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Ye old village blacksmith still on job in Chepachet

Sullivan forges on with second career restoring keepsakes

By LOUIS BLEIWEIS
Written for The Call

GLOCESTER — Under the spreading chestnut tree, the village smithy stands.

The line from literature learned in high school English class tells only in part what is occurring on a quiet, tree-lined Chepachet street.

Missing is the chestnut tree, long ago the victim of a blight in New England.

Present and thriving, however, is the blacksmith shop of Rick Sullivan at 24 Pine Orchard Road.

Sullivan is a Quincy, Mass., native who moved to the village nearly three years ago after spending several years managing the Coggeshall Farm in Bristol, where he also had a blacksmith shop. It is a trade he learned over a period of years at Old Sturbridge Village.

At the age of 38, he has had a varied career after earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts and a master's degree in special education from Providence College.

Now he commutes daily to Seekonk, where he is a special education teacher in the school system.

After settling in Chepachet, he built a 24-by-24-foot shop on his property to ply his second vocation as a blacksmith.

"Blacksmithing is making a comeback after bogging down in the 1940s and 1950s," Sullivan said. "Restoration of old homes is a big business today, and there is need for a blacksmith to craft historical reproductions, hand-wrought iron, fireplace items and lighting devices."

Centered in his workshop is a Buffalo Forge stove capable of producing 3,000 degrees of heat and fueled by soft pea coal the owner purchases from Braintree, Mass., and Cumberland suppliers. Fastened to it is a hood that Sullivan himself made.

The blacksmith said he usually has the stove temperature reach 2,000 degrees, sufficient to bend and shape steel for his purposes at his 115-pound anvil, which he has now found to be too small, leading to a search for a larger replacement.

At the anvil, he has a hammer, cutter, leg vise, tongs, chisels, punches and other tools important in his work.

Recently, Sullivan received a folk arts grant from the Rhode Island Council on the Arts to teach his craft on a one-on-one basis.

When he is not occupied in the classroom, Sullivan works evenings, weekends and in the summer at the blacksmith trade he has come to love.

Now there is even more to occupy his time. He and his wife, the former Joan Thibeault, welcomed their first child, Timothy, within the past year.

Recently, the Glocester Heritage Society sponsored a tour to the Sullivan shop, the first in a series of visits to area artisans. Twenty-five people crowded into the small shop and marveled at the host's skill at the anvil.