

Blacksmith Fun Facts

HIGH TEMPERATURES

Powerful bellows helped heat iron until it was soft enough to work—sometimes up to 2,000 degrees! Before thermometers were used, blacksmiths judged the metal's temperature by its color.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In 1831, a government blacksmith shop was furnished with tools for \$35, which is approximately \$1,000 in today's money.

STAFFING

Some shops employed a blacksmith and a specialized smith, such as a gunsmith. Others employed a jack-of-all-trades who could do anything from gun repair to fire steel fabrication. A striker (assistant) worked at some shops in an apprenticeship arrangement. At small smithies, however, the striker was often tasked with the odd jobs no one else wanted to do. Agency blacksmiths rarely spoke Ho-Chunk, so Indian agents such as John H. Kinzie sometimes acted as translators.

AVAILABILITY OF COAL

In pre-state Wisconsin, coal was a rare but necessary commodity. Iron and coal were brought to the interior of Wisconsin from as far away as St. Louis and Detroit to feed the agency forges.



The Historic Indian Agency House

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Exploring Blacksmithing and Indian Agencies



The Frontier Blacksmith
at the
Historic Indian Agency House



Blacksmiths and Indian Agencies

TREATY OF 1829

In the 1800s, lead mining in southwest Wisconsin created friction between frontier settlers and the Native tribes upon whose land the settlers were encroaching. The Bureau of Indian Affairs saw a need to directly mediate this potentially explosive situation. In 1829, a treaty was signed in Prairie du Chien which stipulated that the U.S. government would purchase Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) land in the lead mining region for \$540,000 over thirty years, as well as provide trade goods and blacksmith services to the tribe. U.S. Commissioners established three blacksmiths throughout Ho-Chunk territory: one in Prairie du Chien, one along the Sugar River near Madison, and one at Fort Winnebago in Portage.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

The government also hoped that the availability of blacksmiths would encourage the tribe to adopt more aspects of European culture. However, the Ho-Chunk primarily valued the smith's work in repairing their hunting tools, including guns and traps, which were essential to the fur trade.

BLACKSMITH HISTORY

Archaeological evidence for ironworking appears as far back as 1500 BC among the Hittite civilization. The trade continued strong into the early 20th century but fell out of common use as industrialism arose. While Europeans introduced blacksmithing to America, metallurgy—including that of copper and lead—was practiced by Natives long before that.

VALUE OF THE TRADE

The blacksmith trade has held great importance for thousands of years, affecting everything from domestic life to agriculture; hunting to equine care; commerce to transportation; children's pastimes to United States government relations with Native people groups and settlers on the early American frontier.

DIG DEEPER

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