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Sanderson operates an 1869 planer. The blacksmith uses mostly machinery that dates to the 1880s and 1920s. He said the state's only other known planer like his is at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn.

Blacksmith works with old-fashioned machinery

By ERICA HOBBS
HILLSDALE DAILY NEWS

QUINCY — He lifts the lump of wrought iron out of the fire and examines the brilliant orange-yellow color. It's ready.

The iron turns to putty under the 1880s Hackney power hammer, bending and turning at each hit.

He walks past the 4,000-pound 1898 Reid engine, giving one the feeling of stepping back in time.

Actually, you've stepped into 21st-Century Quincy in a rare, 19th-Century-style blacksmith shop. The man forging iron is one of the few things in the room created after 1920.

Meet Joel Sanderson: blacksmith, sculptor, artist.

At 39, Sanderson's knowledge of metal work extends well beyond that of his generation.

Despite modern technology, the Quincy resident owns more than 15 metalwork machines, most dating from 1890 to 1920.

"I believe that the forging tools of this era are more controllable and allow me to do more," he said of the vintage equipment. "I don't use old machinery because I want to be a museum, but because it's the best tools for what I need."

Sanderson's work contains an array of both functional and nonfunctional art including railings, lighting, tables and sculptures.

"I pursue my furniture as art," he said. "I treat it as sculpture with function."

Among Sanderson's tools are a planer from 1869 and the Hackney power hammer.

"I love old stuff," he said. "I just do."

Sanderson got his start in ironwork as a teen playing with his great-grandfather's old cast iron forge on the family farm in Quincy in Branch County.

"I was just playing and having fun, every minute I could," he said. "I just always had an interest in it since I was a kid. I always went to living history museums and watched the blacksmiths. That's what I wanted to do."

Starting with steel, Sanderson began his passion forging swords and knives. It was not until after college, however, that Sanderson learned his trade working with iron. That's when he worked under nationally known blacksmith Michael Bendele in Sauder Village, Ohio.

"It was my first exposure to ironwork," he said.

After working with Bendele, Sanderson left briefly to work as a machinist for Arrowsmith Forge in New York before returning a year later to take Bendele's place as the resident blacksmith at Sauder Village.

After seven years in Ohio, he decided to dedicate himself full-time to his own shop in Quincy, where he's been designing and creating wrought ironwork since 2004.

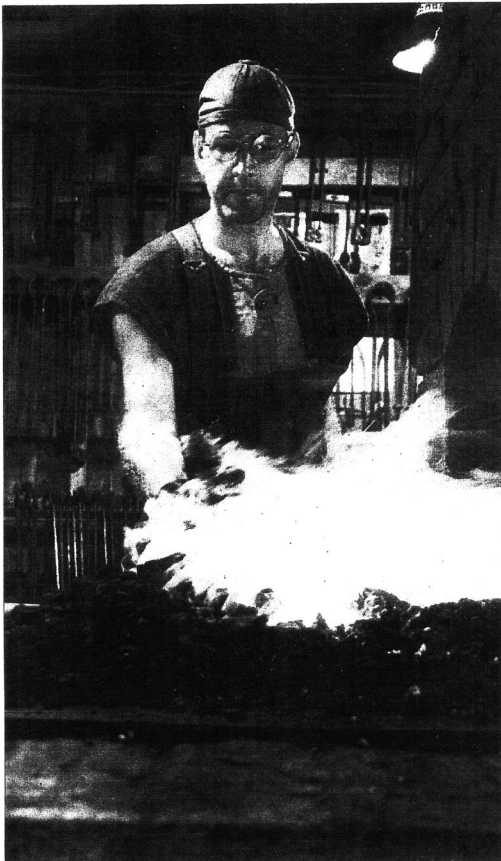
Today, Sanderson's shop has grown from a small, cast iron forge in a barn to a much larger coal forge in the middle of an expanded workspace full of antique machines collected over a lifetime.

His days are spent producing a mixture of self-created artwork and work commissioned by others for use in homes and churches.

"The shop is my hobby," he said. "The art is my language."

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME

MEET MICHIGAN'S IRON MAN



Photos by THOMAS MARCETTI/Hillsdale Daily News

Blacksmith Joel Sanderson pulls a lump of wrought iron from his forge to begin crafting it for one of his many metalwork projects in Quincy in Branch County on Oct. 16.