

Spruce Valley Ranch Wrought Iron Gates

Written by Susan Donaldson

The gates are the work of Master Blacksmith Francis Whitaker and an apprentice. Whitaker might be known to some of you, for he was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1997 during a ceremony at the Clinton White House. He was honored for bringing back the art of blacksmithing to the nation.

Francis Whitaker was born on November 11, 1906 in Woburn, MA. He was influenced greatly by his father, an architecture critic and the first editor of the *Journal of the American Institute of Architecture*. Through his father's connections, at age 15, Whitaker was apprenticed to the nation's foremost blacksmith, Samuel Yellin. Yellin had a shop with two hundred employees in Philadelphia, and it was there that Whitaker did his first work. He crafted four hundred rosettes on the tellers' windows, along the frieze, at the Federal Reserve Bank on Liberty Street in Manhattan. He never forgot that experience and, until his death, he believed that repetition was the surest way to achieve perfection. Besides the bank, his work can be found in the former Central Savings Bank building at Broadway and 73rd Street in New York City and in the late John Denver's home in Aspen.

Whitaker apprenticed with Yellin for a year. 1924-1926 found him in Europe, apprenticed at a seven employee shop run by Germany's premier blacksmith, Julius Schramm. Upon returning to the United States, Whitaker moved to Carmel, CA, where he not only had a blacksmith shop but dipped a toe into politics, serving first on the town's planning commission and later on its city council.

Eventually, Whitaker's love of skiing led him to Colorado; there he stayed until his death. His first stop was Aspen. In no time at all he dove headlong into politics, first participating on the town's planning commission and then serving three terms on its city council. At one point, he was also president of the Artist-Blacksmith Association of North America.

Whitaker's next move was to Carbondale. After setting up his shop, he was persuaded to instruct students in the art of blacksmithing at the Rocky Mountain School, a college-prep institution. Interested students studied under Whitaker for no credit, for his was an extracurricular course. He had to place a cap of eighty-five students on his classes because by then he was nationally famous and sought after as an instructor. Tools and equipment from his shop, including two sizes of twisting wrenches that he invented, were the original artifacts in what later became named the Francis Whitaker Blacksmith School.

Whitaker did not allow his students to use computers or calculators; he required them to do their own math and to construct three-dimensional models of their projects. He believed it was important for blacksmiths to learn architectural and perspective drawing; undoubtedly that belief reflected his father's influence. Whitaker told an interviewer that his own "message" was the same as the Lexus motto: the relentless pursuit of perfection. He also told the interviewer that, in his opinion, the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. is the zenith of ironwork in the United States. Not only did Whitaker appreciate and pursue perfection relentlessly, he wanted his apprentices to at least try to do so as well.

Whitaker's personal life was as full as his professional one. He married twice, but little is known of his first wife who had no interest in his work. His second wife, Portia Lubchenko, was a tremendous help to him and was his teammate until she died. Portia had three sons from her first marriage and Francis had one son from his first. After Portia's death, Whitaker enjoyed a close relationship with Sara, his friend and traveling companion. He was predeceased by his parents and by his brother, "Frimbo", whose articles on train travel throughout the world appeared regularly in the *New Yorker*.

Physical activity was important to the tall and strong Whitaker. He jogged daily and he swam, climbed, backpacked and skied whenever he could; he did the latter nearly every winter day after his move to Colorado. Somehow he also found time to pen his autobiography, *My Life as an Artist-Blacksmith*. Occasionally Aris Sophocles skied with Whitaker. It was Aris who introduced SVR's Win and Susan Lockwood to the skilled artisan. They became enamored of his work and contracted to have a lot of it installed in their first Blue River home, which was in the Coronet. A few years later, Whitaker made SVR's gates. A few years after that he once again created ironwork for a Lockwood home, by then not in Coronet but in Spruce Valley.

Francis Whitaker died on October 23, 1999, in Glenwood Springs. At his request, he grasped a hammer at the moment of his death. He had been allowed to hold it during his surgery and during his stay in a recovery room, but at one point he began to wave it around so much that it was taken from him and placed under his bed for his nurse's safety. When death was imminent, the hammer was placed back in his hand.

The New York Times ran Whitaker's obituary. Four hundred people attended his memorial. The 2004 XIV Rocky Mountain Blacksmithing Conference was dedicated to him. It is indeed fortunate that Spruce Valley Ranch has not only beautiful but historic gates crafted by such a master.