

PROFESSION: Blacksmith

COMPANY: Desert Rat Forge, Cave Creek, Ariz.; (602) 509-1543; desertratforge.com, oldfartsmakingstuff.com

MEDIUM: Steel

TRAINING: Primarily self-taught

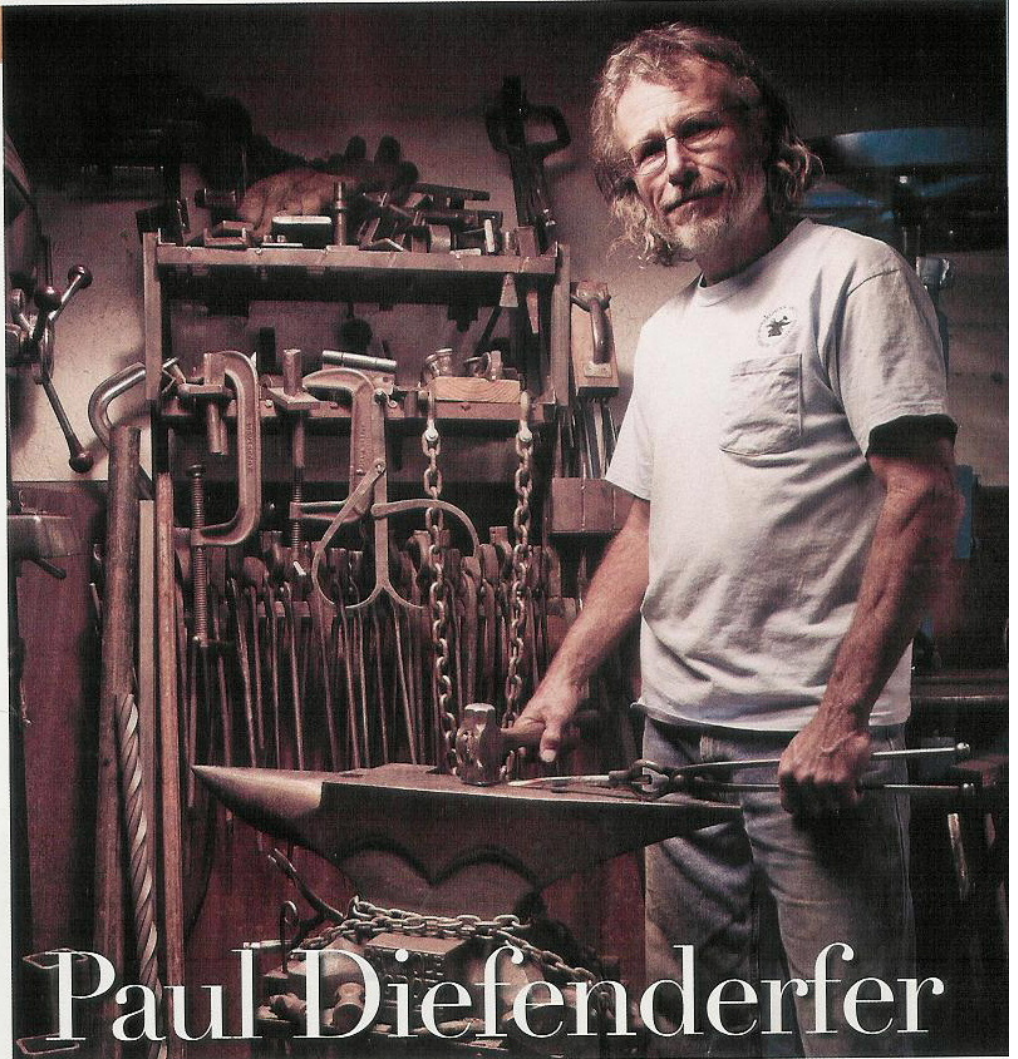
BACKGROUND: Paul “Dief” Diefenderfer was working as a computer programmer when he came across a blacksmith who was forging steel at an arts and crafts festival in 2001. “I was completely fascinated,” he recalls. “I attended a couple seminars, read tons of books and just started heating stuff up. My first piece looked like it went down the garbage disposal, but to be good you have to embrace failure.”

Diefenderfer perfected his skill with lots of practice, turning lumps of metal into ornamental pieces that are also durable. Driven by an urge to create, he now leaves his mark on gates, railings, fireplace screens, door pulls, wall hangings, candlesticks and more. His take on the age-old craft follows a simple rule: “I don’t do straight lines.” Fences lean and flow with the terrain, double-door gates are asymmetrical, and hand-forged designs on doors extend beyond their expected shapes.

“If you draw a box, people tend to stay inside it—it’s easy, quick and you don’t have to think. But I don’t get in the box in the first place. Everyone is fascinated with the plumb and level, but I find they are highly overrated,” he deadpans.

Diefenderfer prides himself on the detail and quality of his work. “The last half of my job is the final 5 percent,” he insists. “I don’t go to the hardware store and buy a latch or round doorknob. I make my own latches and square-head bolts that blend in—it’s the little things that give my work real character.”

The 53-year-old fires up his forge—which heats up to nearly 1,900 degrees—as soon as his burros’ braying awakens him. “Blacksmith fever” keeps him in front of the forge or hammering away in his garage-turned-shop until his other passion kicks in. “I thrive in the heat and work until about 3 p.m.—even in the summer—then hop on my bike, ride to the mountains and start climbing.” And if he happens to come across a discarded piece of steel or bent railroad spike while hiking, it’s pretty darn close to a perfect day. □



Paul Diefenderfer



Top: Paul Diefenderfer uses a variety of tools to hammer, bend and shape a heated piece of steel. **Above:** A pet burro named Utah was the inspiration for this door latch. **Left:** Featuring doors that are off-set, vines that stretch beyond the frame, and a peephole incorporated into the design, this heavily textured gate adds visual intrigue while keeping a property safe and secure.