



Forging Art

by Anika (Slininger) Hanisch

As Judy Baker bent over her work, searing light blazed from the propylene torch, slicing through the scrap metal.

“This is going to be bright,” she cautioned.

After cutting out a small right triangle, she removed her protective goggles and held the rough-edged piece with tongs. She smiled, no doubt thinking of what it would become with a few hours of effort.

A shower of sparks filled the shop as Baker used a grinder to smooth the edges of the rough metal. The little scrap triangle was now ready for its first heat in the propane forge. While the metal began to brighten in the 2,000-degree heat, Baker perused a booklet containing the Angelo Bartolucci design that inspired this project.

Baker, the owner of Sacajawea Forge in Bozeman, has been blacksmithing independently for almost ten years. She has a background in biochemistry though. She learned the basics of forging when, having grown restless in a lab work position, she took a job at W Brand Products, a manufacturer of farrier and veterinarian tools in Livingston. She summarized the desire that led to her substantial career change: “I wanted to know how to make things.”

Eventually she wanted to know how to make things other than hoof-testers. Baker bought a small forge and began experimenting with more artful ideas on her own time. Her employer encouraged her pursuit, providing her a book of blacksmithing designs. A blacksmithing course at Turley Forge in Santa Fe gave her the additional skills she needed.

With minimal equipment, at first she worked with hammer and anvil only. She described how she coped with the muscle fatigue. “I’d have a bucket of water, and I would stick my arm in the water while waiting for the next heat,” she said. “I definitely worked myself to tears.” Now, in a shop equipped with a large treadle hammer and an air hammer, Baker completes her projects with a little less pain. But, it is still very physical work.

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It took several “heats” for Baker to render the general shape of her current project. The small metal scrap eventually grew a neck and tail, and the beginnings of legs. It gradually took on the shape of a bird. Baker brought the hot metal to the anvil for detailing. Careful strikes from the blacksmithing hammer refined the shape of the head

and beak, the curve of the neck, and the scrolling of the tail feathers. Oxidized bits of metal, or scale, flaked off with each impact.

This was the traditional hammer and anvil work that comes to mind upon hearing the word “blacksmith.” The image could have been straight out of an American history text. Only this time a woman wielded the hammer and turned the metal artwork on the anvil.

Baker downplayed her presence in a male-dominated field. “There are more women doing this now,” she said. “It’s fun to be on the inside and realize it’s not that big a deal; it’s like knowing another language.”

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