



The Norman Blacksmith Shop

Special Thanks to

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Rob Frost: Ventura County Cattlemen's Association, Susan Gardner: Camarillo Public Library,
Tom and Theresa Marvel, Pleasant Valley Historical Society, Renee Tallent: Museum of Ventura County

Alec and Janet Nuckols Kinch, Tom Nuckols

and

John Nuckols

The Norman Blacksmith Shop

by

Beth Miller

The ringing of the hammer hitting the anvil could be heard down the road. It had a rhythm and mood all of its own. The music of the hammer and anvil worked together to create, shape and repair. In the early twentieth century, farmers needed tools made and repaired as well as wagon wheels fixed. Their horses and mules supplied the power to the plowshares cutting into the soil. The glowing warmth of the coals in the forge, especially in winter, gave a welcoming comfort as the customers arrived to have their equipment repaired, horses shod, and sit awhile with others to hear the latest local news.

Norman and Son Blacksmithing was essential to the success of ranches, farms and businesses in and around Camarillo. Established in Camarillo in 1910, Isaac "Ike" Norman did a variety of important work including repairing horse-drawn farm machinery, wagons, carriages and sleighs as well as making and repairing household implements. It's not surprising that his shop was located near the railroad tracks. The raw materials that were needed were ordered in lengths of heavy iron and steel and delivered to town by the railroad. The coal, burning in the forge, was the fuel that made the blacksmith's work possible. It was ordered by the ton and also dropped off by the train.

He could make many items for the home and farm, such as utensils for the fireplace or stove, hinges, hooks, nuts, bolts, locks, latches, chains, braces, spikes, nails, drill bits, tools and numerous other items. Eventually the world came to Camarillo and other small towns through the mail-order catalogue. As farmers ordered ready-made household and farm equipment, Ike Norman adapted by repairing and kept his business going. It would be a Camarillo mainstay for over 100 years.

A simple announcement in the Oxnard Courier on April 15, 1910 told the town of Camarillo that Norman & Son, fully equipped, was open for business. The ad listed several of their specialties.

It was reported on May 6, 1910 in the Oxnard Courier that "from simply a repair shop, he has in a few months built it into a factory where many kinds of farm implements are made and everyone is working overtime to turn out the work with promptness which is the motto of the firm. As an evidence of the business being done, the firm a few days ago ordered a ton of steel to be made into bean knives alone."

Oxnard Courier dated
Friday, April 15, 1910

**ATTENTION
FARMERS!**

We wish to announce that our new
blacksmithing and general repair
shop is completed and fully equipped.
Trip hammer installed. Special at-
tention to horseshoeing, sharpening beet
cultivators and cyclones.

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beet cultivators and cyclones.

NORMAN & SON
CAMARILLO, CAL.

Just as farmers kept up-to-date on the local news by dropping in at Norman & Son, they also kept current with the latest equipment available by watching for the ads in the newspaper. The blacksmith shop frequently featured the newest items and services in newspaper ads. "Beet beds built promptly," was publicized in December 1910.

Young John Nuckols carefully watched his grandfather, Ike Norman, work at the forge. Ike's, father, Arthur, and his grandfather had been blacksmiths. As a boy, Ike helped his father in the Ventura shop. When Ike was 21 years old, he and his father opened the Camarillo business in 1910. Ike would work there for 59 years. His daughter, Margaret, married James W. ("Bill") Nuckols who also worked in the blacksmith shop as well as farming in the Santa Rosa Valley. Their son, John Nuckols, would continue the business well into the twenty-first century.

Ike was also the blacksmith for the Camarillo Ranch. Leonard Cruz, who grew up on the Camarillo Ranch, remembered that “Ike Norman had the blacksmith shop near the big red mule barn.* The white deer were nearby. The eucalyptus trees were all around, all trimmed. There were lots of plows that needed to be fixed. I remember the belt running in the shop.”

*(*The mule barn would have been in its original location east of the Camarillo home.)*

Eduardo Escobedo and his mother Manuela, who was a Camarillo Ranch cook, lived in a small house “next door to the blacksmith shop,” said Eduardo. “Wango (a nickname) lived across the street from me and worked there all the time fixing things that broke at the Ranch.” The hammer striking the anvil was part of the everyday melody of Ranch sounds that Eduardo recalled from his youth.

In a property inventory and preparation of a site map, the blacksmith shop, along with several other buildings on the Camarillo Ranch were photographed and documented in 1998. Students, who visit the Ranch on School Tours, learn that the blacksmith held the essential job of creating and maintaining equipment. They also see a variety of blacksmith tools and horseshoes.



Camarillo Ranch Blacksmith Shop built in 1916.

Photo and information below from: The Historic Resources Survey of the Camarillo Ranch June 1998
“The building is entered from east façade through a set of sliding doors. It is painted red with white trim.”



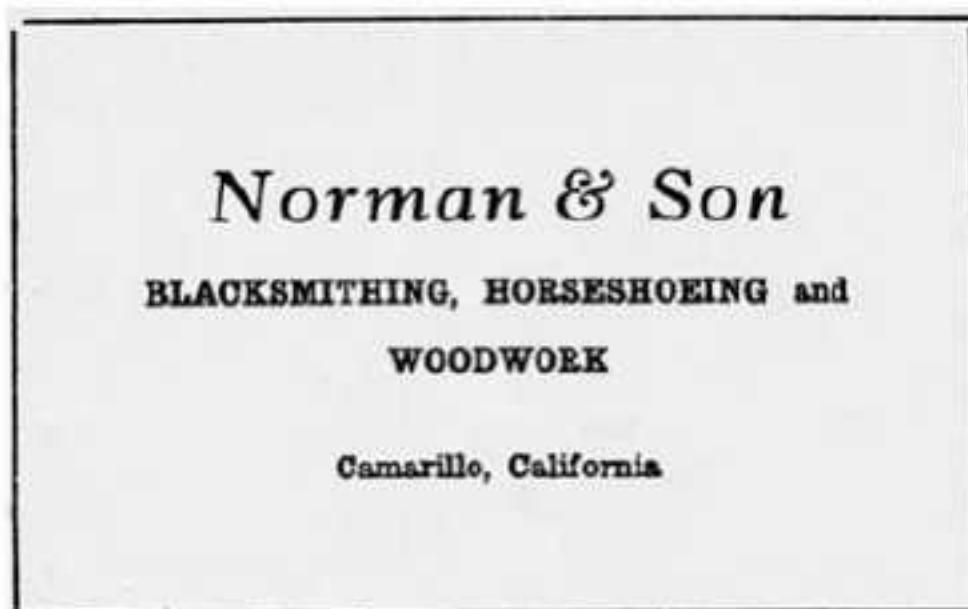
A. Norman & Son Blacksmithing

Arthur Norman set up business in Camarillo near Ventura Boulevard with his son Isaac (Ike) seen here with sleeves rolled up. Undated photo

John's father was a "mechanical genius," recalled John's cousin, Tom Nuckols. "He was always designing farm equipment to make the work more efficient." An example of just one of his projects, was a machine that could go up and down the rows and evenly trim the fruit trees.

Young John hoed the long rows of lima beans working all the way down one row just to have to come back up on the next row. His mind wandered. It wasn't on the crop. He was thinking about the tool.

At an early age, John realized that he would rather be in the blacksmith shop shaping and repairing tools. When he was about 10 years old, grandfather Ike allowed John to help out in the shop. His job was "to keep the shop clean and organize the nuts and bolts," said John. But from time to time, "when it was needed, my grandfather let me hold something as he worked on it." John loved working and learning from his grandfather. Ike taught John the old ways, but John also learned it was essential to remain up-to-date and innovative.



From: Ventura Daily Post September 17, 1924

John realized that education and training were important. As a teenager, he helped out after school and on weekends. Like in the days of his grandfather and great-grandfather, innovation was the key. From there he attended Ventura College where he studied welding and later became qualified to teach welding, the modern-day equivalent to blacksmithing. "Ninety percent of the work became welding. I taught a lot of kids who wanted to weld." The students received practical work experience and many started their own businesses.

There were other earlier locations but in 1941, Ike Norman moved the shop to what became known as Dawson Drive. It was on the same day and year John was born. This is the only location that his grandson John ever knew. When John took over the shop, he kept the Norman name above the door for the business.

In a tradition begun by John's great-grandfather, Arthur Norman, and carried on by grandfather, Ike Norman, John also made branding irons. He often looked at the door and there he could see "the plans." Ranchers frequently came in with a design that John "copied and it was the pattern to go by." It went "from paper to steel," said John.

Rob Frost, a member of the Ventura County Cattlemen's Association, compared the brands to an important modern-day document of car ownership. Simply put, "brands are a pink slip," explained Rob.



Photo courtesy of the Museum of Ventura County-Agriculture Museum
Brands made by the Norman family of blacksmiths documented cattle history in Ventura County.

Each branding iron was scorched upon the shop door. When the shop finally closed in 2011, the Ventura County Cattlemen’s Association and the Museum of Ventura County-Agricultural Museum received the door. Ongoing research to identify the brands is underway. It is a complex study to name and date these brands and their ranches.

“My grandfather did 90% of the brands. I remember an Adohr brand,” said John. “It was a heavy, sliding door. The side door was in the center section of the shop. The brands were on the inside of the door which was originally painted white by my grandfather. (*John removed Ike’s paint.*) The brands were on the lower half and took up more than a quarter of the door.” John also explained that “the brands were put on the door the same way (*direction*) as on the cattle.” A section of the door was preserved in a wooden frame made by John. The original door size was approximately 20’ x 12.’ The preserved, framed section, seen in the above photo, measures 91” long x 51” wide and is 4” thick.

John noted that in his grandfather’s earlier shops, he was told that the brands were on every door. “That was when there was more call for brands. There were more cattle ranches.” Brands are highly regulated by the state.” John noted that “brand patterns had to be approved and the rancher didn’t always get the lettering he wanted.”

In information from the MVC-Agriculture Museum: “This board has an imprint of every brand made by Norman Blacksmith Shop at its Dawson Drive location in Camarillo. When a rancher requested a new brand, it was seared on the board, which served as the side door of the shop. If

additional branding irons were ever needed, the replacements could then be tested against the imprint to see if they were exactly the same.”



Norman Blacksmith Shop was in business on Dawson Drive from 1941-2011

A blacksmith uses a hammer and anvil to shape metal. The heat from the forge brings the metal to a hot enough temperature where the metal will bend and can be shaped. They cut, bend and hammer to create tools, gates sculptures, railings and more. From the iron age until the modern era, blacksmiths were in demand for crafted architectural ironwork. Much of the decorative work, as well as bridges and buildings from the early 20th century, have been preserved. Ironwork covers a variety of artwork utensil or architectural feature, such as gates, grilles, railings and balustrades, fulfilled the functional requirement for strong structures but also provided ornamentation in architecture.

If Ike needed assistance, he would call John “by hitting the anvil a couple of times.” Depending on the job, they worked together and would coordinate the striking with their hammers. Ike used an 8 to 10 pound hammer. John used an 8 pound ball-peen hammer. “The anvil made a ringing sound,” explained John.



John Nuckols in the Norman Blacksmith Shop

Photo and recording courtesy of Alec and Janet Nuckols Kinch

The anvil and all of John Nuckols' original metal pieces that he stored under the round table are in the family collection.

"I was hitting the area that John told me is called the "horn" of the anvil (the pointed area)," explained John's son-in-law, Alec Kinch, who made the recording of John's anvil. The recording "captures the sound of what we remember, including the distinctive ring at the end."



To hear the recording of John's anvil, double-click on the speaker icon:



Recording of John Nuckols' anvil courtesy of Alec Kinch and the Nuckols Family



Photos courtesy of the Camarillo Public Library

Camarillo Public Library fireplace screen designed and crafted by John Nuckols to be functional and decorative.

Sculpted image is of St. Mary Magdalen Chapel.

The Camarillo Public Library is also home to some of John's creative ironwork. In late 2007 or early 2008, he designed the fireplace screen to be protective and eloquent as it does not interfere but rather enhances the original style. The Craftsman style fireplace, with a bas-relief, was inspired by the sculptor O.L. Bachelder. This method of sculpting entails carving or etching away the surface of a flat piece of stone. It comes from the Italian word meaning "low contrast." The sculpted image is of St. Mary Magdalen Chapel.



Photos courtesy of the Nuckols Family

John Nuckols with sons Joe and Jason and grandsons Kyle and baby Zakk at the shop to celebrate the completion of the fireplace screen for the Camarillo Public Library.

Long before creating the fireplace screen, John designed and crafted a gate at the old Camarillo Library on Ponderosa Drive. The library officially opened there on October 26, 1974. Very quickly

the gates became the logo on the Friends of the Camarillo Library newsletter. Shortly afterwards, John used some of the extra materials to design and construct a gate at The Getty Villa in Malibu. "It took time and planning," explained his daughter Janet Nuckols Kinch. "Each project is individually designed and made to properly fit in the setting."



Former Camarillo Library (1974-2007) on Ponderosa Drive

Detail of gates

Gates were created by John Nuckols

Next to the old Camarillo Library, John created a gate and a door for the Camarillo Art Center on the corner of Ponderosa Drive and Eston Street. He also created a gate at St. Mary Magdalen near the classrooms. He did repair work at Pleasant Valley Church. The Camarillo State Hospital also kept him busy with repairs of window guards and hand railings. His numerous decorative projects for homes and restaurants included fireplace grates, curtain rods, stair rails, gates, tables, bookshelves, and custom barbecues to name a few. One of the more challenging projects was creating a circular staircase. "The hardest part was the handrailing. The curve goes up and down on an angle." He enjoyed working with the customers and creating new designs in wrought iron such as for fences and staircase banisters.



Camarillo Art Center gates. Detail of gates on right.



St. Mary Magdalen Chapel gate

Today the modern blacksmith is a welder. A welder uses a welding torch to get two pieces of metal hot enough that they fuse together into a single piece. Up until the 19th century, the only type of welding was forge welding. This type of welding was done by blacksmiths for thousands of years to join together steel and iron using hammering and heat. To forge weld, the blacksmith gets two pieces of steel extremely hot (usually 2,000 degrees F or above). Then they are layered on the anvil and smashed together with a heavy hammer. This force merges two pieces of steel together into a single piece. In the late 1800s, scientists figured out how to create an electric arc using heat. Over time, the blacksmith's hammer, anvil and chisel were replaced by welding guns, electric grinders and other inventions designed to meet the growing need for mass production. Today welding is the cheapest and efficient way to permanently join two pieces of metal together.

There were two forges in the Norman Blacksmith shop. A blacksmithing forge is a type of hearth or furnace where metals are heated before hammered into a shape, to make objects as tools and more. Ike Norman had used a coal fire forge "but coal became too expensive," explained John. "My grandfather ordered coal by the ton. It came by rail. Kids helped my grandfather load up the coal in gunny sacks. Later he ordered coal in one hundred pound sacks," but by that time he was using mainly the gas forge. For some jobs, the gas forge was too big. John continued to use the coal forge with smaller jobs such as sharpening chisel tools.

Though John continued to make farm implements he explained that repairing a part or tool "is an art." Much of the work dealt with hardfacing. "A farmer would bring in a part that was worn. I'd reshape it to correct the shape problem and hardfacing it to strengthen the metal.

Metal parts often fail because they become worn and begin to lose their dimension and functionality. Hardfacing, also known as hard surfacing, is the application of a build-up or wear-resistant weld metal onto a part's surface by means of welding to extend the life of a part. Hardfacing has become extremely important to many industries with the need to protect equipment from wear and abrasion. It extends the life of a part, saves money and improves productivity.

"It triples the life of products," added John. "A big part of the business was hardfacing. John's creativity and experimentation with metals took him to work on a racetrack. "For approximately 10 years, John worked with the Santa Anita Racetrack on the study and use of different hardfacing materials on the end of tynes used to till and prep the racing surface," explained Tom Nuckols. "They were looking for a durable long lasting alloy combination that was welded onto the end of the tynes. He would "take down a load of tynes for them to experiment with." John's daughter, Janet, accompanied him. "I was his side-kick," she said. "I loved going to Santa Anita and watching him work." At a young age, Janet realized the uniqueness of her father's work.

In the 1970s, about three times a year, John would be at Santa Anita Racetrack testing tynes. "It was fun doing it," explained John. Racetrack officials did not know about hardfacing until John introduced the method to them. "It could triple the life of the tyne," said John. The tynes dug down the surface of the track "two or three inches deep" and made it level and smooth. An added bonus was the tynes could uncover a thrown horseshoe.

During a major rainstorm in the 1980s, John designed and built equipment that was capable of getting through the deep mud so the celery could be harvested before being ruined by rain. Overnight John built a sled. It worked so well, that the farmer requested two more. Some 40 years later the sleds are still put to use during a rain.

Ike Norman retired in June 1969. He was 89 years old. That same year, John bought the business from his beloved grandfather along with his many tools and anvil. John kept the Norman name on the sign above the shop door and remained there until he retired in 2011. The Norman Blacksmith Shop had been in business for 101 years.



Photos courtesy of the Nuckols Family

The hundredth anniversary celebration with long-time city council member Mike Morgan, John Nuckols, (center) members of the Ventura County Fire Department, family and friends.





Recognition from the State of California

It has been estimated that thousands of dollars in vintage and handcrafted tools and equipment were donated by John to various organizations including the MVC- Agriculture Museum in Santa Paula, Pleasant Valley Historical Society and to an agricultural training program in San Luis Obispo County so that “the students could use and learn from them,” said Janet. The anvil is still in the family.

For one last time, when he retired, John put up the favorite sign he had created that told his family, friends and customers everything they needed to know. Gone Fishing.





The Norman Blacksmith Shop was leased to Camarillo Somis Feed Store
234 South Dawson Drive near the Lewis Road overpass

Why is it Called "Smith"?

Old English *smið* "blacksmith, armorer, one who works in metal" (jewelers as well as blacksmiths), more broadly, "handicraftsman, practitioner of skilled manual arts" (also including carpenters), from Proto-Germanic **smithaz* "skilled worker" (source also of Old Saxon *smith*, Old Norse *smiðr*, Danish *smed*, Old Frisian *smith*, Old High German *smid*, German *Schmied*, Gothic *-smiþa*, in *aiza-smiþa* "coppersmith"), from PIE root **smi-* "to cut, work with a sharp instrument" (source also of Greek *smile* "knife, chisel"). Attested as a surname at least since c. 975.

From: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/smith>

Designed and Crafted by John Nuckols



Photos courtesy of the Nuckols Family

John was 19 when he made this fireplace screen for his parents, William and Margaret Nuckols, for their family home. This home has been a place of residence to four generations.

“My dad said fireplace screens were a popular request at the time,” said Janet Nuckols Kinch.



K



Other fireplace screens for Nuckols family



John’s unique solution for a collection of stained glass and beveled glass windows helped to protect the glass and repurpose it for a dazzling display.



Custom designed a light fixture beneath the skylight.

The skylight "is one of our favorite pieces." -Tom Nuckols



Copper Mailbox

"This is a copper mailbox my dad made for me. I asked him to make me a metal envelope and he surprised me with this. The photo doesn't really do it justice, but it's likely my favorite hand-crafted piece." -Janet Nuckols Kinch



Barbecue



The firepit was made for the Boy Scout office in Camarillo.



Patio cover



Miyah's Doll bed

John has said that his favorite project was making a special doll bed for his granddaughter, Miyah, and her American Girl doll.



The Norman Blacksmith Shop was kept busy making many household items including cooking utensils. Tom Marvel, Rosa Camarillo Petit's grandson and his wife, Theresa, use a handcrafted chili roaster that they inherited.

From Tom and Theresa Marvel:

We have a flat round cast iron chili roaster that the Norman Blacksmith Shop made for Rosa's kitchen. Tom has used it for browning chilies and warming tortillas. It works really well! Rosa

closely monitored the menus and preparations. Lucy Vidosola and Mary Louise Douglas (*Mimi*) were longtime household staff, companions to Rosa and important members of the Petit home. They used the chili roaster to prepare favorite items for Señora Rosa and Alfred and especially for the family gatherings.

After Alfred and Rosa Petit died, Mimi continued to use the chili roaster until her death in 1995 at age 101 ½.

The griddle is 12 inches in diameter. It is made of iron and was fabricated at the request of Rosa Camarillo Petit in the 1950's by Ike Norman the blacksmith in Camarillo. This griddle has roasted many a chile and toasted many tortillas at Rancho Rosal's kitchen.... AND it has been used for camping! We had it in our camping box along with our other cast iron pots also from Rosa's kitchen.

Rancho Rosal had an electric stove. The round grill was placed over and sat above the electric burner. Using the stem, the chilies are turned as the skin on one side turns dark and begins to pop. After the second side turns dark and begins to pop they are wrapped in a kitchen towel to sweat. The chilies are removed from the towel after a bit and the dark skin of the chile just slides off. The chile is sliced length-wise and the seeds removed. They are put in a long dish with seasoned salt, vinegar and olive oil. Wow! What a yummy flavor served alone as a side dish!

The tortillas were toasted and then removed from the griddle. Lots of butter and cinnamon and sugar were sprinkled over the top for a special treat! Yum!



Research Team

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Blacksmith exhibit at Pleasant Valley Historical Society. Several items were donated by John Nuckols.

Drop by PVHS on Saturday or Sunday Noon-4:00 pm to see the tools and more!

Do you have a story, photo or comment you'd like to share?

Please contact Karin Farrin