

# THE ART OF A BLACKSMITH

## Forging a new legacy



Marlan Downey. Photo by Marea Downey.

When Marlan Downey ('87 Pecten International) first began his work as a blacksmith 30 years ago, he found it was the perfect stress reliever. "I had a 200-pound anvil, a hot piece of steel and a three-pound sledgehammer. I would talk to the steel and anvil about the week's stresses. By the end of the weekend, I was calm, nice Marlan Downey again," he says. "I sure beat the hell out of a lot of iron up there."

Downey has two forges—one at his ranch 50 miles north of Dallas and the other at his cottage in Cornwall, England, where he serves as a blacksmith for the local fishing village three months out of the year. While a forge may seem a strange addition to the home for most, Downey grew up around a forge. "My grandfather was one of the last old-fashioned blacksmiths. He homesteaded in Nebraska in the 1880s, serving as justice of the peace and a farrier blacksmith for the city of Salem." Downey spent his early years sweeping up around his grandfather's shop, watching him shoe horses and the town folk play cards around a pot-bellied stove. His father worked on the second floor of the shop as a cabinet-maker. Downey would pick up woodworking as a hobby later on in life as well.

While he may have started blacksmithing as a way to relieve stress, Downey finds it a novel way to create unique gifts for

friends and family. "I design something that's one of a kind." For former Shell Executive Vice President Charlie Blackburn, Downey created a knife to commemorate two successes they shared in Cameroon and Syria. "I crafted the knife handle from Cameroon elephant ivory (before it was illegal) and used Damascus steel for the blade."

For family friend Herbert Hunt, patriarch of the Hunt family, Downey crafted a set of spurs out of one piece of steel, using 100-year-old silver pesos for the rowels. "What do you get a billionaire? This was something unique."

Downey's creations have even moved a quiet, reticent fisherman in the village of Cornwall. "One of the fishermen wanted a shark harpoon. He said he was running into 150- to 200-pound sharks and he knew they make good eating. I designed and crafted a six-foot harpoon, which he planned to hang over his boat cabin."

When a dowager in a nearby manor house lost her century-old fireplace poker, Downey found the same type of wrought iron used to create the fireplace set. Once the iron was hot, the petite dowager twisted the iron herself with Downey's assistance. "When that iron gets hot, it's like taffy."

While blacksmithing used to require a great deal of heavy lifting, power

equipment has made the craft more accessible to women. "Some of the best blacksmiths in the world today are women. They have a much more artistic eye."

Trying his hand at blacksmithing was no big deal for Downey, who has always thought he can do just about anything. "I might not do things as well as others, but better than most," he jokes. In his early years, Downey built radios, a TV set from Radio Shack and put together his first computer from parts. He's also tried oil painting, woodcarving and even built bombs. "You could buy a dynamite fuse from the local hardware store. I'd make rockets and high-quality bombs for pond catfish, but I'd be careful about it."

One of his proudest creations was a log cabin that he built himself, in the Big Thicket, north of Houston, while still with Shell Pecten. "I made everything myself. I cut down the trees with a double-bitted ax—never used a chain saw. I wanted to see if I was the man my ancestors were."

After the former president of Pecten International retired in 1987, Downey barely took a breath before accepting the role of president at Arco International. Today, he serves on the board of directors for three oil and gas companies, travels around the globe to speak on energy issues and helps manage Roxanna Oil, in Houston, which he founded in 1987.

Though he expects his father and grandfather would be proud of his work as a blacksmith and a woodworker, he feels fortunate that they saw his success at Shell. "They got to read about me in the paper and saw me doing things all over the world. They were proud of me."

Downey encourages others to give blacksmithing a try. "When you heat that iron, it behaves like clay. You mold it, bend it and turn it any way you want. The secret is that it's dead easy; it's only hard to do it really well." Downey adds that if you want to learn more—or just catch up—send him an email at [marlandowney@mindspring.com](mailto:marlandowney@mindspring.com). "I love hearing from old friends from my Shell days." «