

American Twilight:

The Men Who Keep Dying Trades Alive

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My parking meter is expired and I'm out of change. I cut across Wood Street, a once-flourishing business district in Pennsylvania that now looks more like a ghost town, hoping to score change at a local flower shop. "Do you happen to have change for a dollar," I ask the woman standing near the back of the shop. "Probably not," the woman says, almost irritated as she opens the cash register, looks down, looks back at me, then reluctantly hands me two quarters, four dimes, and a nickel.

On my way back to feed the meter, I notice that Elio's Pizza, on the corner of Franklin and Wood, is shuttered. Wilksburg was once a thriving community. But that was before the mass exodus of the early 1970s, when residents headed east for the suburbs and began spending their paychecks at shopping malls instead of independent local businesses. The town has been on life support ever since.

I cram two quarters in my parking meter. I'm running late for my interview at the typesetting shop.

Rudy Lehman: Typesetter

The sun-bleached sign and deteriorating paint in the front of Lehman Typsetting makes the shop look like it has been out of business for decades. But peer through the dust-smudged window, and you'll see the flicker of a ceiling-mounted florescent tube light. Rudy Lehman, a 72-year-old white-haired man stands behind the shop's counter. He has worked as a typesetter for the past 50 years. He is a polite, soft-spoken man who enjoys routine, and seems awkwardly out of place in the 21st century.

When approached for an interview, Lehman said, "You're welcome to talk with me, I just don't know how interesting it'll be." But he is compelling: he still operates a typesetting shop in the year 2007—nearly two decades since computers rendered his trade obsolete.

Lehman keeps a mammoth-sized black machine called a Linotype, which does precisely what its name infers. It spits out "lines of type" in the form of a metal slug that is used to print sentences, paragraphs or entire books on letterpress. Lehman purchased this machine in 1957 for \$15,000. To operate it, he sits down behind a peculiar-looking keyboard whose keys are arranged in order of the frequency they occur in the English language.

A noisy small motor turns the belts and wheels. "Can you hear that?" Lehman asks. "That's the sound of the mats. They drop in from the magazine above and line up here on the assembler to create your text." The sound is like the rhythmic clacking of Connect Four, Milton Bradley's vertical checkers game.

After the mats are lined up to create the desired text, they are thrust into a mold that is filled with molten lead from a heated crucible in the machine's belly. A mechanism called the knife block is then activated, which cuts the injected lead, creating the finished product—a silver metal slug approximately the size and shape of a Hershey's chocolate bar. This drops into a galley tray several inches from Lehman's knee.

"Here it is," he says, showing me the slug as he proudly holds it between his thumb and index finger. Lehman holds it in his right hand and explains minute details of the Linotype. He is talking away—and all the while he is smiling, happy.

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Joe Feldman: Barber

"You have to have a gimmick," Harry Feldman used to tell his son, Joe. "Every business needs a gimmick." Harry was short and mustachioed when he said this. Joe was tall and willowy—a young man just out of barber school.

One particular gimmick came to fruition on a slow business day. Father and son were parked side by side in matching barber chairs, waiting for customers to walk in. "My dad was a good talker, but also played many string instruments," Joe says. "But he was the best at the violin." Harry grabbed his violin and, as if channeling the ghost of a vaudeville performer, played a song—quite a performance, according to Joe. Passersby took notice and peered into the barbershop, even stopping to listen. One customer walked in and asked for a haircut. "Please, let my son take care of you," Harry said. "If he gives you a bad haircut, I'll give you \$1,000." All three men laughed.

Harry Feldman made customers feel at home in his barber chair—he made it feel like *their* chair. In the 77 years he worked as a barber, he amassed numerous friends. One such friend was Fred Rogers, the late host of the PBS children's show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Along the way, he made people laugh. Sometimes, he would dance with the women who stopped by to see why it was taking so long for their husbands to get a simple \$6 haircut. That is, until 1991, when his wife Sarah passed away. Harry died six months later from what Joe describes as "a broken heart, not cancer."

On a busy street in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, the weathered sign above the front door still reads "Harry's Barber

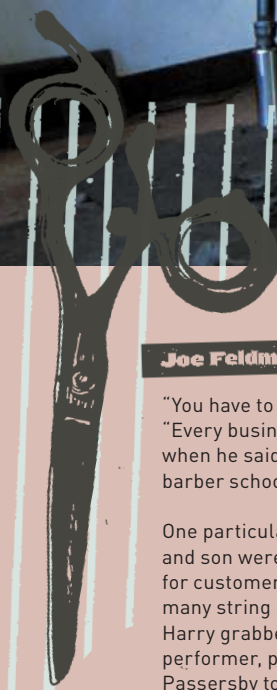
Shoppe." Inside, the radio is tuned in to KDKA. Ritchie Valens' "Donna" is playing. Joe is making small talk as he cuts the hair of a young man home on break from culinary school in New York City. Joe refuses to reveal his age—"My 25-year-old girlfriend will be reading this," he says. But it is well known that Harry's Barber Shoppe has been open since 1972, and that Joe has worked here the entire time.

When his father was alive, Joe often played the straight man to Harry's funny man. Getting Joe to talk about himself is not easy, as the conversation almost always returns to an anecdotal story that Harry used to tell. It is clear that he misses his father terribly—and for a moment, I feel dazed, considering my own mortality and that of my father.

That's when the phone rings. "Hello, barbershop," Joe answers. "I got two people waiting," he tells the caller. "And oh, I want to hear all about the honeymoon."

Every day, people poke their heads into the barbershop to say "hello" to Joe, or simply wave as they pass by. Sometimes the conversation in the shop is quiet—a private affair between Joe and his customer sitting in the chair. But other times, it is electric, as a half dozen men talk loudly with—and sometimes over—each other.

As I walk toward the door, Joe flashes a smile and gestures as if to say, "Just one more thing." He holds a pair of scissors in his right hand and peers out from behind a pair of thin-framed silver eyeglasses. He says that his father always told him, "Joe, remember to give everyone good haircuts, because people don't come here to see your face."





Crock Hunter Blacksmith

Crock Hunter, according to the Greater Pittsburgh Yellow Pages, seems to be the only working blacksmith in all of Western Pennsylvania. I meet him at his Lookout Farm, nestled in hundreds of acres of lush green grass and a hillside dotted with a herd of grazing horses. Hunter is in the seat of his loud lawn tractor, and when he sees me, he shuts off the engine, steps down and greets me with a firm handshake.

His workshop is a large, half-stone, half-wood barn he built by hand. Hunter is 51 years old, with a small, sturdy frame. His eyes are sharp and squinty, like Clint Eastwood's. Laugh lines frame a slightly unruly grayish-brown mustache. His hands are an amalgam of battered knuckles and thick skin.

He has spent nearly three decades shoeing horses, and his body has absorbed a lot of shocks during that time. "The worst was getting kicked in the funny bone right in the back of the elbow," he says, a wry smile spreading across his face. "I never felt that much pain. It happened like that," he says, snapping his fingers. "And it was over. I was on the ground crawling. Crawling and having a chit chat with Jesus."

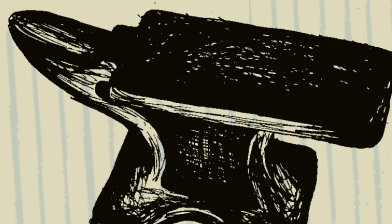
Hunter grew up in rural Pennsylvania, but attended the Oklahoma Farriers College in 1973 to learn his trade. (Farrier is another word for blacksmith. In recent years, this term has become more popular,

perhaps because it sounds less antiquated than "blacksmith.") That's where he acquired the subtle Southern drawl that occasionally slips into his speech. At school, Hunter says he worked under the tutelage of "a full-blooded Cherokee Indian named Butch. And you didn't want to get on Butch's bad side. But we learned [our craft]."

This farm has been in Hunter's family for two generations, though he is single-handedly responsible for taming its expansive acreage and converting it to a workable and profitable hay farm. He undertook this task in the late 1970s and worked thousands of hours to achieve this.

Today, Hunter is a retired farrier—and has been for the past three years. He dedicates his energy to maintaining Lookout Farm. He still shoes the occasional horse for a loyal customer. But mostly, his anvil sits cold.

"At a certain point," he says. "You go home."



The Ghost

the artwork of Richard Colman

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