

The Apprentices

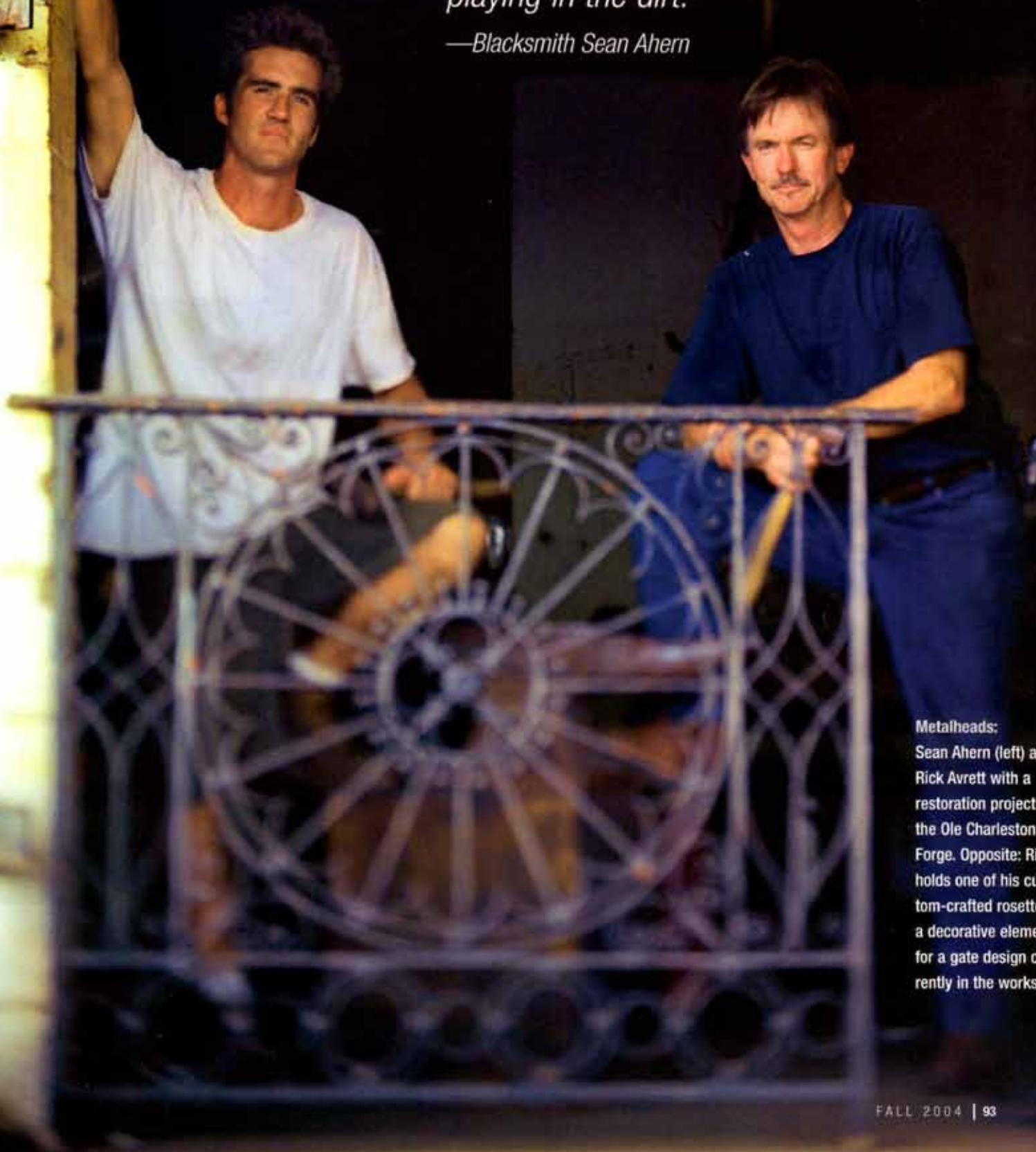
Written By **MOLLY HULETT** ✦ Photographs By **PETER FRANK EDWARDS**

Charleston may have been shaped by the bluster and whirl of cannon fire and hurricanes, but the steepled city was built by hand, from the inside out. Even today, history repeats itself in the clang and clatter of modern workshops dedicated to preserving centuries-old craftsmanship, where generations mingle to produce a one-of-a-kind brand of artistry for the home.



“ It’s loud and hot and grimy. At the end of the day, you’re tired, but you feel like a kid again. It’s like playing in the dirt. ”

—Blacksmith Sean Ahern



Metalheads:
Sean Ahern (left) and Rick Avrett with a restoration project at the Ole Charleston Forge. Opposite: Rick holds one of his custom-crafted rosettes, a decorative element for a gate design currently in the works.



Heavy Metal



✦ **The Art of Iron:** Avrett and Ahern's work (above, left) focuses on the artistic side of the craft. Ahern (above) cuts metal on a chop saw in his North Charleston studio, Ahern's Anvil. A weld-

ing torch (above, right) se- cures a rosette onto the gate.

✦ **Forging the Future:** Ahern (below, left) heats a piece of iron, readying it for shaping. Medallions of human faces and an owl

(below, center), which Avrett calls "fun pieces," will eventually find their way into the ironworker's designs. At the first stage of a new work, Avrett (below, right) forms an iron scroll design over the

horn of an anvil using a cross peen hammer.

✦ **Piecing It Together:** A host of unique elements (opposite page) come together in Avrett's studio to create an ironwork-of-art.





The sun is just beginning its hazy climb across the summer sky, but it's already 115 degrees inside the echoing blast of **Sean Ahern's** North Charleston studio. There, the young blacksmith works solo, muscling iron into intricate architectural sculptures in Ahern's Anvil, the shop he opened two years ago.

"Once I saw all the possibilities in manipulating iron, I never wanted to do anything else," says Ahern, who studied art and metal-working in Atlanta and St. Etienne, France. "It's loud and hot and grimy. At the end of the day, you're tired, but you feel like a kid again. It's like playing in the dirt."

Ahern was in the process of crafting his future when he began a coveted five-month apprenticeship with accomplished blacksmith **Rick Avrett**, who has operated Ole Charleston Forge on the peninsula for 25 years and who strictly limits the number of apprentices he accepts in his shop.

"Apprentices usually don't have enough knowledge to be able to come in and benefit whole projects," explains Avrett, who began his own career at the hand of acclaimed coppersmith John Gantt, with whom he continues to collaborate today. "It takes a lot of work and patience on the owner's part. But Sean was easy. He already had the technical and artistic know-how."

While apprenticing with the master craftsman, Ahern honed his basic fabrication skills. "I like to focus on the artistic side, but if you don't know

how to build something, then the art won't be there," he says. "That's what I learned at Rick's shop: how essential it is to know how to build something right."

This overriding belief in the importance of superior craftsmanship in their distinctive architectural, landscape, and interior ironwork motivates Avrett to work with young artisans like Ahern. "It matters a lot to me to see this craft get passed on in the right way," he says. "I like to see quality continue to improve with time."

Now that Ahern has established his own shop, he understands the need to share his craft with student artists following at his heels. He sits on an advisory board for the School of the Building Arts to help hone its ironwork program. "I'd like to help out as much as I can," he says, "to push students in the right direction so the upcoming generations can benefit."

As they forge the future of their craft, both Avrett and Ahern acknowledge their admiration for the timeless quality inherent in renowned local blacksmith Phillip Simmons' work—and the internal fortitude it takes to devote one's life to an ancient art. "I appreciate his tenacity, persistence, and ability," Avrett says. "For anybody to pursue any kind of trade for as long as he has speaks highly of him as a person," Ahern adds. "He is the master of that unique style of Charleston ironwork. I hope I still have that kind of desire to do this kind of work when I'm his age."