

The Last Blacksmith

By Larry Kidder

It was December 14, 1910 and, with the year drawing to a close, Pleasant Valley readers of the *Hopewell Herald* read the terse announcement on page 2 under Titusville news that, "Roy Harbourn has closed his blacksmith shop in Pleasant Valley." How individual residents of the Valley reacted isn't known, but the reality of this announcement was that a long tradition of blacksmithing at the shop on Valley Road had ended.

The Valley Road blacksmith shop apparently had its origins in the early 1830s, when blacksmith Lewis Phillips married and established his home and shop there. Lewis was the son of Henry Phillips, on whose land the shop was established. Lewis was the great-grandson of John Phillips, a blacksmith and farmer who purchased 125 acres in Pleasant Valley in 1737. John's descendants included blacksmiths and millers in addition to farmers. By the early 1800s, the Phillips commercial enterprises located near the junction of Pleasant Valley and Valley Roads combined with the local one room schoolhouse to form the basis for a potential village center. The schoolhouse represented a central focus and community center for the farm families of the Valley, while the gristmill attracted farmers who brought their wheat to be turned into flour for the national and international market. The blacksmith shop produced many of the tools, and repaired tools, used by the local farmers and could provide services for travelers as well.

For a blacksmith like Lewis Phillips, the raw materials of his profession were readily available at general stores in nearby towns and villages such as Titusville or Lambertville. Such stores carried round and square iron in various sizes from Sweden, England and America and of various types, such as sheet iron, hoop iron, nail rods, rivets, etc. Blacksmiths like Lewis did a variety of work in both iron and wood. They shod horses; repaired wheels, vehicles, and tools; made household items like fireplace irons; and, might even get into cabinetmaking and wheelwrighting. A staple of the blacksmith work was making nails, either the early wrought nails or later cut nails.

Lewis didn't get title to his home and shop until 1852 when his aged father deeded him two acres cut out of his farm for \$1.00. By that time Lewis had been operating his shop for about 20 years. Lewis and his wife, Mary, had a daughter, Catherine, born about 1833. About 1856 Catherine married blacksmith Francis Steward of Hopewell, who perhaps had worked for Lewis before marrying Catharine. In 1857 Lewis and Mary sold their property to Francis for \$1000. Francis was about 23 at the time and by 1860 he and Catherine had two sons, William and George. The family unit, though, was a four generation extended family since Lewis and Mary were living with them, as was Catharine Phillips, the widow of Lewis' father, Henry.

The Francis Steward family experienced a series of tragedies in the early 1860s. Son William died on November 25, 1861 at age 3. Son George died on March 1, 186[2] at age 2. And finally, wife Catharine died July 15, 1864. Francis appears to have struggled on for about a year but then sold the property back to his mother-in-law on August 8, 1865 for \$1100.

Lewis Phillips continued to work the blacksmith shop. In 1870 there was a 9 year old girl named Mary Phillips living with Lewis and Mary. She was probably a granddaughter born in 1861, but what had happened to her father Francis is unknown. Perhaps in his grief he had moved on and left young Mary with his deceased wife's parents.

In 1873 Lewis and Mary sold their house and shop after about 40 years of living and working there. In 1874 the house and shop were purchased by 33 year old blacksmith Andrew J. Shearman of Hopewell for \$1075 and the assumption of a \$500 mortgage. In 1880 Andrew and his wife Josephine were in their late 30s and had no children. Lewis and Mary Phillips were now in their 70s and it would appear that they were living in a tenant dwelling associated with the nearby farm of Lewis' brother, Tunis Phillips.

During the late nineteenth century the number of blacksmith shops was decreasing as more tools and other items made by blacksmiths were being manufactured. By the mid-1880s it appears that the Valley Road blacksmith business was not prospering and on March 29, 1884 the Shearman's sold the property to the family of Rebecca Lawyer of Hopewell for \$1100. The

Shearman's apparently went back to Maryland and in 1900 were living in Baltimore where Andrew gave his occupation as owner of a general store.

Rebecca Lawyer and her husband John were residents of West Amwell where John was a farmer. They apparently purchased the two and a quarter acre lot as a retirement home where John could do some small scale farming, but not blacksmithing. During their ownership they apparently tried to keep the blacksmith business going by renting the shop out or boarding a blacksmith to operate it. Evidence of this is found in a want add placed in the *Hopewell Herald* by Rebecca's son on March 2, 1893, less than two months after John's death. The ad stated:

"WANTED – A young unmarried Blacksmith to board with private family and take whole charge of shop; tools found. Address or call on ELWOOD LAWYER, Pleasant Valley; Postoffice address, Titusville, N.J."

The ad apparently worked and the same paper reported on May 4 that, "We understand that Edward [sic] Lawyer has rented his blacksmith and wheelwright shops to W.H. Myers, formerly blacksmith in Montgomery's quarry." Whether the family had other blacksmiths living with them during the time they owned the shop is not know. Wheelwrights had gradually diverged from blacksmiths but it was not uncommon to see the shops in pairs. After Rebecca Lawyer died in 1895 her children sold the property to Benjamin Wilson and his wife Elizabeth. The Wilsons were an African-American farm couple and, at age 67, Benjamin was only going to raise some poultry on the small lot. After Benjamin died in 1903, Elizabeth sold their goods and moved on to an unknown residence.

In 1908 blacksmith Leroy Harbourt enters the picture. His full name was James Leroy, although he went by his middle name or simply Roy, and on April 15, 1908 he placed an ad on page 1 of the *Hopewell Herald* in the Cent-a-Word ad column announcing, "Having opened a blacksmith shop at the long vacant stand near the Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse. I wish to announce to the public that I am here for business, and solicit a share of your patronage." On page two in the same issue of the paper the Pleasant Valley correspondent, Rachel Williamson, noted, "Leroy Harbourt, who has just launched out in business for himself, is a very steady young man and worthy of the patronage of the people in this and surrounding vicinity. We hope to see him succeed in his new undertaking. He has been in the employ of R. A. Montgomery for some time past." R.A. Montgomery operated the nearby quarry.

Leroy Harbourt was born July 1, 1886 in Titusville; the son of James and Elizabeth Harbourt. In 1900 his father was superintendent of the quarry at the Mercer County Workhouse and Leroy was 14 years old and attending school. At some point he served an apprenticeship as a blacksmith and horse shoer in Dolington, Pennsylvania. His Pleasant Valley blacksmith shop closed in 1910 after just two years. Although the business failed in Pleasant Valley, Leroy continued to be a blacksmith in the Titusville area and was well known for the quality of his work. He represents those blacksmiths who survived by branching out into other areas of work and locating in larger villages.

Leroy stayed in Titusville and married Susie Hunter about 1915. When he registered for the draft in 1917 during World War I he was a blacksmith working for Mercer County at the Workhouse. By 1920 he and Susie had a 3 year old son, Clark and Leroy was working for the railroad as a signal fitter. In 1930 he was living on West River Road in Titusville with Susie and their two sons, and was again proprietor of a blacksmith shop. His son, Merle, remembers their home on Grant Street in Titusville in the 1930s and that his father was a strong, hardworking man with many skills. He continued to work for the railroad throughout his life and also had his blacksmith shop, a Texaco gas station, and an auto repair garage next to his home. Merle recalls seeing him put iron rims on wagon wheels and that he could make just about anything out of metal. He also served as justice of the peace and notary public. Leroy Harbourt died in 1947 of lung cancer still looking to the future with optimism and the hope that he could continue using the skills he developed early in life; including the skills he used as Pleasant Valley's last blacksmith in the shop on Valley Road between 1908 and 1910.