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TOP STORY

WKU draws gunsmiths to 37th annual crafting seminar

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For about 15 to 20 years now, Connecticut resident Walt Framski has been attending a summer gunsmithing seminar at Western Kentucky University that's attracted hundreds of gunmakers and crafters since it was founded almost 40 years ago.

“For me, you see things here you can't see anywhere else,” said Framski, who relishes the opportunity to re-create rifles from the 18th century.

This year's National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association Gunsmithing Seminar attracted about 70 participants from across the country.

It's hosted by WKU's Department of Architectural and Manufacturing Sciences and features workshops on crafts related to gunsmithing, such as engraving, stock carving, wire inlay and Native American quillwork, among others.

Founded in 1981 by Wallace Gusler and retired WKU professor Terry Leeper, the seminar focuses on preserving the craft of the American longrifle, according to the event's official website at www.nmlragunsmithingseminar.org. Classes are offered in three, six and nine-day increments.

On Thursday, California resident Hank Elwood re-created a Jaeger short-barrelled rifle using Rococo-style motifs. The 54-caliber gun featured over and under barrels, which means the gun's two hammers trigger a different barrel.

Elwood, who's been attending the seminar for 27 years, said gunsmiths often hid the secrets of their trade.

“That's why our art form is having to be reborn,” he said.

He's also formed a lot of friendships over nearly 30 years. Participants stay in touch after the seminar ends and share what they've learned once they return the following year.

"It's the only place you can come to learn this," he said. "We all look forward to this every year."

Among the instructors is Gusler, a craftsman who was a master gunsmith at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia.

"I enjoy teaching," he said. "I always learn a lot from the students."

Gusler watched over his beginner students in his engraving class, occasionally stepping in to demonstrate the intricate hammer and chisel movements used to make a decorative spiral.

Margo Trout, of Virginia, was new to engraving this year. She found the work time-consuming, but enjoyable.



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“It is an art form,” she said.

In a separate class, students worked with cleaned porcupine quills to craft pouches and knife sheaths decorated with Native American styles.

Instructor Lally House has been doing quill work for 40 years now. She first started when she was about 17 years old.

“It just sparked my interest as an artist,” she said, adding she feels lucky to have found a lifelong passion.

She enjoys passing down Eastern Woodland designs from Native Americans.

“I love my class. They’re great people,” she said.

Evelyn Beane, who’s been traveling from Maine with her husband to participate in the seminar, said she’s inspired by the passion for keeping history alive.

“I don’t want these arts to go away,” she said.

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Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.