

JAMES B. SMITH
MILLER REVOLVING RIFLE

When Frank Russell asked me to take part in this program, I was quite pleased to be on a team with men I considered most advanced in the collecting of revolving long arms.

For some time I had felt the existing information on the Miller revolving rifle was rather sparse and with some research much more could be uncovered. So far, little has been known about the revolving rifles marked "J and J Miller", Rochester, New York. The only available source being the "Gun Collector" issue number 35 which did mention Miller and gave a patent date of June 11, 1829. Many questions remained to be answered regarding Miller's patent, the relation to the Billinghurst and other revolving rifles of the same general pattern.

Little did I realize what a blind alley this research would lead me into. My first contact was with Mr. Tom Hall who was very helpful in locating a listing of the Miller patent in his library at the Winchester Museum. With this listing on patent date and a very brief description and with the aid of a patent attorney friend of mine, I tried to obtain further information from the U.S. Patent Office. Because of the patent office fire in 1836, during which the records were lost, I was unable to get any new or interesting facts on the Miller patent from this source. My next attempt for new information was directed to the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia where I did obtain some data from their old U.S. Ordnance records.

The most helpful information was received from Mark Aziz who, as you know, is also here today with a presentation of his own, which I am sure was a full time job without having to help me. The information he furnished was taken from the Rochester, New York, city directories and the local newspapers of the time of the Miller activity. Here is the information I have put together from various sources.

The Miller Revolving Rifle patent was issued to James Miller of Brighton, New York on June 11, 1829 and is shown in the U.S. Patent Office listing for the year 1829, listed as patent number 203. This listing describes it as, "An improvement in rifles, muskets and fowling pieces, etc. --- the magazine (cylinder) to contain a number of charges."

Another listing of this patent is found on page 183 in the "Journal of Ordnance Industry", volume 4, dated July to December, 1829, which lists the Miller patent "for an improvement in the construction of firearms, rifles, muskets, fowling pieces, ordnance, etc. to James Miller, Brighton, Monroe County, New York, June 11th". It further states that, "this gun is very similar to Rogers and Wheeler's patent (shown on page 124)". "A revolving chamber containing 7 charges is placed behind the main barrel". "Each of the perforations on this revolving piece has its touch hole, has its percussion Primer". "The improvement relied on in this machine consists in the simplicity of its construction, in every way adapted to hunting and for war purposes". Most of the Miller Revolving Rifles that I have observed are marked "J & J Miller" with a Rochester address on the barrel. In some cases the J & J Miller is also stamped on the lock plate. J & J Miller are the initials of James and John Miller who were operating in Rochester, New York from the years 1827 to about 1852. A few pieces are reported to be marked with J. Miller, others John Miller and are thought to have been made at a later date than the J & J Miller pieces.

From the Rochester directories we find the following information, which I believe, is new and should help us straighten out the mystery of the two J. Millers.

The directory of 1827 lists John Miller, whose occupation was a farmer, boarding with Joseph Medbery on River Street (now St. Paul Street) Rochester, New York. James Miller was not listed in the directory of that year.

In the 1834 directory, James Miller was listed as a gunsmith with a shop at 11 Mason Street Rochester, New York. John Miller also listed as a gunsmith of the same address and boarded with James Miller (assumed to be his brother) at 9 Chestnut Street, Rochester, New York. This is the last year that James Miller is listed.

The Rochester directory of 1838 lists John Miller as operating a gun shop on Front Street, Rochester, New York and lists his residence as the Mansion House. You will note he has moved from the address formerly listed as the James Miller home.

The directory of 1841 lists John Miller of the same Front Street address and residing at the Arcade House.

In the 1844 directory it lists John Miller with a gun shop at the same address and living at 9 Chestnut. Note, his home is now at the address formerly used by James Miller.

Directory of 1847-1848 lists John Miller as a rifle manufacturer operating a shop at the Curtis Block with his home address at 9 Chestnut. In July of 1848, the Curtis Building was completely destroyed by fire and a new gun shop was established at 43 Main Street.

Similarly, we find in the 1849 to 50 directory, James Miller not listed, John Miller a gunsmith at 43 Main Street, home at 9 Chestnut Street.

The directory of 1853-54 shows that John Miller has become a fish dealer at 29 Front Street, retaining his home at the same 9 Chesnut Street.

The records indicate that Miller has gone out of the gun business and turned over his gun shop to Antobres G. Edward, who at one time had worked for Billinghamurst. Miller opened a fish market at 29 Front Street but did not continue in the business very long. This is the last time Miller's name appears in the Rochester directory. John Miller is supposed to have moved to Michigan in 1854, to engage in the fish industry. The Rochester newspaper in 1854 reported Miller as being mixed up in some kind of suicide hoax and being seen in Battle Creek, Michigan. Further information about the Millers is lost. You will note that James Miller, obtained the patent, was not listed after 1834. I believe it is safe to assume that he died some time in the year 1834.

We have always suspected that there was a very close business relationship between Miller and Billinghamurst. Both the Rochester directory and newspapers of the period threw considerable light as to this relationship. In the directory of 1834 we find Billinghamurst listed as working in the Miller shop on Mason Street and living at the home of James Miller on 9 Chesnut Street. Some time after 1834 Billinghamurst left the Miller shop and established his own shop for making revolving rifles and others

and by 1841 Billinghamurst had established a broad reputation as a maker of fine rifles. The patent of June 11, 1829, though not very broad, does predate the Colt patent. James Miller, the inventor, lived in Brighton, New York, a village near Rochester, at the time the patent was granted. He did not start making rifles in Rochester until about 1834. However, his brother John Miller lived in Rochester as early as 1827. By 1834, Billinghamurst was employed as a gunsmith in the Miller shop. We do not know whether James or John Miller were skillful gunsmiths, but we are sure Billinghamurst's skill was exceptionally high. Because we know that the number of early Millers produced was very small and of excellent quality, I believe we can safely assume that Billinghamurst supervised their construction and probably did the finishing work on the Miller rifles. James Miller is not listed in Rochester directories after 1834 and in all probability died during that year. John Miller continued in the gun business until about 1850. The patent probably expired in 1847. The number of rifles made by him during the years from 1835 to 1850 must have been very small because those found marked "J" or "John Miller" are very few. It is possible that John Miller's interest in the gun business was pretty much confined to the granting of the rights to use the Miller patent and collecting the royalties and the promotion of the Miller revolving system.

Many gunsmiths made rifles under Miller's patent, the most famous being Billinghamurst.

Others were:

Elijah Snell of Auburn, New York

Benjamin Bigelow of Marysville, California, formerly an apprentice of Billinghamurst.

Antobres Edwards of Rochester, an apprentice of Billinghamurst who later took over the Miller shop in 1853.

Volpous of Cincinnati, Ohio, an apprentice of Billinghamurst

Patrick Smith of Buffalo, New York 1835 to 1870

G. A. Brown, address unknown, is supposed to have worked for Billinghamurst.

E. S. Ormsby, address unknown, not to be confused with W. L. Ormsby, engraver of Colt cylinders.

A. S. Sizer, address unknown

G. R. Pierce, address unknown

H. V. Perry, Fredonia, New York 1840 to 1860

C. E. Bunge, Geneva, New York

Thomas P. Cherrington, Jr., Catawissa, Pa. 1858

W. H. Smith Rochester, New York, and New York City - apprentice and workman for Billinghamurst.

We are very fortunate to have on display, here today, four of the five or six known Miller Revolving Rifles. All of them are excellent specimens. I would like to describe them briefly at this time.

The first one belongs to Mark Aziz and is of the typical Miller pattern except that it has a full length stock of the military type. I believe this indicates that the Millers were trying to get into the military type gun as their patent describes the rifle as being suitable for muskets, etc. It is, in my opinion, one of the very early Millers.

The next one is owned by Frank Russell and I have just seen it for the first time this morning and I don't know too much about it except that it is one of the "J & J Millers" of very excellent workmanship. It seems to have a little bit of a Kentucky tinge to it. It resembles another Miller pattern rifle that I have examined was made by Elijah Snell of Auburn, New York. The Snell rifle was pretty much on the same pattern with the patchbox and Kentucky type inlays.

The third one was also brought here by Mark Aziz and is owned by a friend of his. It shows the highest quality of workmanship with fine engraving. You will notice that the general design, workmanship and engraving is very similar to the fourth one which belongs to me.

My Miller is slightly unusual and different from the others. It has a leather packing in the forward end of the cylinder which may be one of the patented features of the Miller rifles. It is a feature which was to prevent multi-discharge and excess discharge between the cylinder and the barrel. Aside from that the only unusual part of this rifle is the top strap which is attached to the barrel and dovetailed into the top of the frame, holding it together. I think this has some advantage over the regular Millers and Billinghamst.

Now, the next one is a Cherrington which we don't know too much about and there is a question as to whether it was made by Cherrington or Billinghamst. I am quite sure it was made by Billinghamst and this opinion is confirmed by Mr. Stewart. In any event, I think as you go through our display of the Miller type rifles you will agree with our conclusion that all the various marked names are very closely related to the Miller and Billinghamst arms.