

Apprentice to Blacksmith

The importance and status of being a blacksmith in Centre County is evident by looking at the 1850 Census of Harris Township, Centre County. The Centre Furnace was located at that time within the boundaries of Harris Township. In this very rural, sparsely populated little township in 1850, there were sixteen blacksmiths! Most of these men, again according to the census records, had land and property exceeding the value of most of their county neighbors. Some were residing with other blacksmiths and were learning the trade as an apprentice.

The life of a blacksmith, although highly respected, would have been a difficult, tiring, dirty job. Blacksmith shops were notoriously

dark; the darkness was necessary for the artisan to monitor the degree of heat being generated as he hammered on his objects. Those objects would have included a wide range of items from kitchen utensils to hardware; from farm implements to horseshoes.

Apprentices and Iron Puzzles

Men learned the iron working trade by being apprenticed to a blacksmith. Once qualified, following a seven year apprenticeship, a smith generally became a journeyman. Journeymen would then travel and work for different blacksmiths to become better skilled at their craft until finally becoming a master blacksmith.

Apprentice blacksmiths would spend countless hours doing mundane tasks to practice their trade. An apprentice would spend entire days just crafting nails — a good apprentice could make one thousand nails in a day. One way that blacksmiths taught the young men iron making skills was to teach them to make iron interlocking puzzles. The puzzle making taught them to twist, turn and shape the hot iron — all required expertise for the art of blacksmithing. The completed practice puzzles would then be sold to local taverns to entertain the clientele.

