

Two Kentucky Gunmakers

Part II: John H. Madole—20th Century Gunmaker

Glenn Marsh, M.D.

In the city of Teheran lived Baba Khalet, the Wise One, to whom came many Persians, traveling from afar and near for counsel, which he gave freely to all, seeking nothing for himself in return.

There came to him a young sportsman, foolish in the spending of his money. "Tell me, O Wise One, what shall I do to receive the most for what I spend?"

Baba Khalet answered, "A thing that is bought or sold has no value, unless it contains that which cannot be bought or sold. Look for skillful workmanship, that which has great value!"

"But how shall I know that, if it is a gun which I buy?" asked the young sportsman.

Spoke the Wise One, "My son, workmanship can be easily proven. Glance at the products displayed in the market places, look at the guns, therein will you find the honor and integrity of him who makes it, or the lack of these qualities. Consider well his name before you buy."¹

This somewhat lengthy quote is from James Virgil Howe of the famous team of Griffin and Howe, premier American custom gunmakers of the first half of this Century.

Casual perusal of back issues of the ASAC *Bulletin* reveals little interest, or, perhaps better stated, little research having been done on contemporary gunmakers. Two recent exceptions are articles by Charles Suydam² and Harold Bailey.³

I suppose that very few of us, for whatever reasons, desire to collect "new" items, but I feel that most of us appreciate and respect artistic expression and craftsmanship of the highest order whether old or new—but given a choice, we show bias, and all other factors, including quality, being equal, we would almost always choose old over new. In the article "Lenard Brownell 1922-1982: A Custom Gunmaker" by Harold L. Bailey, Jr., he (Bailey) states, "It would appear that there are now more outstanding gunmakers than at any time in our nation's history."⁴ Many of us would agree. This choice between old and new then becomes a matter of individual collecting preference which may well be expressed as "desirability", which taken with rarity and condition constitutes the most important factors determining value.⁵ Twentieth Century items certainly do belong within the collecting arena and in the introduction to Suydam's article, "Bulls-Eyes and Sharpshooters", he makes his point



vociferously in presenting the case for collecting items of this century.⁶

This presentation will document the abilities of John H. Madole, a 20th Century Kentucky gunmaker of outstanding merit. In fact, he just might be *the* most outstanding Kentucky gunmaker of this Century, taking his place along side of Benjamin Mills, the foremost Kentucky gunmaker of the 19th Century. Mills' work has been investigated in depth and the findings presented at the spring meeting of the ASAC in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1993.⁷

Initially, this information was planned to be incorporated into a single paper consisting of the study of the work of both men. However, the volume of material discovered on Benjamin Mills and constraints of time for the oral presentation and space for the written presentation on Mills precluded this approach. So now we will give our attention to the second principal in this consideration of two Kentucky Gunmakers.

John Huel Madole is a native Kentuckian, born October 25, 1942, in Louisville. He was married in 1964 to Wanda Alberta Anderson, and of this union, one daughter, Angela Beth, was born October 15, 1966. He attended grade and high school in his hometown. Interestingly, there are certain parallels in the backgrounds of Mills and Madole. As Benjamin Mills was a prisoner at Harper's Ferry and held hostage by John Brown, John Madole was also a prisoner, but one of closed minds, as he was denied permission to take machine shop courses in high school, and received no encouragement from teachers who failed to recognize his potential. In a figurative sense, he was held hostage by a school system that recognized no individuality or talent. As we see the abilities of

Madole surface in the work he has produced, we are struck by the ludicrous "not-enough-mechanical aptitude" diagnosis placed upon him as the basis for his rejection for machine shop study. This, disastrous chain of events led to his being a high school dropout with his interests initially shifting mainly to pool halls, after which he drifted into farm and sawmill work.

The subject of this paper is scarcely known within the boundaries of his home state, much less within the boundaries of gun collector groups in general. A notable exception is the membership of the Firearms Engravers' Guild of America and the American Custom Gunmakers' Guild, among whose members the mention of Madole's name commands immediate attention, respect, and interest. Even the most highly respected members of these two groups who are quite busy and much in demand suddenly make time to listen. This was true of Lynton McKenzie, who graciously consented to a telephone interview concerning Madole when I stated the purpose of the call.⁸

Madole reached the thirty-year-age mark before he had his first machine shop job. Before that, he did all work by hand, thus becoming expert in the use of files and at that time a bench lathe was his only machine tool. He designed a set trigger that was capable of being set when slightly squeezed. Further squeezing the same trigger—with very light pressure—caused it to trip the firing mechanism. Within the past two years I heard of one of these surfacing at a gun show at which Madole's invention was viewed as an engineering marvel.

As far as engraving is concerned, Mr. Madole started on his own at age eleven and is self-taught. Lynton McKenzie, arguably the finest engraver in this country, feels that it is a shame that Madole did not serve an apprenticeship when young. McKenzie further states that he finds John Madole one of the finest natural-born engraver-gunmakers in this country. Mr. Madole returns the accolades, expressing his opinion that the three top engravers are McKenzie, Winston Churchill, and Ron Smith in that order. As far as engraving style is concerned, Madole does not care for animals, except for those of Churchill, who, in Madole's opinion, puts motion into art. It is his belief that animal likenesses take away from the beauty of the gun and notes that animal engraving on fine English guns is very rare. He feels that there are major shortcomings of engraving or, rather, engravers, and he resents hurry-up jobs with no feeling for the work. In his opinion, too many "engravers" are more interested in the speed with which they accomplish the job than the resulting artistic merit, and "that group is looking for payday and sundown to the exclusion of all else."⁹

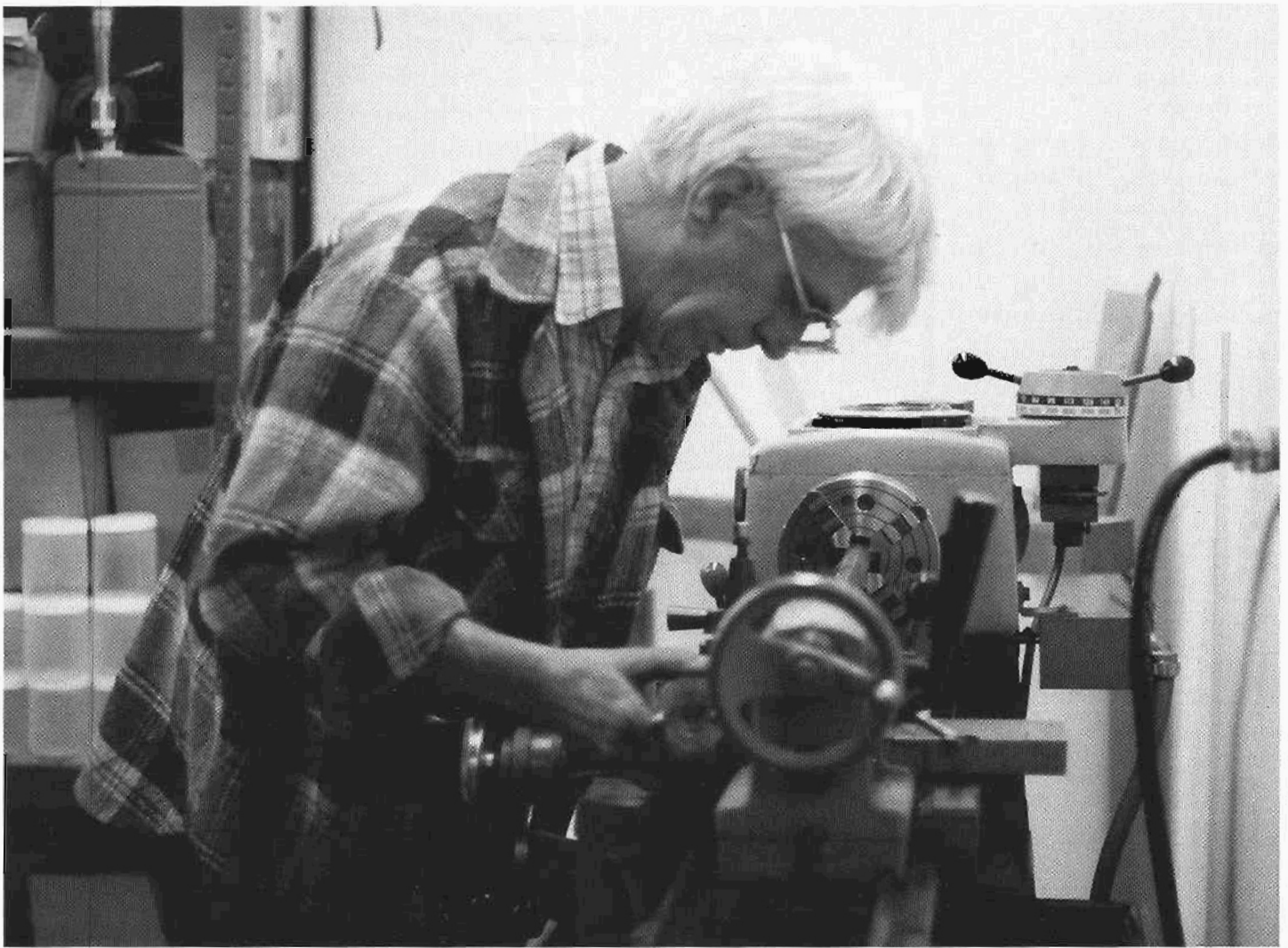
Madole relates that it was only in the early 1980s before he felt comfortable with his engraving results, and he says that Lynton McKenzie had a great impact on his work both as to influence and inspiration. In his words, McKenzie "re-kindled the fire and inspired" his confidence.

Madole likes and has a preference for the old compared to the new, but is not held in awe by the old and explains this simply by saying that, "Everything that is old was once new."¹⁰ "Ideas create ideas," says Madole, and he has no desire to copy the greats of the past such as Nimschke, for example. He has attracted considerable attention by his design and its execution in the extensive modifications on Ruger single shot actions.¹¹ Wishing to enhance the slender lines as well as function, causing an artistic as well as aesthetic result, Madole viewed this as an engineering challenge.¹² He is quick to state that the resulting re-engineering makes the gun no better than a standard Ruger. The modification takes about 200 hours, whether the path chosen is Fraser or Alexander Henry configuration. The Ruger representatives at the NRA convention in St. Louis did not recognize either modification as beginning as a Ruger! He feels that one modification is about as difficult as the other and understates the case by saying that neither modification is for a beginner! The one Alexander Henry type modification is shown as well as one of three Fraser type modifications he has finished.

Another ambitious project concerned fabrication of six 1877 model Sharps actions. These actions were filed and chiseled from 4140 steel stock. I well remember visiting John in his basement shop with the vise and part of the work bench totally obscured by the great mound of filings while the milling machine stood idle. When queried "Why?" he replied that "the milling machine was not accurate enough."¹³ When the receiver mortise was finished, by filing, of course, and the breech block finished, also by filing, I mated the two parts and the breech block did not fall clear of the action by its own weight, nor did it bind during function. With the breech block fitted to the closed action and the unit exposed to a light source, no light was visible at any juncture of the fitted parts. This then was "accurate enough."

Two Sharps have been finished, and one is shot regularly in Black Powder Cartridge Rifle Silhouette competition; the other, Hucy cased serial number 1 is illustrated. Engraving is by McKenzie, but all other metal work including action, barrel chambering, and contouring, sights, etc., is by Madole. This rifle commands the attention of any connoisseur of fine arms, new or old!¹⁴

Impeccable stock work using fine English walnut and traditional stock architecture of the period is by James Corpe. Characteristic of Corpe's work, the checkering and inletting



John Huel Madole (1942–). Selection of the Savage Model 219 (page 72/55) elicited a query from the author relative to the use of this less-than-stellar example of the gun industry's effort as his choice of a medium to express his masterful engraving talent. The reply, in the form of a question, is a classic: "How much was that piece of canvas worth before the Mona Lisa was painted on it?" Here is Madole in a most characteristic pose, working on a small lathe in his shop.



Two distinctly different styles of barrel signatures used on Madole rifles. Name with location appropriate in highly finished custom rifles (above) and simple cursive signature on muzzle loading rifle (below).

are flawless. This particular arm was featured on the cover of *Rifle* magazine.¹⁵

Such gunmaking feats enabled Madole to achieve professional membership in the American Custom Gunmakers' Guild. There are some 30-40 members in this classification wherein the member must make a gun starting with raw metal, not simply assemble one.

The first Ruger conversion to be considered closely resembles an English Fraser side-lever single shot rifle.¹⁶ Retaining the receiver and breech block of a Ruger No. 3, all external and most internal parts were newly fabricated from tool steel. Lines of the receiver were slimmed, and new internal parts including a flat-mainspring powered hammer of lighter weight, and new external parts, including side lever, new trigger and trigger guard, safety, and floor plate, were fabricated and fitted. The side lever opens and closes the action with adequate leverage. Rigby barrel flats were formed and three-leaf rear and blade front sights were made and installed by Madole.¹⁷

Stocking is by James Corpe using dense walnut. Butt stock, pistol grip cap, and forend tip are made from horn by Corpe. The rifle is light, weighing seven pounds, and stock finish consists of multiple coats, hand applied, of course. As a result of his experience and study of original British single shot stock design, Corpe wrote a short article on this subject.¹⁸ Another Fraser-style Ruger by Madole in 30-40 Krag caliber was stocked by Steven Dodd Hughes, and engraved by Mark Drain.¹⁹

Membership for Madole in the Firearms Engravers Guild of America, probably the best known engraver's group, came about through submission of a Colt .45 semi-automatic pistol January, 1989;²⁰ he subsequently submitted a Smith and Wesson Model 24 Revolver.²¹ Both submitted examples of his work not only qualified him for membership, but both won Best of Show!

Stock making does not really interest Madole; however, there is an example of his work pictured. He has made, including stocking, some 20-30 muzzle loading rifles. Some of the very best examples of Madole's work are combined with the talent of fellow Kentuckian James Corpe, a stock maker of the highest order and whose work complements the metal work and engraving shown. Several "collaborative parentage" guns have thus been created.²²

The next Ruger conversion is a modification of a No. 1 action to an Alexander Henry type under lever.²³ Action metal work included machining a new push-button under lever, trigger guard, and trigger, while precisely fitting these to minimal tolerances. Barrel work included forming integral front sight base, fitting to action, chambering to .45-70

caliber and contouring from octagon to round. Both upper and lower action tangs were extended; in addition, a new safety was made and fitted. A mid-range vernier tang sight was mounted on the tang sight base fabricated for this purpose.

Corpe's stock work is up to his usual high standards. Wood chosen is highly figured walnut, shaped with fine design features, including sharp comb and checkering in 24 lines-per-inch English pattern, unstained and brought to completion using multiple coats of hand rubbed finish. As far as is known, this is the only modification of this type in existence. Importantly, this is one of two examples of Corpe's work (the other being a Savage 99) submitted for evaluation prior to his nomination for membership in the American Custom Gunmakers' Guild. Precise stocking, including inletting, checkering, and design details, qualified him for membership. Upon recommendation and subsequent unanimous vote, his election in 1989 was assured.

Much attention has been focused on the Savage 99, another joint project of Madole and Corpe. Undoubtedly, more time and effort has been spent on this particular gun than any other Model 99. Madole did file work on the action and lever to enhance the lines, and also made a quarter rib for mounting the newly-made rear leaf sights on the barrel. The front sight was newly made, as well as safety and trigger. Planning and execution of the engraving is spectacular; the wedge fastened forestock with escutcheons is an unexpected touch. The receiver and lever are finished with electroless nickel plating and bead blasting. Gerhard Hartmann and Otto Weiss, partners in the renowned Hartmann and Weiss gunmaking firm of Hamburg and London said that it was the finest job of stock making that they had seen in 30 years of gunmaking.²⁴ Corpe utilized over 700 hours of labor in the stock, 200 of which were spent in applying the finish.

The final rifle to be discussed in some detail is a system Hagn Hartmann and Weiss single shot rifle in .458 Winchester Magnum caliber. Madole fashioned the handmade three leaf folding sights, contoured, chambered, and fitted the barrel to the action. The pistol grip cap is reminiscent of jewelry highlighted by the fine engraving and gold inlay. Given free rein in artistic expression as to engraving along with gold inlay, he planned and executed this aspect to perfection. The gold inlays with frequent and rapid changes in width give a three dimensional effect (See page 72/51). Borders are precise and compliment the overall effect which is one of being very well done without being overly done—i.e. masterful, but not meretricious.

Corpe's stocking and inletting are without flaw, and the elephant hide covered butt plate and an elephant hide



Book casing of Smith and Wesson Military and Police Revolver; .38 Special caliber, serial number 313914.



Details of engraving, gold inlaying (below), and ivory stocking (above) of Smith and Wesson Military and Police Revolver.

covered Huey case add the final touch.

Basically, Madole loves to design and make things that work and is fascinated by mechanical movements. Firearm action work is generally worked out on paper first, and when he is satisfied with the design, he begins fabrication.

Every engraving job is different. He may spend two to three hours or as long as two to three weeks planning some jobs and on others start engraving initially, sometimes planning on paper, sometimes on the gun itself as the engraving proceeds.

Mr. Madole has some regrets, feeling that the work he does now could have been done years ago with proper training and instruction. Since meeting Lynton McKenzie in the early 1980s, he has learned more from this recognized master than in all the previous years he was able to learn on his own.

When asked to critique Madole's work as an engraver, McKenzie says, "His work is well-thought-out, well-planned, and well-executed, showing a flowing style of continuity with a feeling of Victorian elegance and, in fact, his engraving looks 'old' which adds to the feeling of the work."²⁵

McKenzie, in discussing Madole's gunmaking ability, points out that some 87 highly skilled and specialized craftsmen were involved in making a English best quality rifle. He goes on to point out that Madole has to have exceptional ability in all of these individual areas in order to create an outstanding arm.

John Madole is modest, almost to the point of being shy, and information from him is hard to come by. I believe you will agree as you examine his work that his gunmaking talent as demonstrated is eloquent testimony to his ability.

He no longer is engaged in any joint or individual gunmaking projects. Sadly, he no longer does gun engraving, saying he "can't make a living at it."²⁶ I suppose that is true since he has but one standard, the very finest. He allows no work to leave his shop unless it is just that, the *very* finest. I cannot say that Madole makes no mistakes in his engraving; I will say that with magnifier in hand and adequate time for examination, I have found none, perhaps, because he does his engraving using a 20 power binocular microscope.

In conclusion, I would like frankly to acknowledge my pleasure in being the caretaker/owner of this collection representing much work of an essentially unknown or, better perhaps, a heretofore unrecognized master gunmaker. Much, much more importantly, I think it appropriate for us to recognize the outstanding ability of the subject of this paper, reflect upon the heartbreaking disadvantages under which he labored and learned, and finally, to celebrate his triumph as a classic example of the indomitable human spirit's will to

succeed in the face of seemingly impossible adversity, and yet with perseverance to achieve the pinnacle in his chosen profession.

* * * * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"This paper could not have been done without the untiring efforts, photographic ability, constructive criticism, and encouragement of my wife, Judy, to whom I send the most special thanks of all."

I penned the above two years ago upon completion of "Benjamin Mills, 19th Century Gunmaker". The statement is still true—this time, all the words should be capitalized!!

NOTES

1. James Virgil Howe, *The Modern Gunsmith: Supplement* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1941) 51.
2. Charles R. Suydam, "Bulls-Eyes and Sharpshooters," *ASAC Bulletin* No. 62 (May 1990) 33.
3. Harold I. Bailey Jr., "Lenard Brownell, 1922-1982: A Custom Gunmaker," *ASAC Bulletin* No. 63 (October 1990) 83.
4. Bailey, 83.
5. Norman Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms... and Their Values*, 6th ed (Northbrook: DBI Books, Inc., 1994) 24.
6. Suydam, 33.
7. Glenn Marsh, "Benjamin Mills: 19th Century Kentucky Gunmaker," *ASAC Bulletin* No. 68 (May 1993) 57-69.
8. Lynton McKenzie, telephone interview, 22 March 1993.
9. John Madole, personal interview, 4 April 1993.
10. Madole, 1993.
11. Steven Dodd Hughes, "Working Together," *American Rifleman* Dec. 1989, 61.
12. Steven Dodd Hughes, "Madole/Corpe Sidelever Ruger," *Rifle* July-August 1990, 10-11.
13. Madole, 1993.
14. "Sixth National Custom Gun Exhibition," *The Gun Report*, October 1990, 58.
15. *Rifle*, July-August 1990, cover photo.
16. Jonathan Kirton, *The British Falling Block Breechloading Rifle from 1865*. Tacoma: Armory Publications, 1985 145-158.
17. Terry Wieland, "Built to Shoot," *Sporting Classics*, May-June 1991, 58.
18. James Corpe, "British Single Shot Stock Design," *Gunmaker* July-August 1989, 10-13.
19. Holt Bodinson, "The 1992 Custom Gun Show," *Guns Magazine*, June 1992, 50.
20. Stuart Williams, "1989 Custom Gunmakers' Guild Show," *Guns Magazine*, July 1989, 40.
21. Stuart Williams, "ACGG-FEGA Custom Gun Show," *Guns Magazine*, July 1990, 39.
22. Hughes, "Working Together" 28-29, 61-62.
23. Steven Dodd Hughes, "Craftsmen and the Guns They Make," *Game Country*, July-August 1989, 35.

24. Williams, *Guns Magazine*, July 1989, 66.
25. McKenzie.
26. John Madole, personal interview, 22 Feb. 1995.

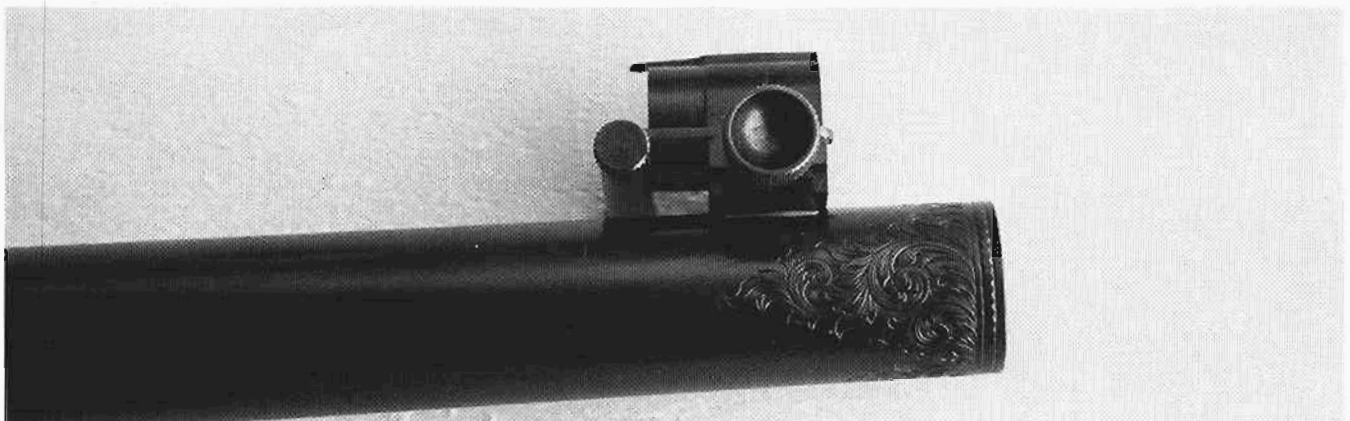
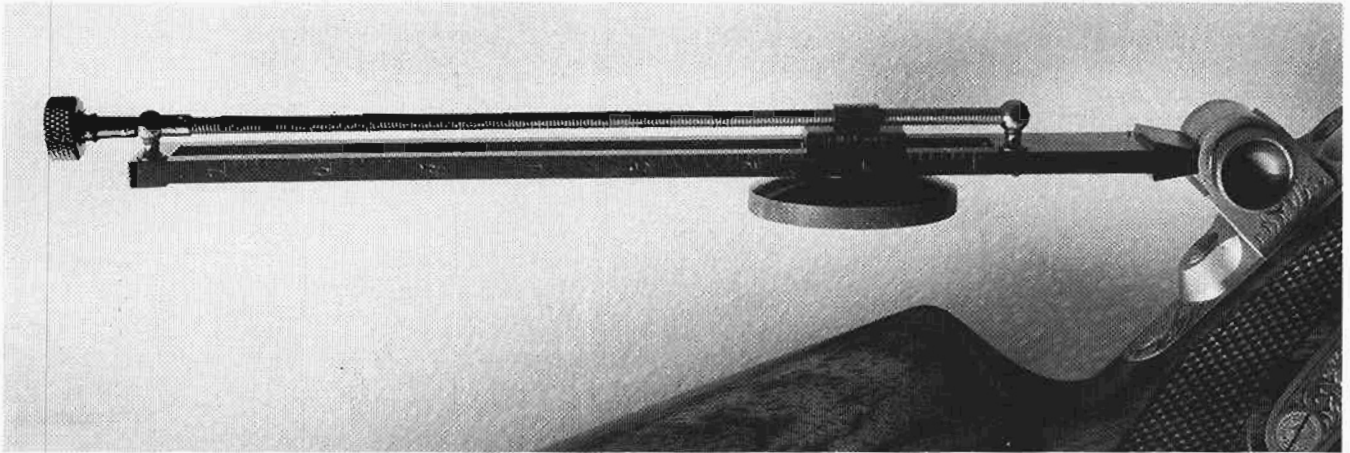
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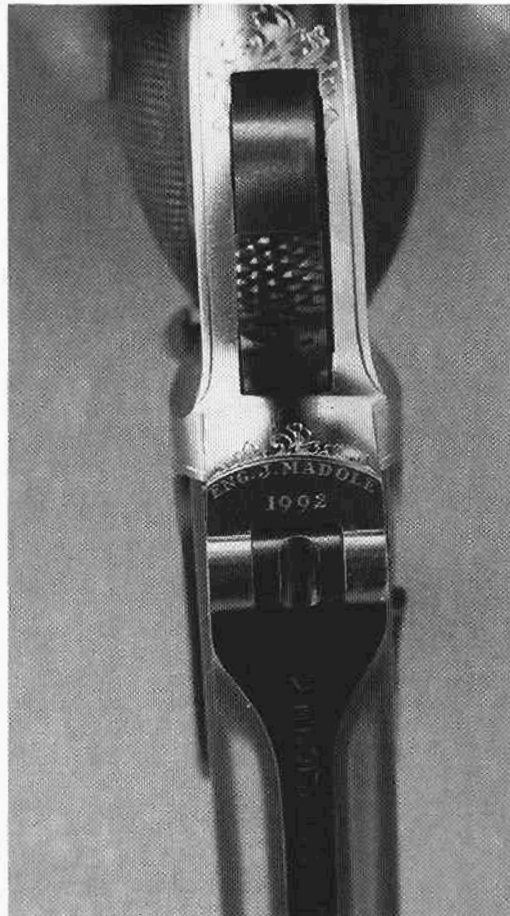
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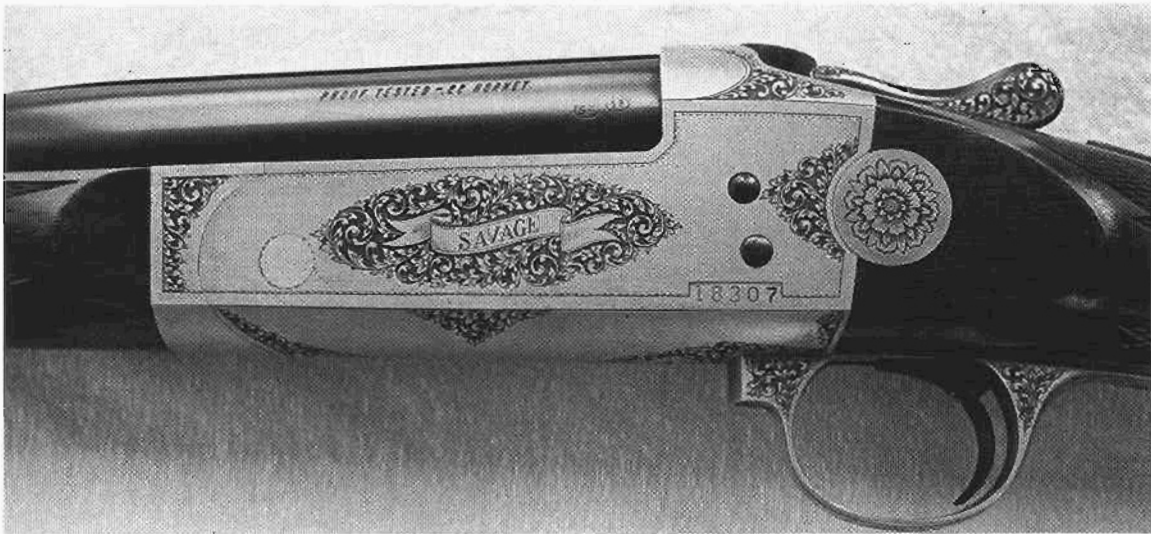
EXAMPLES OF THE WORK OF JOHN H. MADOLE



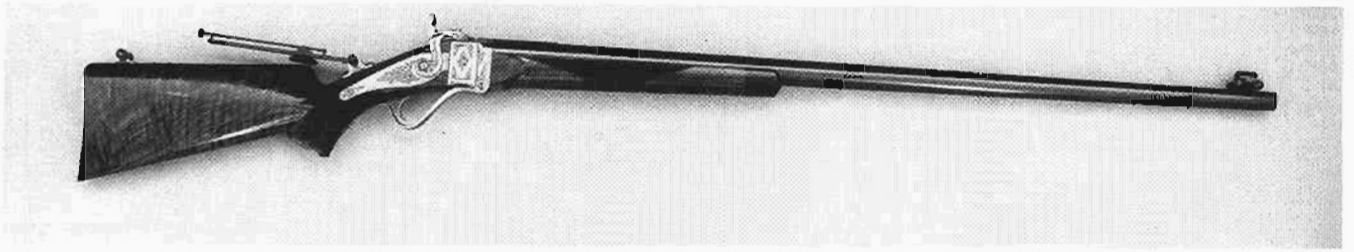
In addition to superlative action work, Madole makes precision sights, here illustrated on the 1877 Sharps.



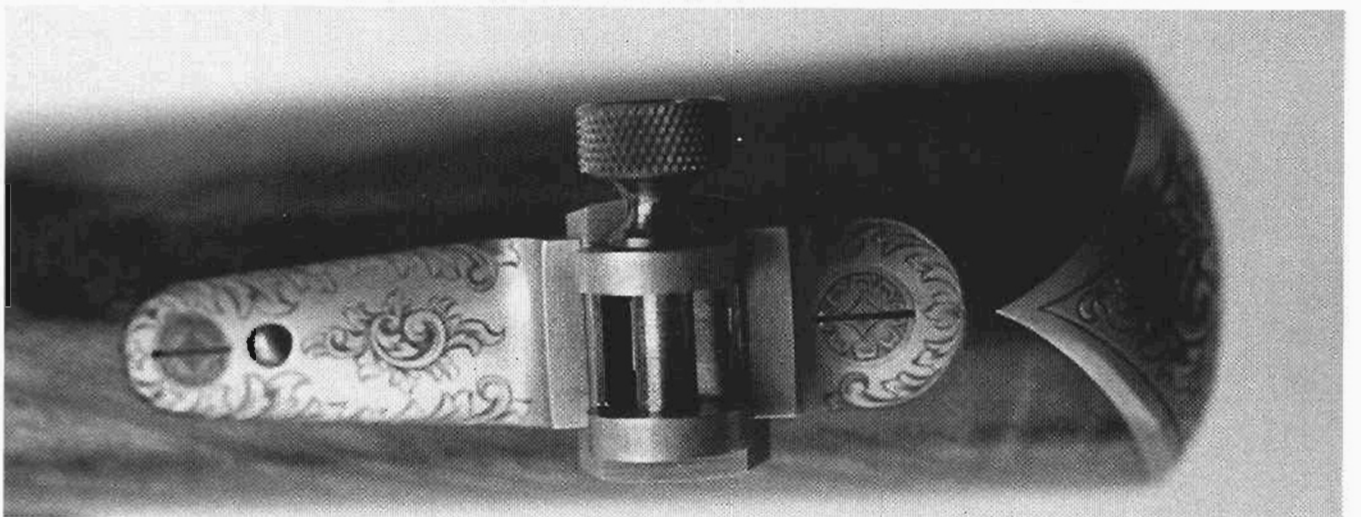
Remington .41 Caliber Rim Fire Double Derringer engraved by Madole. Engraving only by Madole, as noted by his name and date preceded by "Eng."



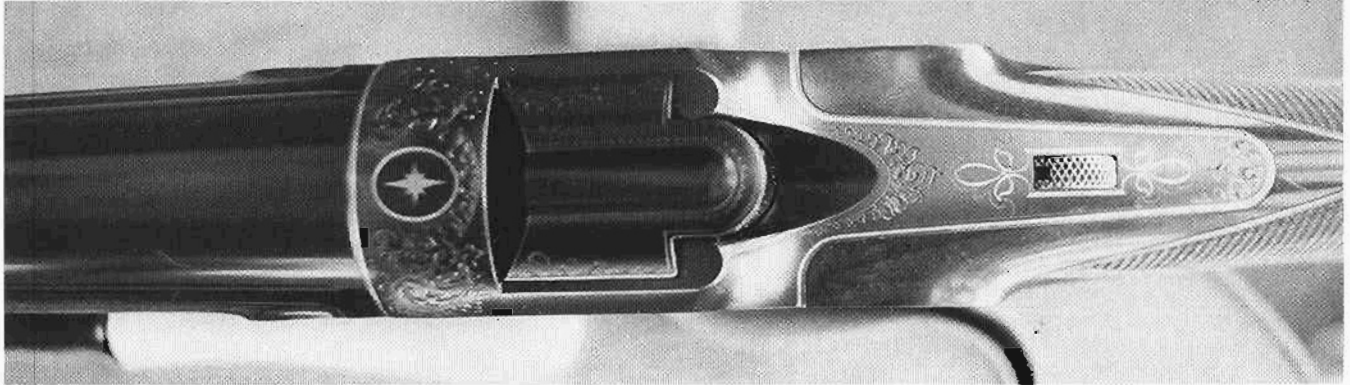
Side view and bottom view of the action of a Savage Model 219, rechambered to 22 K-Hornet caliber, and engraved by Madole.



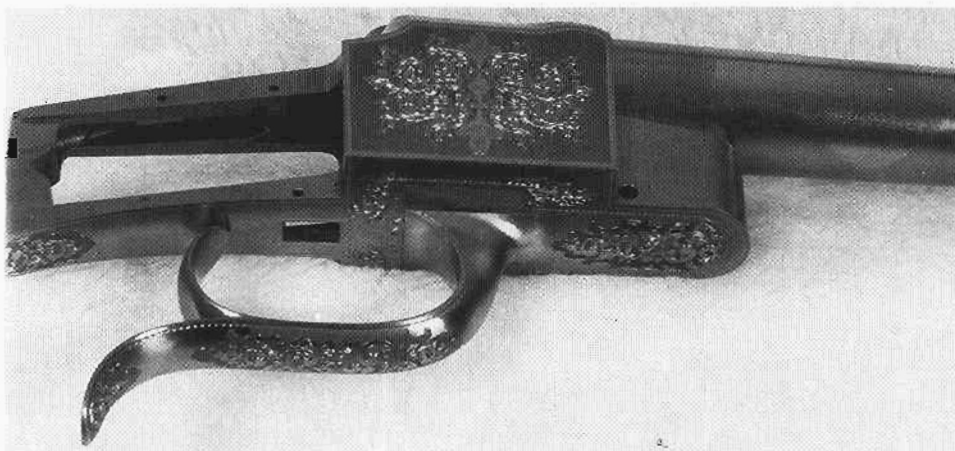
Model 1877 Sharps .45-2.6 inch caliber. Action and lock handmade and all metal parts by Madole except barrel. This, he contoured to include Rigby style flats.



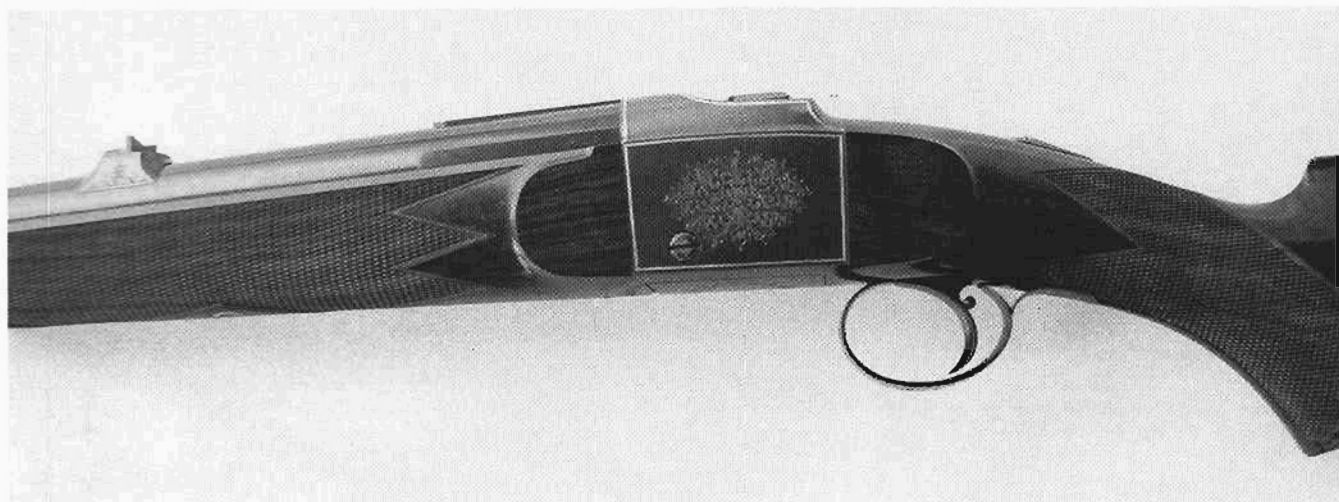
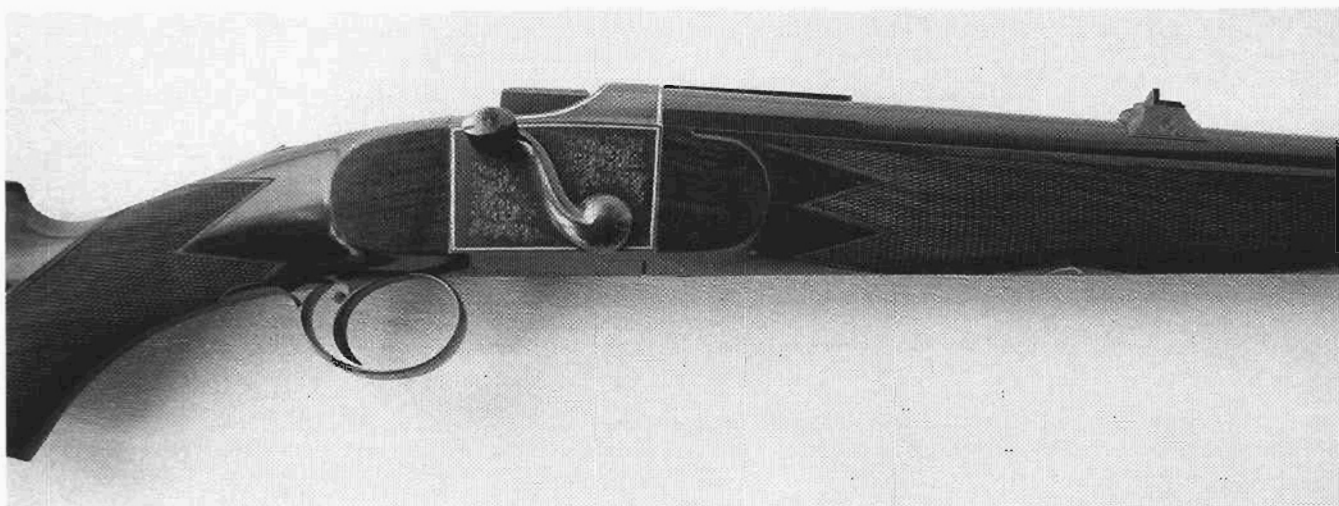
Close-up views showing superlative engraving characteristic of Lynton McKenzie. Please note the fine inletting and checkering of James Corpe. Note also the precision metal work of Madole in the handmade lock and sight bases.



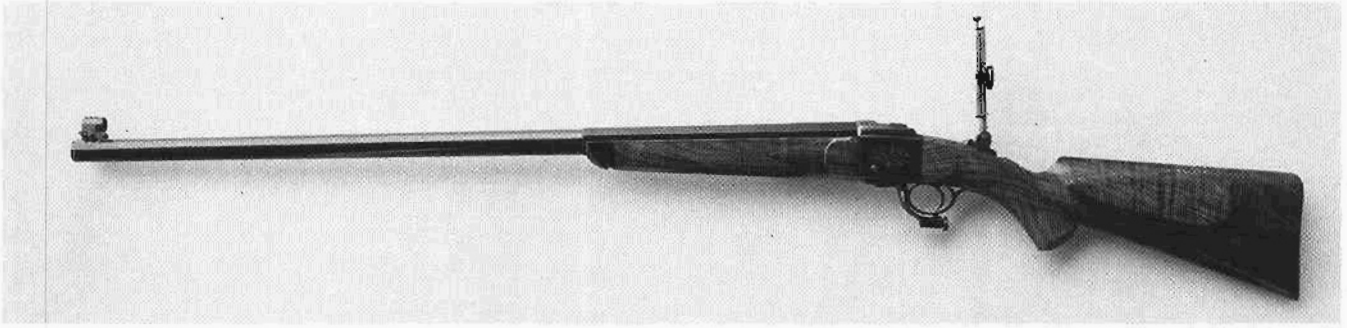
System Hagn in .458 Winchester Magnum caliber on its elephant hide case. Please note the superlative engraving which through design and execution appears at first to be in high relief. The gold inlay in fleur-de-lis pattern with hunter's star on bridge of action is especially noteworthy.



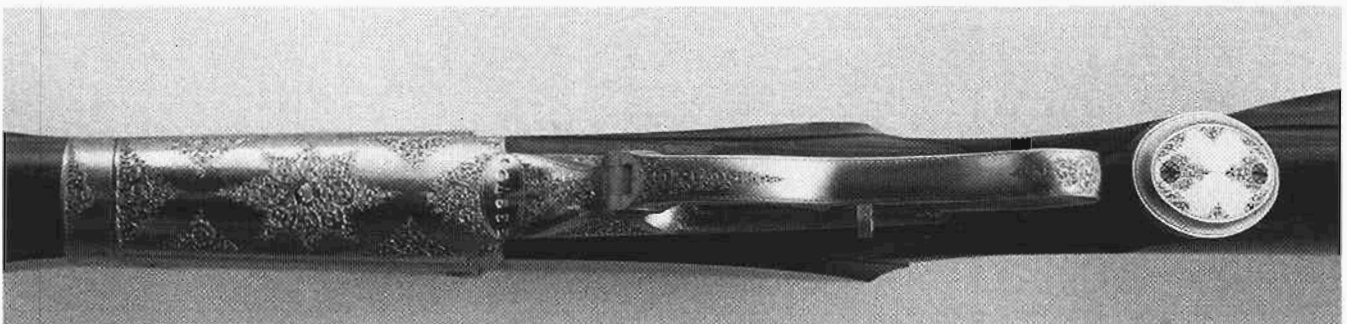
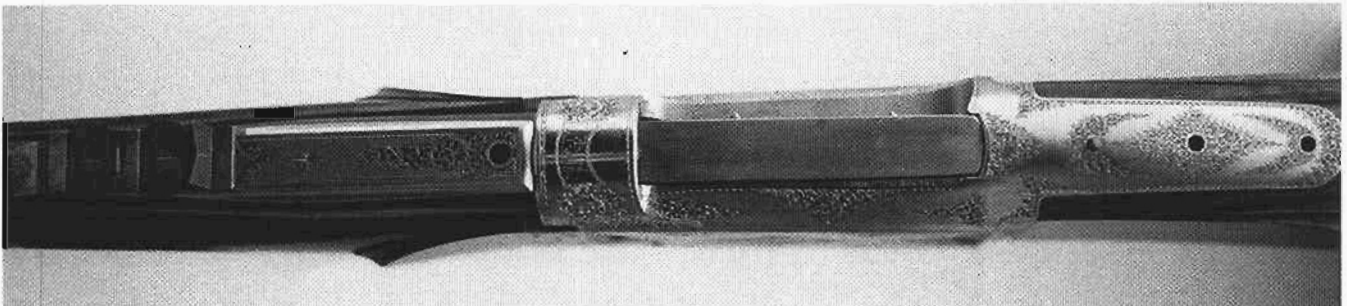
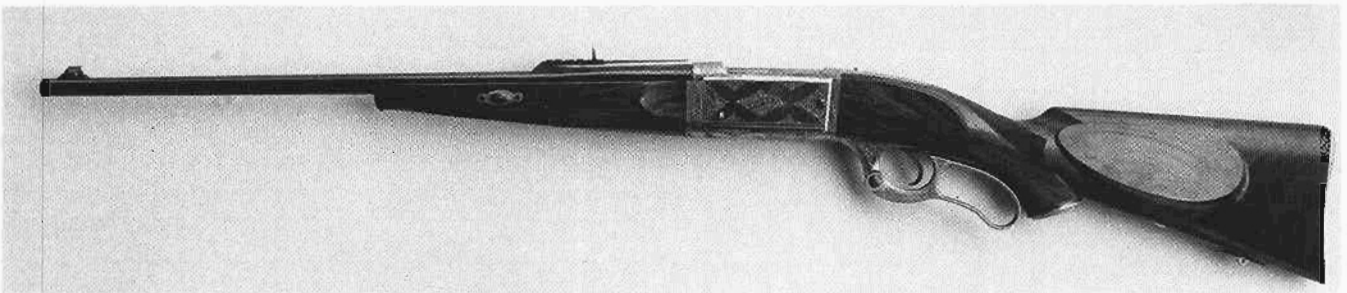
System Hagn barreled action "in the white" which tends to show the three dimensional effect of the engraving better than the finished rifle.



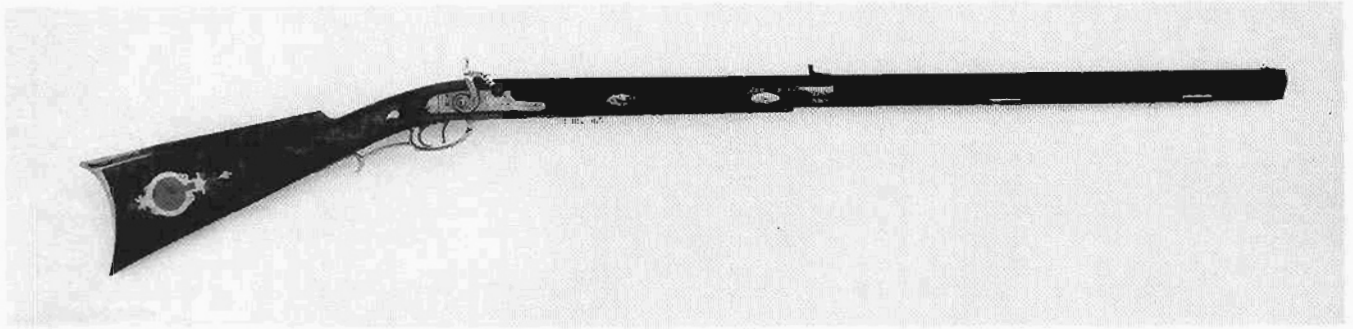
Fraser modification of Ruger No. 3, .45-70 caliber, showing action work, engraving with gold inlay, and newly-made trigger, trigger guard, and sights. Please note balance of engraving, comparing right side of action with lever, and left side with unbroken flat surface.



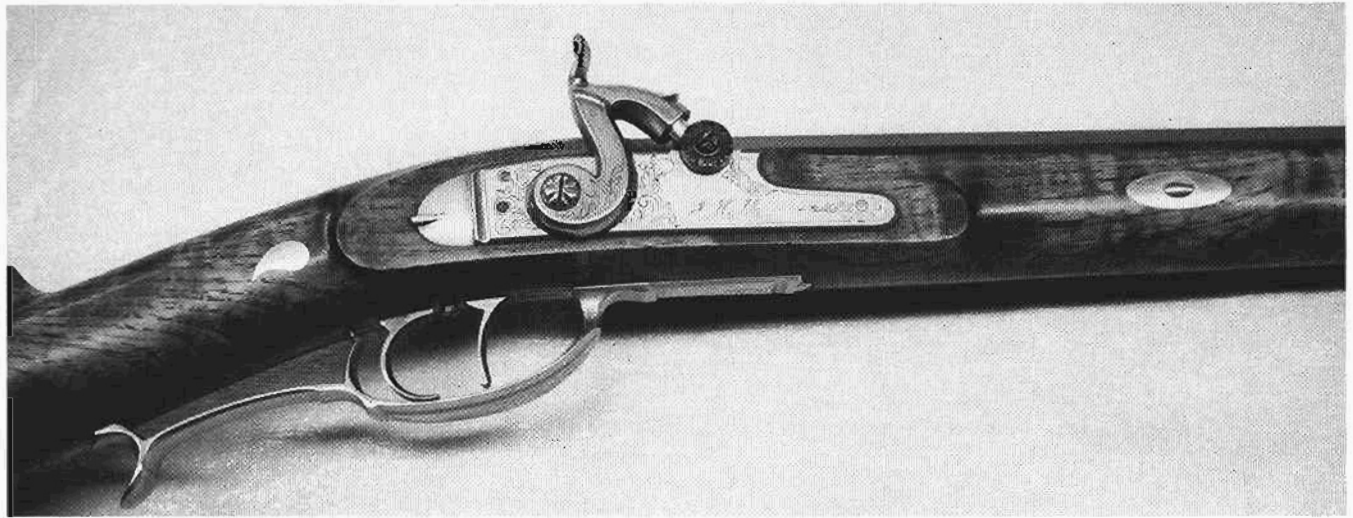
Alexander Henry modification of Ruger No. 1, in .45-70 caliber with perfect mating of wood with metal. Please note the quality of metal work in the fit and style of push button lever and sights.



Savage Model 99 in .303 Savage caliber, showing extensive changes in stocking, sights, and metal work. The engraving, superior metal finishing and stock work are especially noteworthy. Close-up views of side, top, and bottom are shown.



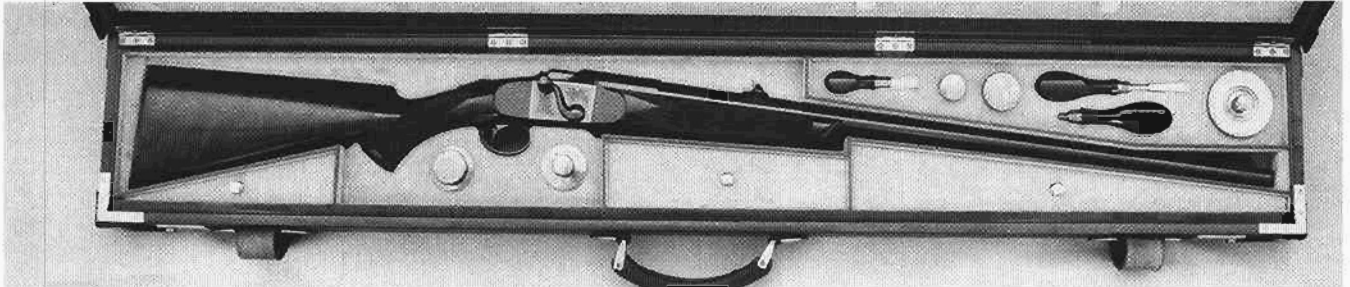
Percussion half-stock .32 caliber muzzle loading rifle, Number 14 of some 20-30 John Madole has made.



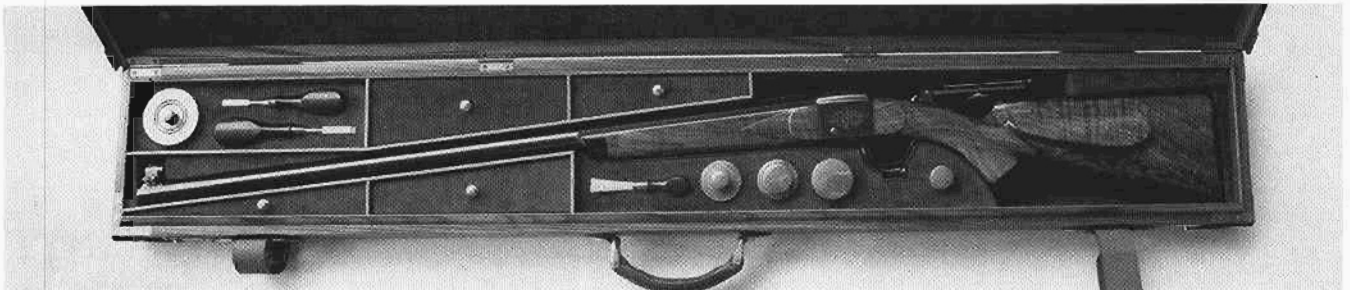
Detailed views of the muzzle loading rifle, showing handmade set triggers, lock, and the type engraving correct for an arm of this vintage.



Five Huey Cased Guns by John Madole and James Corpe. Top, 1877 Sharps Rifle.



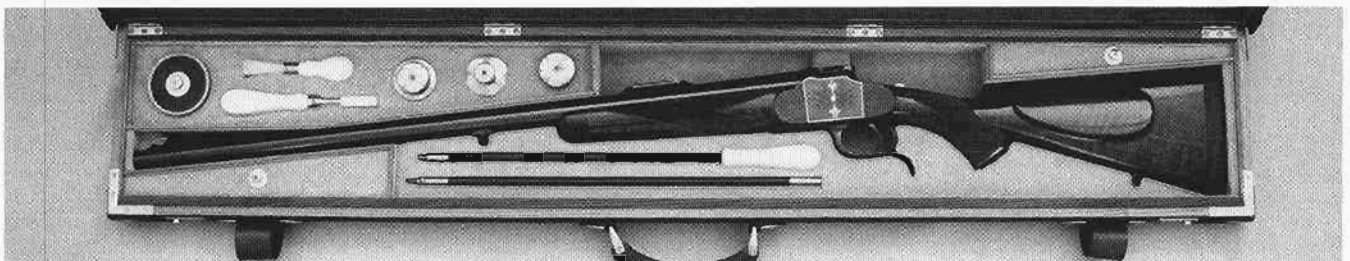
Fraser style modification of Ruger No. 3 Rifle.



Alexander Henry style modification of Ruger No. 1 Rifle.



Upgraded Savage Model 99 Rifle.



System Hagn Hartmann and Weiss rifle.