

The Christian “Schmidt” Miller Apprenticeship

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

This passage penned by Moses over three thousand years ago makes an important statement about training and educational methodology. The words must first reside in the heart of the teacher before they can be effectively transferred to the next generation. Moreover, the English term words translated from the Hebrew דָבָר (dābār) does not capture the full meaning and intent of what Moses wrote. Brown Driver Briggs notes that the meaning of the Hebrew דָבָר (dābār) extends beyond the written and spoken word to include “business” or “occupation.”

Stated another way, effective training of the next generation must extend beyond mere words or head knowledge to include the practical demonstration of the occupation or business. Skilled occupations are best taught by a passionate master craftsman actually engaged in its practice. Effective training is about much more than a classroom; it is a natural and holistic approach that develops the whole person—the head, the heart, and the hands. This type of show and tell mentoring occurs in actual practice with the master craftsman teaching the next generation by immersing and engaging them with the tools of the trade.

The Christian “Schmidt” Miller Apprenticeship programs build on this time tested model to train 21st century craftsmen and women. In fact, both apprenticeship and applied craftsmanship are a central part of SUPERB’s heritage. Christian “Schmidt” Miller born ten generations ago in 1763 is the great-great grandfather of founder John Miller. Schmidt’s diligence and craftsmanship have been passed down through 10 generations to find practical application and benefit in the 21st century.

According to Prickets Fort historians, the apprenticeship training for young men began around the age of fourteen and continued for a period of four to seven years. The apprentice agreed to work for the master craftsman, in this case a blacksmith, until the completion of the apprenticeship and the master craftsman agreed to teach him the trade and provide food, shelter, clothing, and agreed upon payments. The terms of this agreement were documented in a written contract known among Pennsylvania Germans as a Lehr-Vertrag.



Training Programs

According to the Mennonite Encyclopedia, young Christian “Schmidt” Miller entered into such an agreement with Hans Beiler. Hans Beiler was the first Bishop of the Kishacoquillas Valley Amish church from 1806 to 1842¹. During his apprenticeship Hans provided Christian with practical hands on training while literally “sitting in his house”. Young Christian began to apply what he learned right away beginning with the simpler tasks and working towards the more difficult until he became the accomplished “Schmied” (blacksmith) that became his nickname.



Young Christian’s work began early in the morning by cleaning the forge and gathering charcoal for the fire. His responsibility was to keep the fire at the desired temperature for the master craftsmen—in this case Hans Beiler and his journeymen. When the metal was the correct color for bending or forging (usually yellow orange) he would hold the hot metal with tongs while the skilled craftsmen would shape it into the desired wrought iron product.

As time progressed, Christian learned more complex tasks such as deburring a newly forged iron; how to make nails (a highly sought after item in the 18th century) and finally advancing to making a variety of wrought iron ware ranging from hinges to pots, pans, anvils and other colonial hardware. His training also included the necessary literacy and math skills to successfully practice his occupation.

1. John A. Hostetler, “Hans Beiler (1761-1842),” Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.



At the end of Christian’s time of training with Hans Beiler he became a journeyman blacksmith which enabled him to provide valuable goods and services to the frontier. It also provided him with valuable bartering materials to enable him to successfully negotiate “payment” to the Shawnee Indians so he could peacefully occupy the land he had purchased near Jerome, Pennsylvania.

