

Gunsmith Anecdotes*

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Some years ago, I mentioned to our program director that I would be glad to give a talk on short notice in the event that a speaker canceled. Well, Bruce Bazelon called and asked if I could pinch hit for this meeting, so here I am. Over the years during my research on Tennessee gunsmiths, I've picked up a number of anecdotes about them. Anecdotes are usually thought of as being amusing but some are of a serious nature. Today, I will tell you of some of both.

The old-world gunsmiths of the late Renaissance were expected to maintain the highest degree of craftsmanship in their trade in order to remain a member of their guild. There was, however, the occasional disclaimer, which is a quotation from that period, on a sign that hung on the wall of my mentor's shop. It said "Alle Kunst ist umsunst Wenn ein Engel auf das Zundloch brunst". A rough translation is "All skill is for nought when the angel in the flintlock pisses."

According to Dr. J.G.M. Ramsey¹ in his *Annals of Tennessee*, he notes that William Bean migrated from Pittsylvania County, Virginia to what is now Washington County, Tennessee in 1768. William was reportedly a farmer and a gunsmith. The *History of Washington County* states that he was a gunsmith. However, I have yet to find any documented evidence that he made guns, and no rifle bearing his name has turned up. According to tradition, William Bean is said to have taught all of his sons the art of gunsmithing and that they became widely known in the trade. His son Russell (the first white child born in Tennessee) was born in 1769 in what was a part of North Carolina at the time.

John Allison,² in his book *Dropped Stitches in Tennessee History*, notes that Russell Bean "was said to have been the most perfect specimen of manhood in the whole country, without an equal for strength, activity, and physical endurance, and absolutely devoid of fear." For the purposes of my talk, I have summarized the following account about Russell Bean from Allison's book.

After achieving manhood, Russell went to Connecticut and brought back tools and supplies, establishing somewhat of a manufactory of guns and other tools of war. He became widely known in his trade, producing a considerable number of rifles, pistols, and dirks. After a period of production,



he loaded his material on a flatboat and floated down the Nolichucky River to the Tennessee River, on down to the Ohio, and thence to the Mississippi River and to New Orleans. This brings us to the part of the story² about Russell that sounds hard to believe. Russell stayed in New Orleans for about 2 years, and returned to his home at Jonesboro. There, he found his wife nursing an infant. He left the house without a word, went to town to a local tavern, got drunk, and came back home. Taking the infant from the cradle, he took his knife and cut off the child's ears close to its head, saying "that he had marked it so that it would not get mixed up with his children." I have in my possession a copy of arrest warrant that was issued for Russell on the 19th day of February, 1802. Continuing from Allison's book, Russell was arrested, tried, and convicted for that premeditated, heinous crime. In addition to other punishment, he was branded in the palm of his hand. He reportedly bit out the branded part of his hand and spit it on the ground. Tough guy! Russell later learned that a local merchant named Allen was responsible for the child. He was determined to kill Allen and laid in wait for him on a number of occasions, but failing that, he picked a quarrel with Allen's brother and beat him unmercifully. He was indicted for this but the officers sent to arrest him were unwilling or unable to do so, saying that Russell was sitting on his porch with his rifle close at hand and his pistols in his lap. The sheriff quoted Russell as saying that he would kill the first man who approached his

house. The sherrif passed this on to Judge Andrew Jackson who was sitting on the bench at the time. Jackson immediately ordered (the sherrif to) "Summon every man in the courthouse, and bring Bean in here dead or alive." With a sense of humor the sherrif replied "Then I summon your honor first." With pistol in hand, Jackson left the courthouse at once and went to Russell's house. When Jackson got within shooting distance, Russell arose from his chair and called out "I'll surrender to you, Mr. Devil." Russell was taken to the courthouse, tried, and had to pay a heavy fine.

William Bean's son Baxter is the best known of the Bean family of gunsmiths. Like Samuel Colt, his guns were well made and highly regarded. However, there were other gunsmiths who made better guns than Baxter Bean, but Bean had the reputation and publicity which made him famous. I'll tell you of an amusing incident that occurred one afternoon at his shop. Baxter was using a bow drill to drill a hole in a piece of metal. For those of you who are unfamiliar with a bow drill, it is a spindle-like device which held a drill bit at one end and had a swivel knob at the other. The user would lean into the drill on the knob, and with a small bow having the cord wrapped around the spindle several times, the bow would be pulled back and forth, turning the bit. Either the bit was dull, the metal unusually hard, or both, because a piercing racket came from the bit as it squeeked and squawked back and forth with the bow. A passing drunk who had evidently spent part of the afternoon at a local tavern, stopped at the door of the shop and watched and listened for a while. According to a local bystander, the drunk was heard to say as he staggered away, "Damnedest fiddle music I ever heard".

My next story was passed on to me by a descendant of the Tennessee gunsmith Abijah Fairchild. A local man stopped by Abijah's shop one morning and asked if Abijah could repair his pistol. Abijah considered the gun not worth the effort and refused to work on it. It was probably a single shot pistol like one made by Bacon or Allen & Thurber, not a high-quality gun that was almost worn out. Every time the man went into town, he would stop by and pester Abijah to repair his pistol. This began to get very old, so one morning Abijah grudgingly agreed to work on the gun and said that it would be ready when the man returned on his way home at the end of the day. After the man left, Abijah put the end of the pistol barrel into his forge and began to pump the bellows. Bringing the end of the barrel to a red heat and striking it with his hammer, he forged it into a long, tapering point and set the gun on his bench to cool. Later that afternoon, the customer stopped by to pick up his pistol. Looking at what Abijah had done, he exclaimed "I can't shoot a man with that!". Gesturing pointedly, Abijah said, "No, but you can gouge him with it".

According to my friend Garnett Powell, Hacker Martin worked in Jonesboro, Tennessee from the late 1930s into the 1940s. Hacker was well-known for his muzzle-loading rifles and was one of a few gunsmiths in the country who carried on this tradition at the time. He bought an old mill in the 1930s and built his shop around 1941. He moved to Appomatox, Virginia around 1948, where he continued his craft. He had the reputation of sometimes being cantankerous and somewhat of a character. I never met Hacker, but my long-time friend Earl Lanning told me a few of Hacker's comments. One time, Earl asked how Hacker tempered a mainspring. Hacker replied "Not too hard and not too soft—just so it has "spizerinctum". On another occasion, Earl commented on the famous late senator from Tennessee, Estes Kefauver. Earl wondered what with Kefauver being away in Washington so much of the time, what kept the senator and his wife together all those years. Hacker thought a moment and replied "Well, she had one thing and he had t'other." Another time, Earl asked Hacker what it took to hand-forged a rifle barrel. Hacker replied "Three dumb men and a great big fire".

Those of you who have read the book by the late Walter Cline³ *The Muzzle Loading Rifle—Then and Now*, may have wondered why so many of the old timers pictured therein had rifles with unusually long barrels. These guns were made in the Soddy-Daisy area just north of Chattanooga. I knew the late gunmaker Jimmy Gault of Soddy for many years. He told me that those long-barreled rifles were made during the 1930s and 1940s and that he believed only about 35 of them were made. He said that the gunsmiths would scrap older, broken rifles for parts and take two barrels and weld them end to end. At the time, it didn't occur to me to ask why they did that. I thought about it off and on over the years. It finally occurred to me that most of the men who posed with their rifles for Walter Cline's photographs were getting up in years. With the extra-long barrels and the rear sight placed further from the breech, the rear sight would be more in focus for shooters whose vision was changing as they got older. I have fired one of those long-barreled rifles and it was very accurate at 50 yards.

Here is a story about a tragic event that doesn't involve a gunsmith, except that a Baxter Bean rifle was part of the story. There's a delightful little book entitled *Lure of the Great Smokies*⁴ that tells of life in the area that became our nation's most-popular national park. One of the photographs therein is of Uncle Sammy Burchfield with his "...James Bean rifle." I have had that rifle in my hands, and it was signed on the barrel on a silver plate "B. Bean for A. Garla(nd)". Apparently Bean didn't allow enough room to sign the owner's name in full—Garland. Uncle Sammy stood about six and one-half feet tall, with a long beard almost down to his belt and his rifle at his side. From looking at the photo-

graph, I suspected that the rifle had been restocked. I subsequently had the opportunity to examine and photograph the rifle. I suspected that it had been restocked by one of the Keller family of gunsmiths who worked in nearby Maryville, most likely Samuel Keller. At the time of Mason's writing, the gun had passed to Mr. John Oliver. The following story was related to me by Mr. Clay Oliver who had subsequently inherited the gun. Mr. Clay Oliver, who owned the rifle when I photographed it, was born and raised in Cades Cove, which is where Uncle Sammy had lived. Mr. Oliver told me that one day, another resident of Cades Cove, whose name I do not recall and is referred to herein as the unnamed man, was shot and killed as he played with his children in the front yard of his cabin. All of the men in the Cove knew about their neighbors rifles, and the bullet was identified as belonging to a small-calibered gun owned by a man named Little George Powell. Based on the evidence, Little George was charged with the murder of the unnamed man and was sentenced to life in prison. His sentence was commuted and he was sent home when the authorities learned that he was soon to die of tuberculosis. On his death bed, Uncle Sammy confessed to the murder. He had stolen one of the Little George's bullets while at a local shooting match. He had used very thick patching around the bullet when he shot the unnamed man with his larger caliber Bean rifle. When asked why, Uncle Sammy said that the unnamed man had told the revenooers of the whereabouts of his moonshine still, with Little George being blamed for the murder.

About halfway between Murfreesboro and Franklin, Tennessee lies the small community of Triune. That was the home town of Mr. O. S. Jones, an old-time gunsmith who worked up until the 1960s. I often stopped to visit Mr. Jones on my way to the annual Dixie muzzle-loading rifle shoot at Charley Hafner's farm on Owl Hollow Road near Franklin. Mr. Jones was known for his short-barreled rifles. He had nearly a dozen of the old wooden-style rifling guides that he

had made with varying rates of twist. I don't believe that he had a one that was longer than 3 feet. My friends at the match told me that if I ever left a gun for Mr. Jones to work on, that I shouldn't be surprised when I picked it up to find that the barrel had been shortened, if only for a couple of inches. I arrived at the shoot one August with my favorite target rifle, Old Skinner. When I told some of the other shooters that I had stopped to visit Mr. Jones, they insisted on seeing Old Skinner, fearing that Mr. Jones might have shortened the barrel. Well, he hadn't. I then learned that a man had recently left a very nice 3rd model Colt Dragoon with Mr. Jones to have an original hand spring installed to replace a broken one. When the man returned to pick up his gun, you guessed it. Mr. Jones had shortened the barrel a fraction of an inch. I didn't learn what the man had to say to Mr. Jones, but it couldn't have been complimentary.

This concludes my presentation. I would like to hear from you if anyone knows of any accounts similar to those that I have related to you. Thank you for your kind attention.

NOTES

1. Dr. J.G.M. Ramsey, 1853. *Annals of Tennessee to the End of the 18th Century*. Originally published by Walter Jones, Charleston, South Carolina.

2. John Allison, 1971. *Dropped Stitches in Tennessee History*. Facsimile reproduction by Charles Elder, bookseller-publisher, Nashville, Tennessee.

3. Walter M. Cline, 1942. *The Muzzle-Loading Rifle, Then & Now*. Standard Printing and Publishing Co., Huntington, West Virginia.

4. R. L. Mason, 1927. *Lure of the Great Smokies*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA 328 p.

*Presented at the meeting of the American Society of Arms Collectors at Charleston, SC on March 30, 2001.