



President's Message Fall 2015

The Present, The Past, and The Future

The Present

I have had the honor to serve on the ABANA board and also serve as its President. In November, my term is up and I will be off the board. I would like to thank all the board members that I've served with for their hard work. It has been interesting at times getting 15 board members to agree on something. But for the most part, once something was decided, we worked as a team to do it. I think we have made progress but there is more to do. Dimitri Gerakaris was one of ABANA's founding members. He sent me the following questions and answers. The questions are from Matt McGee who was concerned about recording the basics of early ABANA history. Thank you Matt and Dimitri

Dimitri has provided us with great insight into ABANA's formation and purpose. He has said it better than I can . . . I believe it still holds true today.

The Past

1. Why did the founders of ABANA feel it was important to preserve the old ways of blacksmithing?

We knew we were not going into competition with the changes in mode of production brought about by industrialization. The day of the blacksmith hammering out every tool and piece of hardware is gone. We found artist-blacksmiths were primarily coming from an art and design background and were interested in using the traditional techniques of the blacksmith to fashion new and artistic works according to our own visions. Ivan Bailey and I both spoke German and knew of the German word *Kunstschmied*. The term "artist-blacksmith", which does not have a counterpart in English, is a direct translation of that German word. We wanted to go beyond the then-current technique of only welding found metal objects together which is very limiting and restricts you to what you find in the scrap yard. We wanted to be able to make exactly what we envisioned. This applied to items that were strictly sculptural, as well as items which were functional and artistic in nature, such as gates, furniture, weathervanes, and lighting fixtures.

2. What was the long term goal for ABANA when you established it? How has it met or not met those expectations?

Despite our humble origins, I purposely called it the Artist Blacksmiths' Association of North America because I knew this had international appeal and was not restricted to just one country. Please note the correct position of the apostrophe after the S. Somewhere along the line, somebody put it between the H and the S which connotes the possessive of only one blacksmith.

I suspected we would have continued get-togethers, but given that the movement would eventually grow to far greater size and geographical area, the vast majority of our communications and education would have to occur through our journal, *The Anvil's Ring*. When we founded ABANA, I was preoccupied with not only running my own forge, but with laying up stone walls building a new forge and a new home. Alex Bealer and his secretary Joan Abbott got things going by putting out a stapled newsletter of several pages under that name *The Anvil's Ring*, which I co-edited, and upon moving into my new forge and home, took over the editorship of the *Anvil's Ring*. I had edited and produced a quarterly magazine when I was a student at Dartmouth and my wife, Mary, also had layout and publishing experience so we turned it into a magazine. We did the labor intensive, pre-computerized publishing for four years until we began our family. We realized we had established and refined the format of the *Anvil's Ring* which could be continued by others. We had established a circulation of around 6,000. We have since been delighted to see the *Anvil's Ring* continued by others, as it is the lifeblood of the organization.

3. What would you like to see happen in the next 50 years for ABANA and blacksmithing in general?

The most notable feature of ABANA from the beginning was the openness of all the members to freely share information so nobody would have to re-invent the wheel and not be petty in keeping secrets. That has largely

continued and is one of ABANA's greatest strengths. We were also very fortunate to begin with people who would not let their egos get in the way and NOT focus simply on growing ABANA for the sake of making an organization larger and more powerful, and especially not for organization leaders to set themselves up as something special. The greatest threats to ABANA in its history so far have been when individuals strayed from that philosophy and saw ABANA or their leadership positions and egos as the end goal. Fortunately, those deviations have more than once been corrected by the other level-headed members and the course re-aligned to the founding purposes of freely sharing information. If in the long run that simple goal can be kept straight, ABANA will continue and prosper.

4. What do you feel are the most important things blacksmithing can teach children today?

We face the danger of our nation no longer producing things. We face the danger of retreat to a virtual and digital world. We face the danger of passive lives. Blacksmithing can teach children that we can actually make things and produce what we want. As helpful as computers may be, blacksmithing can show them the physical world is infinitely more real and more rewarding than the digital world. It can show them we do not have to passively take only that which is offered to us, but that we can actively make the world in which we live and make it according to our own ideas and inclinations.

5. Why Westville? Why did the founders of ABANA consider Westville an appropriate place to begin the organization?

Westville was a natural place to meet because it already had a forge and we were allowed to set up a number of smaller portable forges, and hammer on into the night as long as we wished. Westville president Joe Mahon graciously made us feel most welcomed. We did not meet there with the intention of setting up an organization. Alex Bealer called for a one-time gathering of all the blacksmiths he knew. But that Saturday night of March 17, 1973, after the official demonstrations and talks and our hammering into the evening, we later gathered in Alex's motel room at June's and sat in a circle, going around with each providing a tip or technique. Finally back in my room at June's after 2AM, it occurred to me that we should get together on a repeated basis, and particularly to have a journal so we could keep sharing information and not have to independently re-invent the wheel. I was also very tempted to just go to sleep, as it had been a long day and because Alex had been liberally pouring, as he repeatedly chimed "Aren't we all just a bunch of nuts?"

But I fought off sleep just long enough to scribble in my notebook the framework for an organization to share the love and knowledge of smithing . . . called The Artist Blacksmiths' Association of North America. The next morning, I shared this idea with Alex and Ivan Bailey over breakfast, asking if at some point that Sunday morning, I might read that proposal to the group. Alex said, "You better watch out, you just might get elected president!" I said, "No way, I am building a new home and forge while running my business. You have a secretary, you are well-known, and would be the perfect first president. I'll help you edit the journal and we can get this off the ground. Besides, I like the way Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and then helped out, but waited to become the third president." And that's exactly what happened.

The next morning, Alex introduced me to read my proposal to the group. As I did, people all started reaching into their pockets to pull out the \$5 dues which I proposed. I could hardly enter their names and addresses fast enough into my notebook. Before we knew it, we had founded ABANA. We unanimously elected Alex president and, because I had the records, was the first secretary-treasurer. Because I did not want to be both Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, I handed all the money to Alex's neighbor, David Wall, and told him he was treasurer. The rest is history.

Dimitri Gerakaris

Canaan, New Hampshire

July 11, 2015

The Future

Where are we going? That is up to you, the Members. Let your board members know what you want. We have some things coming down the pike and I am excited to see how they work out!

Looking Forward,

David Hutchison, President