



2026 ABANA Conference Spotlight Matt Jenkins: With a Cherry on Top

by Torie Van Horne. Based on an interview with Addison de Lisle on June 11, 2025. Photos courtesy of the artist.

Matt Jenkins is an internationally recognized, award-winning Canadian blacksmith who uses hand tools and early industrial equipment to create designs with a timeless feel. Over the past 25 years, he has honed his skills and techniques while studying under master smiths around North America. In 2009, he received an Honorable Mention in the team forging at the World Forging Championship in Stia, Italy. Returning to Stia in 2015, Matt took home first place in the Drawing and Design category. In addition to daily forging for clients, he leads workshops at Cloverdale Forge and has taught at the John C. Campbell Folk School and the Center for Metal Arts.

Rooted deeply in a love of history and technique, Matt Jenkins has cultivated an expansive perspective on both the craft and the blacksmithing community.

When Matt was growing up, his father worked as a historical reenactor and self-taught blacksmith at Lower Fort Garry National Historic Site in Saint Andrews, Manitoba, about 30 minutes north of Winnipeg. Like most teenagers who don't want to admit their parents are cool, Matt tried to stay away from the forge. However, that all changed the summer Matt was a university student studying engineering and looking for a job.

"I applied to work at the Fort because it was right down the road, and they were like 'Jenkins, Jenkins, your dad's a blacksmith, you can be a blacksmith.'

Left: The basis for the book *HOOKED*, July hooks of the #366Hook project. 2016.

Then it was trial by fire because I had never spent any time in the shop until it became part of a job. In the end, I had the most luxurious situation I can imagine; I got paid for four months of the year to practice because the park didn't really need anything, they just needed me to talk about blacksmithing. It was my job to practice and learn about it, and pass along knowledge to other people. How ideal is that? It's the best job I've ever had," Matt jokes, "It's been all downhill from there."

After working at Lower Fort Garry for four years, Matt attended a conference in Bemidji, Minnesota, with the Northern Metalsmith Guild. "I went there thinking I had this blacksmithing thing down. I thought I knew more than anyone," Matt admits, "Then once I was there, I realized I knew nothing. It expanded my whole world."

Hungry for more knowledge and experience, Matt applied for the work-study program at John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina. For six months, Matt practiced smithing every day and took a new class with different instructors nearly every week. "The diversity of people you interact with is crazy," He says, "It was another eye-opening experience. It taught me there's more to blacksmithing than fire pokers, spatulas, and hookeys."

While at the Folk School, Matt also met Karen "Rudy" Rudolph, his longtime partner in life and forging. Matt continued to pursue engineering as his career path, but blacksmithing was always there, lingering on the sidelines. "It's a bit of an addiction, I have never known any blacksmith who has managed to stick it out that is not a little bit on the addicted side."

Matt was unsure how to turn his passion into an occupation, but when Rudy moved to the Jenkins' family farm in Selkirk, they decided to take the plunge and open Cloverdale Forge: a full-time production shop and teaching space.

"That was about eight or nine years ago," Matt recalls, "and it's a very different world working full time as a blacksmith than the flexibility of having it as a side hustle. The problem used to be, how do

you make blacksmithing full-time? Now the problem is how do you balance the fun and the play with the drudgery of a 300-unit run of a single piece?"

Matt has come up with a solution to this last problem with something he calls 'the cherry.'

"So, you know how when you're having a banana split and you save the best bite for the end? Every product that Rudy and I make or design always needs to have that cherry on top. We make a product that we call "Handy Pokers." They're just fire pokers with a hand at one end in various poses, and they're ridiculous, but people love them. In order to speed up their production, we have the hands laser cut, and then I position the fingers and forge weld them onto the handles. The practice of the lap weld and the jump weld is what makes it all worthwhile. I can crank through a bunch of those, and each time there is the challenge of 'will it work this time?' After a while, you get pretty consistent at it, but that's the cherry for that project. The cherry is when there are a bunch of drudge steps, and then there's one real sweet little bit of forging that you get to do. That's where the joy comes from."

It was around the same time that Matt developed his philosophy for 'the cherry' that he also undertook the personal challenge that would become the foundation for his book, *Hooked*.

"I was complaining to Rudy about how my work was getting boring, so she said, 'Well, we need more hooks. Why don't you do one of those one-creative-thing-a-day challenges?' So she showed me an example - I think it was *A Year of Spoons* - and I said, 'Okay, I can do that.'

It was sometime just after Christmas when I went into the shop with Instagram open, and I decided to make one hook for every day of the year. When I got back to the house, Rudy had seen the post, and she said, 'A year!? I meant maybe a month. What are you, crazy?'

Decorative grille forged during a Charley Orlando workshop in 2002, 14 x 14 x 1.5 in.





I didn't even know if I could make 300 different hooks. The mystery of the project was wonderful. As a social media challenge, I also had a built-in cheerleading section. It was really nice to put something out there and have people respond so positively. It was like having a workout buddy, someone to hold your feet to the flames and say, 'what's it going to be today?' Some days it was almost midnight, and I didn't have anything done, and then when I posted my piece, I would get comments like, 'I wasn't sure you were gonna make it today.' It was wonderful.

Looking back on it, the best part was that I got to try lots of new things with no consequences. It was a good lesson in the ability to drop something that wasn't working, and start with something fresh tomorrow."

Eventually, the challenge became both a traveling

show and a book. "We were very lucky that the Manitoba Craft Council was putting together a new gallery space, and they had an open slot to fill. We arranged all 366 hooks on boards, and it became their first solo show there. As luck would have it, ABANA picked it up, and the show went to Arizona, Nebraska, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, then to Ontario for CanIRON 2023. Then, thanks to a graphic designer named Tyler Friesen and Rudy's tireless efforts, it became a book. Rudy really deserves all the credit for that. If it had been up to me, there would just be a three-ring binder with a bunch of paper in it."

A casual observer at Cloverdale Forge would notice that the yin and yang of struggle and joy come in all forms for Matt; from production work to

