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SAVANNAH

M A G A Z I N E

January/February 20
VOL. 11 NO. 1 \$3

DELICIOUS DELIGHT

Crème Caramel

DECORATIVE IRONWORK

Lacy, Yet Functional

DR. FRANK A. BUTLER

AASU's Spirited President

KITCHEN MAKEOVER

With European Flair



WHERE FUNCTION AND GRACE MEET—SAVANNAH'S ORNAMENTAL IRONWORK

BY ZOE RANDALL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL NURNBERG

Savannah's ironwork: lacy and lovely; sturdy and functional. For some, the height of architectural grace and adornment; for others, like Michael J. Sebacher, iron is a medium for functional works of architecture and furniture.

"Iron should have a function," said Sebacher, proprietor/designer/ironworker of Savannah Classic Ironworks, L.L.C. "It is innate to the material and consistent with its historical origins. Its design should be friendly to both the eye and the hand," said Sebacher, whose decorative wrought iron is becoming quite popular in Savannah.

I wanted to see.

Sebacher, tall and muscular in his cargo shorts and T-shirt, met me at J. D. Weed's Antiques — afraid I might get lost finding his midtown cinder block studio. I followed him, in his little red Miata convertible, through lanes, driveways and corners of parking lots (the "shortcut") to his fenced in studio space.

Inside, amid a sundry of metal working tools and abrasives — a propane forge the size of a toaster oven — are his latest projects: reproductions of 19th-century balcony rails for a West Harris Street home, and his beds.

Sebacher has designed, and is in the process of crafting, four unique styles of king-sized iron beds: "Victorian," "Sun and Moon," "Taj Mahal" and "Vines." They are splendid pieces of functional (key word for Sebacher) ironwork, painted in black, burgundy and/or shades of bronze. And they're rather "high-end."

In the rear of the shop, Bulgarian painter Antonia Toneva, does all of Sebacher's faux finishing work. Two other part-time ironworkers work in the shop on a project-to-project basis.

"Eventually, I'd like to just make one of the beds myself ... train other ironworkers," said Sebacher.

Why beds? "Beds are such personal things. Do a railing and the whole world sees it. No one sees your bed unless you want them to," says Sebacher. And from there, we take a tour of his more public work.

First stop: the East Gordon Street home of Bruce and Ingrid Jacobs (recent transplants from Atlanta), to see the courtyard balconies Sebacher had recently designed, forged and installed for them — wonderful bends of railing, adding classic beauty, support and the feeling of additional space to the Jacobs' newly renovated townhouse.

On to East Charlton Street to see yet another balcony rail — this one, a traditional circular design, composed of 26-inch rings, threaded and secured by 214 seamless bands of iron — each one forged by Sebacher.

"It was tedious going ... by it's very nature, ironworking can be monotonous, as well as physically demanding. Certainly, the fulfillment and gratification of completing a quality piece must

outweigh the mental fortitude and physical endurance required to complete it ... if not, best to find another line of work," said Sebacher, stepping back to take another look at his craftsmanship before we climb back into the Miata and head for West Harris Street.

There, I saw the original balconies that Sebacher had replicated in his studio. "It's important to have the awareness of historical origins of the structure and its particular decorative elements ... Just as important to know traditional ironworking methods for use in replication and dating existing pieces," he told me. And we look at other iron work — Sebacher giving me a mini history lesson about architecture

*Reminiscent of grandmother's garden,
weeping willows, splashing fountains
and lovely ladies in voluminous skirts,
is the ornamental iron that graced
verandas and windows of the old
Southern "town" houses long ago.*

— Lillian Chaplin Bragg, Savannah, 1957

and decorative wrought iron.

So how did this 37-year-old, ex-nuclear submarine Navy man and Gulfstream management development consultant (having earned his M.A. in Adult Education/Training Dynamics and Management from the University of Michigan in 1995) — with an engineering stint at Ford Motors Company in between — come to iron working?

It was Gulfstream that brought Sebacher to Savannah, recruiting him in 1998. And it was a “mess of a big old house” on Henry Street and Waters Avenue — specifically, the need of an iron gate — that brought him to his present vocation.

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“Victorian,” “Sun and Moon,”
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“I was in the midst of renovating my house — 3,500 square feet with eight fireplaces, in shambles — basically doing everything myself, rebuilding doors, hunting for salvages in Keller’s flea market. I needed a fence with a gate,” said Sebacher. So he called around for price quotes.

“I was floored by the amounts of money people were asking,” he told me, adding that, in hindsight, some of the quotes he received were much less than what he now charges. In any case, Sebacher decided that he could build the gate himself.

And he did.

Sebacher (opposite) works to create delicate detailing for a current project. The courtyard railings (opposite, bottom) of an East Gordon Street townhouse are among Sebacher’s most recent undertakings.

It’s a lovely traditional style white iron gate with an oval window. He also designed and crafted the interior staircase railing, complete with a swing door on the top landing ... necessary to keep his five dogs from making mischief downstairs. “Mom made the curtains,” Sebacher smiled, giving me a tour of the house. Mom (who, with her husband and daughter, Sebacher’s “little sister,” raises horses in the Atlanta area) and son did a great job on the house.

What’s next on Michael Sebacher’s career path?

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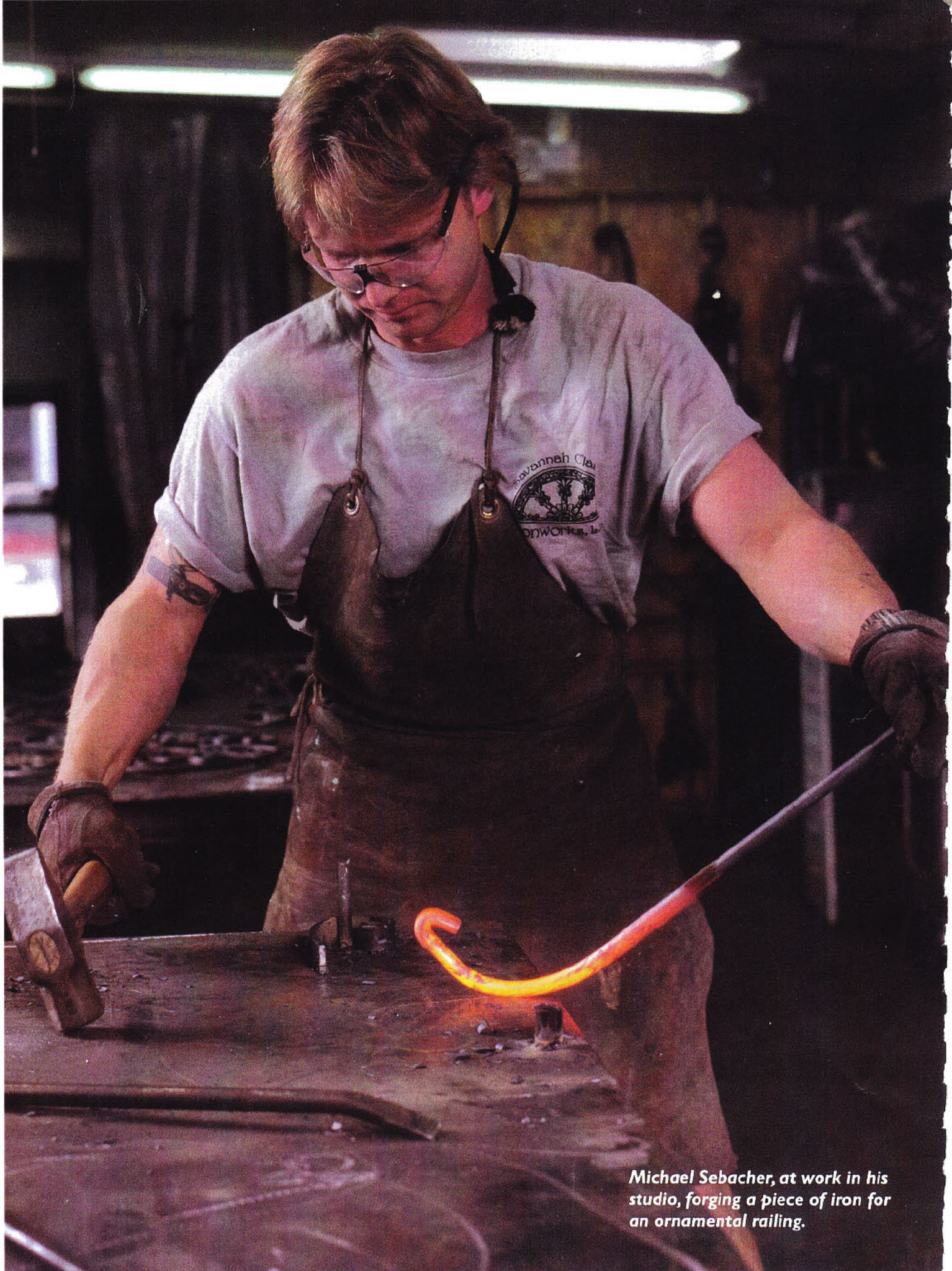
“This is it. I feel an extreme sense of urgency to build my future today or get hosed. And I love this more than anything else I’ve ever done ... started this business welding in the rain ... working on a concrete slab in my backyard,” said Sebacher, adding that it’s also time for him to make some money. “Money is freedom,” he said. And so is being his own boss.

Sebacher dropped me at my car. I noticed the tattoo on his left arm — a scroll-y “X” shape, composed of two distinct lines — reminiscent of old iron-work patterns.

“Did you design it yourself?” I asked.

“Funny, it was two years before I ever thought about getting into the iron business,” Sebacher mused.

I guess it was a sign. ☐



Michael Sebacher, at work in his studio, forging a piece of iron for an ornamental railing.

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