

Second-Career Blacksmith Impresses With Shop-Built Items

Jack Bligh of Greensboro, N.C., built a second career as a blacksmith. "Thirty years ago, when I first retired, I wanted to stay active and do something mechanical with my hands," he says. "I took classes to make old-style black powder guns, which involved blacksmithing. But after several guns, I realized that I preferred the blacksmithing aspect. Blacksmithing grew from there into a hobby, and now it's a full-time job."

Bligh sells homemade products on his website and eBay. His grab hooks remain popular. "I do logging and had several weld failures with my 'made in China' grab hooks," he says. "I began making my own. Now I sell them in colors coordinating with John Deere and Kubota tractors." Each is priced at \$39 (free shipping is available across the U.S.), and the order includes the grab hook for a 5/16 or 3/8 chain, spacer, nuts and bolts.

Many of Bligh's projects are inspired out of necessity. "I had a tree limb go onto my 5000E series John Deere tractor, and the company wanted over \$500 for a brush guard," he says. "Instead, I made a slip-over brush guard from scrap steel for approximately \$23. It works great." He plans to perfect his design further and eventually sell the brush guards.

Bligh has also updated his grader blade for a fraction of the cost of a new one. "My previous tractor had a 7-ft. grader blade, but my new tractor is wider," he says. "I needed a longer blade to go past the wheels but didn't want to pay \$1,000 to \$3,000 for an 8-ft. grader blade. My solution was to weld on a 3/8-in. thick by 5-in. plate protruding on one side of the 7-ft. blade. It's ugly but works great!" He plans to replace it with a bolt-on piece with three studs when time allows.

Bligh's quick to offer advice for other would-be blacksmiths. "Seek out formal



Grab hooks come in various tractor colors.



Shop-built brush guard.

education. I suggest going to a school with blacksmithing classes," he says. "Tennessee Tech in Smithville actually offers a degree in blacksmithing, and there's also John C. Campbell Folk School in Cherokee County, N.C., and the Artist-Blacksmith Association of North America. You can join a local association and apprentice under an experienced blacksmith." He hopes others will find the trade as fulfilling of a second career as he has. "Don't be afraid to continue learning! I'm 84 and still enrolled in college courses. In fact, I just graduated as a certified welder."

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Nichols will torch the long hairs as a final step to better blend them with the clipped areas. The goal is a "ranch clip," in which the bulls look well-presented but natural two months later.

Cattle Service Offers Clipping All Winter

Ryan Nichols of Veteran, Wyo., manages Nichols Cattle Service, a traveling bull clipping operation. Bulls grow lots of hair in northern climates, and clipping lets customers see each bull's overall shape better. While most of his work is in Eastern Montana, Nichols also ventures to North Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado and even Minnesota and Oregon.

Nichols grew up around the industry. "My first job out of high school was sitting in a show barn, halter-breaking cattle. That line of work was really interesting to me." He soon started a mentorship with an esteemed bull clipper. "My mentor got in a jam with a big order. He needed help filling it and took me on board," says Nichols. "I got addicted to the work and loved working for him during college breaks. It was rewarding to work with all those knowledgeable people; I gained experience for setting up my own farm operation."

Today, Nichols runs a two-man operation. He clips full-time from the 1st of December to the beginning of March. That aligns with bull-selling season, which runs from the 1st of January through April. At the season's end, Nichols heads home to calve his own herd. "This job has helped me develop an 'off-farm' income source still closely tied to agriculture. Many farmers have second jobs in town, so I consider this mine."

He prices per head, but the rate varies based on factors like the size of the herd and travel distance. "Sometimes I'm traveling 13 hours for a job and spending the night in a hotel," Nichols says. "I can't charge that rancher the same rate as someone who lives an hour from me."

The trimming process starts with a quick visual analysis of each animal as it enters the trimming chute. Nichols clips from the shoulders forward, cleaning up the animal's

top line, neck, brisket, knees and hocks. As a final step, he'll torch the long hairs to better blend them with the clipped areas. The goal is what's known as a "ranch clip," where the bulls look well-presented but natural two months later.

Nichols can handle about 50 head a day in the middle of winter. "You're on your feet the whole workday," he says. "There's lots of shifting around these giant animals. We have to be on edge at all times." His favorite part of the business remains the connections with customers. Many of the ranchers he works with are some of the best in the industry, meaning he gets to use their knowledge for his operation.

Nichols believes clipping gives a stronger first impression. When bull buyers see a catalog with trimmed and cleaned-up bulls, they know that the rancher invested in them. "There's a lot of misconception that we're changing the image of cattle, but in reality, the image we're creating is the one people are familiar with anyways," he says. "A good image will sell the bull, and one animal goes for an average of \$8,000. Think of it like selling a car. You wouldn't leave McDonald's wrappers all over the trunk."

Finding a mentor early on was key for Nichols, and he suggests others interested in bull clipping do the same. He believes potential mentors will be more than willing, as finding good help remains challenging in the industry. "There can be a scarcity of people excited to perform farm work. The weather conditions can be brutal. It gets really cold. But the job is always rewarding."

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Lund drilling needed hole in a boiler on-site at a railroad preservation society.



Full-Service Custom Boiler Shop

Jeff Lund is the man to contact if you need a boiler for a steam-powered engine. The certified boilermaker has worked on boilers several stories tall, a 44-ft. steam-powered Navy cutter, and boilers for steam-powered gristmills. It all started with a small steam engine he wanted to restore.

"I had repairs done, and I wasn't happy with them," says Lund, a music teacher at the time. "I thought I could do better myself."

Once he built his own boiler, he started getting requests from others. As orders piled up, he gave his resignation to his school principal.

"You'll be back, he said," recalls Lund. That was 20 years ago. Not only has he not returned to teaching, but he operates Lund

Machine Works. It's a complete service for design, construction, repair and alteration of boilers, but also remounting of traction engines and refractory repair. The shop also has lathe and vertical and horizontal milling capabilities.

"I'll do restoration and machine work," says Lund. "But technically, I'm a boiler shop. We do new commercial equipment installations, as well as new steam boiler generator sets."

Not only does Lund build and repair boilers to national standards, but he has also designed his own machining tools, including one for forming boiler parts. This tool allows him to create replacements that match the original and meet today's code.

"I start with a tape measure and the old

boiler," says Lund. "However, to make it compliant with the current code, some of the bend radii are required to be different. There's a lot of math, a lot of thinking and a lot of planning. The forming machine lets me take a flat sheet and form the radius needed before welding the sheets together."

One thing that sets Lund apart in the steam engine repair world is his American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) certification. ASME writes the Boiler and Pressure Vessel Code (BPVC), which regulates the design and construction of boilers and pressure vessels. The code is revised every two years, making staying on top of changes vital.

"I started out wanting to repair boilers, but with the first big project, I realized it was beyond repair," says Lund. "I got certified so I could build new boilers."

Lund notes that when restoring most old steam engines, a person is better off just

starting over with a new boiler. This is especially true if the old one is starting to leak.

"You can fix a leak, but then you'll get another and another," he says.

Boiler replacement can also be necessary if it fails state testing. Lund notes that in his home state of Minnesota, ultrasonic testing of boiler thickness is mandatory, and the boiler is rated accordingly.

Lund is no longer doing multi-story boilers, which must be done on-site. Everything he does today can be done in the shop. "We're doing one for a gristmill in eastern Ohio," says Lund. "We cut the center out, and now we have to figure out how to put it back together."

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