

Burn Down the Cabin!

Blacksmith Gets All Fired Up at Forge

Story and Photography By Gayle Morrow

In an earlier time, the village blacksmith was the hub (and a few of the spokes, too) of his community's wheel. From the hardware that held their cabins together to the weapons and other tools they required, American settlers were dependent on the local guy with the forge. Nails were so valuable that, in some cases, when settlers decided to move on, they would burn their cabins just to retrieve the nails. In fact, said Doug Firestone, a history lover and, you guessed it, a working blacksmith and gunsmith, when the country began expanding west, a blacksmith was so vital to success that wherever one settled the community formed around him.

The notion of community and his role in it is one Firestone cherishes and nourishes. It's evident when you visit Firestone Forge, situated on Route 144 between Galeton and Germania. The business is a stop on the PA Route 6 Artisan Trail. During the summer months, it is a showcase for his own fun and functional forged creations—hardware, cooking implements, fireplace sets, gardening tools, all manner of hooks and hanging devices—as well as items from other PA Wilds juried artisans. Firestone admits a sort of bemusement at calling himself an artist, but the quality of his work calls for the label.

Firestone got his start early, hanging out at his uncle's gunsmith/pattern-making shop. At one point, his uncle couldn't find the flat springs used in old guns. "I made an impromptu forge," recalled Firestone. He found a spring pattern in an old Popular Mechanics and began making the flat springs his uncle needed. After high school, he attended the University of Maine for a while, studying forestry.



Above: Blacksmith and gunsmith Doug Firestone makes products for home and hearth. **Below:** This hanging pot or basket holder and the snake ring holder (right) are examples of Firestone's iron forged home items.

But he was disenchanted when he realized that "all they were teaching me was how to cut down trees." He went in a few other directions, including engineering, and then wound his way back to metal, blacksmithing, and gunsmithing.

"I caught myself on fire; I caught my barn on fire," he said, laughing at his early efforts. He eventually discovered the rendezvous circuit—events that include living history, pioneering, and military reenactments—and realized there was a market there for household products as well as an opportunity to indulge his love of history. Local events include the Tioga County Early Days and the Cherry Springs Woodsman's Festival. This time of year, if you stop in at Firestone Forge to purchase a music stand, candelabra, or something



as basic as a toilet paper holder, you may find yourself drawn to the warmth of the woodstove. A customer comes to pick up an 1880s-era gun Firestone has repaired. "No electricity was used to make that," he noted. "It was guys with files." A local couple drops in to peruse the resident bookshelf. Firestone's wife, Chris, a botanist with the state Bureau of Forestry, brings coffee from the house and then she and their son, Dane, head over to Wellsboro to help package Goodies For Our Troops. Another neighbor turns the conversation to a topic on the mind of many residents these days—gas drilling. Firestone, a civil engineer in a previous life, is working on a limited basis with an engineering firm to offer assistance to municipalities dealing with the variety of situations arising from the gas industry. He explained that he thought he was retired from engineering work when he moved from Perry County to Potter County in 2003. He had been working at an engineering firm in Harrisburg but confessed to a change in priorities after September 11, 2001. "I realized my family wanted me and my



time more than the money," he said. But over the past couple of years he also began to realize, with a little prodding from his wife, that communities—his immediate geographic community as well as other groups to which he feels a connection—might be in need of the services he could provide. So the village blacksmith, still, finds himself at the hub of a wheel. 🏠

Shop: *Firestone Forge*
Location: 1280 Germania Road,
 Galeton, PA
Phone: 814-435-8277
Hours: vary with the season
Web site: www.firestoneforge.com

Gayle Morrow, former editor of The Wellsboro Gazette, cooks locally, and organically, at the West End Market Café.

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