

# The Spice of Kentucky Rifle Collecting

by Clarence Frederick Runtsch

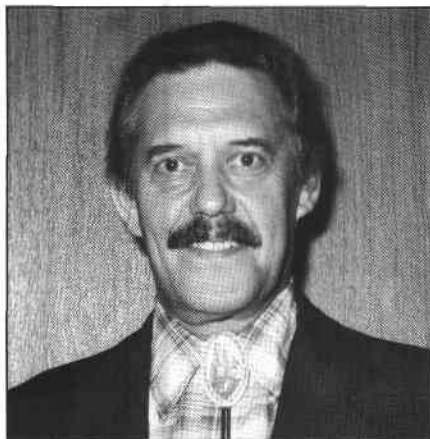
There are usually three different approaches to collecting Kentucky Rifles. These three approaches have specific boundaries in theory, but in reality serve only as guidelines that are extremely flexible.

The first represents a collector's overall appreciation for this interesting American weapon. Collections of this type are based on having representative examples or a cross-section of some of the different schools of Kentucky rifle making. The collections of Harmon Leonard and Jim Lucie demonstrate this first approach.

The second method of Kentucky rifle collecting concentrates mainly on a particular school or area. This can be demonstrated by the Lehigh County collection of Ron Gable, and the Robin Hale collection of Southern rifles.

A collection representing the third approach is one that features a particular maker or a family of makers. Bill Reisner's collection which specializes in Kentucky rifles made by the Hawken family, and the Armstrong rifles owned by former member Albert Sullivan are examples.

This talk is about rifles in still another category which encompasses all Kentucky rifle making schools, during all periods, *concentrating on interesting and unusual details*. In my opinion, giving attention to some of the uncommon features can add spice to the field of collecting Kentucky rifles. This discussion is primarily concerned with the

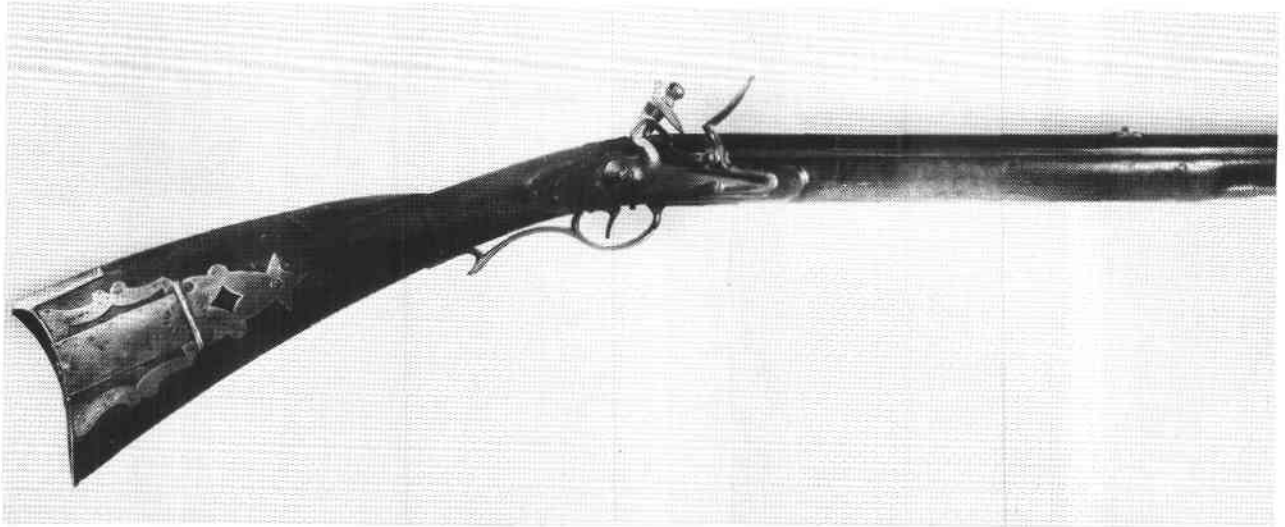


spice, and includes examples of firing mechanisms, multi-shot systems, hand-to-hand capabilities, and a few random remarks regarding decorations. The first few rifles we will examine have features that are found on numerous others, but as we progress, we will observe details that are not so common, and in some cases unique.

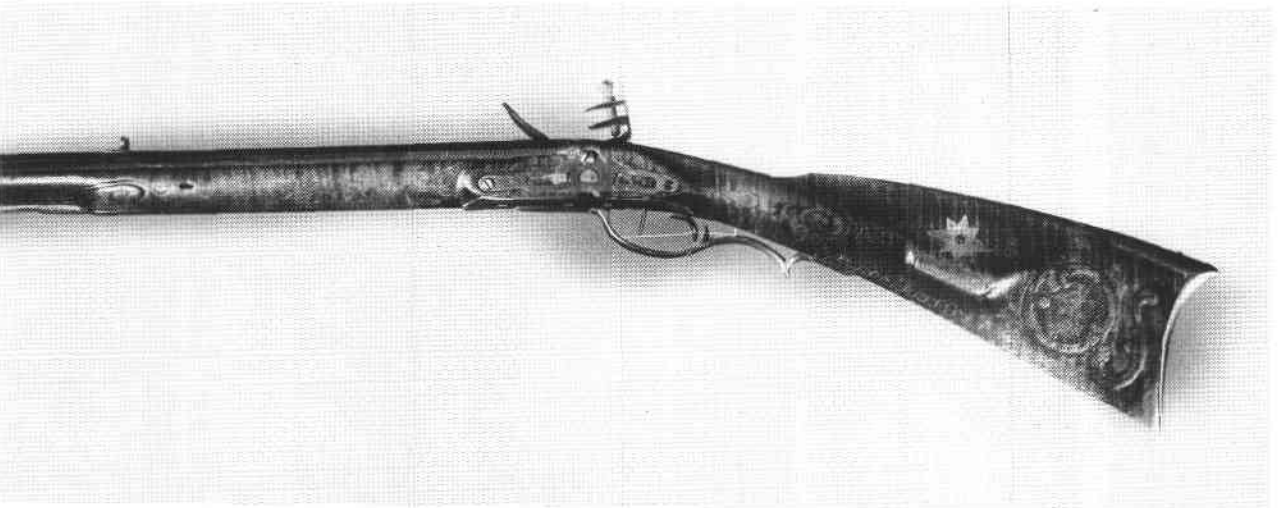
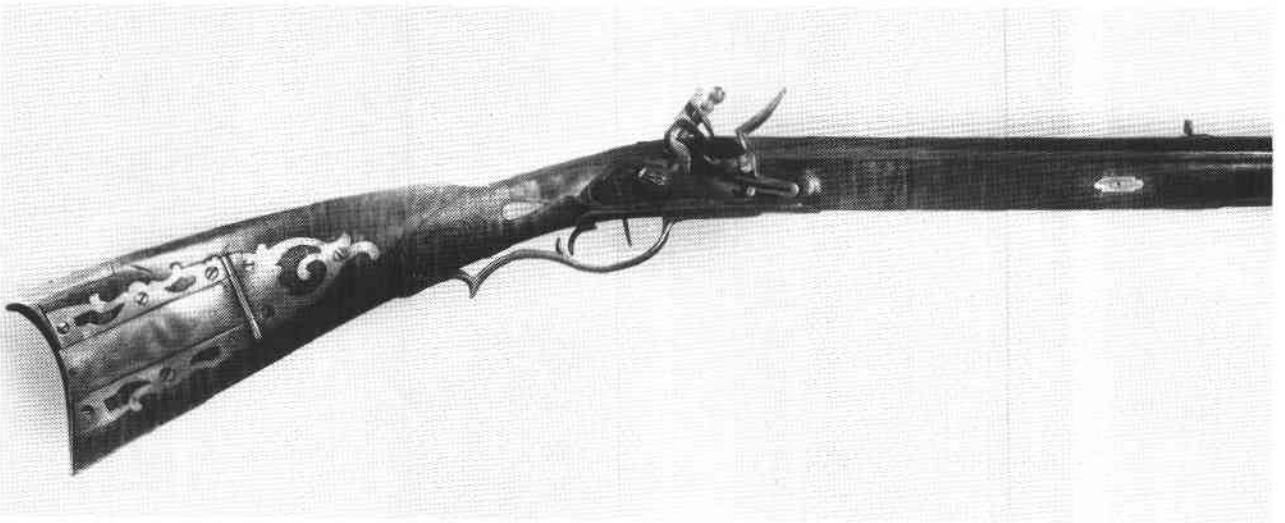
Many of the rifles used in this presentation show various stages and qualities of restoration or repair, and even neglect, which stems from the fact that Kentucky rifles were used and often abused over a period of many years, to a much greater extent than many other types of weapons.



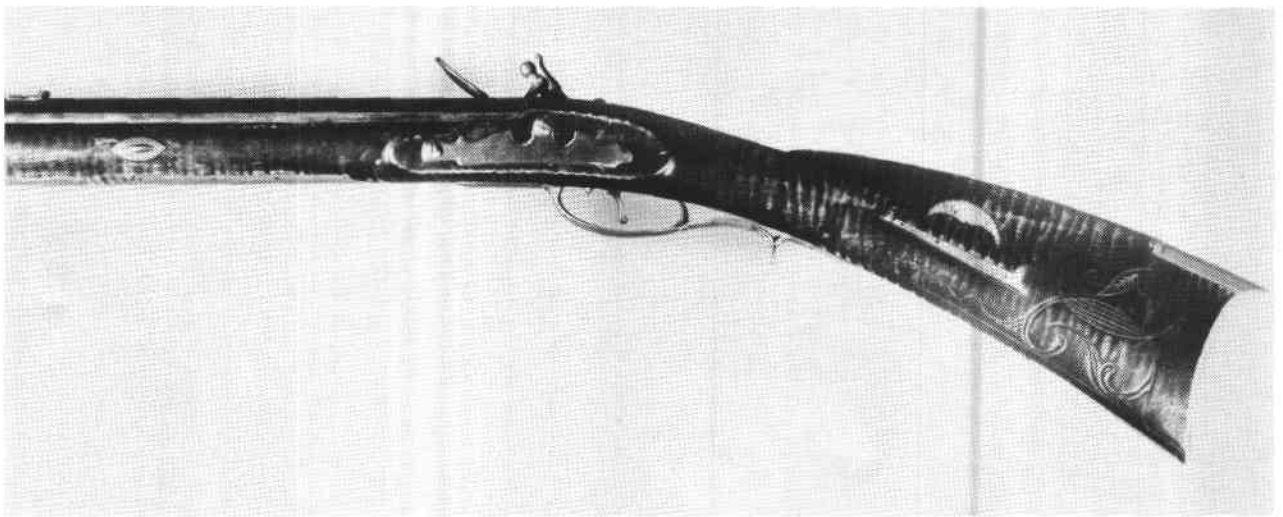
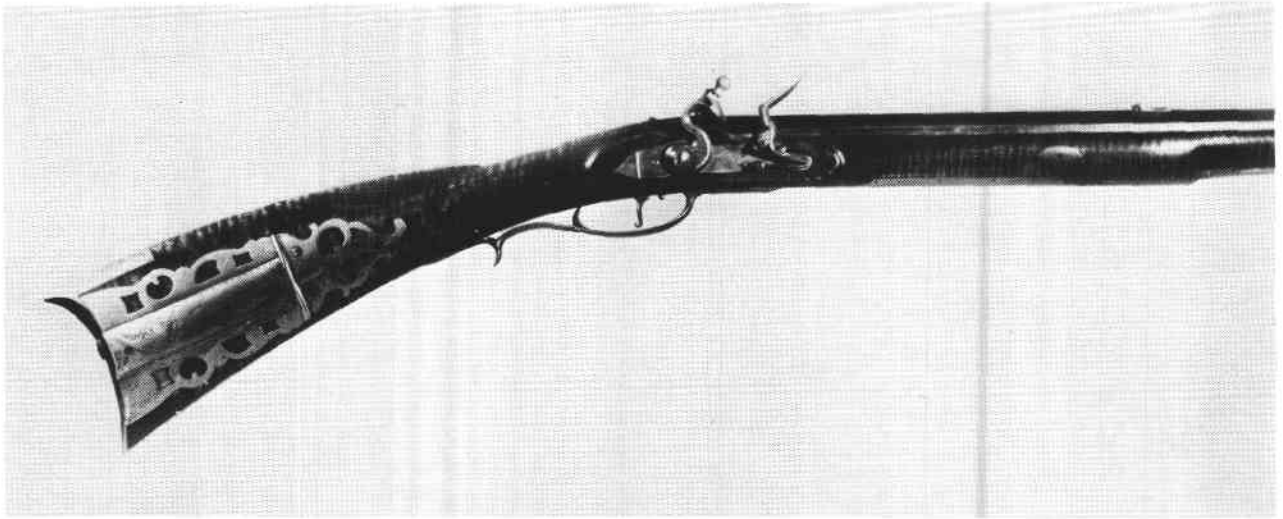
The first rifle in this review is probably the earliest. Its single most interesting feature is its sliding patchbox cover which is used instead of the customary hinged-lid type. The severity of design and lack of decoration sets it apart from many other later rifles.



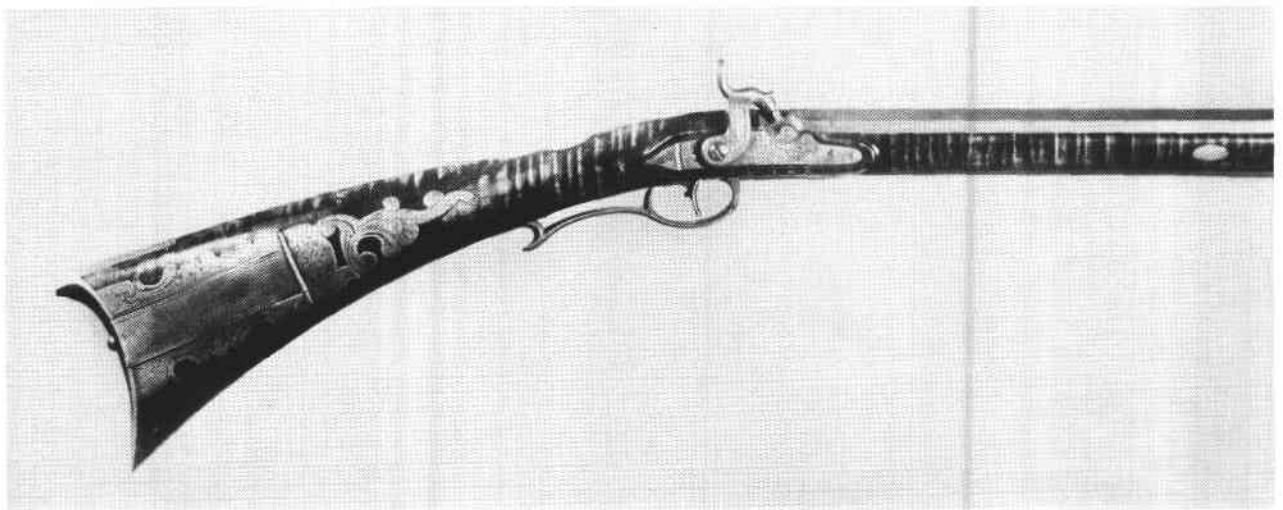
**This early rifle has a half-round, half-octagon barrel. On the top barrel flat, where the maker's name is usually seen, is the engraved image of a man's head in profile. The most interesting feature of this rifle is well concealed, however: the lands and the grooves in the barrel are straightcut instead of being spiral rifled.**



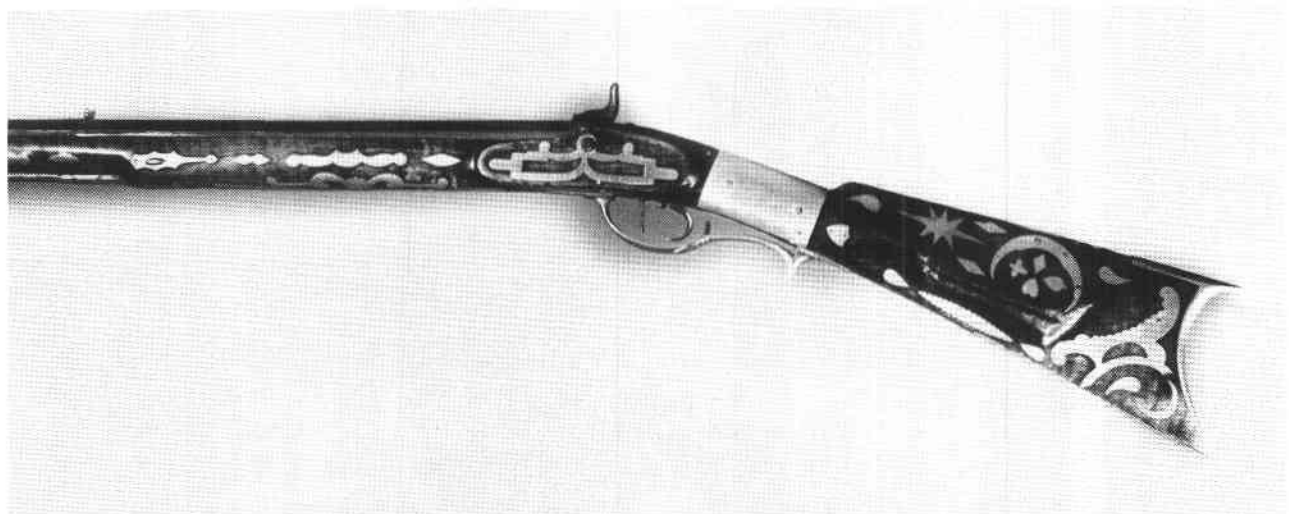
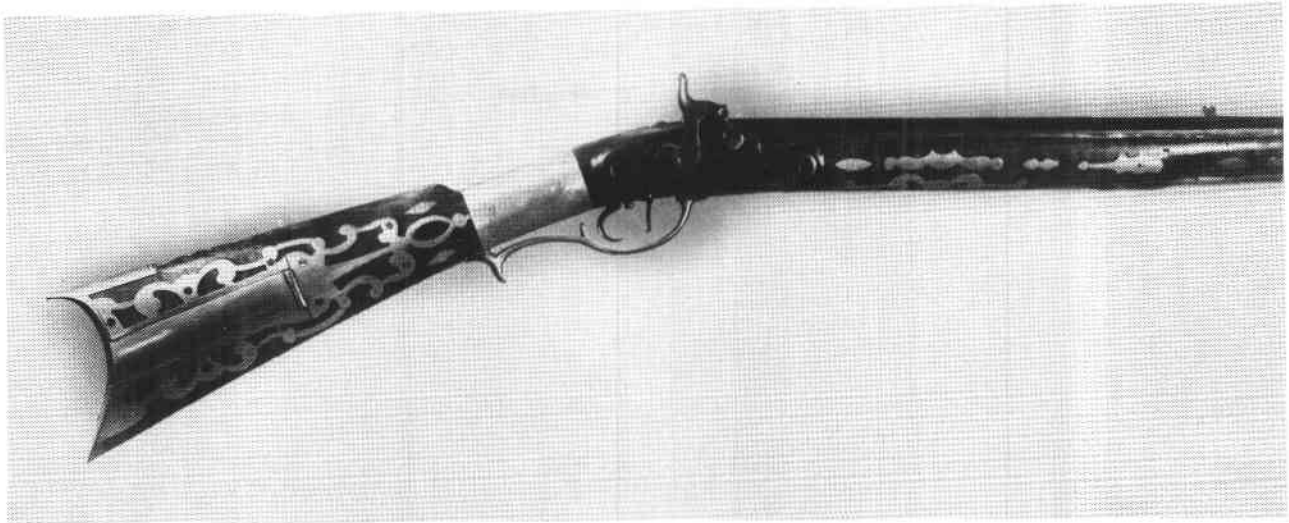
**H. Aldenderfer made this Lancaster County rifle in the conventional style with an interesting token bit of Pennsylvania Dutch design engraved on the patchbox, and with an odd example of raised carving on the reverse of the butt.**



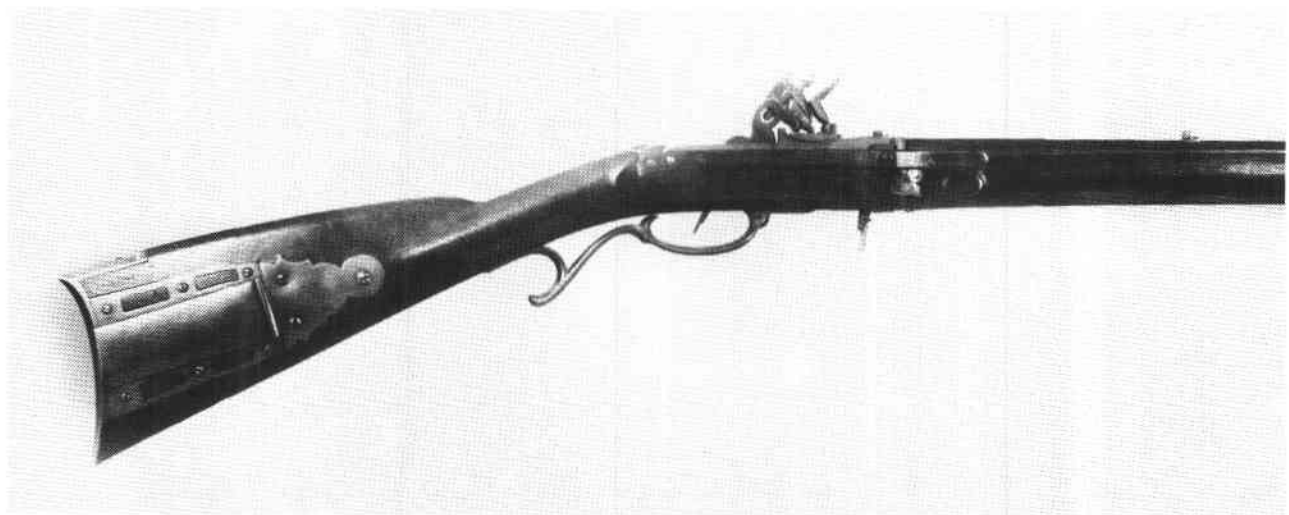
This unmarked Kentucky rifle is similar in appearance to others which are signed "S. Miller." The incised carving on the reverse of the butt stock is an item of interest to collectors, but of course is not as desirable as raised carving. Most signed "S. Miller" rifles are incised carved.



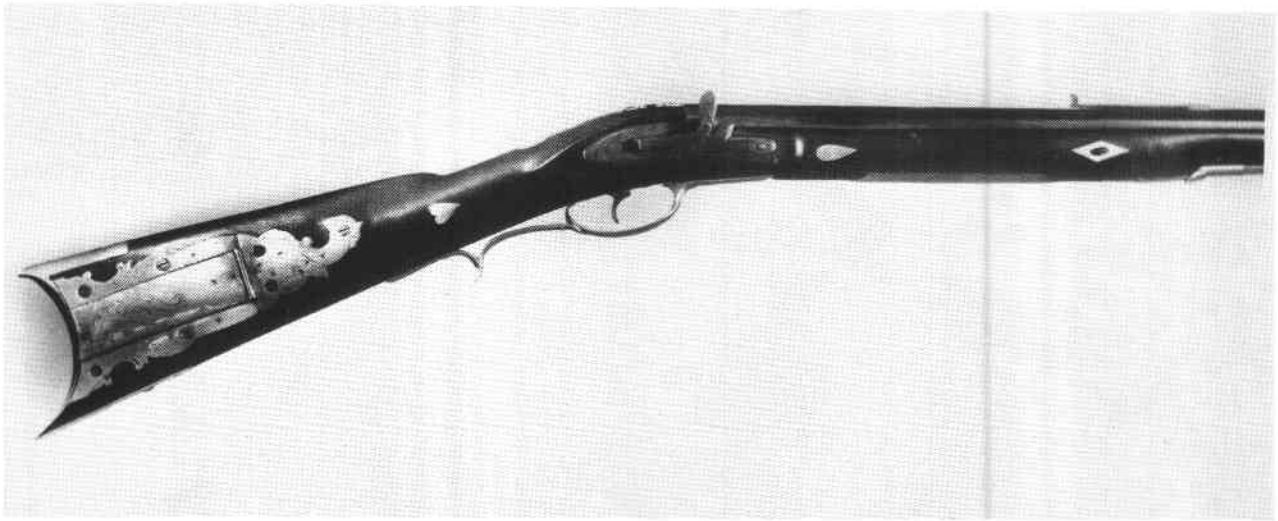
The man who made this fine rifle didn't sign his name. Perhaps he was of the opinion that his capable workmanship was signature enough. This is an example of the very graceful rifles produced by makers of the Lehigh County School. It appears to be an unusual conversion from flint-lock, although, there is a possibility that it was made as a percussion piece using a converted flintlock for the purpose. Instead of a conventional breech plug, a breech block somewhat similar in appearance to a patented breech is used. Two other features deserve attention. One is the patchbox that is secured to the stock with pins. No screws are used, as is customary. The other is the toe plate that extends all the way from the butt plate to the rear of the trigger guard. An engraved plate continues from the front of the trigger guard, extending all the way forward to include the lower ramrod thimble.



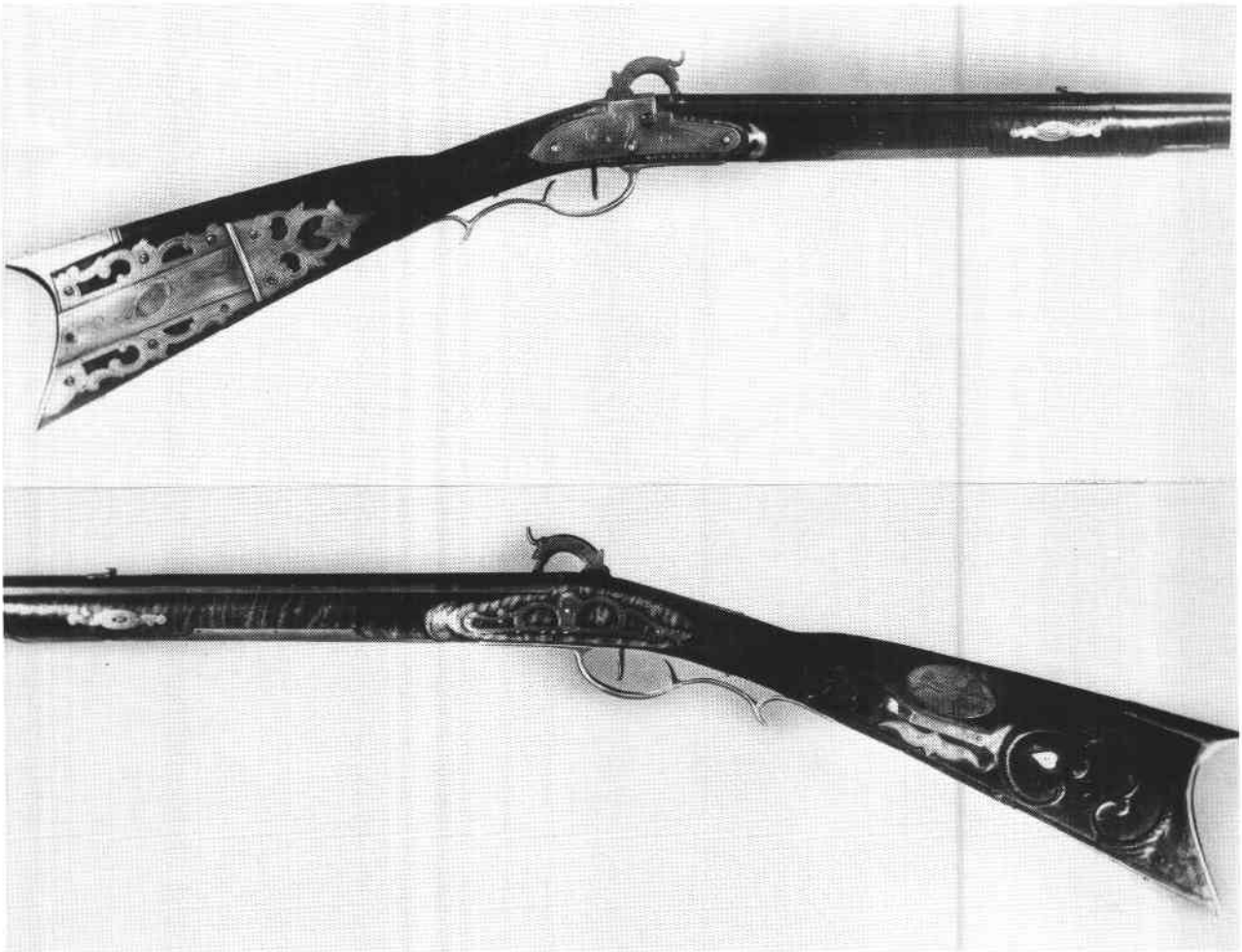
The over-abundant number of German silver inlays on this rifle seems to indicate that it was made for a man of wealth, or at least for one whose credit was good, in that inlay work is very time-consuming and must have been expensive. The piece is unsigned. There is a clue to the character of the original owner, however, because almost all of the inlays except four obvious ones are meaningless. A cluster of hearts, diamonds, spades and clubs on the reverse of the butt stock suggests that the rifle was made for a gambler, or at least a man who liked his cards.



This rifle illustrates the use of the Hall breech loading system. The lines of the rifle are essentially those of the Kentucky style, being very different in appearance to the military rifles that were manufactured using the Hall system, mostly at a latter date. Rifles of this type were produced between about 1811 and 1818. According to research by Dwight Demeritt, 24 are known today. The only other breech loading system that I've seen on a Kentucky rifle was a backwoods conversion of a fine raised carved rifle that had been modified to accept a store-bought brass-cased cartridge.



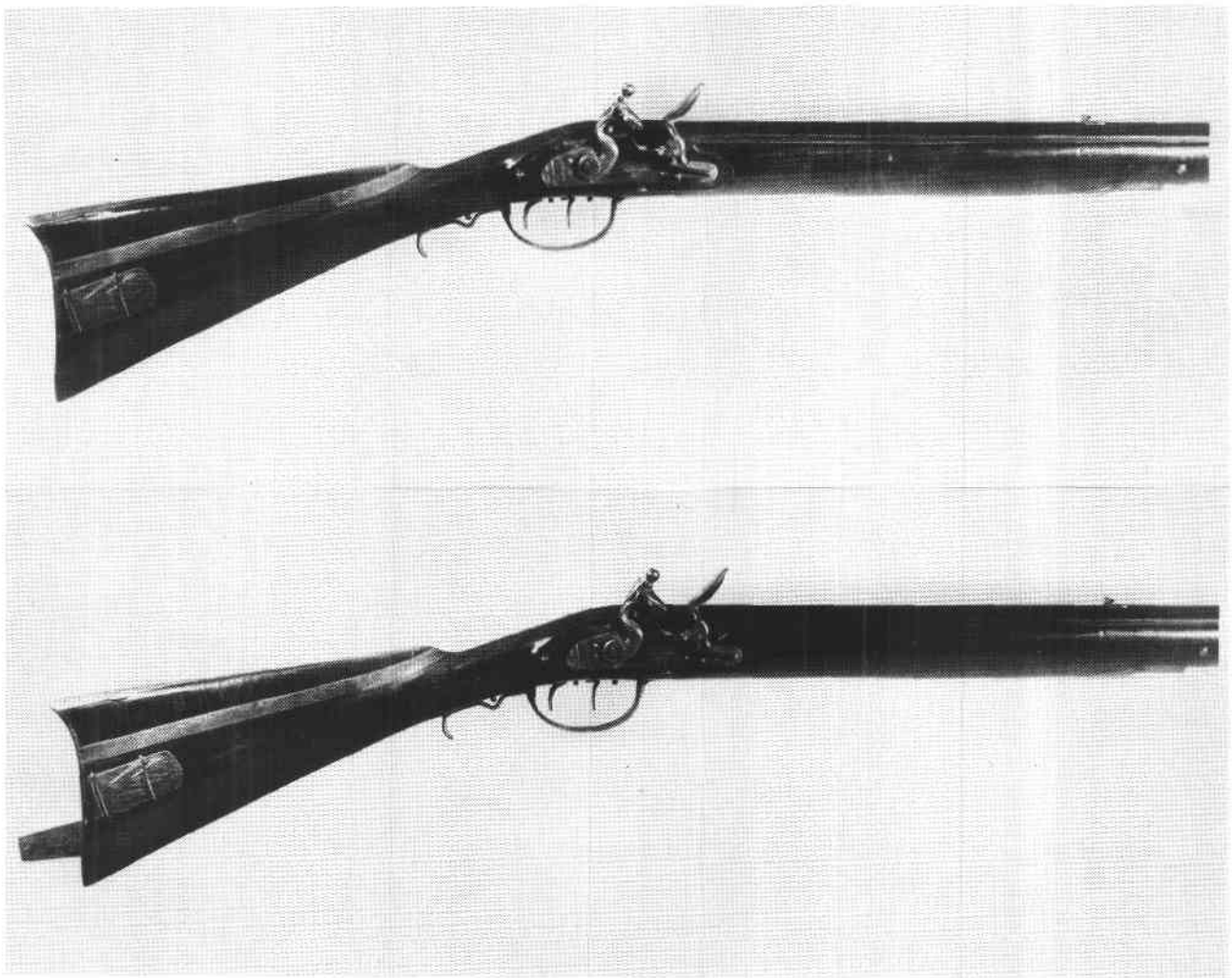
In early 1971, Robin Hale and I were invited to visit Joe Kindig, Jr. on the condition that "we bring some guns along." Although we weren't aware at the time, Mr. Kindig was on his death bed; he died four days after our visit. In retrospect, Robin and I both agreed that Mr. Kindig was mentally alert and as intensely interested in Kentucky rifles as he had ever been. He selected the rifles that we brought to be included in the exhibit of Kentucky rifles that he had planned in conjunction with a forum for the Museum of the Historical Society of York, Pennsylvania. When he was shown this rifle, marked "J. Brooks," he said, "Oh, that's just another mule-eared percussion rifle." When he was told that it was not percussion but instead a pill-lock, he seemed surprised, and said that in all of his years of collecting, he had never before seen a Kentucky rifle with a pill-lock ignition system.



At first glance, this rifle appears to have a conventional percussion lock. Closer examination, however, reveals that what appears to be the lock is a brass side plate. Instead, the system used is commonly referred to as a box lock. The lock is housed in an area directly adjacent to the breech plug tang. There is no cavity for the lock where the brass plate is located. This rifle is marked "A. Johnson Dec. 1833" on a silver plate in the top barrel flat. Additional features of interest include delicate and well designed raised carving on the reverse of the butt stock, and an engraving of a primitive American eagle on a silver plate inlaid in the cheek piece. This is another of the rifles that was selected for the exhibit at the Museum of the Historical Society of York, Pennsylvania, in 1971. In a book that shows photographs of many of the rifles in that exhibit, this piece is described as a pill lock, which it is not.



Following the over-under swivel breech in flintlock, this rifle shows the same mechanical revolving system in percussion. J. Hillegas of Pottsville, Pennsylvania made this rifle. The size of the bores in the barrels are approximately the same, however one has conventional spiral rifling and the other is multi-grooved and straight-cut which is very uncommon for a Kentucky rifle.

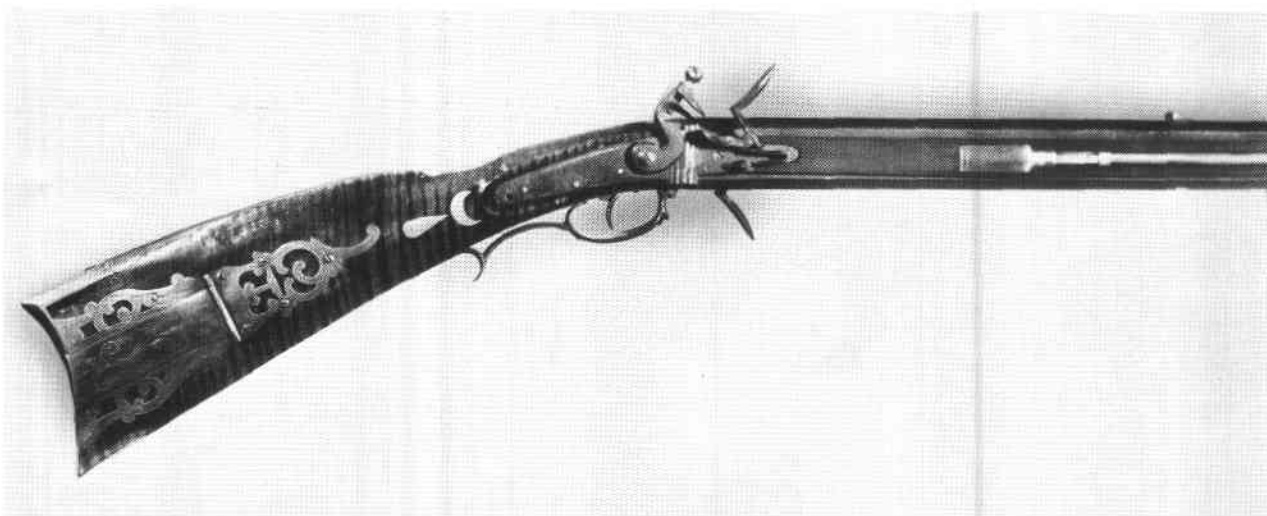


We usually do not think of the Kentucky rifle as a hand-to-hand rifle weapon. In fact, some critics sight this as a weakness. There are however a few Kentucky rifles that were made with or made to accommodate a bayonet. A very few have been observed that have octagon barrels there were machined round at the muzzle in order to accept the installation of a socket bayonet. Even more scarce are rifles with built-in bayonets.

This Kentucky rifle with an integral bayonet in this study is from the collection of William S. Binnings, Sr. of Thibodaux, Louisiana. This fine Southern rifle was made with a bayonet concealed in the underside of the butt stock. A hinge system located at the toe of the butt allows the bayonet to be folded down and extended backward. At some time in the past, the bayonet on this rifle was broken. Part of the recessed cavity in the stock which was made to house the concealed bayonet was then filled-in with wood. The lock on this rifle was stamped Ketland & Co. The only mark which might be a clue to the maker is a sunken cartouche on the side barrel flat at the breech which has two initials that appear to be "J.P."



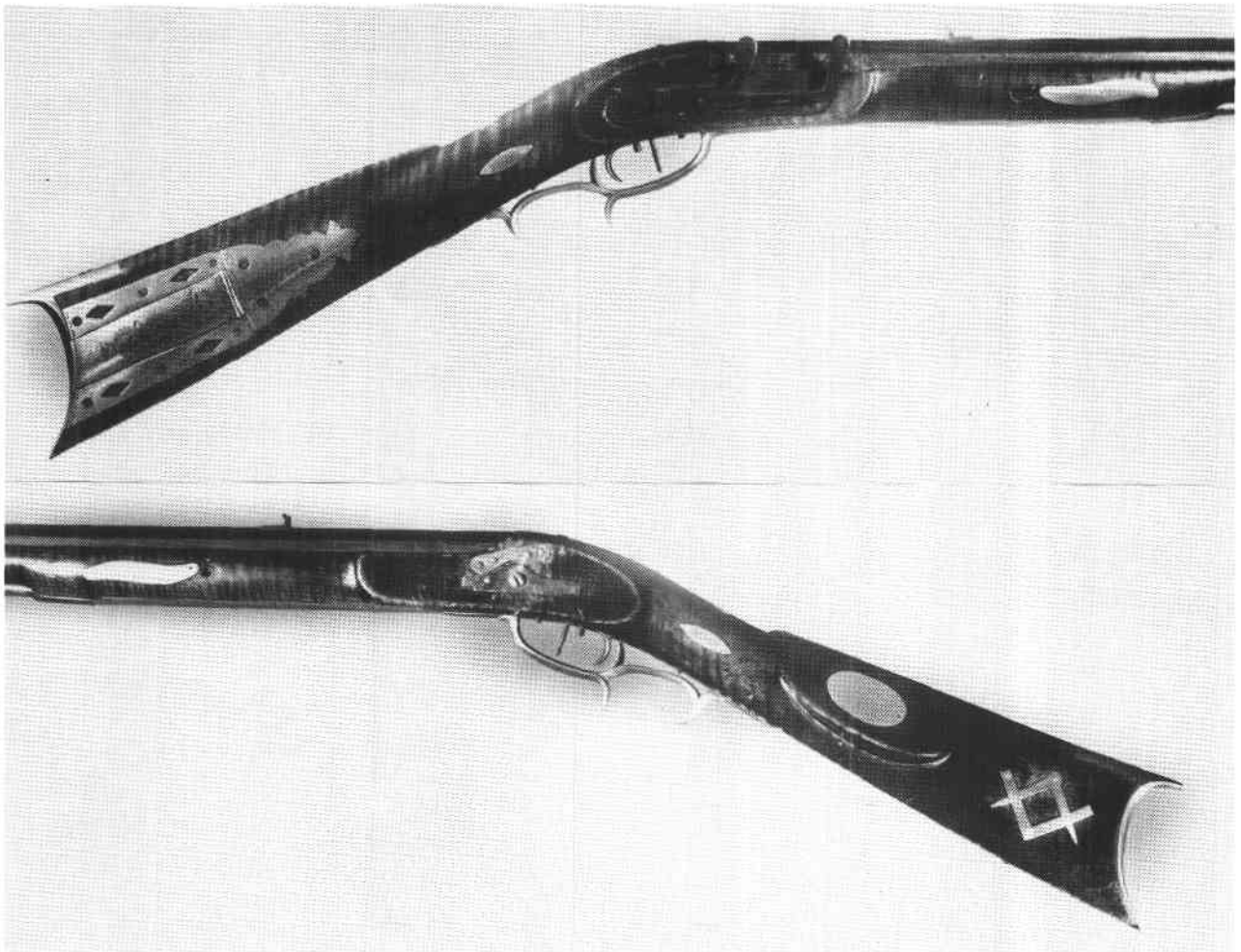
Another version of a multi-shot Kentucky rifle is the side-by-side rifle which is unmarked but has a patchbox designed similar to those made by a smith who marked his rifles with initials which seem to be "S.L." or "J.L.," and who was probably either John, or Samuel, or Simon Loudenslager. One barrel is rifled, the other is smooth and marked "shot."



Of the comparatively few multi-shot Kentucky rifles, the swivel breech over-under is the type most frequently found. This flintlock rifle serves as a representative example. The only identifying marks are the initials "N.C." in block letters on one barrel flat. A cut-out spread eagle in an oval motif is inlaid on the cheek piece.

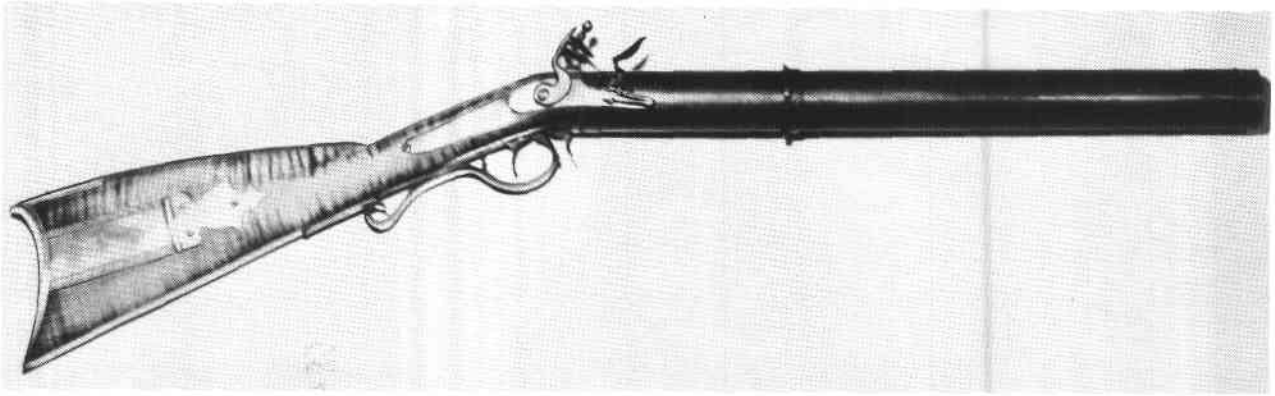


Two-barreled rifles, whether over-under or side-by-side are not common, but Kentucky rifles having more than two barrels are extremely rare. The next two rifles we will examine are unique, as far as I can determine. This three-barrel rifle has a swivel breech system somewhat similar to the percussion and flintlock rifles we have observed. This is the only three-barrel Kentucky rifle that I have ever seen. There are related three-barrel rifles that might be considered as being members of the Plains rifle family, but subject to contradiction, no other three-barrel Kentucky rifles exist. But as sure as a positive statement as this is made, others will surface. There are no marks to indicate the maker. This rifle was shown in Dillon's *Kentucky Rifle* book in 1924, as being in the "Snyder" collection. Dillon indicated that it was converted from flintlock, however I doubt whether that statement is accurate.



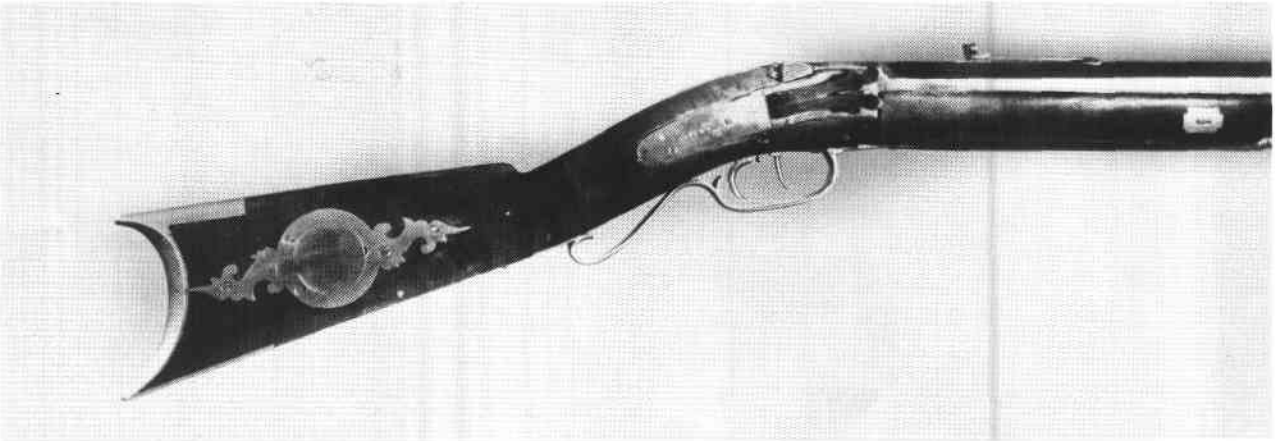
This superposed rifle by "M. Best" represents still another effort by a Kentucky rifle maker to increase firepower by using a single percussion lock with two side hammers which are intended to fire two loads individually in a single barrel. The success of firing a rifle of this type without having the two charges igniting simultaneously seems to be somewhat doubtful. In addition to the unusual look, another item of interest is the Masonic inlay on the reverse side of the butt stock. This rifle is another of those selected by the late Joe Kindig, Jr. to be included in the exhibit of Kentucky rifles which was assembled at the Museum of the Historical Society of York, Pennsylvania.





For a number of years, this flintlock pepperbox Kentucky rifle was in the collection of the late Frank Russell, who was a member of our organization. It surely must be one-of-a-kind. This rifle is 7 shot, with each bore being approximately .36 caliber. It does not have conventional rifling, but instead, each bore has five flat sides without distinct lands and grooves. The barrel is revolved by hand for operation, with a mechanism similar to other swivel breech Kentucky rifles. The only identifying mark on the piece is "John Coleher — Easton," which is stamped on the unusual back-action flintlock. This rifle is presently owned by William Orbello of Texas.

The last two rifles that we will observe are not true Kentucky rifles in the usual sense, but might be considered to be descendants or at least first cousins because they were made by smiths who likely also produced Kentucky rifles. They are included to show the efforts of gun makers to produce a more sophisticated weapon than the single-shot Kentucky rifle.



This rifle was made by P.E. Hall. The single stationary barrel has four rifled bores which are fired individually by four separate side hammers. Lock plates are mounted on each side of the breech. Each lock plate has two hammers which must be cocked and fired separately.



The last rifle has six rifled bores drilled into a single barrel. The rifle is basically a hand-operated pepperbox. To fire, the barrel must be revolved by hand for each shot. There are no marks to indicate the identity of the maker of this rifle.

Although we have considered some of the spice of Kentucky rifle collecting in this talk, it does not by any means constitute a complete coverage. Other unusual features and totally unique rifles exist. Consider Kentucky rifles with take-down stocks; heavy rifles, some weighing more than 25 pounds, that were made for target shooting; rifles with excessively long barrels; rifles with oversize barrels and large smooth bores intended for use as punt guns for harvesting game, or for use as rampart defense weapons; small scale rifles made for women or children; the list goes on. Considering all of this, the study and research of the spice can be one of the most fascinating aspects of collecting Kentucky rifles.