

INDIAN TRADE GUNS

by Charles E. Hanson, Jr.



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My subject is Indian trade guns. This could be a very broad field because hundreds of kinds of guns were sold to Indians at various times and various places. I'm going to keep it to its narrow sense and talk only about the true trade gun of old fur trade commercial records - this gun that is called the Northwest gun.

It was, and is, a very light smoothbore fullstock musket with some very obvious distinguishing features. Most striking is of course the brass sea serpent that looks like a snake and doubles as both ornament and side screw plate. Next feature is the thin iron guard with the abnormally large guard bow. Third is the flat sheet brass butt plate with short top tang turned at right angles to the plate. The caliber is approximately .60. This light caliber was rather closely adhered to with a few exceptions like the Leman trade guns made for the U.S. Indian Department. This caliber was so standard that the trading posts carried 25 lb. sacks of half ounce balls as a regular stock item.

There are other usual features of course, but they are incidental and not peculiar to North West guns. For example the stock is generally grooved on each side of the comb, the barrel is part octagon and the full stock has a rounded tip with thin brass binding strip. The front sight is a flat iron semicircle and

there is no rear sight. The brass used simple serpentine castings but toward the middle 1700's flat engraved serpent plates were popular on British trade guns.

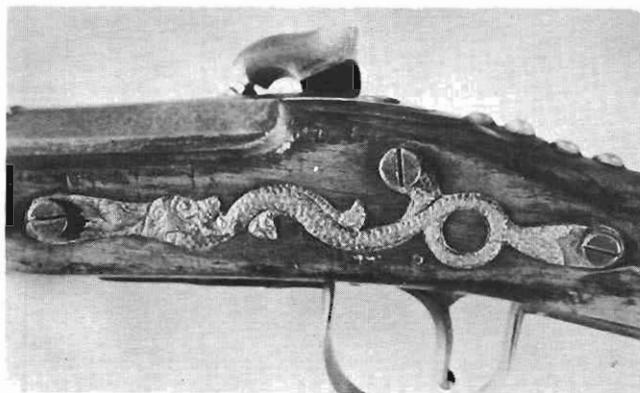
The end of the French and Indian Wars brought a tremendous boom in the British fur trade, opening as it did the vast Great Lakes and Mississippi valley regions to British traders. Rum, guns and ammunition began to flow out to the Northwest territory by the thousands of canoe loads.

To fulfill the demand and minimize competition the traders began ordering a reasonably well standardized type of trade musket that soon became known everywhere in the colonies as the Northwest gun.

Correspondence in the Hudson's Bay archives indicates that the term "Northwest gun" may have come into popular use as early as the 1760's. Though the design of the Northwest gun was undoubtedly influenced by the trade guns previously sold extensively by the Dutch and the French, it was primarily a British gun and remained so. Researchers persist in using twentieth century interpretations of old records which mention German, French and Dutch Northwest guns. Investigation so far has always shown these guns to be products of the Liege area. Many flags have flown over the city of Liege; actually the Kingdom of Belgium as we know it did not exist until 1830.

The term "Northwest Gun" was very common and generally used but it was by no means universal. These weapons have also been rod guides are ribbed and only rarely does a Northwest gun have a bottom thimble. During the hundred and thirty years or so that it was manufactured, barrel lengths have varied from 30 to 48 inches. In original condition the Northwest gun has a blued barrel, varnished stock and polished mountings.

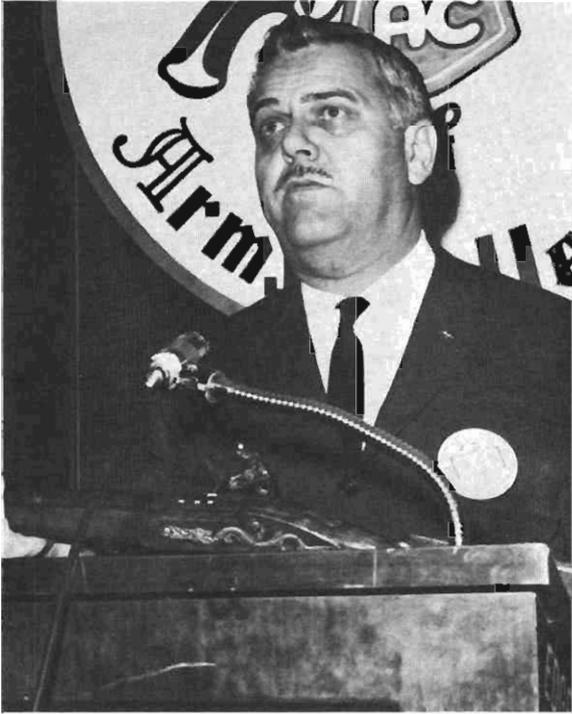
The Northwest gun is relatively scarce today but hundreds of thousands of them were made and sold on the frontier. They first appeared about the time of the Revolutionary War and remained in peak demand for a hundred years. In the 1880's they began to decline rapidly in popularity and by 1912 the Hudson's Bay Company office in London was asking the Northern posts to substitute something else if possible when requests for Northwest guns were received.



TYPICAL "SERPENT" SIDE PLATE, A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF THE NORTHWEST GUNS.

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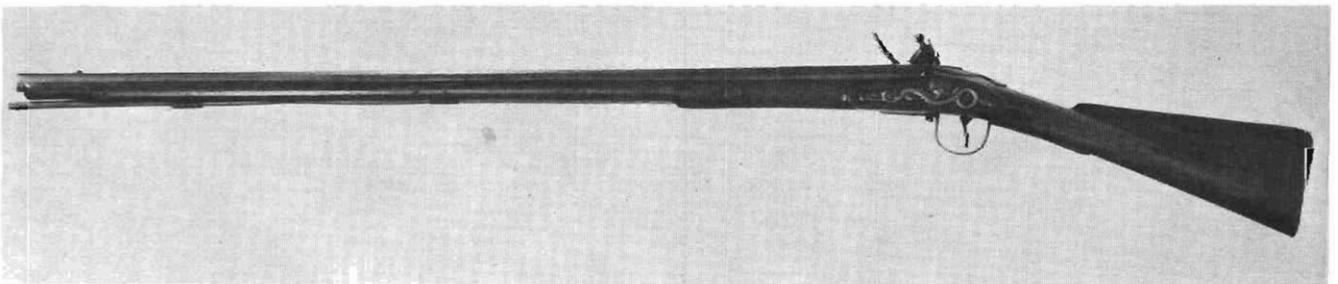
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NORTHWEST GUN BY PRITCHETT, 1819. LOCK AND BARREL STAMPED WITH TOMBSTONE FOX MARK.

Guns were sold to the Indians by early Colonial traders in large quantities during the 17th century. This trade had much to do with the ascendancy of the Iroquois to a powerful position in Colonial affairs. The light cheap trade muskets followed the conventional patterns of the day but were lighter in weight and much smaller in bore. There is very positive evidence that light calibers constituted one of the earliest distinguishing features of guns made especially for the Indian trade.

As gunmaking progressed in the 18th century the guns sold in the trade were just light fowlers of cheap quality. This brought about the use of the serpent side plate so popular on Dutch and British fusils and fowlers of the 1680-1710 period. The early ones used simple serpentine castings but toward the middle 1700's flat engraved serpent plates were popular on British trade guns.

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Many of the early specimens were made for wholesalers in places like Albany, Philadelphia and Charles Town, South Carolina. These guns were long and rakish with deeply curved stocks and slender outlines. Examples of this period by Grice, Wilson, Wicksted and other 18th century makers, have no trading company view marks or dates. Most of them however bear the maker's name on the lock and often his initials on the barrel between the two proof marks. If there is a question as to which Williams or Wilson put his name on a Northwest gun lock, it might be resolved by these initials on the barrel.



"CHIEF'S GRADE" NORTHWEST GUN MADE FOR THE AMERICAN FUR COMPANY IN THE 1830's

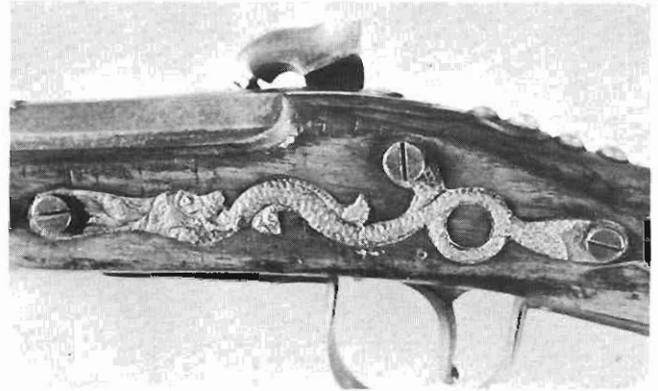
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The names of trade gun makers for the Hudson's Bay Company for the period 1670 to 1820 are known because the Company has remained in existence to the present day with most of its records intact. Unfortunately actual specimens made for the company in that period are extremely rare. Much more common and less readily identifiable are two other classes of trade guns from the 1790-1820 period.

One class bears a view mark on the lock and barrel consisting of a small circle about 0.4 inch in diameter with a sitting fox facing right. These guns generally bear makers names but are not dated. The majority of them were made by Ketland and Wheeler of Birmingham. Since specimens with these markings usually turn up around the Great Lakes and since the known makers of this type operated around the 1800 period it is assumed that they were made for some branch of the North West Company. This company operated from 1784 to 1821 around the West of the Great Lakes as the Canadian opposition to the Hudson's Bay Company operating out of the Bay.

It is my present opinion that these fox in circle guns may well have been made for the Mackinaw Company. This company was composed of former North West Company traders headquartering at Michilimackinac to avoid American restrictions on alien traders operating from Canada. It was eventually purchased by John Jacob Astor and taken over after the War of 1812. I say this because the trade guns purchased and inspected by the British Government for Indian allies in the Northwest at the time of the War of 1812 also all bear this mark. Unless they were carefully examined for inspector's marks such guns would have excited little interest at Detroit or Green Bay in 1812.

The British "war trade guns" were made by a large number of makers and often turn up in good condition. They generally have the military proofs and broad arrow with inspector's stamp on the lock plate. As far as



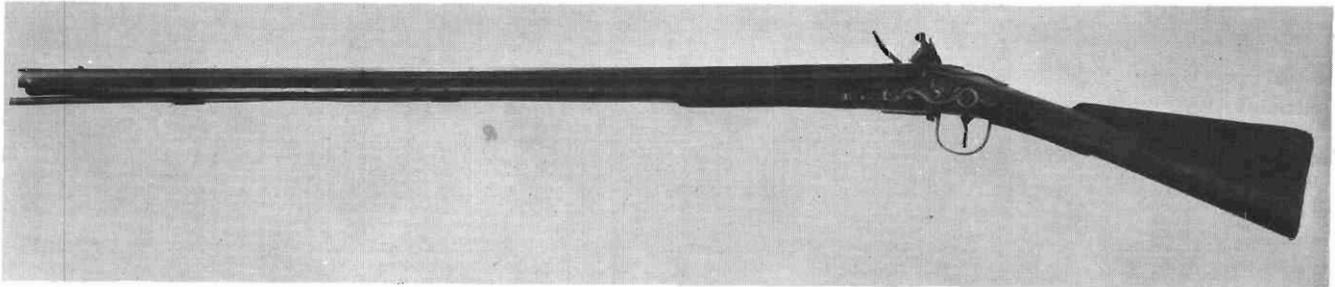
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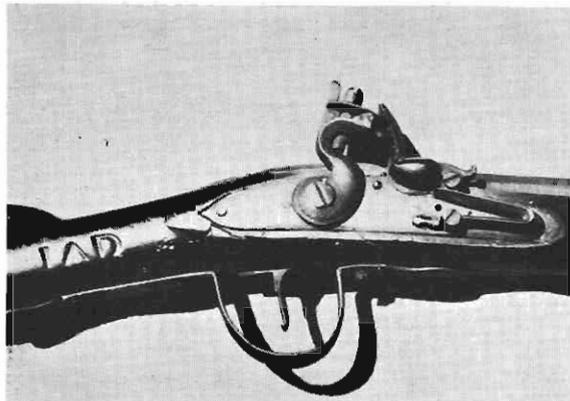
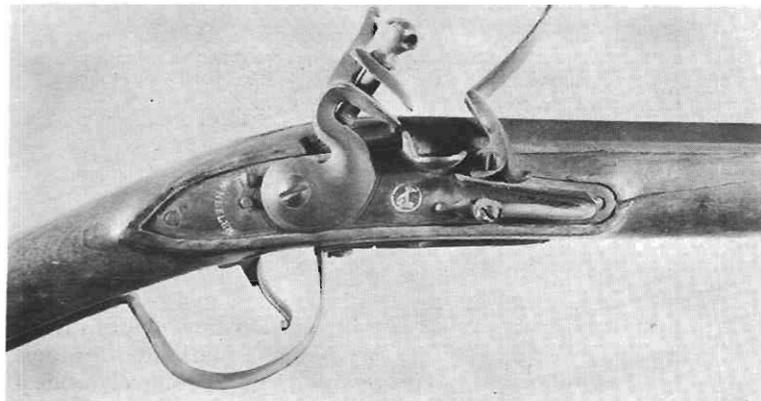
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“fox in circle” guns go they are much more common than the civilian trade models with the same marks. A number of makers have been noted including Ketland & Walker, Whately, Morris, Dawes and Rolfe. Blackmore discussed Government contracts for trade guns in his book, “British Military Firearms”. They were intended to arm the “Canadian Militia” but many of them were distributed directly by agents of the Canadian Indian Department.

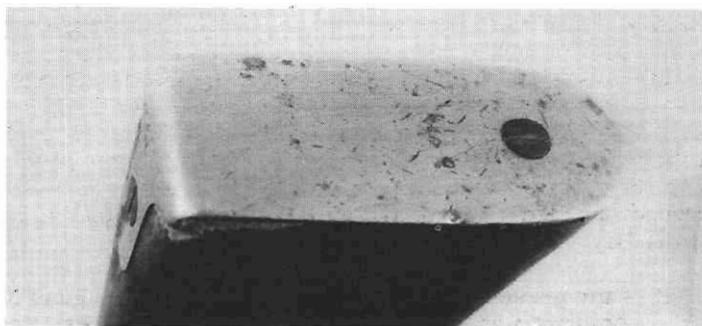
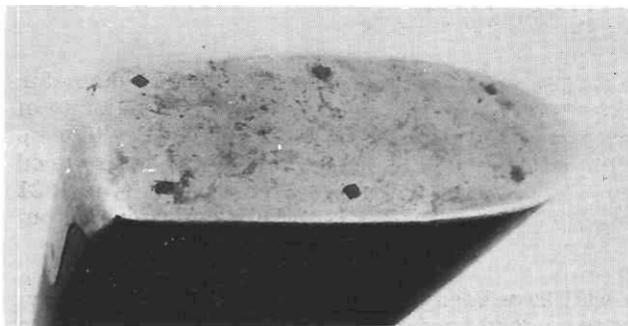


LEFT: EARLY NORTHWEST GUN BY WHEELER WITH “FOX IN CIRCLE” VIEW MARK ON LOCK. RIGHT: WATELY NORTHWEST GUN WITH BRITISH GOVERNMENT PROOF MARKS AND BRAND OF CANADIAN INDIAN DEPARTMENT ON WRIST.

The second class of the 1790-1820 period guns bear the view mark later used by the Hudson’s Bay Company and called a “tombstone fox”. This is a deep stamping about 0.2 inch wide and 0.4 inch high with a rounded top. It always contains a sitting fox with erect tail surmounting two initials. These guns are dated and specimens with various dates from 1792 to 1820 exist. Most of the existing specimens are by Barnett who is known to have made many trade guns for the Northwest Company of Montreal before 1821.

These pre-1820 Northwest guns incorporated some early 18th century characteristics that used to confuse collectors. By this I mean such items as the tang screw coming from below to engage a threaded hole in the breech tang, three lock screws, unbridled pan and a butt plate held on with small square nails. The two-screw lock with bridled pan began to appear on trade guns in the 1820’s but guns for the Hudson’s Bay Company retained the nailed-on butt plate and the tang screw from below until at least 1836.

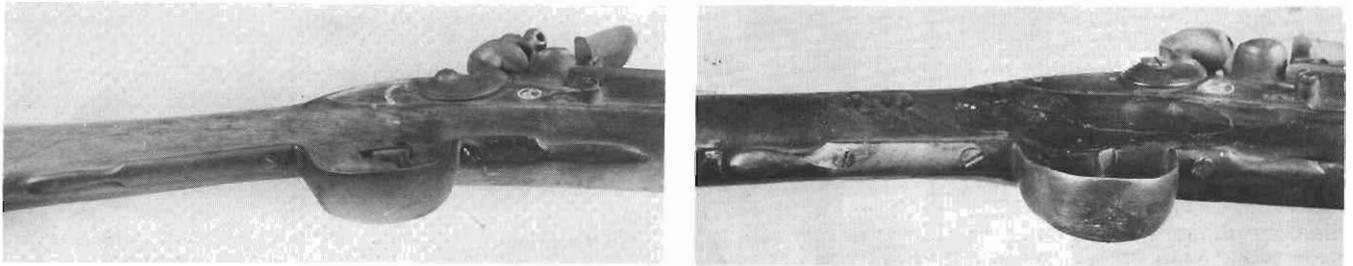
In 1821 the Northwest Company merged with the Hudson’s Bay Company. After that date Hudson’s Bay guns carried the tombstone fox with the maker’s name and date. The fox stamping regularly included the initials “EB”. Of all trade guns the HBC guns were uniformly the best. They were produced under strict agreements and were viewed by an independent firm, usually Bond of London. By the 1840’s the HBC guns had been standardized with double-throat military type hammers and butt plates held on securely by 5 screws. Bore was standardized at 24 gauge. Well known makers included Wilson, Barnett and Parker Field & Company. Barrel lengths in the first half of the 19th century ran from 30 inches to 48 inches.



LEFT: 18th CENTURY NAILED-ON BUTT PLATE. USED UNTIL THE 1830’S ON TRADE GUNS SOLD IN CANADA. RIGHT: TYPICAL BUTT PLATE ON 19th CENTURY NORTHWEST GUNS MADE FOR SALE IN THE UNITED STATES.

By 1800 American traders were importing thousands of British Northwest guns. These guns were rarely dated and sometimes there was no maker's name. By the late 1800's they were bringing in a great many cheap trade guns from the factories of Liege. This is a step that the Hudson Bay Company tried only once, in the late 1860's. It was decided that Belgian guns simply did not measure up to English standards. During the 1830-1860 period the two commonest Northwest guns in the American trade were those by W. Chance of Birmingham and those of doubtful lineage with the "ELG" proofmark of Belgium. These U.S. trade guns uniformly had gooseneck hammers, two-screw locks and flat brass butt plates with only two screws. Most of them were made with 30 to 42 inch barrels but Chance supplied a few with 48 inch barrels. American traders were careful to imitate the Hudson's Bay Company product to a flagrant extent. Most of the guns imported came with "tombstone fox" markings and some American Fur Company orders specified spurious maker's names like "Burnett" to imitate the Hudson's Bay Barnetts. The initials in the tombstone were generally "LA" and it is usually assumed that they originally stood for John Astor. Many of the Belgian guns were dated but those by W. Chance were not. A very few guns were ordered in a fancy "Chief's grade" with brass trigger guard, inlays and selected stock wood.

American gunmakers eventually entered the picture. The United States Office of Indian Trade began operations in 1796 to provide honest traders for Indians on the frontier. Until 1812 the Office sold both Lancaster rifles and Northwest guns imported from England. However the War of 1812 cut off legal importations of trade guns and the Government traders were soon clamoring for guns to meet the continued Indian demands. Small quantities of light Ketland fowlers were purchased from American sporting goods dealers to fill the gap but the Office of Indian Trade began to solicit offers from American makers.



LEFT: TRIGGER GUARD ON EARLY WHEELER NORTHWEST GUN. RIGHT: TRIGGER GUARD ON WATELY NORTHWEST GUN.

Henry Deringer had already become a highly successful contractor for rifles sold by the Office of Indian trade and officials finally prevailed upon him to make some Northwest guns in 1814. He continued to make them under various Government contracts until 1844 but there is no record of any sales to private trading companies. The great majority of Deringer trade guns carry an eagle on the lockplate. Most of them are undated but have the name on lock and barrel. A few have been found with maple stocks.

J. J. Henry had a similar experience with the American Fur Company formed by John Jacob Astor. After supplying quantities of rifles to the company he finally decided to make Northwest guns as well. Henry trade guns with dates from 1828 to 1848 are known but specimens are quite scarce today. The earlier ones have a crude "fox in circle" on the lockplate and are dated. Dating is not uniform on Henry trade guns but all carry the name on lock and barrel. Indian Bureau correspondence indicates that Henry highly resented the monopoly that he felt Deringer had been given on Government contracts. However examination of existing specimens indicates that the Government preference was well-taken. The Deringer Northwest guns have better and longer greech plugs, more serviceable locks and more gracefully designed stocks.

The next American makers to produce trade guns were Edward Tryon of Philadelphia and Henry Lemman of Lancaster. Both made trade guns for private sale and for Government contracts in the 1840-60 period. The Tryon guns were usually light in weight and often incorporated cheap Belgian locks or barrels. A hassle with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Major Hagner, the Government inspector, in 1855, ended Tryson's contracts with the Government for trade guns. Some of Tryon's guns were decorated with German silver ovals on the wrist and forestock and profuse stampings of ferns, palm trees, griffins and stars on the barrels and even the locks.

Leman's guns were of good quality and the Government was still ordering them in 1860. A few of them were original percussion lock and hundreds of them were ordered in .65 and .70 calibers as well as the conventional .60 caliber. Leman strongly objected to the distribution of the larger-caliber guns bearing his name but he took the contracts just the same. Leman guns have "H.E. Leman, Lancaster, Pa." on locks and barrels. The locks also have a tombstone fox with the letters "PA" - surely this must have been for "Pennsylvania." Some of the very late Leman Northwest guns are very distinctive copies of contemporary Hudson's Bay guns, having 5 screws in the butt plates and double-throat flintlock hammers.

After the Civil War Americans still imported a few Belgian guns of progressively poorer quality but most traders simply started selling surplus Civil War guns like Sharps, Spencers and "Mississippi rifles" to

the western braves. In Canada the Northwest gun held on for a long time. A percussion model using the Civil War Enfield lock was adopted by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1860's but flintlocks were still purchased until 1886. Percussion Northwest guns are known to have been sold in the early years of the twentieth century. These ante-bellum trade guns were sold in 30, 36, and 42-inch barrel lengths.

Now just a brief consideration of the Northwest gun as a collector's piece. These guns are scarce, they don't turn up very often in the attics of ancestral homes. Their home was a saddle sheath or a tepee or a Red River cart. A cheap gun in the first place, the Northwest gun generally suffered a great deal of use and abuse and ended up being scrapped for the ornaments that its brass would make and the hide scraper that could be devised from the flattened rear portion of the barrel. They are therefore expensive for the condition in which they are usually found.

These guns were generally produced under short-term contractual agreements of some kind but many others were made for stock by small wholesalers. There are therefore a great many varieties of markings encountered and making a type collection of Northwest guns is a most difficult and discouraging task.

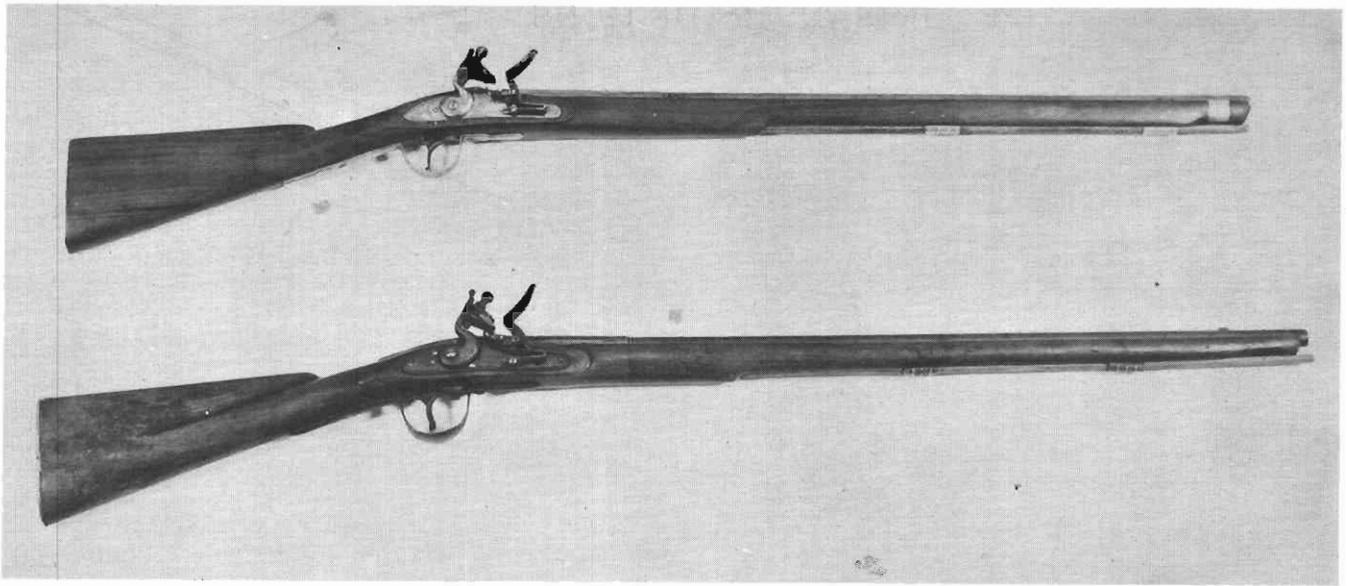
The most common trade gun of the first half of the 19th century is the Barnett made for the Northwest Company before 1821 and for the Hudson's Bay Company after that date. After 1861 the most common guns today are probably those made by Parker Field & Company of London. If you are seeking a late percussion HBC gun you will probably find a Barnett first. Of the American-made specimens existing today, the majority bear the mark of H.E. Leman.

The general trend by collectors seems to be a desire to obtain one good representative specimen to provide a companion piece for Kentucky rifles or similar pieces of American historical significance. This can of course be done. The real problem is to find a Northwest gun in original flint lock and clean sound condition. One alternative is to seek "character" - a gun with the typical Indian brass tack decorations and possibly, picturesque rawhide repairs to the stock.

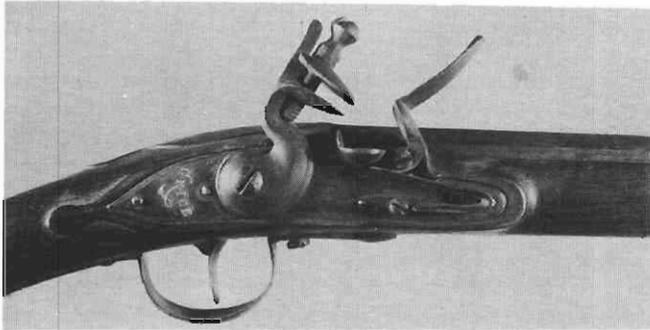
On these latter pieces I can only voice a strong warning. The brass tack decorations have been faked unmercifully, many jobs adding insult to injury through the use of 20th century plated steel tacks. A magnet will disclose these modern tacks but the deception is much harder to detect if genuine old cast brass furniture tacks have been used. If so, you may be able to tell something by lifting a few tacks to inspect the condition of the stock, etc. underneath. I'd like to add here that it is bad enough to thus dress up a genuine old trade gun in poor condition but it is even worse to add tacks and rawhide to a worthless shotgun or musket so that it will pass as an Indian relic. This is being done consistently and, in some cases, quite expertly.

On the bright side of trade gun collecting we have first of all the ease of identification. A gun with distinguishing features is obviously a trade gun and nothing else. It is as distinctive as a flint lock Kentucky or a pure specimen of an official military model. The only people who come to grief on identification are those who have failed to give trade guns any serious study and then decide a gun is "Indian" from the most superficial characteristics. A part octagon barrel, or red paint or a crude lock and barrel have nothing to do with making a gun a Northwest gun. They are after all a very distinct type and it does take some factual knowledge to work with them at all. Second, we have something that can be rather closely dated by careful inspection, certainly as easily as Kentuckies can be dated. Third we have something of obvious historical interest that is rare and unusual. Northwest guns were made in England, Belgium and the United States but all of them were made for North America. They fulfilled a great need in the daily life, not only of Indians from Natchitoches to the Arctic Circle, but the typical French-Canadian voyageur paddling his bark canoe or trudging along beside his Red River cart. In describing the differences between French and American trappers, to Washington Irving, Captain Bonneville pointed out that the Americans preferred the rifle and despised the "shotgun" while "the Creole and Canadian are apt to prefer the light fusee".

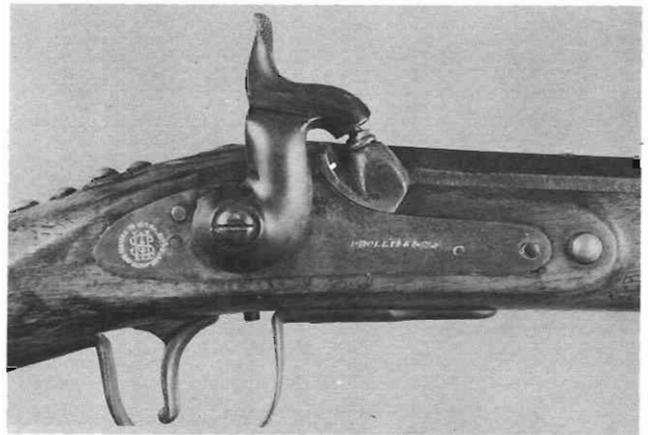
As a true piece of Americana a Northwest gun will always be something a little bit special in any collection.



TOP: MADE BY J. HENRY BOULTON, OF PENNSYLVANIA, PERIOD 1849. BOTTOM: MADE BY PARKER FIELD & CO., LONDON FOR THE HUDSON BAY COMPANY. DATED 1871.



VERY EARLY NORTHWEST GUN BY GRICE WITH THREE SCREW LOCK AND UNBRIDLED PAN.



LATE PERCUSSION NORTHWEST GUN BY HOLLIS, PERIOD 1880-90



FOX IN CIRCLE



TOMBSTONE FOX

NORTHWEST GUN MARKS



19TH. CENTURY



18TH. CENTURY

EAST INDIA COMPANY



BRITISH AFRICAN MARK