

What I Did on my Vacation
or
A Summer Camp for Adults
Steve Bloom

I had the opportunity to take the sword-making course under Don Fogg at the John C. Campbell Folk School in late September. My advice, in a nutshell, is that if you can possibly take a course at the Folk School, do it.

The experience starts with check-in (Sunday afternoon) at Keith Hall and getting familiar with the campus, a number of shops, studios, and residences that are scattered on both sides of the main road on somewhat hilly terrain (especially to a Floridian). After an evening orientation, our first meal at the Dining Hall (when the bell rings, you go in – later in the week, you tend to salivate at the sounds of bells), we made our ways to our respective studios. For the smiths, that's the Whitaker shop, down the road, over the hill, and far away (actually not a bad walk if you have knees, possible on a bike, and driveable for wimps like me). At the shop, we settled in, selected a station, adjusted anvil heights (report on just how that was done will be forthcoming), met our fellow smiths and the instructors (Don Fogg and Chuck Patrick), and were given a reasonable idea of what to expect for the next week.

My wife and I were staying at Rock House - where the rooms are so small, that the mice (if there were any) would be hunch-backed - Ok, they weren't that small, but I couldn't resist. The room was more than adequate considering how little time we spent there and there was a large common area plus the porch with rockers (which we actually did get to use one evening).

Monday morning started with the stumble into the Keith House coffee room to inject the first dose of caffeine. Don and a few of the other students were there talking knives and that set the pattern for the rest of the mornings. At 7:45 was 'Morning Song' (group-sing-alongs, banjo-picking, mountain humor, local history, etc. depending on the day). At 8:15, the bell (remember the bell?) rang, and it was time for breakfast. The food was served family style, was more than adequate (unless too many smiths sat at the same table), and was quite good (with the exception of meatless Wednesday - but more on that later).

By 9:00, we were in the shop, ready to rock. Our first task was to create a **sen** - a Japanese draw knife used to plane steel from the forged sword. We made the **sens** from 5160 (8" of rusty truck spring) by drawing out a tang on either end, leaving 4 to 5" in the center which was forged into a concave/convex form (see drawing). The **sens** were heat-cycled, quenched in oil and drawn in low-temp (400 F) molten salt. We then scrounged in the reject wood pile for handle material and completed the tools. After a talk on correct forging technique and stretching exercises, we got to work banging out our swords - and I was pleasantly surprised to see how well the hammers I had made for the course worked (articles describing them have appeared or will appear in the near future). By the end of the day, I had a rough **wakizashi** (24" or so long) though it should have been a **katana** (33" long) - never let *anyone* (including the instructor) distract you when you have steel in the fire ...arggg.

Tuesday was consumed with refining the shape, smoothing out hammer marks, setting the tang, and heat-cycling

the blade (a task handled by Chuck Patrick after he approved of the preliminary work). The next task was clearing the surface. That was accomplished by first scrubbing with a coarse stone (hint: get the stones used to grind concrete and

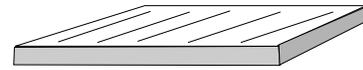
terrazzo) to remove scale, then scraping with the **sen** to refine the ridge line and blade surfaces. Of course, all hammer marks had to go (I got to *hate* hammer marks). The sword was then draw-filed (mill bastard, second cut, smooth in succession). There was a lunch and dinner in there somewhere between 9:00 AM and 9:00 PM, but when you're having so much fun, you don't tend to notice.

Wednesday was the day my chunk of 1050 became a sword. After the surface prep was approved (and after Don demonstrated the technique), a satanite coat was applied to the blade in a quasi-Japanese manner (using a frosting wand from K-mart). It was carefully brought up to critical temperature in a long gas forge and quenched in water. Apparently my technique was passable since the blade survived. This is cool stuff. Wednesday was also vegetarian day at the Dining Hall. It so happened that Col. Tim Ryan invited the smiths to try his Uncle Ringo Ryan's Chili Beef Stew (a product of the cooking course being taught by our favorite auctioneer). We didn't need a second invitation. Wednesday night was also demo night at the Whitaker Shop - Don showed how to quench a blade to any and all students and staff from the other courses. This is another nice tradition of the Folk School - the various instructors run a small demonstration on a given evening for the whole school.

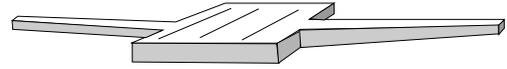
Thursday and Friday were sanding time - it takes a long time to hand sand a sword. Don demonstrated the appropriate technique and then it was up to us to sand, sand, and sand some more. We begin with 120 grit (wet/dry paper on a wood block), refined the lines with 220 and 320 EDM stones, worked through 320,400, 600, 1200, 1500 and 2000 grit papers. By that time, the temper line (**hamon**) was beginning to be visible. A little ferric chloride solution completed the unveiling. Friday night was show-and-tell for all the courses - there is some mind-boggling stuff being produced at the Folk School!

Saturday was pick it up, say good-bye, and hit the road. Overall it was a great experience with almost no negative aspects (I did mention meatless Wednesday, right?) And I would (and will) do it again.

5160 - 2 x 8 x 3/8"



Draw out tangs



Shape into concave beneath and convex above



Cross-section of tool

