



THE GUNSMITH AND HIS SHOP

Two things allowed for western expansion in the colonies. The first was the pioneer, or frontiersman, a person who was independent or self-reliant. The second was the introduction of the rifle. The frontiersman with his rifle could procure food and fight the enemy, the Native Americans, to a greater advantage. Hunting and defending oneself and family required good dependable firearms. The guns that the first settlers brought to this country were smoothbore muskets that had served those people well along the coastal regions. They could hunt larger game at close range, as well as hunt waterfowl with the same gun. The Native Americans traded for the smoothbore musket and carried it into the first settlements west of the Allegheny Mountains. The military used smoothbore muskets into the Civil War.

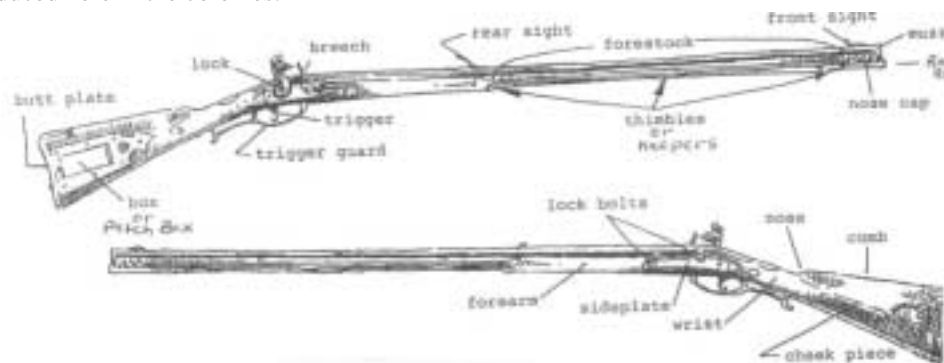
Around 1710, with the first big influx of German immigrants, came German gunsmiths, who brought with them German rifles and rifle building technology. These were short heavy-barreled guns. They had octagonal barrels with fat, clubby stocks. All guns of the 18th century had a flintlock firing mechanism. The stocks of these guns were usually made of walnut and highly decorated with relief carving on the wood and metal, with a sliding wooden cover on the butt of the stock. These guns were the forerunners for what we know now as the Pennsylvania or Kentucky rifles. These early rifles were slower to load than the smoothbore muskets, but were far superior in accuracy. With this Germanic influence, the American gunsmith took the idea of the rifle, expanded on some of the elements, and produced the Kentucky rifle. The rifles made in America before the Revolutionary War were a little longer than the German rifles. They were slimmer but retained the wide butt and sliding wooden patch box on the side like their early predecessors. The American gunsmiths decorated early rifles with some carvings but few or no engraving on the metal parts (which were brass). They were usually not signed by the maker.



By the end of the French and Indian War, the Kentucky rifle had reached its full development. Although it was still shorter and less ornate in decoration than Revolutionary or Post-Revolutionary rifles, the Kentucky rifle had classic characteristics that set it apart from all other firearms. The rifle had plain or slightly curly maple stock (which was slim and graceful), an octagonal barrel of forty inches or more, and a simple brass patch box. The brass patch box was a true American invention that replaced the sliding wooden box. After the Revolutionary War, in the 1810s, stocks were of fancy, curly maple, highly carved and highly engraved, with fancy patch boxes. This was the Golden Age of Kentucky rifle building. Previously, most gunsmiths had been building muskets and rifles for the Revolutionary War therefore, they had little time for ornamentation on guns. All that they could do was build functional, accurate guns for the war effort. After the war, less skilled gunsmiths would have gone out of business, become blacksmiths, or gone into some other kind of work, but the skilled craftsman would have become the skilled



artist of the Golden Age. Most gunsmiths did not produce their own barrels and locks. It was cheaper to buy imported locks or use a recycled barrel and lock than it was to make one, although there were a few locks and barrels produced here in the colonies.



Life in an 18th century gun shop would have included long days for a smith and his apprentice or apprentices. The shop would have had poor lighting and been crowded with different equipment, like a boring machine, a rifling bench, and a forge. It is a wonder that he accomplished beautiful work. Imagine a gunsmith making a barrel and then boring and rifling it. It took about a week just for the barrel. Imagine carving a beautiful stock with very little light and doing intricate engraving. A gunsmith not only built new guns but repaired them as well, which meant he had to know how to make screws, springs, repair stocks, etc. He also made fine knives and tomahawks.

Some gunsmiths also made powder horns, and with each new rifle, they made a bullet mold to go with the gun. In Europe, at this same time, no one man made an entire gun, due to a guild system. In the European guild system, you had a barrel maker, lock maker, stocker, a maker of mountings (like a trigger guard or butt plate), and an engraver. Due to lack of skilled labor in America, you had one gunsmith doing it all. In addition, a gunsmith would repair just about anything, especially if no blacksmith was in the neighborhood.

In the Gunsmith Shop today, you can see how a rifling bench works. You can see the furs stacked up that a rifle would have taken at that time, and you can see the dedication and craftsmanship a gunsmith puts into his work, just as you would have seen 225 years ago.

RESOURCE MATERIAL

Diderot.

Encyclopedia of Trades and Industries.

Kindig.

Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age.

Wright. K.A. and J.W.

Building a Kentucky Rifle.