summer. The foundation, interior and exterior walls, and the roof were repaired, the building was fireproofed, and the sliding doors at the front were restored. The official opening of the Blacksmith Shop Museum was July 16, 1994 as part of Lacombe Days.



Restoration of the Blacksmith Shop, 1993

On September 24, 2011, the Blacksmith Shop was designated as a Provincial Historic Resource by the Minister of Culture and Tourism of Alberta. On September 26, 2015, the Shop also became Lacombe's second Municipal Heritage Resource.



Municipal Designation Ceremony, 2015



Lacombe Blacksmith Shop Museum

Provincial Historic Resource



Alberta's Oldest Operational Blacksmith Shop in its Original Location



Introduction

The Blacksmith Shop Museum on Glass Street (49th Street) is the oldest operating blacksmith shop on its original site in Alberta. First opened in 1902, the Blacksmith Shop was one of several shops in downtown Lacombe at the time.

At its prime, Lacombe boasted 7 or 8 operational blacksmith shops. On average, however, the number of shops operating at the same time in Lacombe was between 5 and 6. A. F. Weddle was the first owner of the blacksmith shop on Glass Street but Roger Selvais, the shop's last commercial owner, owned the shop the longest.

This shop has been restored to preserve the art of traditional coal-fired blacksmithing. As a continually operational shop, the museum has a working coal-fired forge that volunteer smiths use to create all sorts of handmade items. Additional space in the shop is for public viewings of the smiths hard at work as well as for displays about Lacombe's blacksmithing history and typical tools of the trade.



Lacombe Blacksmith Shop Museum, 2011

The Shop's First Owners

The blacksmith shop was first opened in 1902 by A.F. Weddle. It was the fourth shop to open in Lacombe. The next year, Weddle sold his shop to the Watson Brothers, Alfred Dickie and Stanley Sandford.

The Watson Brothers owned the shop until 1907 and hired another blacksmith, Fred Taylor, to work for them in 1906. John McNab was the third owner of the blacksmith shop. He worked for nineteen years alone then formed a partnership with John Reeves in 1926. A year later, Reeves bought out McNab's share of the shop and operated it alone until 1939.



Fred, Bill & Guy Watson inside Shop, circa. 1913

The services provided by blacksmiths in this shop were very important. Blacksmiths were needed to shoe horses for farmers as well as repair farm machinery and wagons. Shops would sometimes specialize in the type of services they offered while others were more multi-purpose.

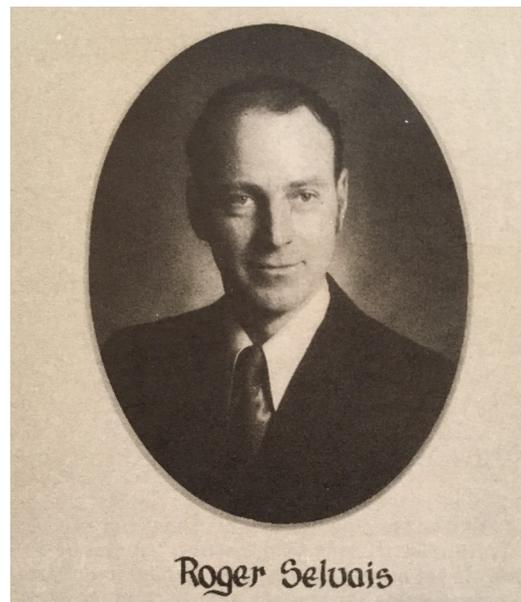
The Selvais Family

The Selvais family owned the shop the longest. After moving to Lacombe from Eckville in 1939, Jules Selvais rented the shop from John Reeves for three years before buying the business outright.

Originally from Belgium, Jules learned to smith in Belgium before immigrating to Canada in the 1920s. His son Roger helped around the shop in the 1950s and took over the shop in the 1960s.

In 1953, a welding shop was added to the rear of the building to accommodate larger vehicle repairs.

Actual blacksmithing in the shop phased out around that time as well. Roger, with help from his son Ronald, operated the shop commercially until 1987. In 1993, the shop was purchased by the Lacombe & District Historical Society and restored for use as a museum.



Roger Selvais

Other Shops in Lacombe

The first blacksmith to open shop in Lacombe was John Beatty. His shop was opened on Glass Street in 1891 and operated until 1909 when Beatty passed away. In 1903, Fred Taylor was listed as working in this shop.



Nanton Street, 1896 (Fincham blacksmith shop second building on left)

The second shop to open, opened on Nanton Street (50th Street) in 1896. John Fincham was the first owner of this shop and had his own personal residence across the street. Fincham sold his shop to Jim Guy Fincham and Jim I. Watson in 1909. For the next twenty-five years, this Nanton Street shop had seven different owners. 1916 alone saw the shop change hands three times. In 1934, the shop and the Fincham residence were torn down to make way for new automobile service stations.

In 1901, Hugo Gottschlich opened the third blacksmith shop in Lacombe. Originally from Germany, Gottschlich first immigrated to Idaho in 1896 then traveled north to Lacombe in 1901. He operated his shop on Railway Street until his retirement in 1917. He then turned his full attention to farming and music.

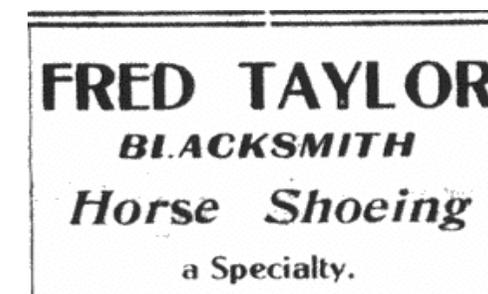
Other Shops in Lacombe



Gottschlich Blacksmith Shop, 1903

The fifth blacksmith shop in Lacombe was owned by Thomas Norish and operated for only five years. Norish opened his shop in 1903 on the corner of Glass Street and Hamilton Avenue (49th Street and 51st Avenue). It is possible that Norish left his shop because of a fire.

Fred Taylor began his blacksmithing career in Lacombe in 1903. In 1908 he opened Lacombe's sixth shop on Barnett Avenue near the Morrison & Johnson warehouse. He purchased a new shop on the corner of Nanton Street and Hamilton Avenue (50th Street and 51st Avenue) in 1916. He blacksmithed at various locations until 1931.



Western Globe Advertisement, 17 April 1912

Other Shops in Lacombe

In 1914 a blacksmith shop was built on Barnett Avenue (50th Ave) in the approximate location of the Bank of Montreal. C.C. Curtis was the first owner of the lot but it was Fred Duckett who built the actual shop. Robert Hoath rented the shop for thirteen years before it was sold to Claude Rowe in 1933. Tony Akey and L. Wendleboe both rented the shop from Rowe until the shop was sold in 1946. The lot was eventually used for a Shell gas station.



Dobirstein Blacksmith Shop circa. 1928

In 1928, Emma Hunt purchased the old Gottschlich blacksmith shop on Railway Street. She rented her shop to Fred Dobirstein Sr. who eventually purchased the shop in 1935. When he enlisted to fight in World War II, Dobirstein sold the shop to Jacob Tetz and Tony Akey. Dobirstein sustained injuries in the War that resulted in him having his left forearm amputated. He never went back to the trade after returning home.