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Blacksmithing an essential part of community

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

Relatively few young people today have witnessed a blacksmith at work. These men usually had great skill and knowledge of how to create and/or repair many necessities of a bygone era—things like nails, horseshoes, wheels, agricultural implements, weapons, and chains.

Traditionally, the “blacksmith” was called “black” to distinguish his work with heavy metals such as iron and steel from that of a whitesmith (or tinsmith, who worked with light metals), gunsmith (who worked with guns), or goldsmith (who worked with gold and precious metals). An essential part of any community before the days of the automobile, blacksmiths played an important role in Arkadelphia through the years.

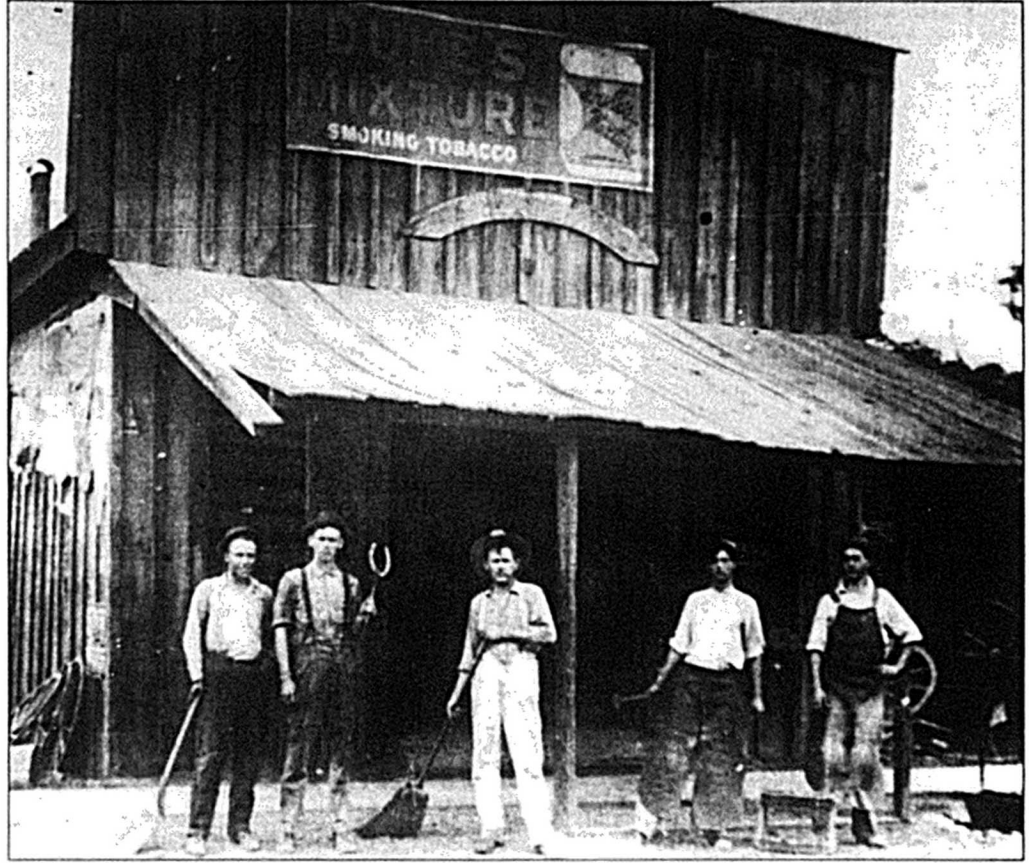
In fact, one of Arkadelphia’s earliest citizens was a blacksmith. Adam Blakely opened a blacksmith shop in about 1810, making it one of the small village’s first businesses. His enterprise sat on the west side of the Ouachita River near where the highway bridge crosses the river today. So significant was his role in the community, that the town came to be called Blakelytown—the name did not change to Arkadelphia until about 1840.

For many decades after Blakely began his operation, the town always had at least one blacksmith shop. Advertisements for such businesses may be found in local newspapers

through the years. The shops offered services such as shoeing horses, making and repairing wagon wheels, sharpening plows, as well as actually making horseshoes, wheels, and plows.

Blacksmith shops came to be popular places in Arkadelphia, especially for those who came to town from outlying areas. Men played games such as dominos and checkers while they waited for their items to be repaired, and, they just talked. The shops became social centers and well as places of business. Local historian Farrar Newberry recalled that there were often as many as five or six blacksmithing enterprises in Arkadelphia during his boyhood in the early twentieth century. For example, the shop of Joe Miller faced east on Fifth, between Main and Crittenden. It is believed that the last shop to remain active was John Duke’s business. At one time, the Duke family’s shop (John’s father, Wade, was a blacksmith, too) stood at the southeast corner of Seventh and Clay. John later moved the operation to Fifth Street between Crittenden and Crawford.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230.1360) or the Clark County Historical Association’s Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245.5332).



IMAGES COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Top photo, Duke’s Blacksmith Shop in 1909. Alfred Duke (right), John Duke (second from right), W.H. Duke (holding horseshoe), and the Wood boys. At right, Miller Blacksmith Shop, man seated is John Butler.