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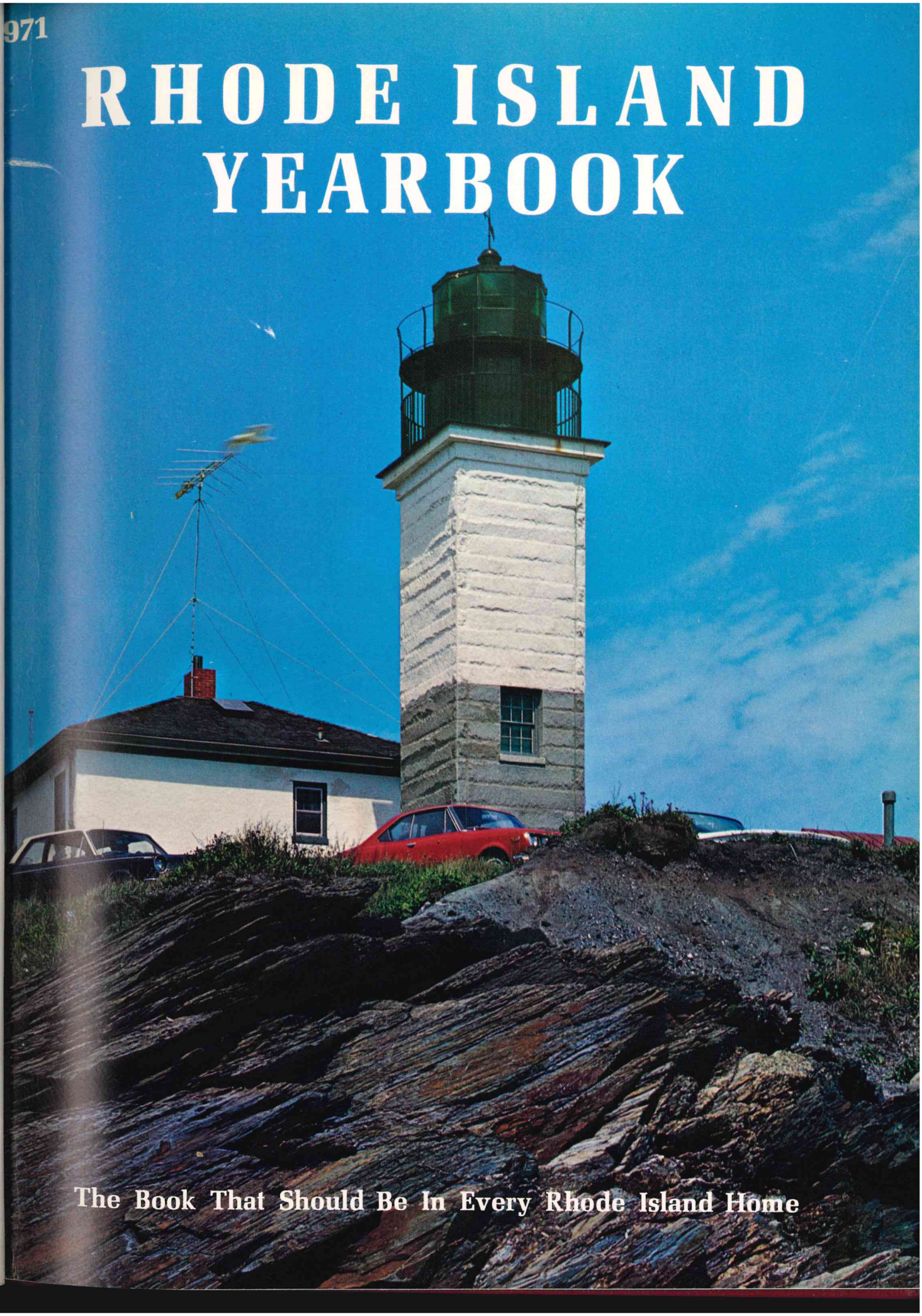
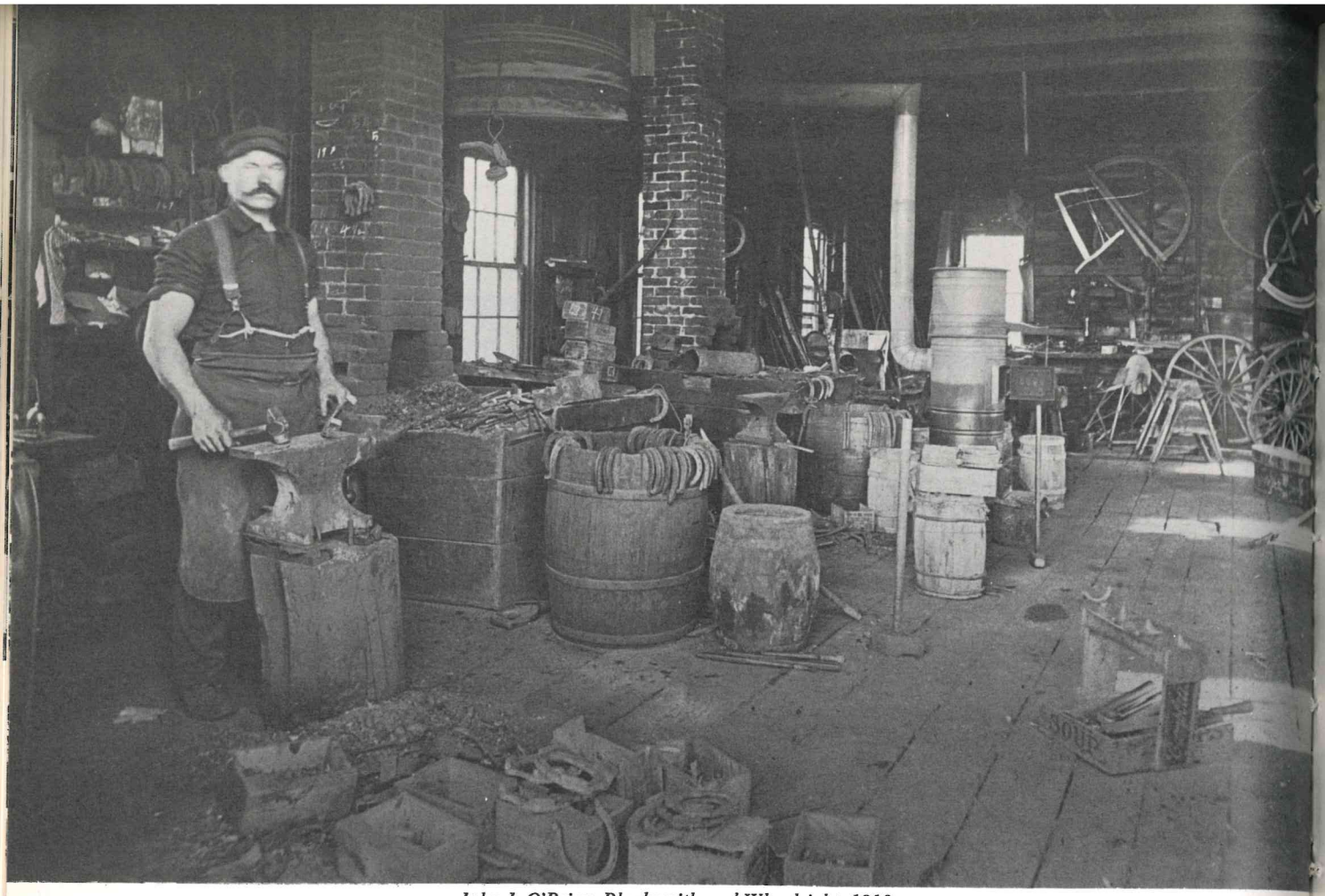
RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



The Book That Should Be In Every Rhode Island Home



John J. O'Brien, Blacksmith and Wheelright, 1910

Tales of a Blacksmith Shop

BY JOHN J. O'BRIEN, JR.

"Under a worn and leaky roof,
The village smith he stands,
Holding the hoof of a kicking horse
In his strong and sinewy hands.
A kicking horse who will not stand,
Despite his stern commands." . . .

"COME on, Joe. I need your help," said my father, handing Joe the twister and grabbing his shoeing box. "Let's go."

Joe, a somewhat slow-witted lad who happened to be hanging around the shop at the time, took the twister and ran hurriedly down the street in my father's wake.

A small crowd was gathered around a horse lying prone in the street in front of Duffy's store. It was very dead. Standing there, next to its mate and minding its own business while ice was being delivered from the wagon it drew, it had the misfortune to get in the way of a runaway horse. The sharp point of a shaft had pierced its chest and the poor animal had to be destroyed.

So there it lay in its gore.

But again the sharp realities of life intruded even beyond death. Only yesterday, the horse had been shod by my father, and Chaffee, the ice dealer, didn't want to lose the shoes as well as the horse. So he asked my father to take them off before the dead horse van carted the animal away.

Once on the scene, my father lost no time. He motioned the crowd back, took the twister from Joe and quickly fastened its loop around the lip of the dead horse. (Lest you wonder unduly, the twister was a short staff with a rawhide loop on one end, which was twisted around the lip of a horse who kicked when he was shod, to keep his mind off kicking.)

"Here, Joe," said Pa, giving another twist, "Take a tight grip here. When I say 'tighten it' you do that. When I tell you to loosen it, loosen it."

Joe did as he was told. As my father quickly removed the shoes, he would give his commands to Joe, who followed them importantly, as the interested crowd looked on. It wasn't until the last shoe was pulled that he had a glimmer of doubt.

"Say, John," he said, "What the hell am I holding the twister on a dead horse for?"

"Well," said Pa, "You never can tell. He might have had one last kick left in him!"

They say that Joe was so damn mad that he threw the twister right over the roof of the nearby railroad station!

Well, that was my father. In a business that was hard, laborious work, he was always looking for some practical joke to play, some way to lighten his daily toil with a bit of humor. Over his shop there was a sign which read:

John J. O'Brien, Blacksmith and Wheelwright

And that's what he was — and a very good one. He took great pride in his work. As a horseshoer, he could cure corns in a horse thru corrective shoeing and he knew how to prevent interfering, or hitting one foot against the other. As a wheelwright, he could repair all kinds of wagons, build carts completely in his spare time, and reset the steel tires as they expanded and loosened on the wagon wheels, in the summer heat.

The shop, itself, was at Clyde, just past the railroad bridge which spanned the road. Here, from 1902 to 1927 he carried on his trade, until a change of ownership forced him to give up the land which he had leased thru the years. Here for twenty-five years his anvil rang in the community; and here, together with his fellows, he did more to keep the local transportation on a firm footing than anyone else. He shod horses for grocery men, doctors, farmers, ice men, oil companies, mill operators and others, who, in the day of the horse, needed his services to carry on their business.

Do you know a blacksmith shop? It's a most fascinating place. It has an atmosphere of its own, with its open forge whose fierce heat enables the smith to shape the horseshoes and other metals to his need; the tools of the trade, the sledge hammers, the vises, the shoeing box, with its cutting devices and special nails; the brine barrel to cool the metal and temper the steel, and the rafters overhead from which hung wagon wheels and supported long bands of steel from which tires were made. On the floor in front of the anvil were new shoes made in different sizes, various iron work to be done, and kegs of shoes which had to be fitted for the horses' hooves. But, above all, it had the distinctive smell which came from the continuing presence of the horses who came to be shod.

The blacksmith, himself, with his leather apron, his muscular arms, his skill in making the shoes and handling the horses he shod, was also most fascinating. The school children, at least, as they looked in on their way to and from school, found it so, — particularly as he told them tall stories or sang to them as he worked. Occasionally, and unnoticed by the children, he would spit on the anvil, put the hot iron on the moisture, and produce a very satisfying explosion when he hit it.

I started in the business at an early age. When I was about 10 and my brother, Gene, about 12, my father decided to put us to work. One of us in the morning and the other in the afternoon accompanied him to the shop. There, we performed a very important function. Specifically, it was our job to keep the flies off the horses as they were shod (the horses, not the flies). Armed with a staff with a horse's tail tied on one end, we both felt our importance as we switched manfully away.

While working, we had the chance to watch our father work: to listen to him discuss with "Keenie" Bentley or Manual Enos the problems of farming; to wonder at the unusual things a grocery man encounters in his rounds; or to try to understand his philosophical discussions with Mr. Sternbach, the junkman.

Always, as well, there would be some joke for him to play and us to enjoy.

I remember, particularly, a day when the trolley pole of the Crompton-Hope car came off the overhead wire. The tracks ran along Main Street past the shop and the pole would sometimes come off because of a slight rise in the road. As the conductor got out to replace the pole, cursing softly to himself, my father banged loudly on the half-open door of the shop. The door was suspended loosely on an overhead rail, and, when hit, would produce a very satisfying noise, indeed.

"Whoa!" said my father, "Hold up your leg and stand still!"

Startled, the bewildered passengers looked toward the shop; but they never did know, as the electric pulled slowly away, whether or not the horse succeeded in kicking down the door!

As I grew older and stronger, I worked after school and on Saturdays in the shop. My principal job in horseshoeing was to pull off the shoes and "clinch-up" the new shoes after my father did the actual shoeing. "Clinching-up" meant to turn over the nails against the outside of the hoof to make sure the shoe stayed on. Whatever speed of motion I have, I acquired trying to keep ahead of my father, a very fast worker, as he fitted the shoes and nailed them on. Woe betide me if I held him up!

Pa was a big man and very strong. Of medium height, he weighed about 220 pounds all the years I knew him. Often I marvelled at his ability to lift heavy weights, to move a heavy cart by putting his back under it, or to hold a 1,700 pound horse who didn't care to be shod. Absolutely fearless, he would never let a horse leave the shop without being shod. For the kickers (and we had some beauts!) he had a special apparatus which consisted of

a stout rope which ran thru a pulley suspended from an overhead beam. This rope fastened to a leather strap around the horse's hind leg. The leg was pulled forcibly up to shoeing height and in a position for my father to work.

My job was to hold the rope. It sure was exciting!

The old time blacksmith shop attracted characters as honey does the bees. Besides the rough-spoken teamsters (and a little fellow comes to mind, named *Peanuts,* who drove a four-horse hitch for "But" Knight, the moving man), there were always hangers-on who watched my father work.

I remember a trio who worked on the roads for the town and came to the shop on rainy days. Johnny Cady, Johnny Boyle and a Mr. Thewlis, were pals together and very dignified as they smoked their pipes and talked over local affairs. Johnny Boyle, who once refused to hold the twister on the grounds that the horse was "lookin' at him," could tell you the day everyone in the community had died, when they were waked, and who was at the funeral. I don't know it for a fact, but my father told me that one of them ate the clinkers from his forge. He could have.

One of the highlights of the week, in the summertime, was when Johnny Essex came around on Friday. Johnny was a little fellow who "followed the shore" and sold his shellfish to make a precarious living. Nothing has ever tasted quite as delicious as little necks from Johnny which I fried over my father's forge.

It was of more than passing interest to me when I learned that Johnny got married. I was also glad to hear of the wonderful honeymoon trip of the happy couple. All day long, back and forth, they rode on the Crompton-Hope street car, a distance of some eight miles between the villages. Love knows no bounds, indeed, and it must have been something most inspiring to see, — she in her wedding gown and he in his wedding coat. He was five feet tall while his beloved must have been about six feet.

Pa also had many hired men, although only one at a time. They were mainly itinerant workers who came in the fall to remain thru the winter and leave in the spring.

Wilfred, a French-Canadian from Trois-Rivieres, Canada, stayed with him longest. He was a quiet man, a good worker, but could never quite master the English language. My father shod horses for both the Standard Oil Company of New York and the Texas Company. To Wilfred, the first was "big Kerosine" and the second "little Kerosine."

Among others I remember was Miles Enright who boarded with us during the winter he worked. He believed in ghosts and scared me as he told of wandering in cemeteries and seeing the ghosts of the buried dead sitting on their tombstones.

Another, was a big, raw-boned Irish lad, with old Ireland in his speech and an abysmal ignorance of such things as electricity. When we explained to him that, by pushing a button downstairs he could put on the hall light upstairs, he pondered for a minute and then said, in his lovely brogue:

"Do I have to come downstairs again to put it out?"

Most interesting of all was Tom O'Brien, a good-natured, always-smiling man. He was the quickest of all in shoeing a horse and was the only one who could keep up with my father. Unfortunately, one New Year's Eve, he was found dead, under mysterious circumstances, in the Lippitt Boarding House.

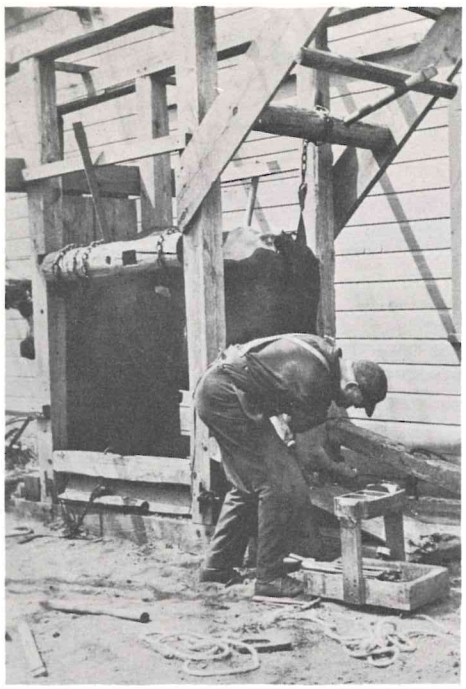
Just one more anecdote before I close. The winters were, strangely enough, in some respects the most enjoyable times in a blacksmith shop. Then, with snow on the ground and ice in the streets, the same horse would sometimes be shod twice in the same day to keep his shoes sharp. On these "sharpening" days, my father would be at work from six in the morning to ten at night. On one occasion, he shod 49 horses, all by himself. And that's going some!

Personally, one of my most vivid recollections is of a two-week period when I was having a vacation from college. The roads were icy all during this time and I spent every day at the shop, pulling off shoes and clinching them up. Hard work never killed anyone but, out of condition as I was, it sure nearly wrecked my back! My father kidded me for years after.

So ends my tale of a period long since made obsolete by the advent of faster transportation. As I glance at a large painting I have, which shows the interior of the shop, with its old-fashioned and inadequate Franklin stove, and my father at his anvil fitting a shoe for the horse on the floor, I am very glad, indeed, to have worked at this interesting trade in my growing-up years.

Is blacksmithing dead? Maybe — but an article in the Los Angeles *Times* of April 13, 1970 says "No." It tells of a course being given to high school students in Sacramento County to satisfy an increasing demand. Its graduates will be able to earn $10,000 to $12,000 annually. The name of the course? Horseshoeing. The article says that the 9 million horses in the country are more than there were at the turn of the century and that a horseshoer can get as high as $25 for shoeing a horse.

Was my father right when he said: "One damn fool in the family is enough!" Perhaps he was. I note in his day book for May 7, 1902 the entry: "Fred Baker, Shoeing one horse, $1.25 — Paid." Again, on April 17, 1940, he records the last horse he shod: "Angell, Shoeing one horse, $3.00 — Pd." Not too much of an increase in 38 years, would you say? Maybe old Horace was right when he said, "Go West, young man."



The Blacksmith shoes an ox.

"And he wonders, as he works away,
How long 'twill be before
He'll get his customer to pay
That old unsettled score.
And yet, he really dare not say
'Your credit is good no more.'

At last the work is done.
The customer says —
'That looks like a good job, John,
Please place it on your books.'
And the smith he longs to hand him one
Of Sullivan's fierce left hooks.

At evening, when his day is done
He goes to get his mail.
The city jobber, whom he owes,
Is camping on his trail
And says that he must settle up
In two days, without fail.

That night, when all the village folk
Are wrapped in slumber deep,
He nails a sign upon his shop
Ere he retires to sleep.
It is a large and glaring sign
And reads 'FOR SALE, — DAMN CHEAP!' "

A century and more ago contraptions like this Self-propelled Farm Engine were the marvels of the day. And farm contractors were excited about them. Today, General Contractors use today's marvels of earth-moving equipment, cranes, jackhammers and all the other "tools of the trade" to accomplish each job with speed and efficiency.