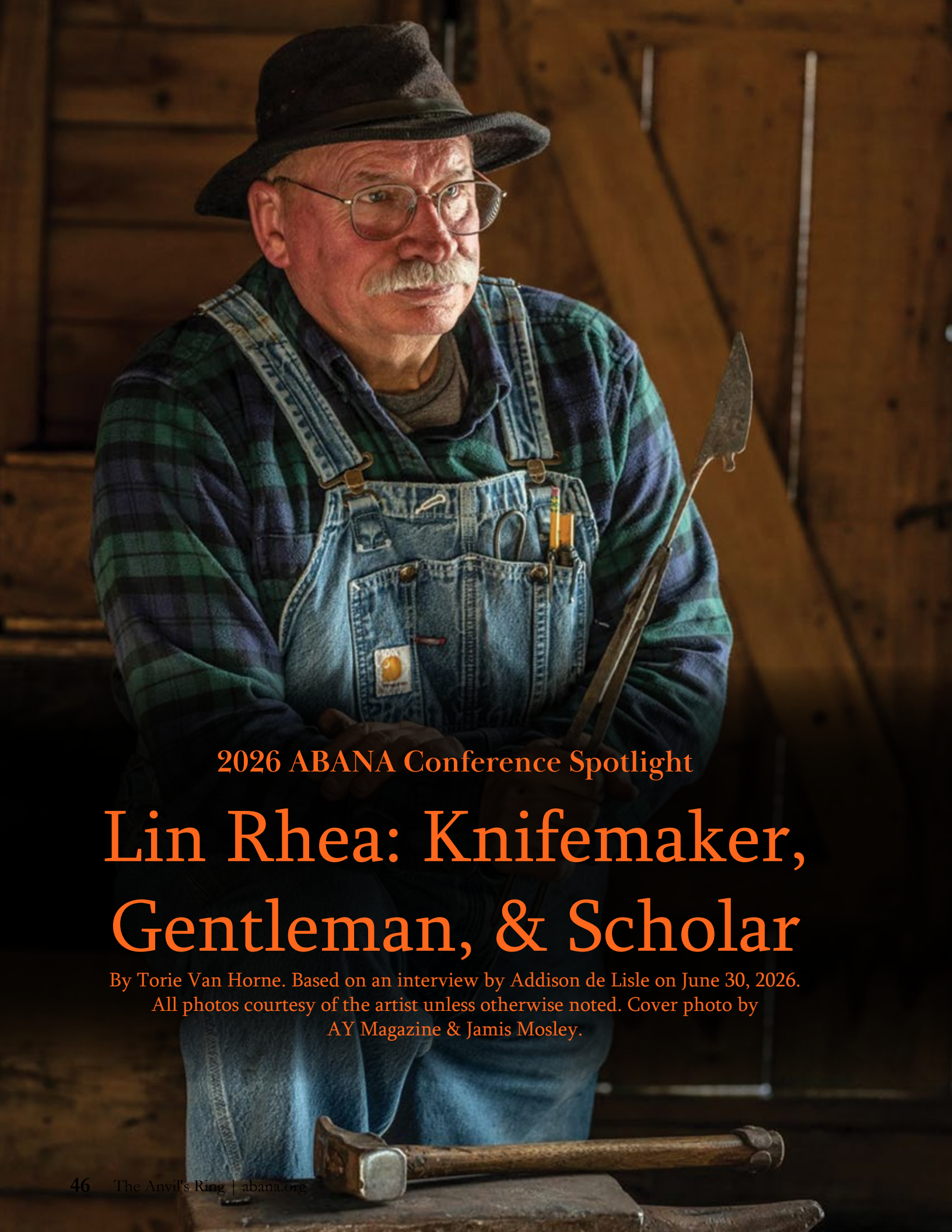




2026 ABANA Conference Spotlight

Lin Rhea: Knifemaker, Gentleman, & Scholar

By Torie Van Horne. Based on an interview by Addison de Lisle on June 30, 2026.

All photos courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted. Cover photo by
AY Magazine & Jamis Mosley.

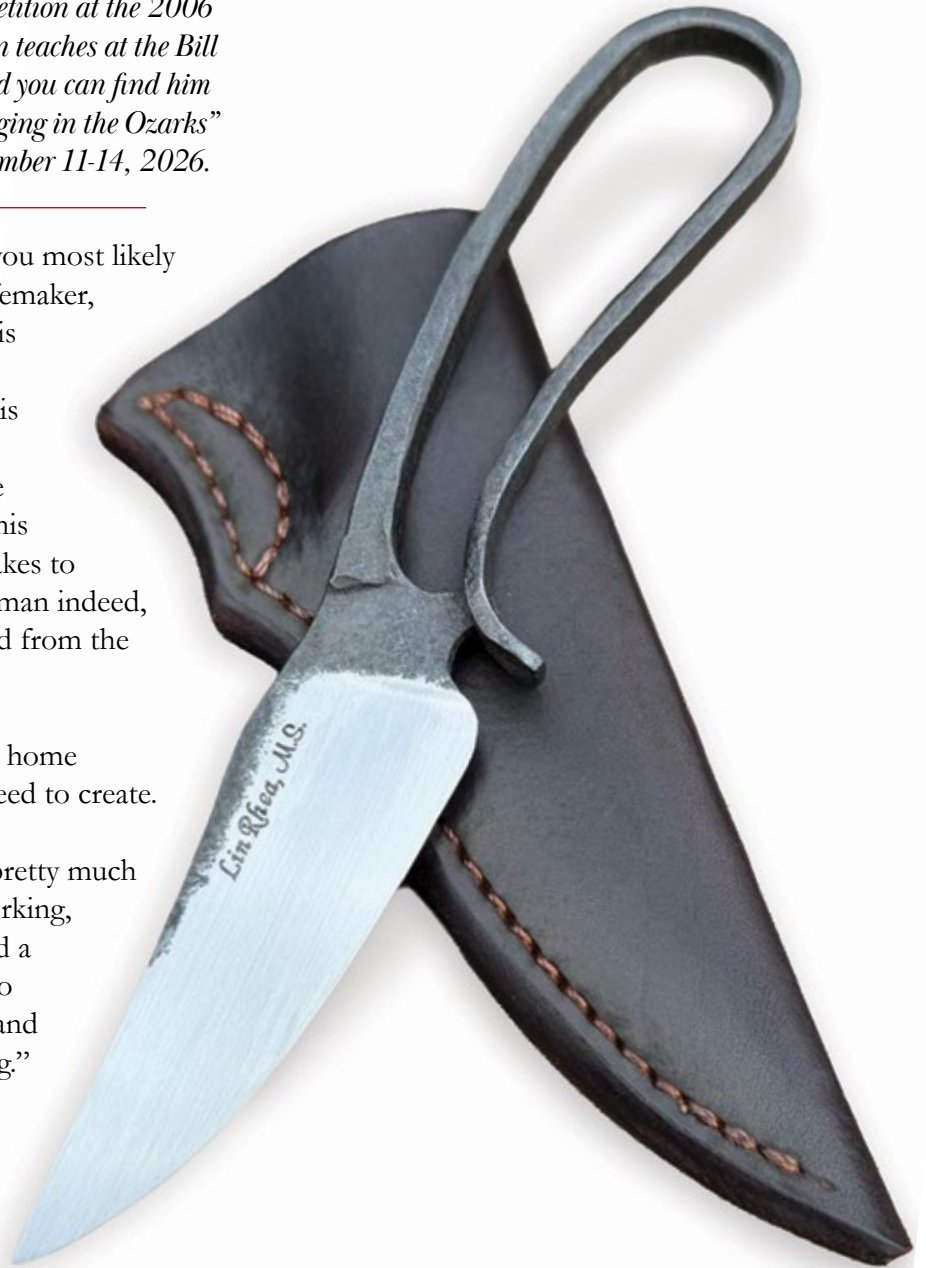
Lin Rhea is a knifemaker and blacksmith living, working, and teaching in Arkansas on the Eastern edge of the Ouachita Mountains. Growing up as a 'country boy,' Lin says a knife was a necessity, not just for looks. He formally began making knives in 2002, earned his Master Smith (MS) designation from the American Bladesmith Society in 2009, and has since won several competitions, including the John White MS Memorial Best Bowie award in 2018 and the World Championship Cutting Knife Competition at the 2006 Blade Show in Atlanta, Georgia. Lin teaches at the Bill Moran School of Bladesmithing, and you can find him at ABANA's 2026 Conference, "Forging in the Ozarks" in Bentonville, Arkansas, this November 11-14, 2026.

If you know the name Lin Rhea, you most likely know his work as a decorated knifemaker, and have perhaps even heard of his signature piece: the X-Rhea. You may, however, be unaware that he is something of an Indiana Jones of historical blacksmithing, or that he came to forging ostensibly late in his career. One conversation is all it takes to realize that Lin is a singular gentleman indeed, who seems to experience the world from the inside out.

After decades as a carpenter and a home builder, Lin could not shake the need to create.

"I've had a shop on my property pretty much from the beginning. I did woodworking, cabinets, you name it. I just needed a shop. I'm one of those people who has got to have a place to get out and putter around and make something."

For years he wanted to make knives, but the cost in time away from work always felt too high. "I've used knives all my life for hunting and fishing. I did make a few on my own, but the truth is I didn't know what I was doing. I made some that looked pretty decent, but I had no idea if they would function properly."



Finally, in 2002 Lin's wife, Kay, decided it was time to make this dream a reality, and insisted that he take a proper knifemaking course at the Bill Moran School of Bladesmithing in Texas. Lin dove straight into a two-week Introduction to Bladesmithing class, and describes that first experience as "a real eye opener."

For Lin, blacksmithing felt like second nature. No stranger to crafting three-dimensional objects or wielding a hammer, it turned out he had an aptitude for it.

"At first my goal was to take a course once a year just to build on that. In the meantime, I would acquire equipment, use my imagination, practice, and just do the best I could. But then I got into cutting competitions, which require you to make your own knife. To be any good at these cutting competitions, you have to understand the geometry of Bowie knives. The knife has also got to be comfortable and suitable. Participating in these competitions helped me a lot."

Ultimately, Lin won the World Championship title at the 2006 Blade Show in Atlanta, Georgia, cementing his commitment to the craft.

"That win was a big deal. I really didn't know how big a deal it was because I was so green and gullible. My mentors encouraged me to go, and I remember thinking, 'I don't know if I can make it down there. I'm just a country boy, you know.' That win propelled me to really try harder. It actually showed me that there were a lot of people counting on me."

While Lin continued his blademaking, he also began to delve into the history of forging, tracing his love of knives backwards into technique and materials.

"In 2010 I began working for the Historic Arkansas Museum in Little Rock. Since I had experience forging blades, it was a short hop, skip, and a jump to forging historic items like hardware and tools. I began working with Peter Ross, and we became friends. Peter is arguably one of the best smiths I have ever known. I generally defer to him whenever I have any questions because he's so good at historic smithing."





Photo edit by Jocelyn Frasier.

In recent years, another professional friendship became life changing for Lin, when he met and began working with the late retired rocket scientist, bladesmith, and historian, Jim Batson, kicking off Lin's transition from historical creator to historical scholar.

"It still hurts a little that he's gone. He was a big influence on me. He was a wonderful historian. He logged thousands and thousands of miles driving across the country to look at archives and historical blacksmithing work. I went with him for some of that. He was looking for details pertaining to certain makers, trying to fill in blanks in the narrative with historic facts. Especially for legends like James Black, or Rezin Bowie. In this area, Jim's research was invaluable.

I'm also part of a research group he was in. We've got archaeologists, we've got historians, we've got blacksmiths. I'm in the group because I make knives and I understand construction. We have the blessing of the Historic Arkansas Museum, who owns several historic knives. We can go into collections to conduct testing to date them. We X-ray them to literally see what's inside, and how they are made because sometimes the maker did things inside the knife you can't see with the naked eye.

In the steel making process of the early 1800s, we didn't have modern techniques, we didn't have modern steels, we didn't have alloys. It was just basically iron with carbon. In the 1860s and '70s, new steel started entering the market. With testing we can validate which period it is reported to be from.

"Now when a James Black knife comes out of the woodwork somehow, we'll be invited to take a look at it. There are characteristics of James Black's authentic work that are common amongst the knives we know that he made. We have a pivotal knife that sets the precedent, and we use it to determine how many features match. We've come across fakes, too. We document modern tool marks, and any differences between these knives and authentic ones. We have to go about the whole process in a really logical way. Some of these knives are nearly 200 years old, and they're worth as much as a famous painting. It's so exciting to see it all come together. It leads to a lot of extra rabbit trails, but that's ok."



Photo by Caleb Royer.

One direct rabbit trail Lin can trace from his work on historic blacksmithing is the invention of his own X-Rhea knife.

“One year I went out to North Carolina to see Peter Ross in his shop, where we were making a historic padlock. I had a lot of hours on the road, and I was doing a lot of thinking about this padlock. The way it's constructed and put together is just mortise and tenon joinery. So I started thinking about what other projects I could make that would use that technique.

“I had been playing around with Rat tail knives, but I just couldn't get excited about them because they have so much flex. They just don't feel solid to me.

I started to think about how I could take the idea of a blacksmith knife and improve it so it's solid and functional. Something you can depend on.

“I was in the museum blacksmith shop one day and I drew this knife. It was just a little sketch on the floor in chalk. I attached the tail to that little standoff with a rivet. I started forging and ended up making one right there and then. Over time I just kept improving things, and now it's really not so much a knife maker project - it's a blacksmith project.

In true Lin fashion, the beauty of the object isn't just the utility of the blade or its striking appearance; it's the process of creation itself.

“One of the reasons why I think it’s such a good design is that it creates an opportunity for forge practice. Tapering, upsetting, punching - it’s a three-dimensional object that develops in stages because you have to get the pre-form right to start with. If you don’t get the pre-form right, the finished product is not going to be right. It helped me to envision the end product in stages and develop a specific process. It impressed upon me the need for every project to have a process. You can tweak the process and change the whole product. I find that fascinating. I want the process to be teachable, repeatable, and consistent. The challenge has made me a better smith.

Our bodies just respond and appreciate something that’s made ergonomically proportionate. Our eyes go to it. It’s not just a clunky piece of metal with a sharp edge. I wanted to have some positive and negative space. I want to have flow. I want it to be a blacksmith sculpture.”

Perhaps unsurprising for a historian, Lin places huge emphasis on mastery of smithing fundamentals in both his work and his teaching, and worries about tools that skip over deeper experiential knowledge.

"I would like to see bladesmiths use more blacksmithing. I would like to see them *not* run to the side of the boat that has all the fancy tools, the CNC routers, the laser engravers, the laser cutters. Not that I don’t like lasers. I want upcoming smiths to know that *they* are the most important tool in their shop. You can’t know if something is going to work unless you try it. Sometimes you just have to visualize the process and go for it.”

When asked what other advice he has for beginning smiths, Lin’s immediate response is, “Use good material.”

“This is one of my pet peeves. Someone asked me once what steel I use when I practice. I said, ‘I don’t practice. I just forge things.’ To some people that might sound arrogant, but I don’t mean it that way at all. Simply put, I don’t waste time using anything but the appropriate material. I don’t substitute lower quality material and just go through the motions. If I’m making something, I want to make it the right way.”

For Lin, the history of blacksmithing isn’t something preserved behind museum glass; it is living, breathing knowledge passed from hand to hand in a world increasingly obsessed with shortcuts. The real holy grail of being a bladesmith or a blacksmith isn’t just the finished piece; it’s understanding the process that brought you there. 

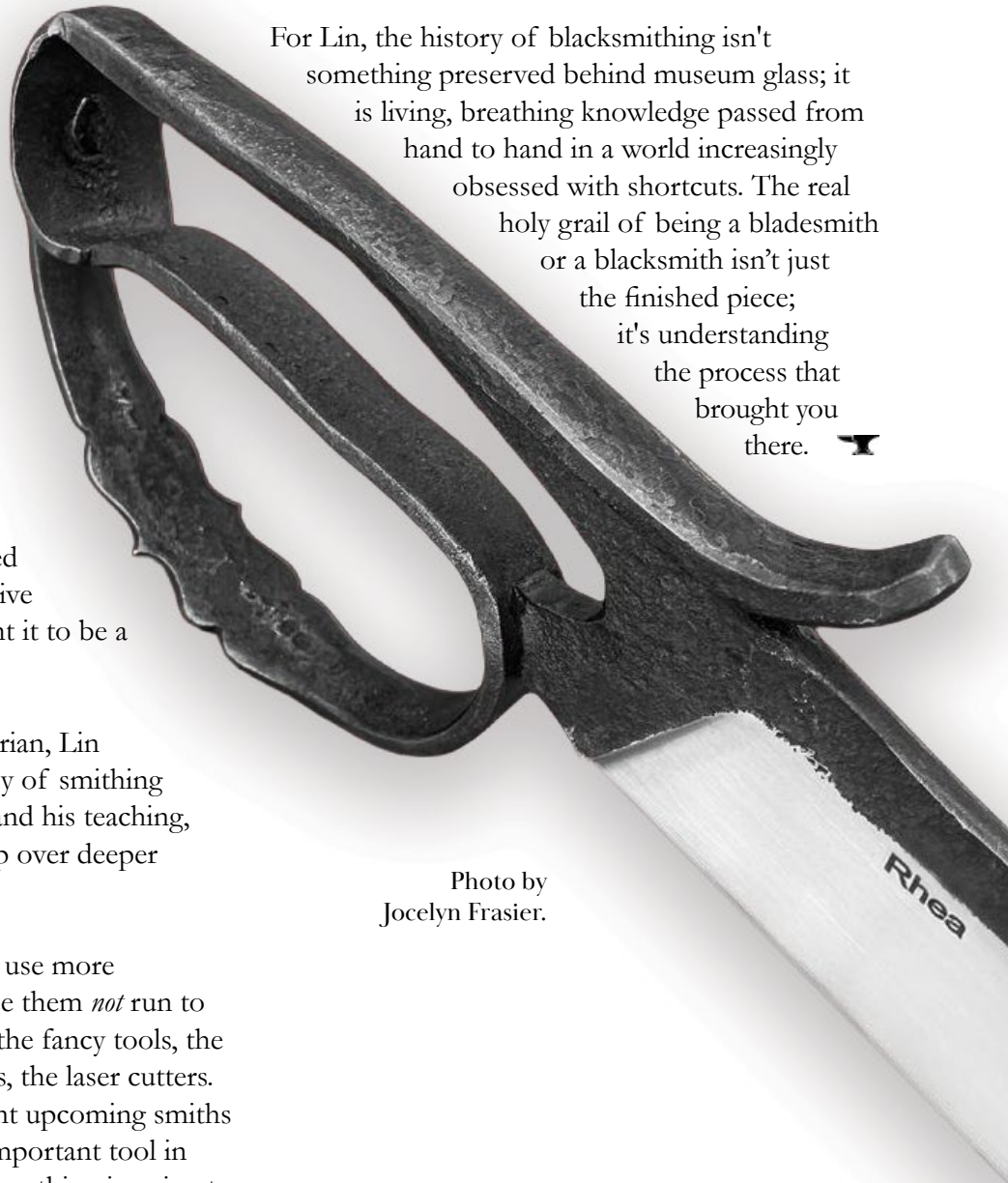


Photo by
Jocelyn Frasier.

See more of Lin Rhea's work on his website
rheaknives.com & on Instagram at
[@lin_rhea_knifemaker](https://www.instagram.com/lin_rhea_knifemaker)