

Indian Trade Guns: A Brief History, Mid 1600s to Early 1900s

By William M. Reid

Editor's Note: Bill Reid spoke to our group almost from memory to fill a speaker spot vacated due to business conflicts. His talk and question session was quite informational, so a brief history with pictures follows.

When the North American continent was being developed in the 1600's by the Dutch, English, French, Russian, and Spanish settlers, one of the first items of value found were fur pelts of fox, muskrat, lynx, bobcat, deer, and especially beaver. These were in demand by wealthy Europeans. European settlers had little skill in trapping animals; however the Native Americans were experienced trappers.

Native Americans trapped furs and traded them for knives, pots, pans and guns. The European settler then sent the furs to Europe to acquire manufactured goods or

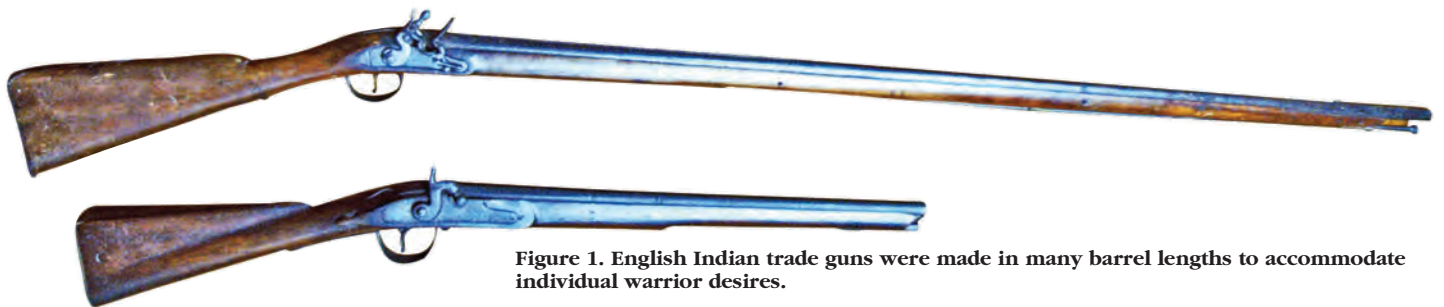
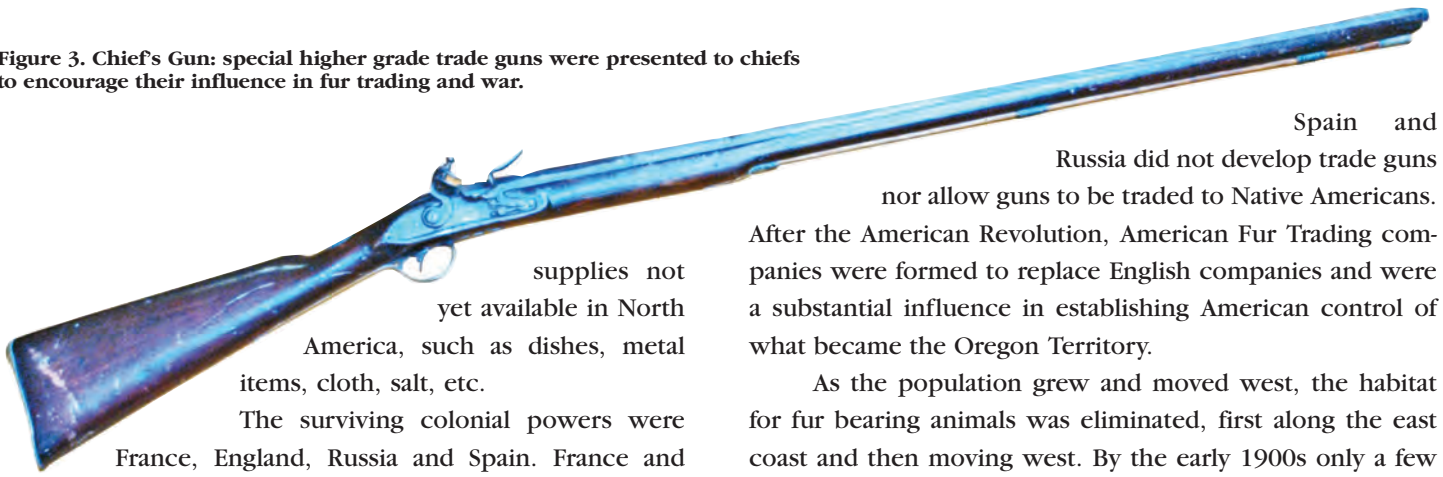


Figure 1. English Indian trade guns were made in many barrel lengths to accommodate individual warrior desires.



Figure 2. Typical side plate and large trigger guard. Indian warriors were using two fingers on bows and arrows, and carried over the same use on guns.¹

Figure 3. Chief's Gun: special higher grade trade guns were presented to chiefs to encourage their influence in fur trading and war.



supplies not yet available in North America, such as dishes, metal items, cloth, salt, etc.

The surviving colonial powers were France, England, Russia and Spain. France and England developed large trading companies with outposts in the wilderness to trade for furs. They developed guns that were suited for the forest and used by the Native Americans. These were inexpensive, light weight and of smaller caliber than the military weapons in general use by the colonist.

Spain and Russia did not develop trade guns nor allow guns to be traded to Native Americans. After the American Revolution, American Fur Trading companies were formed to replace English companies and were a substantial influence in establishing American control of what became the Oregon Territory.

As the population grew and moved west, the habitat for fur bearing animals was eliminated, first along the east coast and then moving west. By the early 1900s only a few remote areas in Western Canada and the Northwest U.S. Territories were commercially trapping fur bearing animals. Thus ended over two hundred and fifty years of commerce that employed thousands of people and helped develop a continent.

Figure 4. Chief's Gun: engraved wrist medallion.

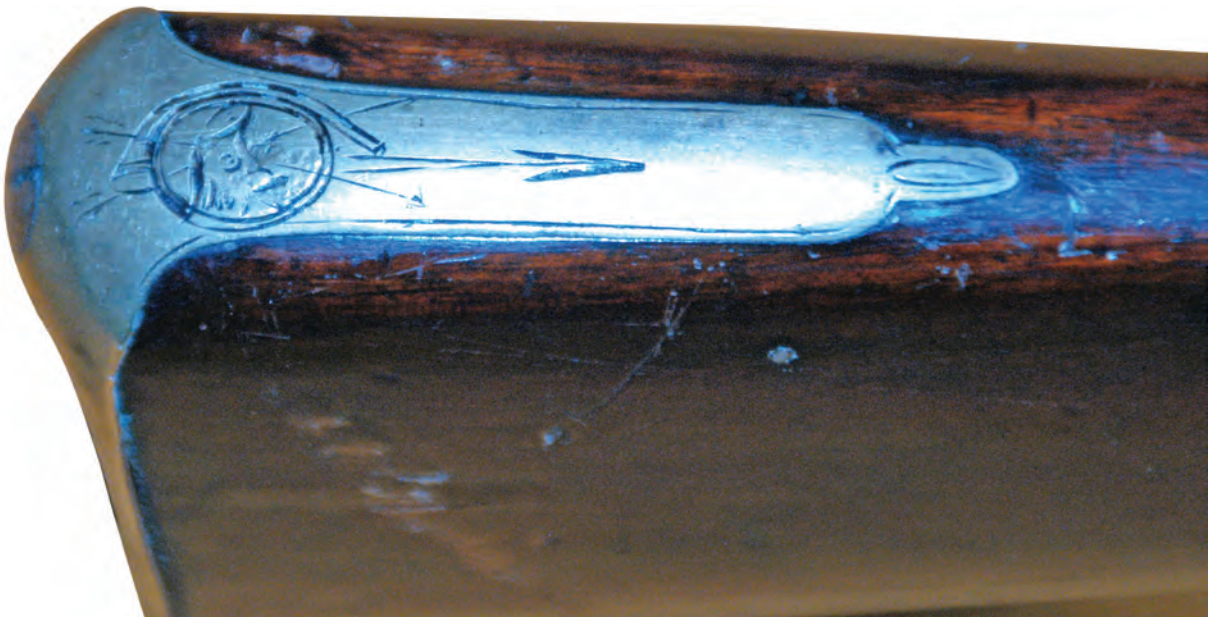


Figure 5. Chief's Gun: engraved butt tange.

Figure 6. Chief's Gun: engraved lockplate.

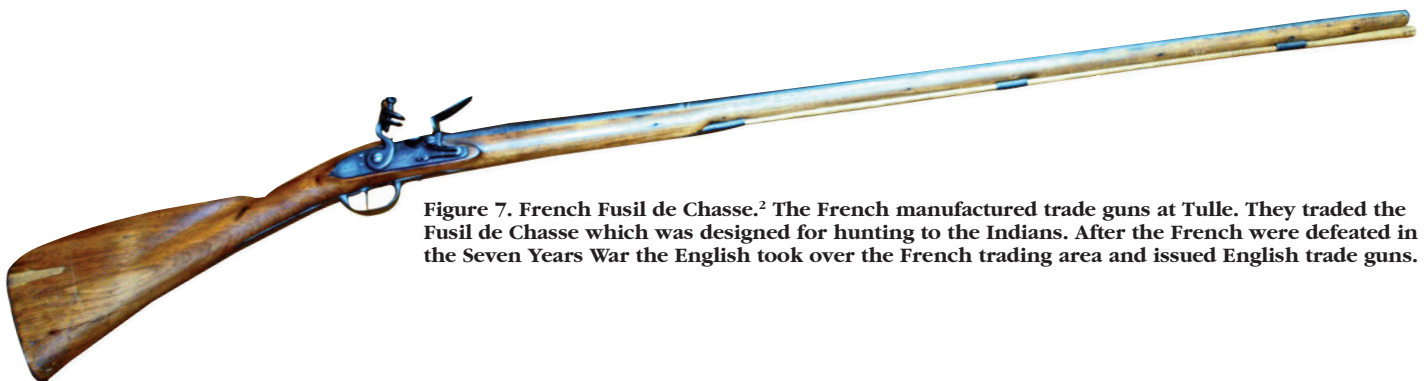


Figure 7. French Fusil de Chasse.² The French manufactured trade guns at Tulle. They traded the Fusil de Chasse which was designed for hunting to the Indians. After the French were defeated in the Seven Years War the English took over the French trading area and issued English trade guns.



Figure 8. French Fusil de Chasse: sideplate.



Figure 9. French Fusil de Chasse: butt tangs.

REFERENCES

1. *Trade guns of the Hudson Bay Company 1670-1970*, S. James Gooding, p. 134.

2. *The Fusil de Tulle in New France 1691-1741*, Russel Bouchard, p. 32.