

Chris Erlich, Fort Nisqually Foundation
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For 40 years, John Simpkins was a committed volunteer at Fort Nisqually Living History Museum. He played significant roles in the creation of the blacksmith's shop and the formation of the Fort Nisqually Foundation. John passed away in March, and we remember him here for his generosity of spirit and talent.

Most people likely first met John in front of the forge. Steve Anderson, who served as the Fort's supervisor in the 1980s, remembered John as "part of small team that got the blacksmith shop up and running — and actually working as one of the fort's first living history participants." Steve said John was instrumental in the acquisition of a large collection of blacksmithing tools from the ASARCO smelter. He worked on the development and reconstruction of the blacksmith shop, and he personally took on the job of refurbishing and refashioning the bellows.

As John himself recalled in a Facebook post, "we took the blacksmith shop from a static exhibition to a working shop and I worked it until I was able to no more."

And John was a talented blacksmith. Volunteer and former Foundation President Dana Repp recalled "I decided I needed an awl so someone suggested I ask John. He says, 'Sure, but I don't have handle material here so I'll have to take it home and bring it to you next week.' I was expecting a metal awl with some crude handle, little did I know. Instead, I received a piece of art. It was polished steel with a small, delicate, deer antler handle and brass cap that fit my hand perfectly. The sharp point was capped with a cork from a wine bottle. (We always loved a good glass of wine.) I was dumbfounded that he would go to this length for an awl, and I told him as much. He replied, 'If it's useful, it should also be beautiful.' That saying has stuck with me for years, so very Victorian."

John regularly fashioned hinges, gate latches, and other hardware for the fort that stood out for their artistic flair as much as its functionality. He made other beautiful pieces – tripods, candlesticks, and more – that he donated to Foundation auctions, and they were always top sellers.

John was always generous with his time and his knowledge. He volunteered to operate the blacksmith shop for events, school tours, and camps. Current Museum Supervisor Jim Lauderdale said, "His interest was always in supporting the museum. He never missed a special event unless he was out of town on one of his trips to Iceland or elsewhere." Retired Fort Educator Lane Sample remembers, "John made anything I needed for camps, such as skewers for biscuits on a stick. He was always good with school tours. He helped many young teens at Camp Fort Nisqually make strikers."

John worked with aspiring blacksmiths of all ages. Jim recalled, "When I first came to Fort Nisqually, John was regularly volunteering at the forge on Sundays and had at least one

regular apprentice.” Synthia Santos remembers, “He was patient and kind introducing the blacksmith basics with my grandson Jaden.” And Rick Scot echoed that sentiment, “John took my son Wyatt under his wing and taught him blacksmithing. An incredibly talented and kind man.”

One of his adult students was volunteer Rich Repp. “He was always there when I needed him and he was always up for making something new. He and I laughed more over an anvil than at any other place even when I would work exuberantly on a project just to watch it break at the very end. I always felt honored to work with him at the blacksmiths shop... he was one of the best teachers I have ever experienced.”

And John shared his knowledge beyond the fort too. Melissa McGinnis, who was museum supervisor in the 1990s and went on to manage historic preservation projects for Metro Parks, recalled reaching out to John for help with the restoration of the Dickman Mill headsaw. She knew he had spent much of his professional career designing large scale equipment for mills. She said, “John didn't hesitate to help. The next day we were standing in the back of the Point Defiance maintenance yard looking at a collection of large metal pieces of equipment. John could identify everything, explained how they went together and how they worked. Before you know it, he was on the phone calling people he knew with the right equipment and facilities to help. Fast forward to the restored headsaw now on display at Dickman Mill Park.”

Many remember John for his welcoming ways. I remember during my first few weeks as the Fort's event coordinator, John making his way up to my desk to present me with a miniature brass anvil, which was followed later that year by an invitation to his annual Christmas party. He made me feel welcomed.

Melissa remembered her first Burns Dinner, “Even though I was new, John insisted I set at the head of the table. I quickly felt embraced as one of the group.... He encouraged interested visitors to come join the volunteer corps and get involved.” Jim recalled, “His generosity of spirit and good will towards those he met seemed to always be in abundance.”

Rich remembered receiving an invite to John's Christmas party, “with a time of 12pm ‘til... I took him at his word ‘til’ I had my mom and dad in tow, Dana by my side and we arrived at his house at 9pm! I didn't find out until later that night that the party had ended at 6pm. In true English fashion, he answered the door and asked, ‘What are you doing here?’ I said, ‘You said the invitation was from ‘12pm ‘til,’ so...Here we are!’ Anyone who knew him knows exactly what his response was. He invited us in after a good laugh, proceeded to pull out what was left of the earlier celebration, and we visited for an hour and a half. He did say that next year there would be an end time added to the invitation.”

As present as he was in the blacksmith shop, or strolling the grounds in his kilt welcoming visitors and talking with volunteers, he was also active behind the scenes.

Melissa remembers, “John was also a part of the group that decided Fort Nisqually needed a foundation so they would have the money to do what they knew needed to happen at the fort.” John helped form the foundation and became its first treasurer. John served numerous terms during the next 30 years. Dana recalled, “He didn't care to have long discussions, he just wanted to know what he could do or give or who he could talk to to make something possible.” At his last Burns Dinner earlier this year, John remarked on the history and continued importance of the Foundation.

John will be well remembered. I think Melissa put it best, “He leaves a big hole in the fabric of Fort Nisqually's story.”

Let us raise a glass and toast to absent friends, in honor of John.