



Plate 11
JACOB ERNST percussion lock "before". Charles Semmer photo

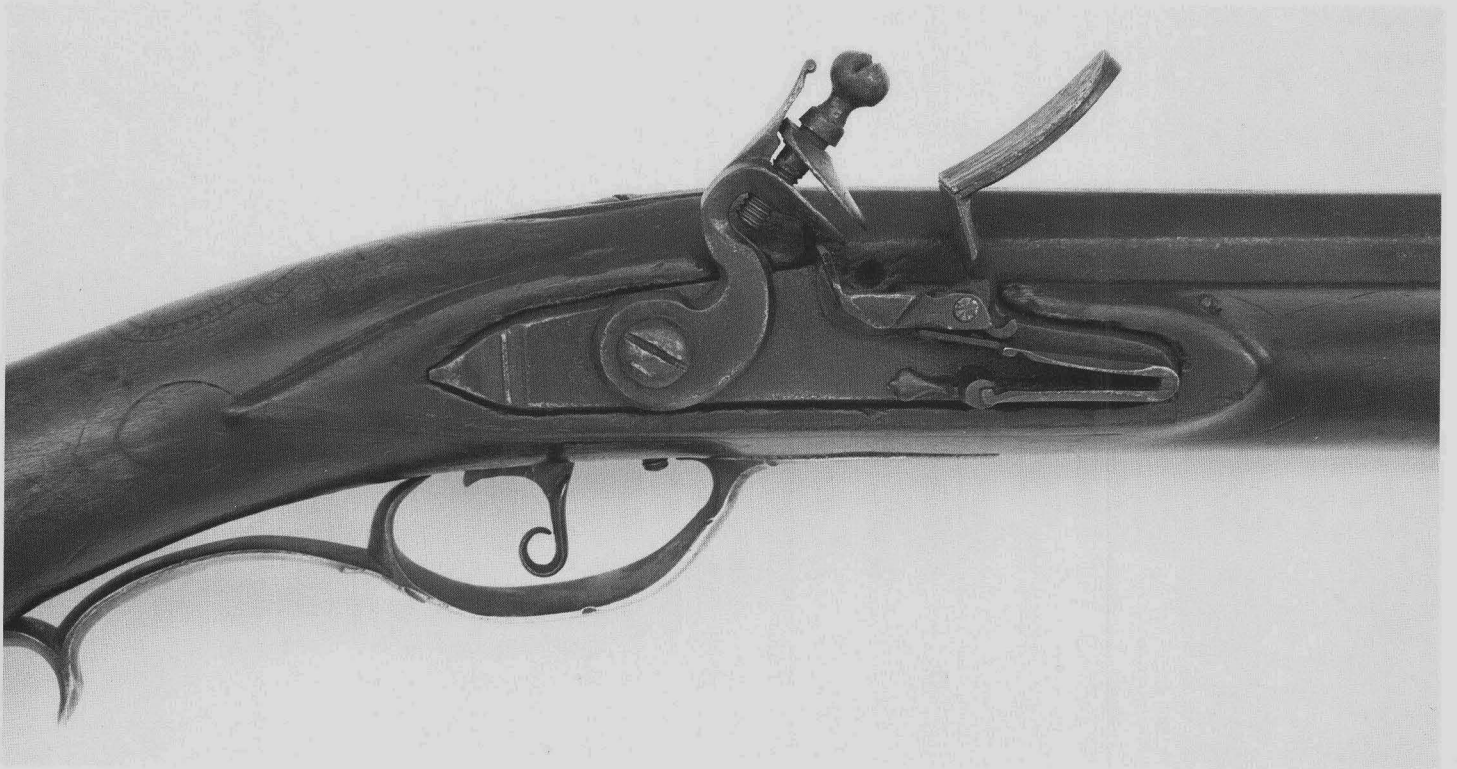


Plate 12
JACOB ERNST flint lock "after". Charles Semmer photo

The Restoration of a Nineteenth Century Kentucky Rifle

Warren Sellke

My Colorado Gun Collectors Association membership in good standing had just about run its course. It wasn't that my dues were delinquent, mind you, but still outstanding was my promise of some years back to provide the club with a program on antique firearms restoration. It's just that the right project had not yet come along.

I was waiting for a project that required extensive work on both metal and wood, and, hopefully, reversion from percussion to the flint lock ignition system—should it be a Kentucky rifle. With a project akin to this I felt it would be possible to narrate fifty or sixty slides showing some interesting in-process repair sequences portraying this aspect of gun collecting. A *big* question mark loomed on the horizon regarding one segment of the proposed program's feasibility and this was: would the owner's inclination be one of letting the entire gun collecting universe becoming privy to his having had a fine antique gun extensively "fixed"?

Enter Mr. Ron Peterson of Ron Peterson Guns, Inc., Albuquerque, New Mexico, U.S.A.

As he handed me the rifle over my gun show table in Denver, I *knew* this was divine intervention. Here was a great Golden Age period (Circa 1760-1835) Kentucky rifle in need of tender, loving care, boasting a relief *and* incised carved curly maple stock, engraved brass patchbox, and the barrel had not even been cut off!

In his usual matter-of-fact way, Ron asked, "Can you fix it for me?"

Within a single minute of examining it, buttplate to muzzle, I knew what I wanted to do.

"What do you want me to do?"

"You're the expert—just do what's right." Now are these not wonderful marching orders?

"I've been wanting a raised-carved Kentucky rifle for my collection and this is a keeper."

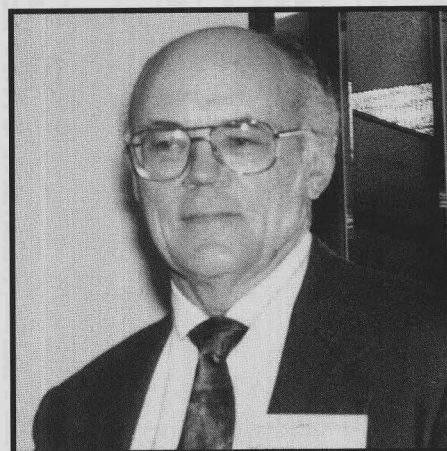
"In addition to repairing the damaged stock areas, I'd like to reconvert to flint," I suggested.

"Well, like I just said, you're the expert, so do what is right!"

Now for the \$64,000 question.

"Would you mind if I photographed the entire process for a Colorado Gun Collectors Association (CGCA) narrated slide program on antique firearms restoration?"

"O.K. with me."



Now did I not just say divine intervention was involved here?

I'm sure a few years ago it would have been much more difficult to obtain collector approval for this sort of project publicity. The stigmatism that exists concerning restoration work is diminishing, however. This is, in part, due to the high quality of work being done today. Contributing considerably to this elevated quality is the current availability of first-class printed reference material, along with great detail photos, frequently resulting in the most historically accurate results possible. Also, sources of "attic find," untouched, collecting-class material continue in their diminishment. So let's properly restore the ones we do have and enjoy them!

This might be the place to say that 85-90% of my restoration work now consists of reworking previous attempts. These past efforts were adequate for the time in which they were done, but these are different times with different restoration philosophies emerging. Do we not update the repairs to these historic treasures based upon new-found technologies and the most recent historical research available, resulting in the quality of restoration appropriate for the collectable?

Of course, I'm speaking here from an American perspective. What about the differences in American/non-American antique-restoration philosophies? The most basically accepted approach in these "colonies" is to restructure only the damaged/missing area(s) and leave the remainder of the piece "as is." In other somewhat blunt terms, don't clean; don't scour; don't sand; don't file. Of course there are exceptions to these nearly Biblical exhortations, but not

many. For instance, a little bit of clean-up may be necessary to read the gun builder's name on the top barrel flat behind the front sight of a Kentucky rifle or pistol. Other times a little "tidying up" with lanolin hand soap, WD-40 and tooth brush may be permissible—but please don't disturb/remove hard patina from wood or metal! A collector friend possesses an Abraham Schweitzer Kentucky, original in every respect, with so much crudulation cemented in the recesses around the flint lock that he absolutely refuses to let me pull it for photo or parts mold-making purposes! To him I say, "O.K. Dude!"

Granted, my exposure to "overseas" restoration attempts are very limited. But judging from what I've seen and comments from world traveled collector/dealers, spit-and-polish seem to be the orders of the day.

I would find it extremely interesting and informative to visit archives and armories beyond these shores to contemplate what state of repair, or disrepair, exists particularly where repair/restoration work has not been attempted within, say, the past one hundred years.

Will these different restoration philosophies with correspondingly different results continue indefinitely on parallel, somewhat separated, courses or is convergence, or even divergence, on the horizon?

Anyway! . . . Folks in the collecting/dealing field seemingly with increasing regularity are "hub-bubbing" at buying/selling/trading time, discussing restoration pros and cons for the piece in question, as a now-valid part of their "networking."

So after several months of fun—er, work—the time finally arrived for me to present pictorially my JACOB ERNST Kentucky rifle restoration efforts to the CGCA.

The program was well received, judging from the questions and comments that followed. I fielded an assortment of technically-oriented questions which I answered without getting laboriously involved, thereby preventing a dozing audience.

A query which came forth that I had received on previous occasions was "do you keep records for your jobs?" My casual reply was IT'S CONFIDENTIAL.

Secondly, collectors quite understandably wondered if anyone else would see their gun(s) should I have it (them) for repair purposes. Basically, no one but me views another's treasure(s). One exception to this axiom is, if I feel outside consultation is necessary for the most historically and aesthetically correct conclusion, I will seek specialized advice and guidance—but only with approval of my client. Forever after I will hold this information confidential. In 20 years this philosophy has never failed.

It wasn't long after my CGCA promissory fulfillment that Mr. Tom Lewis asked if I'd like to "do it again" for the American Society of Arms Collectors.

I was ecstatic with this invitation, so, of course, my reply was "yes, when and where?" I've known members of this organization for a considerable period of time and was well aware of their individual "impeccable character" and the lofty class of their collections.

So here we are. Now let's get down to the business of making a Kentucky Rifle look like it's been well used, but not abused, for a period of fifty or sixty years. Listed here are the areas of Ron's JACOB ERNST rifle that required attention.

1. *Stock*

Fill entire lock cavity with new wood for reception of new lock

Replace missing pieces of foreend wood—both sides—near muzzle. Fabricate and install missing forward brass loading rod thimble, nosecap and front iron barrel keeper. Color, finish and age entire stock and new metal work.

2. *Barrel*

Remove percussion nipple drum, weld up corresponding hole; drill new touchhole appropriately placed with respect to new lock flash plan location. Age touchhole area of barrel consistent with flint-lock pattern of pitting and corrosion.

3. *Lock*

Construct new Germanic-style flint lock, age and install.

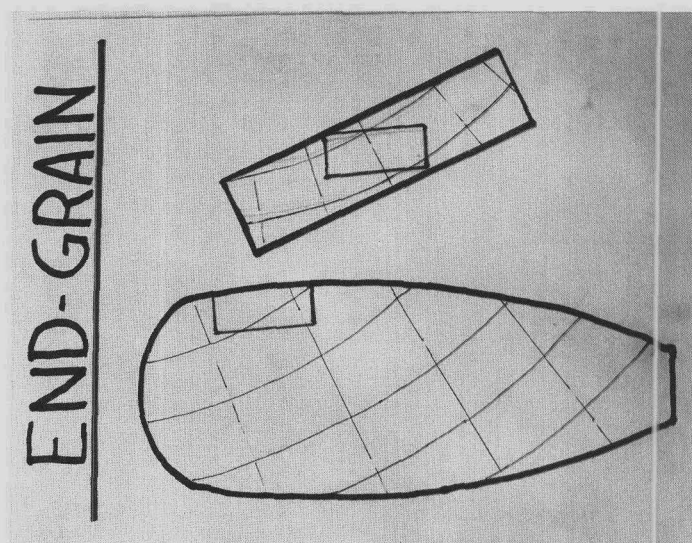
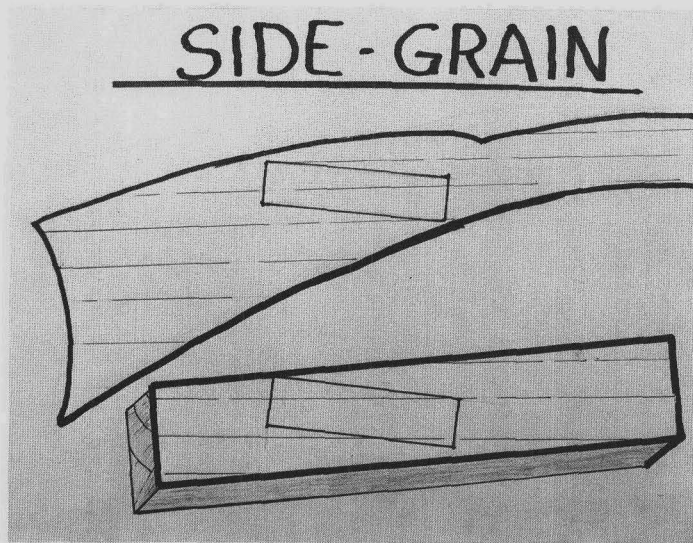
4. *Rod*

Carve new tapered hickory loading rod.

Closely examining the maple stock I noted that it had experienced almost normal usage. The expected dents, dings, scratches, and a few small cracks, excepting the foreend, which was missing entire sections of wood, were in evidence.

The original finish and working-life patina had been chemically removed by someone. Fortunately, the wood had not been sanded, scraped or filed, thereby leaving intact the uneven surface that 185 years of drying, shrinking and rubbing produces.

This predictable surface unevenness can best be seen by looking down the stock, much as one sights down a rifle barrel. For example, surfacing growth rings rise ever so slightly above the softer, hence worn-away wood between them. Also, a curly maple (tiger stripe, fiddle back) stock frequently displays a wavy appearance when viewed in this manner, the frequency of wave crests and troughs being dictated by the number of tiger stripes per inch.



Plates 1 & 2
Stock and replacement wood grain diagrams

These surface irregularities are most desirable on a fine antique (gun or furniture) and unfortunately disappear when sanding or filing has occurred. The unevenness can be reintroduced artificially, but only with extreme expenditures of time and patience—and money!

The relief and incised carving in like manner had not been unnaturally abraded.

My first operational step was to remove the percussion lock and fill the entire cavity with a piece of maple exhibiting just a hint of curliness. It was necessary to shave off old, punky wood around the inner edges for a permanent old-wood/new-wood colored-epoxy bond.

The question arises, or should, “when choosing a new piece of wood, are there selection criteria, other than wood species, to be considered for the desired results?” The answer is “yes.”

To illustrate with the simplest of scenarios, let’s assume our stock is of plain, straight-grain lumber.

Upon finding a pile of corresponding wood type, growth-ring characteristics are our next consideration. This natural phenomena is viewed from an end-grain perspective. The rings of the replacement wood must correspond as closely as possible with those of the stock when viewed under the butt plate. The rings must compare favorably in both distance separating them, and curvature (arc radius).

Now, how do we orient the new wood for inletting into the stock, or does it matter? Again, “yes—it matters.”

Imagine the replacement piece suspended in space, where it must undergo alignment in a three-dimensional sense. Look at Plates 1 and 2 to help visualize the procedures that follow.

The wood must, in nautical terms, be “rolled,” “yawed,”

and “pitched” until exactly the right attitude is achieved. This stellar object is aligned correctly when, 1) it is “rolled” sufficiently to bring about concentricity between its growth rings and those of the stock, 2) it is “yawed” until its grain lines are parallel with those of the stock, looking at the stock from the side, and 3) it is “pitched” so its grain lines are parallel with those of the stock, but looking at the stock from top or bottom.

Another situation to ponder is when the stock is *not* straight-grained. Consider, for example, curly maple in a Kentucky rifle or “feathered” grain factory grade XXXX buttstock of a Winchester “One of One Thousand.” In these cases the new wood must additionally be slid fore and aft until the surface pattern matches.

With our wood selection firmly anchored in space, all we need now do is draw lines thereon, such that when sawn, allow a perfect fit when lowered into the stock. The repair piece, smothered in appropriately-tinted epoxy, is held firmly in its new home by spring clamp(s) made of heavy-duty coathanger wire and/or rubber bands fashioned from Mack truck tire inner tubes.

All of this sounds like a lot of work, and usually is. But it cannot begin to compare with the complexities and frustrations of correcting color and light-reflecting characteristics of a poorly selected and positioned piece of new wood.

I’ve included photos (Plates 3 through 8) of a broken Sharps wrist repair to drive home the point that these self-same new wood installation procedures must be followed for even the smallest of implantations.

Let’s now go back to the lock area and brainstorm ideas dealing with what ignition configuration and lock style is correct for our JACOB ERNST.

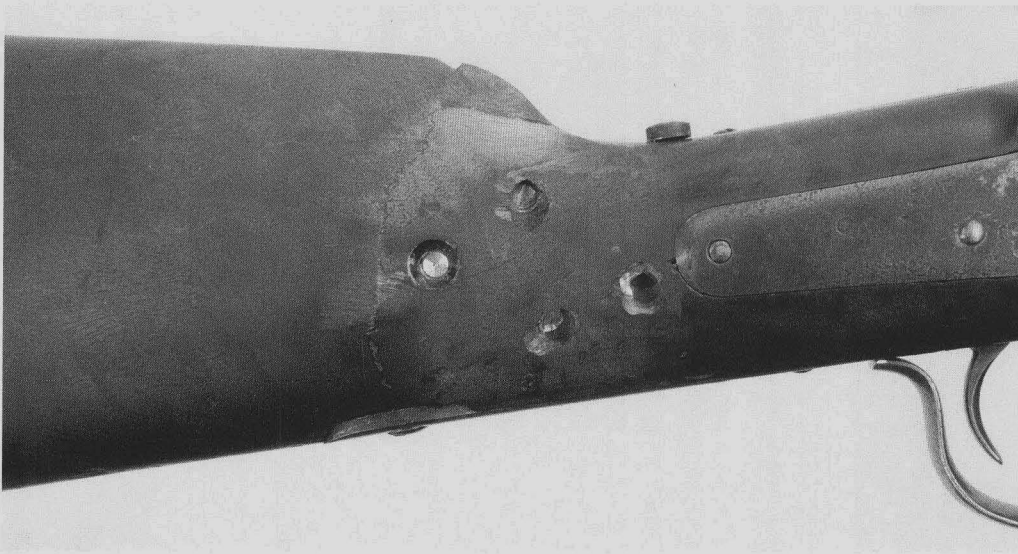


Plate 3
Damaged areas ready for new wood. Author's photo

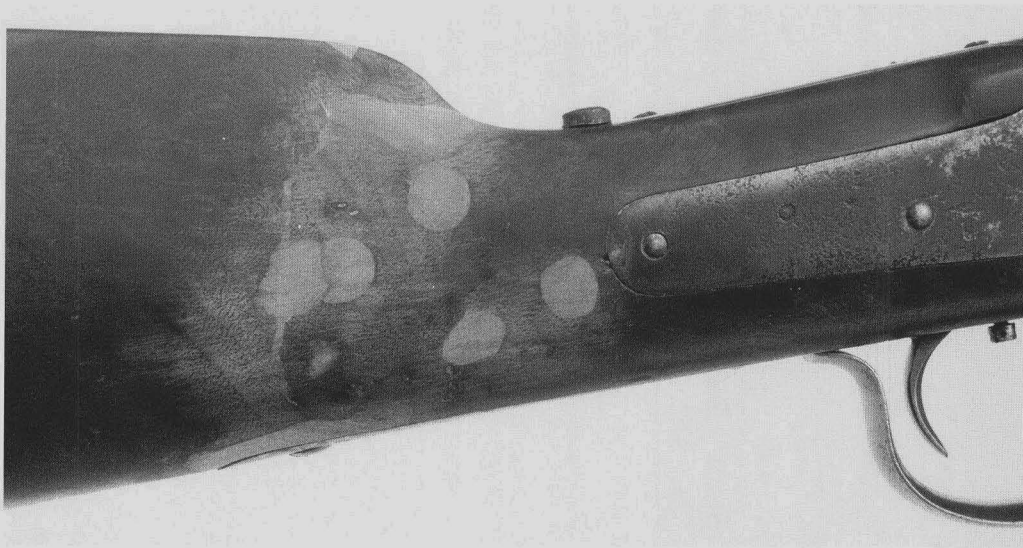


Plate 4
New wood installed. Inserts were oriented and placed into position in accordance with JACOB ERNST Kentucky rifle wood replacement procedures in the text.

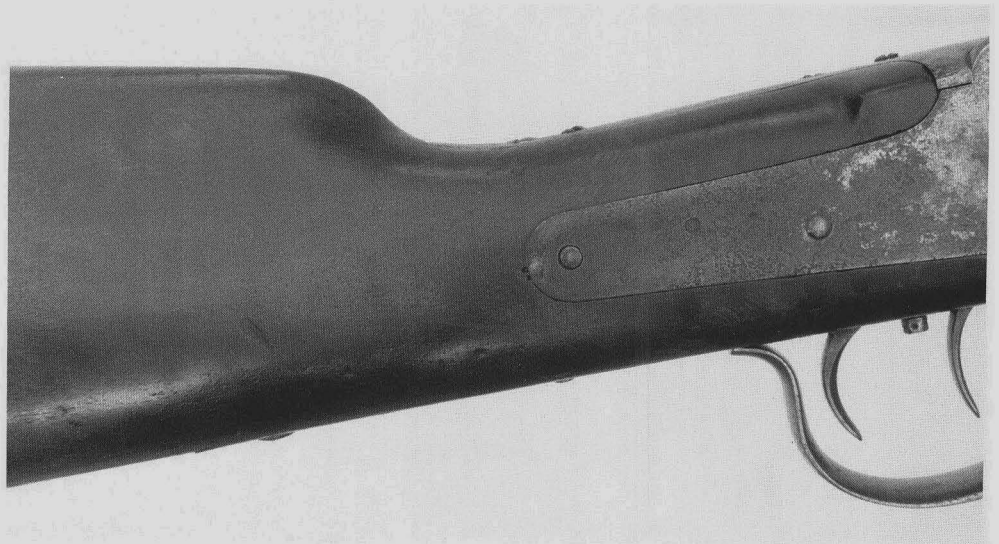


Plate 5
Subsequent coloring, shading and blending techniques, as in 4, duplicate methodologies in text. Author's photo

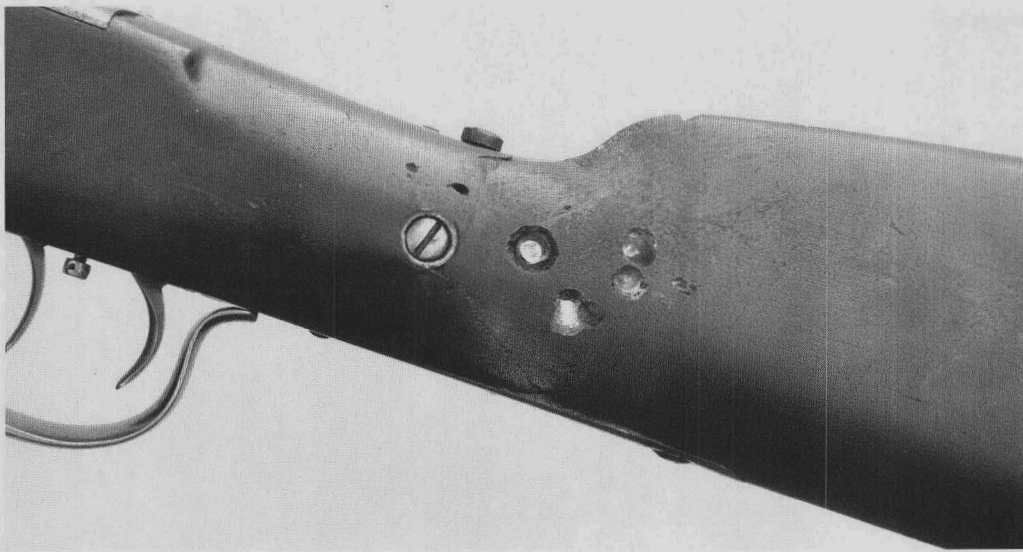


Plate 6
Damaged areas ready for new wood. Author's photo

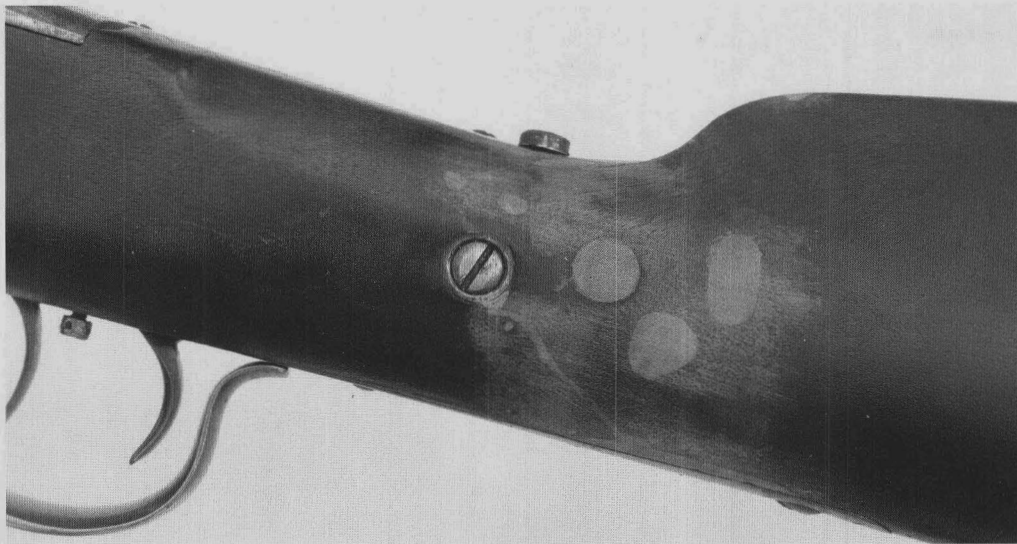


Plate 7
New wood installed. Inserts were oriented and placed into position in accordance with JACOB ERNST Kentucky rifle wood replacement procedures in the text.

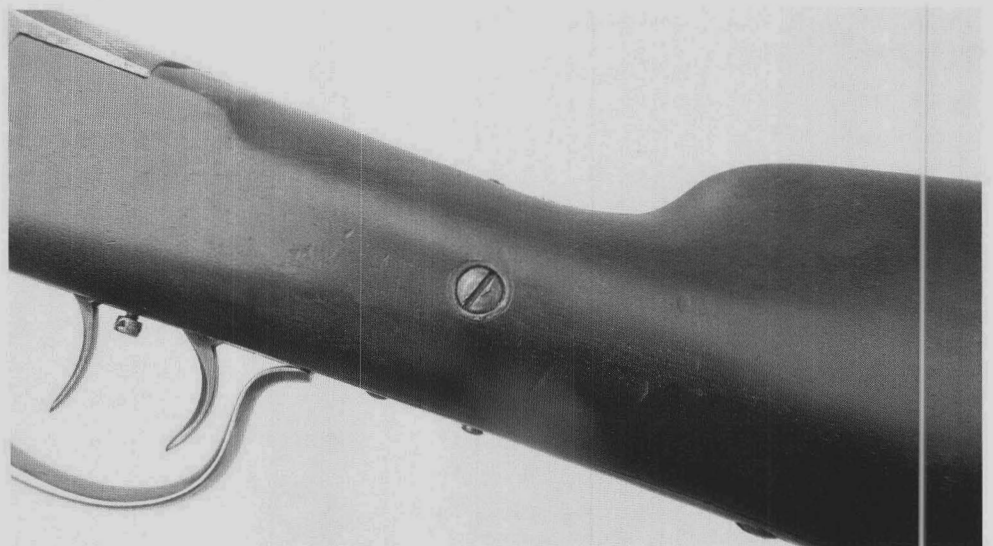


Plate 8
Subsequent coloring, shading and blending techniques, as in 4, duplicate methodologies in text.
Author's photo

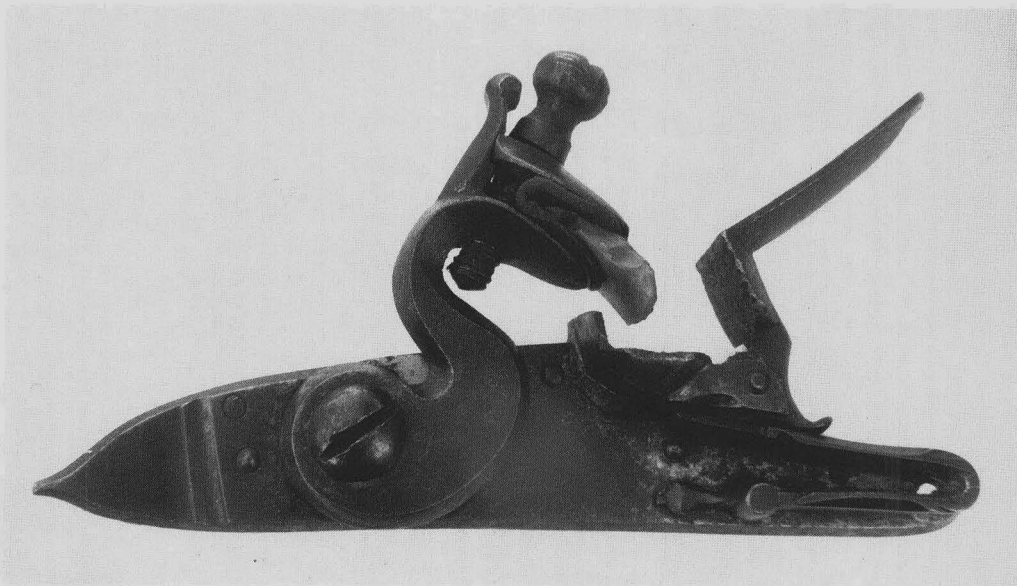


Plate 9
Germanic flint lock (all original). Author's photo

When I have the privilege to view an antique Kentucky rifle, my glances frequently gravitate first to the lock. This, I suppose, is to bolster my preconceived notions of lock "correctness." For example, if it is still in its flint lock configuration, I expect to see a "Germanic" style lock (Plate 9) in a John Bonewitz, Wolfgang Haga or George Shroyer built gun. Engraved detail is almost never found on its exterior surfaces and up to three block-stamped letters can frequently be found on the lockplate's central interior.

The majority of the locks in Kentuckies representing this style were made in Germany, or the area that is now Belgium, for shipment to America in the early and middle years of the Golden Age period, all very similar to one another in appearance—even down to the internal parts.

Undoubtedly locks closely resembling these in appearance were made in this country, but by and large, it was more economical to use the imported Germanic mechanisms. Their cottage industries producing these locks were in an advanced state of development compared to our fledgling gun shop procedures.

Finding another style of flint lock in one of these rifles of this era does not necessarily mean it's wrong, but after handling a respectable number of our finest surviving Kentuckies, Germanic is my expectation for this timeframe.

Another relatively common flint lock style found in American long guns and pistols is the English style, Plate 10. These likewise were trade locks, produced by a number of makers in London and Birmingham for the colonies. And as is true for Germanic locks, the individual lock parts are very similar, lockmaker to lockmaker, so as to be sometimes nearly interchangeable. These locks are usually heavily engraved, with very similar patterns lock to lock, on most external parts.

Melchoir Fordney (Lancaster, Pennsylvania) made beautiful rifles in the late Golden Age era, several that I've seen containing English locks. Two familiar locks of this style grouping are by KETLAND and ASHMORE, so identified on the plate face.

The English style seems to have supplanted the Germanic type later in the Golden Age period, again for economic reasons. Both function the same.

If I see an English cock on an otherwise Germanic flint lock, I think NOT CORRECT, at least as far as its original construction is concerned. This might have been a working-life repair, but I would replace it with one of Germanic configuration.

A third group of Kentucky rifle and pistol lock makers not to go unmentioned worked in America. This home-spun lock variety varies considerably in style, some identifiable according to "school" (geographic area) and others by individual gun maker.

For example, a Bedford County (Pennsylvania) gun in original condition in all probability will contain a percussion lock with a unique appearance all its own, with a long slender plate (looking much like a torpedo sans fins) and hammer sporting an extended, upswept spur. The lock in a gun by Jacob Stoudenour is a good example of this style. Most Bedfords were made after the Golden Age period and flint locks of this school are very rare.

A lock that is unique as to gun builder is one originating in John Armstrong's shop (Emmitsburg, Maryland). His shop turned out beautiful flint *and* percussion locks, both in terms of unique basic architecture and engraved decoration.

Many American-made locks vary markedly from their Germanic and English counterparts, with respect to architec-

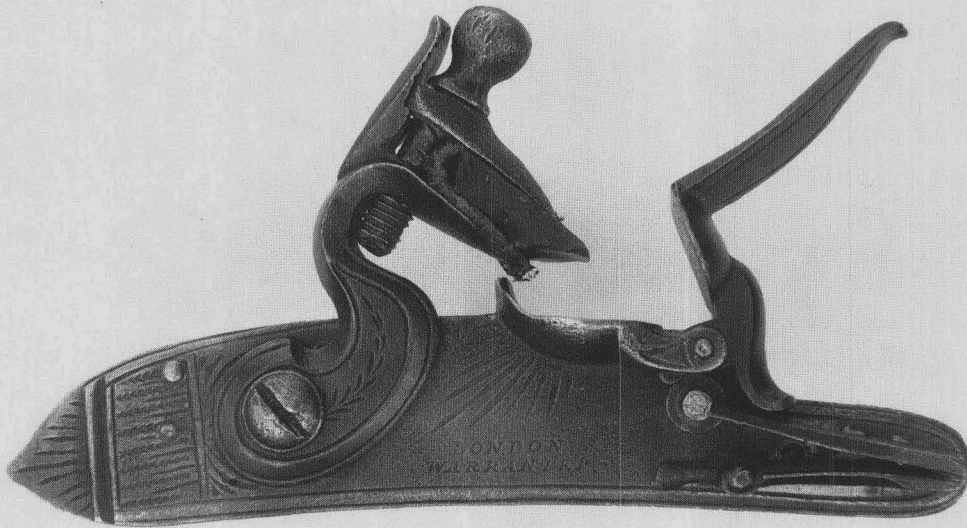


Plate 10
English flint lock (all original). Author's photo

ture and engraving found on them. A new book on the Kentucky lock (with many colored pictures) would be a boon to collectors, students and restorers alike.

Consider some of the basic architectural differences of the two lock styles in this table:

	Germanic	English
Lockplate Face	Usually plain containing no engraved detail nor name I.D. except in rare instances.	Frequently engraved borders on plate, lock, and frizzen and pan arm; "wheat" pattern on cock and lockplate tail; radiating lines beneath flashpan; "WAR-RANTED" plus a name.
Lockplate Tail	Slender lance point	Some rounded, others rounded and slightly tipped.
Cock	Thick goose neck, bottom round extending full lockplate vertical distance.	Slender goose neck.
Flashpan Frizzen spring action	Faceted bottom. Friction (normally)	Rounded bottom. Roller bearing (usually).
Flashpan	Separate and fitted to lockplate.	Integral with lockplate.

One can conclude from this brief treatise on Kentucky rifle and pistol locks that it is an involved, on going, and often confusing endeavor. It is: I have accumulated photos of forty-five original flint locks and conversions in my efforts of

finding trends and patterns with regard to lock building and usage.

So . . . what lock do we then put in our project gun? First, we need to decide whether or not it was originally flint!

If we are lucky, the original lock and associated internal parts on our ERNST rifle will be original equipment with 1) flint cock replaced by a percussion hammer, 2) frizzen, frizzen spring and pan removed and 3) flint-appendage screw holes in the plate plugged. Being able to see the original lock plate still in place, perfectly fitting the original cavity, would help us considerably in determining its original ignition configuration.

Unfortunately this was not the case for our ERNST.

Instead, the smith making the conversion to percussion simply removed the entire original lock and shaved wood as necessary around the cavity edges to accommodate his new lock, leaving portions of the original cavity unfilled (Plate 11).

Observations that helped me conclude that it was originally Germanic flint were:

1. Jacob Ernst built this rifle in an area of Pennsylvania (York County) where rifles and pistols by his contemporaries usually contained Germanic flint locks.
2. Stock architecture (especially the wide, deep butt) and beautiful, folksy relief/incised carving places it in the Golden Age period of Kentucky rifle building when many guns sported the Germanic style—prior, I believe, to the influx of the English locks.
3. The stock lock panel appears to have been designed around a slender, graceful Germanic lock plate.
4. The forward retaining lock bolt hole in the stock was plugged. Most Kentuckies identified as original flint had this bolt whereas most percussions did not.



Plate 13
Stock bare of color and finish as accomplished by a previous restorer; percussion lock still in place. Charles Semmer photos

5. The full-cock position clearance trough was cut in the wood behind the flashpan—unnecessary on most percussion guns.

Even when new guns with the new percussion system began appearing on the scene, the flint lock did not just drop into an abyss. Not a few smiths continued building flints for years to come, at customer's request, I'm sure. Three reasons for this come to mind.

First, percussion caps had just been developed and hence were not always dependable; they frequently did not go "pop." Secondly, caps were often difficult, if not impossible, to find on the frontier. Lastly, and of significant importance also was the fact that the users of these weapons had spent much time and energy becoming familiar with, tuning and practicing with these "tools of the trade." They knew them, trusted them—yes, even loved them! A flintlock ignition system is quite reliable, even in damp weather, when set up properly and maintained. (Consider the Indian's stretchable bow string when *his* equipment got wet!)

"Change to percussion? Get real!"

Are we all rushing out to buy WINDOWS 95 to update *our* tools of *our* trade?

In the words of Jackie Gleason, my teen-age hero: "HARDY HAR HAR!" We'll just let others jump in first and try it out for a while and let *them* debug this new system!

A GERMANIC FLINT LOCK it shall be!

I have in inventory castings necessary for fabricating complete Germanic and English flint lock mechanisms.

Down through the years when photographing original locks I was usually granted permission also to make rubber molds of each part. The ERNST lock mortise area of the stock looked as if it had been carved specifically for one of my Germanic flint lockplate castings. After much filing, fitting, polishing and hardening, I had a real-looking, functioning Germanic lock—minus aging and patina, of course.

The nipple drum was removed from barrel breech and resulting hole welded up. Additional welding, primarily for metal buildup, was necessary on the drum barrel flat and two upper adjacent flats. The burnout/corrosion pattern on this area of the barrel is totally different on a percussion gun than a flinter, hence it also needed to be reconfigured.

The new touchhole was located and drilled in almost the identical center of the recently-removed drum. The new lock was positioned, with the proper lock flashpan and barrel touchhole relationship established, and inlet into the new wood to rest against the barrel. The lock was then anchored in place with two through-bolts. See Plate 12 (page 73/2) for completed lock and wood in this area.

As the new, separated lock parts and barrel were rusting in warm sunlight (or under the heatlamp) within their respective damp, sealed containers, my thoughts revolved to the coloring, aging and patinization of the stock.

Plates 13 and 14 show a stock denuded of finish and color by a previous restorer, with percussion lock still in place. Some of the most beautiful antique wood colorations can be found on Kentucky rifles. This seems to be particularly true, in my view, if the builder red-impregnated his new stock. As years progressed and the gun was exposed to the

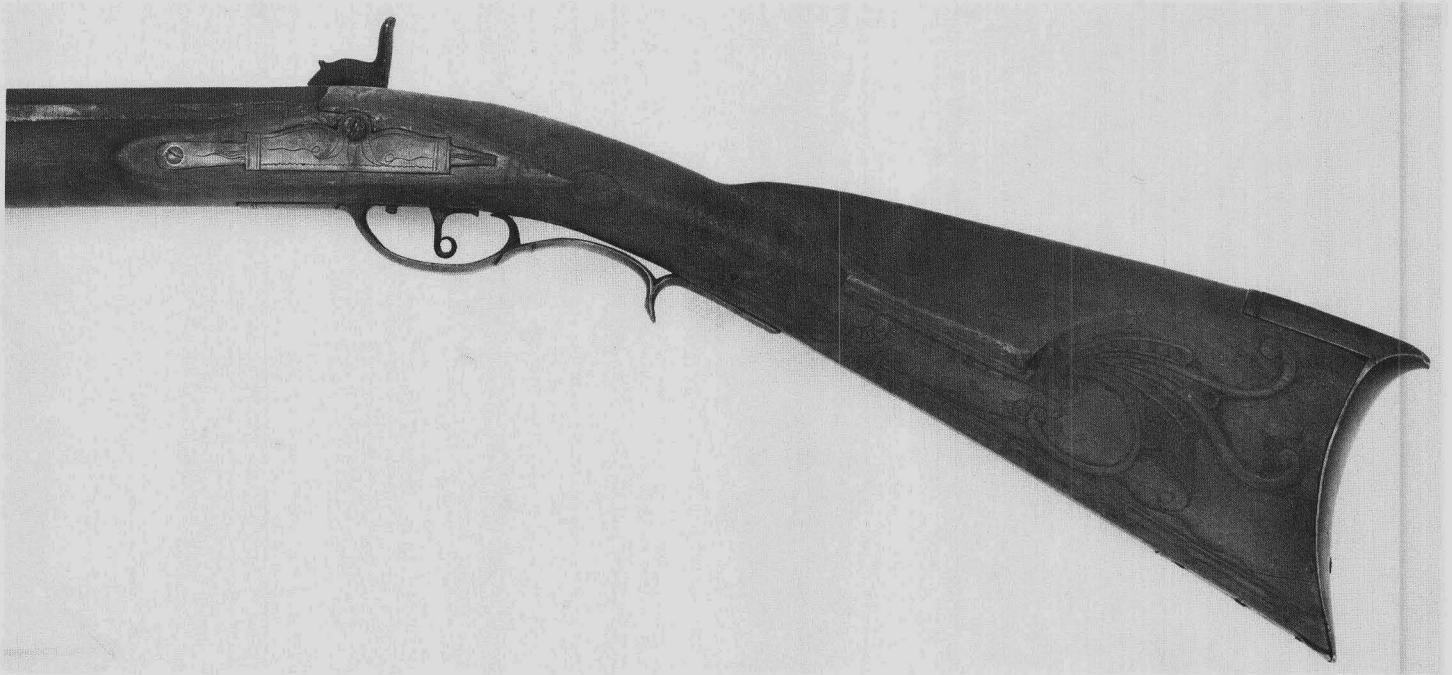


Plate 14
Stock bare of color and finish as accomplished by a previous restorer; percussion lock still in place. Charles Semmer photos

effects of sunlight, extreme temperature changes, moisture variations, stock oil, skin oil and just plain old dirt, Mother nature worked her magic. The result, as you view the gun in sunlight, is a glorious, ever-varying combination of colors—yes, even rivaling a New Mexico autumn sunset!

The blending of these colors, as well as overall relative lightness or darkness, depends on the area of the stock being studied. The crooks, crannies and crevices, and low spots in general appear darkest. Then, as you proceed to the areas that are higher and more apt to be rubbed, scratched and dented during use, the color shading becomes lightest. The buttstock cheekrest area is generally a good example of this phenomena.

Frequently for aesthetically-pleasing architectural reasons, the stocker would “dish-out” the cheekrest. The center, or lowest portion of this shallow depression, can be totally black. As the eye moves outward and the wood surface begins to rise and hint of a transition from concave to convex, the black fades and lightens, giving way to a very deep, rich oxblood red. And continuing outward and up, the red subtly begins to blend with brown and yellow. Continuing on across the surface, the red then disappears, surrendering totally to a richly magnificent golden butterscotch. Finally, as we round the comb, the highest and most exposed area of the topography in this locale, the yellow-brown evolves lightest and brightest. Likewise, the wood grain on the high spots is most in evidence. Given that the gun is “attic untouched,” these color variances will be found overall.

One more pleasing antique color variation is sometimes noted: the foreend begins to darken about one third of the

way toward the muzzle. This continues till only blacky carbon exists at the extreme end.

It’s ironic that during my tour of national service in the United States Navy many years ago, my medical records carried the description “color defective vision”! An obvious error.

I’ve indulged in much ponderance over the years attempting to reconstruct in my mind the natural evolution of events, giving us these vivid, glowing colors. My dream was to eventually find that magic paint brush whose deft strokes would duplicate nature’s glory. Toward this end then I commenced the recoloring and refinishing process of Ron Peterson’s JACOB ERNST gun.

I began by applying a red non-grain-raising (NGR) spirit-based wood dye overall.

Then it was a matter of applying cyclicly other colors—the obvious ones seemingly in the proper places, hopefully for desired effects. Sometimes I’d combine two or more colors before application while in other situations the dyes were layered on singly.

Were my incremental efforts successful each attempt? Not very dang often!

“Now I do recall your several ‘subtle’ hints how you’d like to display this treasure in February at Vegas; but *please, especially* at this juncture, *don’t* ask again when the job will be *finished!*”

Eventually when the stock appearance approached my mental image of color-correctness, I’d apply a coat of very thin sealer/finish. Viewing my new coloring efforts with this “wet” look in bright sunlight, I’d know whether “antique-

ness" was being achieved. The wet finish was then rubbed off, followed by more color addition, modification, and yes, sometimes negation. Then more finish and another look-see.

As this cycle repeats, recessed areas are luxuriated with dustings of lamp black. This represents years of exposure to dirty hands, sweaty hands, bloody hands, falling in the mud, falling in snow, falling in the corner of the cabin room, and vile cursings for misfiring due to forgetting to pour in the main charge, netting only a very embarrassing flash-in-the-pan!

By the time the stock hues are right, just about enough finish has been built up to evidence a bit of hand-rubbed glow overall. Only a few more finish coats generally are necessary. See Plates 15 and 16 for completed coloration—sorry I can't "color-enhance" them for you! These same coloring techniques are also used when making the afore-mentioned Sharps wrist repairs disappear. I haven't found the magic coloring brush, but I'm still looking!

The missing front rod thimble was fabricated, fitted and aged as was the front barrel keeper and loading rod. Only weeks before, Tom Lewis had given me an original one-piece brass nose cap for my hope chest. It fit perfectly! When the new tapered hickory loading rod is withdrawn from beneath the barrel, it exhibits a slightly lighter color where protected by the pipes and forestock channel.

The rusting barrel and lock parts were removed from their respective sealed containers and inspected, displaying a coat of heavy red/brown rust overall. I removed the upper porous layer by cutting with a Gillette razor blade. This left a thin, opaque layer of rust on the parts. Boiling in water for a minute or two darkens them even more. The frizzen, tumbler, bridge, sear and various springs were hardened and re-rusted and the entire lock assembled. The completed lock and barrel were subjected to stern abrasive measures to lighten edges, corners and other high spots.

The entire rifle was assembled and, with a few minor exceptions, passed inspection.

We need now accomplish only two more relatively minor, but all-important, steps for a successful restoration conclusion.

Let's lighten up the forestock a bit more where the hand grasps it for portage (balance-point). And yes, the barrel edges also. Then we must heavily bleach a little bit of wood fore and aft of the flashpan to the point of it appearing ashen in its colorlessness. After all, these poor little fellows endured the very terrible fiery wrath of hell's bowels, belched through the touch hole each time the critter was fired! You'll know whereof I speak if you've ever stood within thirty feet of the little aperture at the instant of ignition.

Finally, I'll make only a couple of statements here concerning my antique firearms restoration ideology, as this is a separate topic, akin to discussions of politics and religion. I won't transform an antique into something I'm convinced it never was. And how a client represents his restored piece to others is totally outside my sphere of control. Stated more eloquently are Tom Lewis' ten commandments of antique firearms restoration, condensed into two short sentences, namely, 1) restoration is for preservation, not deception, and 2) when in doubt, do nothing.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ron Peterson
Tom Lewis
John (Jack) Brooks
Dick Hammer
Charles Semmer, photographer

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Warren Sellke, who resides in Lakewood, Colorado, is a full time gunsmith, having quit his job as a computer systems analyst at Lowry Airforce Base in 1980 to go on his own. He specializes in restoration of fine antique guns and building replicas of Golden Age Kentucky rifles and pistols. His production is very limited, rarely more than one a year. He has built three miniature Kentuckies that actually shoot and is currently making a few pairs of percussion derringer pistols of the "peanut" size.

THE RIFLE RESTORED!



Plate 15
Charles Semmer photo

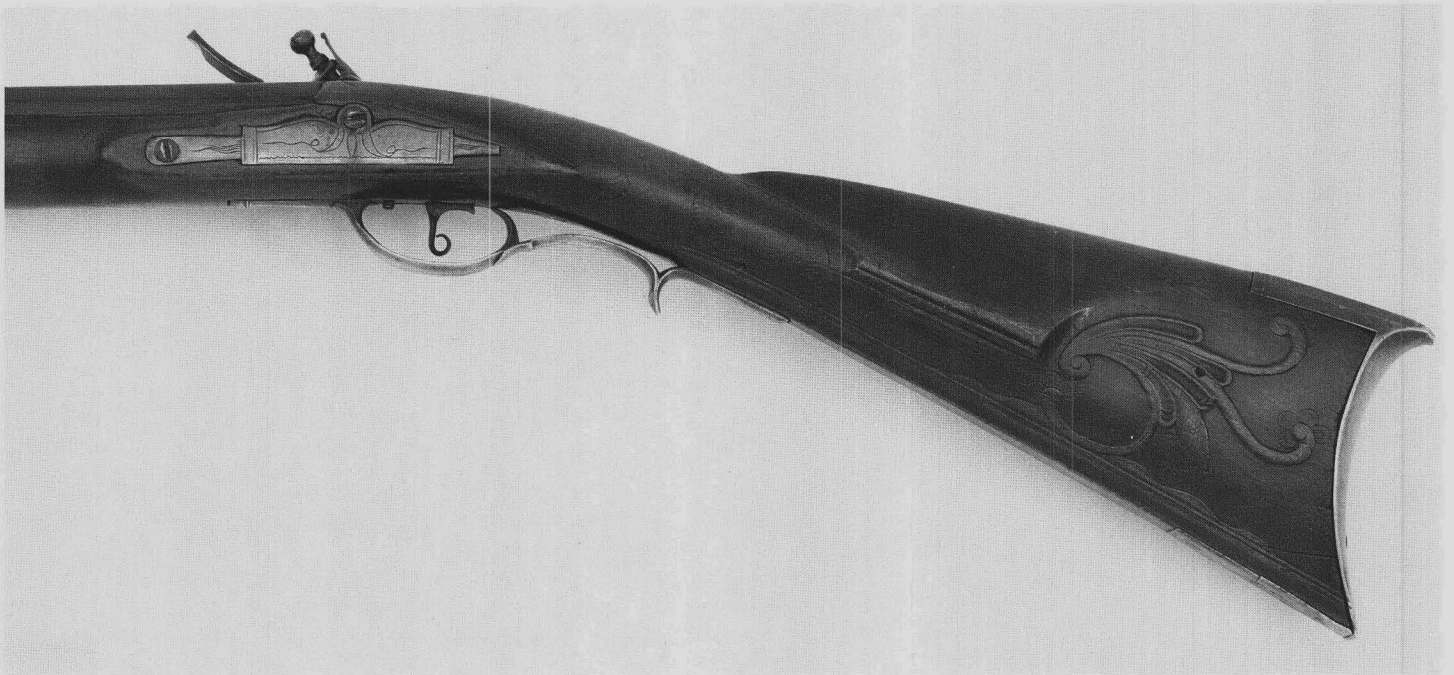


Plate 16
Charles Semmer photo