

Blacksmith Bows Out

By Kate McCarter

Chicago Arrow Staff Reporter

John Gruber loved his job hammering hot steel at a forge on Chicago's West Side. But the day his lizard really started screaming, he knew he had to quit for good. "That's eighty pounds of metal...that missed me by an inch only because my lizard started screaming," Gruber explains.

"Learning to trust your sixth sense, I call it the lizard...The hair stands up on the back of your neck...[and] my lizard started screaming 'Get back, get away, it's not right.'"

Gruber, 31, from Oak Park, finds himself floundering after quitting his job at Anderson Shumaker Forge. He worked in a coffee shop in Forest Park for a few months and is now taking the career-minded step of finishing up his degree at Triton College. But he manages to continue working metal, forging armor on the weekends at the Chicago Fire Arts Center. In the past year he has joined the faculty and has a growing cadre of students.

Make no mistake, though, Gruber misses the daily thrill of work at Anderson Shumaker: "I'm sure my eyes light up and my face gets all smile-y when I talked about it." But after a close call with a glowing hot piece of metal on a trajectory towards his face, he decided he had to throw in the towel.

Anderson Shumaker "is a pretty macho environment", in which Gruber, too, seems to revel: "Shit happens. If it doesn't debilitate you then you keep working." Gruber worked there in two stints, from 99 to 2001 and for a year-and-a-half before he

quit in September of 2006. His girlfriend is relieved that he bowed out, like John, fearing one accident too many.

Gruber cuts to the chase about why the job is so dangerous: “When something flies off the anvil, it’s usually forty pounds or heavier. Forty pounds moving God knows how fast...30, 50, 60, 80 miles an hour does a lot of damage to a person...When accidents happen, either nothing happens or it goes really bad.”

Gruber describes his coworkers’ numerous injuries. Stephen “was pretty close to missing one side of his face. He came back to work the same day. Went to the hospital, got his nose set, got his stitches put in, and went right back to work again.”

Walter showed Gruber his injuries two weeks after a piece of metal “shot out between the anvil and the hammer, and hit him just below the knee.” It “looked like it was a purple foot, and from halfway up the foot, down to his toes, was all black. It looked like frostbite, [but] it was just congealed blood.”

Frank, a senior blacksmith, “had his ankle completely crushed. He has six pins in his right ankle.”

Casey’s accident left him debilitated. Coworkers scattered as they saw a piece of metal fly off the anvil. But Casey was hit: “The ring tipped over and fell on the back of his calf. This ring was still glowing orange when it landed on him...It instantly burned his pants. Gone. And the weight of the ring, 80 pounds with 1000 degrees behind it, started sinking into his calf. Literally burning the muscle and tissue away as it sank in.”

Gruber has his own tales of injury. “I was hit in the chest with a 50 lb. piece of metal that was again, about red hot.” He was up and walking within a minute and didn’t imagine that he was really injured.

In a daze, he forgot about his hard hat and safety glasses and continued working, much to his hammer driver, Stash's, amazement: Stash "shook his head and smiled and started hammering on the piece...And while I'm working the block I'm thinking to myself: 'Holy crap, I have just been hit, not once but twice, with the same piece of metal, and I think it almost hit me in the face.'"

After they finished the piece, Stash checked Gruber out: "There's this big red burn on my stomach and then a bruise on my chest already. Like Holy Crap, 'can we have a few minutes?' 'Yeah, take ten minutes.' Ten minutes later, I had a cigarette, came back, we started working some more."

Another day, some red-hot scale flaked off a piece of metal they were working and blew around Gruber's face mask and into his eye. "You could kind of hear it pop when it first hit my eye...a day or two later and I was still pulling little black pieces out."

Compounding the daily risk the workers undertake each day they come to the job, the machinery at the factory is in the neighborhood of a century old. The steam driven hammers were built in 1913 and were originally used in constructing pieces for steam locomotive engines. Upkeep has been minimal.

The vodka the workers add to their Gatorade isn't likely helping matters either: "Yeah, I remember when I got hired on the second time, I was given a Polish shot of vodka, which is a glass of vodka. This was at nine o'clock in the morning and the guys were already drinking and toasty." Gruber defers on the vodka himself, but works on intimately dangerous jobs with those who don't necessarily exercise the same caution.

It gets hot in the forge. The worker who holds the monkey, a device which makes sure the metal doesn't get pounded too thin, Gruber describes as an "unlucky sap...he has

1100, 900 degree metal sitting less than 2 feet away from him with all that radiant heat. It gets hot, it gets really really hot.”

The workers come to work early to avoid the heat of midday: “In the summertime we work from 4:30 to 12 o’clock.” The hammer room is usually about 20 degrees warmer than the temperatures outside, and they work through it all: “Back when we had the 103 days last summer. We worked through those and we were sitting at at least 115 to 120 degrees.”

And it’s loud. Gruber describes that “it gets insanely noisy...As you walk, you feel the vibrations, like a Jurassic Park kind of thing. Dinosaurs are 3 tons, 3 tons is about 6,000 pounds. That hammer is 6,000 pounds. Thump thump thump thump. You just wonder if that’s a dinosaur running...You can’t hear each other, so speaking doesn’t happen. Everything is done with hand signals and if you’re not quick enough to catch a hand signal you just get hurt.”

Gruber’s was paid \$14/hour. The senior blacksmith doesn’t make significantly more, at \$17/ hour, and with the potential of serious injury, Gruber decided to move on.

Anderson Shumaker is an open die forge, it specializes in creating such simple geometric shapes as rings and bars. Forging, as opposed to casting, creates a stronger molecular structure. As Gruber explains: “It’s much stronger – what the forging does is it stretches the grain of the steel throughout the shape.” Anderson Shumaker has three steam-driven hammers which forge out materials of varying weights.

Gruber was a blacksmith on the smallest of the hammers, the 3500 pound. A hulking piece of machinery at 10 feet tall, it repeatedly hammers material in the range of 20 to 150 pounds. The steel is heated in one of the 15 furnaces onsite, transferred to the

anvil, where as Gruber explains: “my job was to hold a piece of metal...while a hammer dropper was slamming 3500 pounds of steel down over and over again on my steel as I would turn it or roll it or shape it.”

The opportunities for accidents are numerous as the heat and the force compound each others' effect. Gruber explains that: “You have to know what's going on and have a good understanding of how metal moves so you can anticipate what the next course of action is going to be as far as shaping out that material.”

Gruber's pivotal day on the job came when he was working a piece of Inconel 700 with his mentor Stash. Gruber relieved a newbie from working with the material, which is particularly hard, slippery and dangerous to work. But Gruber quickly found himself overwhelmed by the accelerating beat of hammer hits by Little Joe: “every time the hammer strikes the piece moves about 2 inches towards me. So, hammer strikes, piece moves, and I kick it back. Hammer strikes, piece moves, and I kick it back. Well, Joe started picking up his rhythm [and] in three or four hammer beats the piece had walked towards me almost 6 inches. Three more hits and it's going to fall off the anvil. We don't want it to fall off the anvil.”

Gruber made a decisive move to knock the piece back on the anvil when his lizard spoke up: “My lizard started screaming: ‘get back, get away it's not right’ and on the next hammer beat that's when the lizard went ‘Now’ and I moved off to the side...and I dropped my shoulders way back and the piece flew off the anvil. I thought it was aiming, I thought it was going for my head, so I arched really far back, spun around and landed on my hands and knees...Everybody who was within eye shot was watching Stash and I work this piece. They all thought that I'd been hit. Stash thought I was hit.”

As Gruber recounts it, the senior blacksmith approached him later and let him know that he was missed by a mere inch...an inch that determined the difference between a likely fatality and a good tale.

Among the shook-up crowd, Little Joe asked Gruber a question: “What was it like?...Did you like your life?...He said: your life, did it flash before your eyes, how was it?” Gruber couldn’t attest to any experience of his life flashing before his eyes, but it was that day that he decided: “I really love the work, it was just that one time was way too close. There was just way too much that could happen. And not enough payoff.”

Within a week he had moved onto a new job in the safe environment of a coffee shop. He continues his work with metal, forging armor on the weekends at the Chicago Fire Arts Center, near the intersection of Elston and Cortland. He works by the flame of a hot furnace, hammering steel over the subtle inclines of an anvil.

Gruber works in a mere t-shirt on a sub-zero day in a building which his girlfriend remarks is only “theoretically heated,” long inured to the cold after years of forging armor in his family’s garage.

His t-shirt is stained with yesterday’s ketchup and coal. His hair is kept short, perhaps left over from his days in the army. He has a strong build, a little stocky of late, as he struggles to find time for fighting practice with the Society for Creative Anachronism. Indeed, he uses his own self-built, fully functional armor for these practices.

As he fits his girlfriend for a new suit of armor, they look forward to the battle they will do come spring.