



Using an old clutch plate as an anvil, Pierre Didier, 71, welds iron for another household object with the attention to detail and style he learned as a boy in Luxembourg. A floor lamp (insert) took 500 hours to complete. (Staff photos by Bob Woodring)

Work left 40 years ago lures Old World artisan

By MIKE SCANLON

Ironworkers are usually depicted as tough-talking, big guys in sleeveless T-shirts.

They are not supposed to be 71-year-old men who wear berets, use coat hangers as raw material and rely on the clutch plate from an extinct Plymouth as a makeshift anvil.

Pierre Didier, who does all these things, may just be the most unusual ironworker you're likely to find — not to mention the best.

A native of Luxembourg, Didier makes ornamental ironwork. And although he was more or less born into the craft, he found other things to do for the better part of a century before finally following in his blacksmith father's footsteps.

In fact, until his retirement as a tool-maker three years ago, Didier's last brush with iron came in 1936.

"That was just before the war. Then the business went down and I had to get out. Nobody had money for the kind of thing," recalls Didier, who started building bicycles after the bottom dropped out of ornamental ironworking.

There followed about 20 years of building bicycles, a trade that in 1957 brought Didier, his wife Marie and their three children to the United States. He came here to build small, motorized bicycles for a Pontiac firm that got out of the bicycle business after he arrived in this country.

Didier says he liked the opportunities he saw for his children here, so he stayed and learned to become a tool maker for a living.

FOLLOWING HIS 1978 retirement, Didier started a handyman project he'd been looking forward to for the better part of two decades.

"When we moved in here in 1960 I thought I'd like to put an iron grill on the front door. Well, it took me about 20 years, but I finally got it done," says Didier.

"Crafting the door took about 200 hours.

Even after he had his idea for the door grill, he changed it. — a Bicentennial-minded scrollwork "1776" came off the door after he finished.

Then Didier moved on to building a fireplace grill and a hanging lamp, before spending 500 hours last year making a floor lamp.

"My initials are in there, but you have to know they're there," he said.

Once he points them out, you notice his initials are everywhere, sometimes backwards and upside down.

The letters are there because Didier's last ironworking project in 1936, building a decorative security grill for a collection of rare books, wound up as a story in a French newspaper. But no one could remember who'd made it.

"I didn't think of the initials at the time," says Didier, who recalls with some pride a lock arrangement he built into the library grill so that, even with a key, the door could be unlocked only if a concealed button were pressed.

Didier works only in the winter on the iron. Summers are given to gardening and watching birds in any of 15 or so birdhouses towering over his rambling Garden City backyard.

The winter is nearly over, and Didier is still designing this year's project, a Tiffany-style lampshade.

He isn't worried, however.

"Once I start working, I work from 9 in the morning to 9 at night," said Didier, who then shrugs and adds, "I do take off

for lunch."

Most kinds of sheet steel are too thick for his purposes, so he relies heavily on metal coat hangers and steel rods that he hammers flat.

ALTHOUGH DIDIER has a remarkable hobby, it doesn't seem all that special compared to the rest of his life.

For instance, during World War II a letter arrived at Didier's bicycle shop from a man he still calls "Reichminister Albert Speer," an architect jailed for his role in boosting Nazi armament production.

Speer's autobiography, "Inside the Third Reich," made international best-seller lists.

"I should have kept that letter," says Didier. "It might be worth something."

Didier says competitors had managed to wheedle a letter from Speer telling Didier to get out of the business of making bicycle frames. The letter meant the bottom dropped out of Didier's frame construction business — he moved it to the basement of the shop.

Next to the shop was vacant storefront. Didier says he rented the shop for "storage space."

What he says was stored there were people on the run from the Nazis, mostly escaped prisoners-of-war, and on at least one occasion a neighbor whose Resistance activities had become known to the Germans.

Despite a close call or two, Didier says he had no real trouble with the Nazis until very late in the war.

"A couple of weeks before the occupation ended, I noticed I was being followed," he said.

Didier's brother-in-law was not involved in partisan activities, but he still died at Dachau.

High schoolers to visit university

Several thousand high school students and their families are expected to come to the Oakland University Feb. 25 for a competitive scholarship examination and career day.

According to OU admissions director Jerry Rose, the sessions will tell students how to "get a scholarship based on ability without regard to family need" and how to pick a career field with "good job prospects."

All high school students and their families will be able to attend the open house and career talks. Only students who register in advance will be eligible to

take a special scholarship exam.

Scholarship awards range from \$100 to \$600 a year based on test scores and high school grades. Registration information can be obtained by calling OU at 377-3380.

Career seminars include education, biology, health sciences, engineering, economics, management and nursing as well as the physical sciences and liberal arts.

A parents session will include discussions of financial aids, career advising and placement services.

BIRMINGHAM STORE

ODD LOT SALE*

STARTS THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15
3 DAYS ONLY: THURSDAY, FRIDAY, SATURDAY

SUITS were 155 to 230, now 69.95
SPORT COATS were 95 to 135, now 39.95
JEANS and
PRE-CUT SLACKS were 16.50 to 23, now .. 6.99
DRESS SLACKS were 32.50 to 47.50, now .. 12.99

3/4 off

regular price

DRESS SHIRTS, SWEATERS, SPORT SHIRTS

Alterations will be made on suits at customer's costs.

No alterations will be made on other sale clothing or accessories.

* not all sizes available

THE BARN
REGULAR AND LONG SIZES

NAPOLEON'S CLOSET
SHORT SIZES ONLY

685 SOUTH ADAMS ROAD - BIRMINGHAM - 642-5262

Standard Federal Savings Offers Continuous Compounding on 26-Week Money Market Certificates

9.592%

ANNUAL RATE

10.214%

EFFECTIVE ANNUAL YIELD

This effective annual yield is subject to change at renewal.

Rate in effect Thursday, February 15, through Wednesday, February 21.

EXAMPLE: BASED ON THIS WEEK'S RATES, \$10,000 WOULD EARN \$496.88 AT THE END OF 26 WEEKS.

Earn the highest effective annual yield available on insured savings by investing \$10,000 or more in a 26-Week Money Market Certificate Account. The rate established at the time an account is opened is the rate in effect on that certificate for the full 26-week term.

These accounts are automatically renewed upon maturity at the then CURRENT rate unless otherwise notified. Federal regulations require a substantial interest penalty for early withdrawal from certificate accounts.



Call 643-9583
AT ANY TIME
to obtain the
current week's rate.

CRATE AND CARGO

Presidents' Days
22% OFF EVERYTHING!

• DINNERWARE 22% OFF

• FLATWARE 22% OFF

• GIFTS 22% OFF

• SMALL FURNISHINGS 22% OFF

• APPLIANCES 22% OFF

• KITCHEN GOODIES 22% OFF

• CUTLERY 22% OFF

CRATE AND CARGO

See our complete array of gifts for every sized budget

Your store for dinnerware, flatware, the tabletop and gourmet kitchen. All at fabulous value.

Meadowbrook Village Mall
Adams & Wilson Roads in Rochester

Mon-Sat. 10-9
Sun. 12-5
Major Credit Card

Phone 375-9900