

# Blacksmith has many irons in the fire

By **Randi Atwood**  
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Tallahassee native Will Manning, 26, has been a full-time blacksmith for almost two years. He had originally studied sound design, and was considering attending school for music, when he saw the advertisement for a living-history interpreter at Mission San Luis.

Manning always had enjoyed metalwork, and had learned to weld from local artist Mark Dickson. He had taken a class at the Master Craftsman Studios,

and had played around with basic forging in his backyard, mostly making metal lamps. But he never considered it a possible career path until the opportunity arose to learn and practice historic blacksmithing at Mission San Luis.

"I feel like, for the first six months, I did nothing but practice making nails. We make a lot of nails," he laughs.

He first had to perfect the most fundamental blacksmithing skills. Now he's pro-



**ALICIA OSBORNE**/Special to the Democrat  
Will Manning demonstrates historic blacksmithing at Mission San Luis.

gressing beyond the basics, slowly learning to make historic tools.

Manning gives a great deal of credit for his education to Charlton Prather, known as "Skeeter." Prather, now in his 80s, is a founding member of the board of Mission San Luis, a driving force behind the Florida Artist Blacksmith Association (FABA) and a mentor to Manning.

"He is a true master," says Manning respectfully. "He built all the chandeliers for the mission's reconstruction. In fact, he's responsible for the mission having a blacksmith shop in the first place."

## The San Luis story

Mission San Luis has nine full-time interpreters and many liv-

ing-history volunteers. There is the friar, who cares for the church complex, including an infirmary and medicinal herb garden, and the friar's Apalachee Indian cook, who prepares food and watches over the chickens. There's a wealthy Spanish lady, her mestizo cook ("mestizo" is the Spanish word for "mixed," and usually referred to a person who was half Apalachee and half Spanish), and several soldiers at the fort. And, of course, there's the blacksmith.

The real-life blacksmiths appeared at the mission near the end of San Luis' history. In 1702, only two years before the Spanish burned the mission

## BLACKSMITH

from Page 8 / TLH

to the ground, the king of Spain sent two journeymen blacksmiths (young men with at least seven years of experience) for a single purpose — to make iron spikes for the wall around the fort. You can see the actual spikes they made, which are about an inch thick, in San Luis' archaeological collection.

Manning's blacksmith character is based loosely on these real journeymen. He calls himself Guillermo Montoya — Guillermo is the Spanish equivalent of William, and Montoya was the surname the previous blacksmith at the mission had chosen. Montoya's fictional backstory includes a wife, and a dog named Flora, who pulled him ashore when a hurricane capsized his ship.

In January, San Luis unveiled its new blacksmith shop, a genuine historic machine and welding shop that operates without electricity. Everything is done by hand, and all the work in the shop is accomplished using instruments forged through blacksmithing.

Manning has promised himself that he will never use a lighter or matches to start a fire in the shop. He uses a steel striker of Spanish design that he forged himself, along with chert stone (a kind of flint available locally), char cloth and dried moss to make a fire every morning.

His clothing, authentic to 1702, is also a challenge, especially in

Florida's summer heat. The costume includes heavy stockings, britches, a long-sleeved shirt and a bandana.

"When I first got there, the costumer gave me an outfit with all these laces in the front," remembers Manning. "After that caught fire, I put in a request for a blacksmith's apron."

### A day in the life

Manning really has two jobs. As a blacksmith, he spends most of his days hammering metal, similar to what the original blacksmiths would have done. He personally made all the spikes used in constructing his new shop. His priority is to repair tools and create whatever is needed on site.

"Part of blacksmithing is not being wasteful, so we take our worn-out tools and turn them into something else," explains Manning. "If something is broken or bent, we don't throw it away — we re-purpose it."

The other part of his job is interacting with the public. Though he has no formal teaching experience, he says that his work at San Luis has shown him the joys of teaching visitors and volunteers.

"My favorite part is when I talk to a group of kids who really want to be there," says Manning. "I have an advantage in getting their attention, because I work with fire. But it's very rewarding when they listen and ask questions, and you know they are learning."

He often has young visitors come into the shop and help with the

safer tasks, like pumping the bellows. The kids who help while he's making nails even get to take a nail home with them.

Manning soon will be giving formal "Blacksmithing for Beginners" workshops, teaching participants how to build and maintain a fire, use tools and create historic hardware.

His plans also include more study. He considers himself an apprentice, not even at the skill level of the mission's original journeymen blacksmiths. He was recently awarded a scholarship to take a tool-making class in North Carolina, and he plans to dedicate more time to his backyard forge.

"I often daydream about being a private working blacksmith and making handmade items like scissors. My ultimate metalwork goal is to be able make anything people need by hand."