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A love forged in the flames - History and romance unite for Blacksmith Date Night

By Maggie Miles January 1, 2021 Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA) Page: 20E Word Count: 830

Island Farm is at it again with another fun, unique and COVID-safe series to get us out of our house and into a time-machine back to the 1800s.

This time, the focus is blacksmithing, and it's designed with you and your special someone in mind.

In late November, some couples got an opportunity to learn the trade from a skilled expert and create a beautiful horseshoe fish to hang on their wall as part of the farm's Blacksmith Date Night.

"It was the most romantic thing my wife could have done for me," says Stephen Parsons, 47, from Elizabeth City, whose wife surprised him by signing them up.

"For me, it was probably like how it feels when a woman gets a bouquet of flowers."

In 1850, there was one blacksmith listed on record on Roanoke Island: Hugh Gaylord, who was located on the north end of the island. Today Randy Hodges, of Manteo Blacksmith Shop, and Island Farm are carrying on the tradition.

The blacksmith shop is designed to look exactly like the one Gaylord would have used.

Hodges, 67, and his shop have been a mainstay on the Outer Banks for years. He's been perfecting his craft since 1980 and has been Roanoke Island's resident blacksmith since 1999.

Children and adults alike remember his shop at the Magnolia Market in downtown Manteo, and his demonstrations around town teaching this historic craft.

His metal art can be seen at KDH Cooperative Gallery & Studios at milepost 8.5 on the bypass in Kill Devil Hills.

Hodges credits growing up around metal working in his dad's machine and fabrication shop for instilling a love of working with his hands, and his family trips to historic sites like Williamsburg growing up as what sparked a love of history.

But he credits his wife for stoking his blacksmithing fire.

"The truth of the matter is that my wife is the one who cut me loose because she got tired of hearing me say I wanted to try it," says Hodges.

So, for their first anniversary, she got him some tools and a book. "She handed them to me and said, 'Here ya go, stop talking about it and go do it.'"

According to Hodges, the interest in old-fashioned blacksmithing has had a huge resurgence in popularity due to a reality show on the History Channel called "Forged in Fire."

He feels like there are a lot of people out there who feel like he did 40 years ago - they want to learn but have no idea where to start. The answer is Blacksmith Date Night.

Not unlike like Hodges, date night participant Parsons had been interested in blacksmithing for a long time and dabbled in different kinds of metal work since he was 12.

"It was nice that my wife supported me enough to find something like this and she was interested in it more than I thought she would be. It was nice to be able to do it in a relaxed environment - more than just needing something to be fixed around the house," he says.

Hodges teaches private lessons but says Island Farm's workshop offers something different.

"The date night experience is more fun and less intense and there's the concept of couples working together," he says.

"And it's not just strictly a guy thing, the women really enjoy it. too."

This was true for Candis Stoessner, 33, of Kill Devil Hills.

"It was a blast!" she says. Elements to making the horseshoe fish required teamwork between the couples.

"One of us made the eye , one of us made the mouth, one of us made the markings on the fin, and so we took turns making different parts. It was really neat, and really fun."

And the couples loved that it's a practical skill they can continue using.

"We would definitely feel more comfortable blacksmithing and feel like it's something that we could do in the future," says Stoessner.

Ladd Bayliss, executive director at the farm, says it's easy to read about history but the goal is to provide a hands-on learning experience.

"We ... try really hard to accentuate and amplify the importance of normal people who lived on Roanoke Island before the first flight and after the Lost Colony," says Bayliss.

"So, I think by providing events where you can bring a partner and learn really simple ways of heating metal and turning it into very practical shapes and artwork is a really great way to understand the history of this place and the people who survived here in really challenging conditions."

To learn more about Island Farm and upcoming workshops, visit <https://obcinc.org/visit-our-sites/island-farm> , check out @IslandFarmRoanokeIsland on Facebook or call 252-473-6500.

Blacksmith Randy Hodges demonstrates his trade. Randy Hodges, of Manteo Blacksmith Shop, walks participants through his trade during a recent Blacksmith Date Night at Island Farm in Manteo. In late November at Island Farm in Manteo, some couples got an opportunity to learn the trade of blacksmithing from a skilled expert and create a beautiful horseshoe fish to hang on their wall. courtesy Island Farm courtesy Island Farm courtesy Island Farm

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