



# FIRING AN IMAGINATION

By Craig and Mary Ann Ross



I have footage that was taken by my father 60 years ago at the home of Don Blyth in the spring of 1958. It's a 20 second clip of my six-year-old twin brother Carl and I running through the smoke after Don's cannon was fired. Don, a member of the Ontario Arms Collector's Association, had hosted a muzzle-loading shoot at his farm and the unforgettably exciting part of the day was the first time I had ever witnessed the firing of a cannon. I recall being fascinated by the engraving on the breech (Figure 1), but, of course, I had no idea of its provenance or significance in Canadian history.

I have memories while a young lad of sitting in the front seat of my father's car and driving the back roads to hunt groundhogs. When one was spotted, he would stop the car and take the old muzzle loading rifle from the back seat. It was thrilling to hear the "whoof" of the shot as it was fired and to see the billowing smoke spreading out ahead of it with its distinct smell. Even more exciting was the securing and bringing home of the tail as bounty.



Figure 1. A close up of the breech engraving of the cannon

It was during those magical childhood days that I recall sitting on the bank by our house in Port Hope, Ontario with a neighborhood girl. She looked down at the cinder drive and picked up an old Canadian large cent dated 1859 (Figure 2). We looked at it for a moment and as she prepared to toss it away, I asked if I could have it. It didn't mean anything to Donna but to me was a treasure. I still have it.



Figure 2. A Canadian large cent dated 1859

I grew up in a family that appreciated old objects, most having been passed down from previous generations. I enjoyed going to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto with my family as a very young child. I loved the displays which were housed in beautiful wooden framed glass cabinets which at that time were filled chock-a-block with interesting items (not like today where the emphasis is different). I imagined creating a museum of my own and, at the age of seven, I gathered together my many treasures and encouraged the neighborhood friends to do the same, placing it all on makeshift tables of old wooden doors supported by saw horses in our carriage house. I even put a sign out in front of our home on the main street of Port Hope which read: Museum Admission: 2 cents.

Some may recall the "How and Why" magazine published in the 60's and its purpose was to help children understand the nature of things. One publication in particular became a favourite as it focused on old weapons. This led me on to exploring many other gun-related books. This interest also caused me a great deal of frustration. When I saw pictures of particularly interesting weapons, I remember thinking that I likely would never find anything like them, as I imagined that any family who had these treasures in their possession would never part with them. I knew that I needed to have them though; to have an object from an event that occurred long ago, but it was all still a mystery as to how one found more of these things!

I often wondered about that cannon over the years; my imagination soared with the possibilities of how it got there, where it had been and whether it had ever been fired in battle.

As a lad I spent many summers at the family farm shooting various guns owned by my father (Figure 3) and by the age of 12 he gave me an American fowling piece...which I still have. At the age of 16, I was shooting groundhogs with an American target rifle by

E.W. Cooke of Lockport, New York. As an 18th birthday present, my father gave me a flintlock pistol with a cannon barrel by Willet (Figure 4).



Figure 3. My turn to shoot at family farm



Figure 4. The three guns my father gave me

The years passed quickly with school, college, marriage, buying a business and the birth of four children (Figure 5). By the time I was 28, I had a little extra time and cash to go to a gun show with my brother and met a man who eventually became a friend and mentor who sold me my first acquisition...a brass canon-barreled flintlock pistol. Appreciating my interest, Dr. Alan Fulton invited me to see his collection. It was during that visit that the name Keith Neal was mentioned; one that would later continuously crop up in conversations, numerous articles, books, and acknowledgements. And so, the wonderful and fascinating journey of serious collecting began. Also part of this journey, though, was a great deal of stomach-churning, doubt-ridden, heart-stopping turmoil.

Over the years that turmoil has been assuaged by the most important influence in my life (Figure 6). My wife Mary Ann and I have a unique relationship. Ours has been a partnership in raising our family, conducting our business and has continued even more so in collecting. She has been and remains an invaluable source of encouragement and is a vital part in the decision making process. Her evolution and interest in arms and armor allows me to gain a valued sounding board. Her collecting interest was sparked in 1989 in London, England when she bought a 16th century Italian linstock from Robin Dale ..... to my astonishment! She will often be the one to find something interesting or will point out a unique feature on a pistol that I had overlooked. She delights in spending

hours cleaning an object once we get it home. We travel to shows together (Figure 7) and after my first table partner at the Baltimore Show, the late Clark Hoffman (also a past ASAC member; Figure 8) was no longer able to attend, Mary Ann, who had been accompanying me to the shows for many years, then took Clark's place



Figure 5. A busy time with 4 children under the age of seven



Figure 6. The most important influence in my life



Figure 7 MaryAnn chats with Ted and Patty Bell at the Las Vegas Gun Show in the early 90's



Figure 8. My Baltimore Show table partner Clark Hoffman

During the early formative years, I met numerous collectors who were more than willing to share their knowledge and introduce me to others. The late Alan Gamble, who, seeing my interest, suggested that I choose to collect a specific type of weapon that few others collected because acquisitions could be bought fairly reasonably and there would be fewer people to compete with. More importantly though, he suggested to focus on something that I loved. At one of my first shows, he took me around the tables pointing out many different examples; including a mid-18thc. English turn-off pistol. I was intrigued by the cannon barrel and the silver grotesque mask (having already seen a pair in Alan Fulton's collection by Delaney) and so I began my journey of discovery of turn-off pistols and ones specifically made during the Queen Anne era. I came to the realization though, that as I scoured the many books I could find on antique firearms, there was very little published information about this type of weapon.



Figure 9. John and Kandi Chalapis with Mary Ann and me

Following up on an advertisement in *Man At Arms*, I bought several pistols, including a turn-off pistol by Wilson. I took it to the 1984 Brampton Arms Fair as I was hoping to show it to my new collector friends, knowing that they would give me their honest opinions. One of them took a look at it and announced, "You're lucky, there is a man here today who collects this type of weapon". He then introduced me to John Chalapis (Figure 9). Many here will recognize the name as John is a past president of The American Society. I was delighted, after showing him the pistol, when he asked me if it was for sale! Identifying with my passion, I was

invited to his home in Wyndotte, Michigan to view his collection. It was a pleasure to see so many fine examples of pistols that I had appreciated in books, articles and auction catalogues already. It was also at Brampton that I met Dave Weaver and the late Bob Hendry (Figure 10) who later became invaluable mentors, traveling companions (along with wives Judi and Lorna) and future American Society members.



Figure 10. from left to right: myself, Clark Hoffman, Robin Dale, Rob Hendry and Dave Weaver enjoying a meal after the Baltimore

I eventually widened my area of interest to include not only pairs of turn-off, holster and dueling pistols, but also long guns, carbines, blunderbusses and a new interest with unique ignition and loading systems of the 17th, 18th and into the 19th centuries. Of course, with all of this, I needed to have the accoutrements as well ...holsters, gun powder cans, eprouvettes, etc.!



Figure 11. The Canadian Guild of Antique Arms Historians.

I joined the Canadian Guild of Antique Arms Historians (Figure 11) and would regularly see Don Blyth at these meetings. I would often ask him about the cannon and I finally learned of its history. He told me the gun was originally placed at the entrance to the Governor's residence in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Lower Canada (as it was known at the time). The following is an excerpt from a letter from A.W. Kennard, Master of the Armouries, H.M. Tower of London, dated 18 February, 1964 in response to an inquiry by Don:

“Dear Sir,

The gun appears from the diameter of the bore to be a 12 pounder, though it is unusually short for a gun of this caliber and also very light. The marking 6-1-10 is the weight (6 cwt. 1 quart 10 lbs). The name on the base-ring is that of William North, appointed foreman of the brass foundry at the Royal Arsenal, Woolich, in 1813. M. Evans, the name in front of the vent-hatch, I cannot trace. The number 80 in roman numerals on the reinforce ring is the number of the gun entered in the Royal Gun Foundries register of pieces cast. The number on the underside being the foundry number, the figure 80 agreeing with the register number. The broad arrow, of course, denotes Government property. The monogram on the chase is that of the Master General of the Ordnance William, Viscount Beresford, surrounded by the ribbon of the Order of the Bath, the motto of which is, *Tria Juncta In Uno*. Lord Beresford was Master General from 1828-1830. The above is all the information that I can give you. As I stated earlier in the letter, I am surprised the gun is not longer and heavier for the given bore.....it may, of course, be a howitzer ie., a short shell firing gun, though, in this case, it is rather too long. It may, of course, be experimental or made for some special purpose.”

The cannon also has on its breach the Royal Crest and motto of George IV. During the Second World War, the gun had been sold for scrap to raise funds for the war effort. The owner of the scrapyard contacted Don telling him of the gun, he bought it and proudly positioned it on his front yard. He also laughed about the time of getting together with like-minded friends late one night (no doubt, after consuming some whisky) and loading it with 2 lbs. of black powder, which not only managed to blow out several of the front windows in his house, but also prompted calls of complaints from his neighbors!

The late Jim Gooding, (Figure 12) past honorary member of the American Society, also became a special mentor. He had contacts all over the world through his museum connections as well as his publication, “Arms Collecting” (these sources of reference can still be obtained from Joe Salter). Jim collaborated with many authors, collectors and curators in the field of arms and armour and hosted many of them at his home in Bloomfield, Ontario (Figure 13).



Figure 12. S. James Gooding



Figure 13. Jim and Joyce at their home with invited guests Jeff and Nancy Payne, Robin Dale and Mary Ann.

As he and his wife Joyce lived only an hour away, we felt honoured to be included in numerous dinner invitations where we made valuable contacts. Jim thrived on connecting people. This generosity led us to an introduction to John Burgoyne (Figure 14) and we have enjoyed a unique friendship with him and his wife Di since then. If we had a question on any subject, Jim would promptly find an article about it or suggest a contact that we could pursue. He would often drop in to our home for a quick visit and a coffee usually with some interesting story or article to share.



Figure 14. Jim introduces John Burgoyne to me at our home in 2003

Through the 80's and 90's, Mary Ann and I went on three Arms Tours organized by Jim and Joyce. It was on our first tour in 1986 that we first met Tom and Ellie Grinslade. These tours took us to England and Belgium, into the back rooms of the Tower of London, Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Armouries at Leeds; with guided tours of The Wallace Collection, Chatham Dockyards and Boughton House to name just a few. We met key people in the field, including Howard Blackmore (Figure 15), former deputy Master of the Tower of London and Claude Blair (Figure 16), Keeper of Metallurgy at the Victoria & Albert, both of whom authored innumerable articles and books on the arms subject. It should be noted that Blair's expertise also extended to silver as well as ancient funerary armour, brasses, effigies and monuments. Many friendships were formed as a direct result of these Arms Tours. Jim's contribution to the Arms and Armour field of study was extraordinary. We were very fortunate to have this incredible resource available so close.

We experienced our first American Society meeting at Saratoga in the fall of 1989 (Figure 17).



Figure 15. Howard Blackmore



Figure 16. Claude Blair



Figure 17. The Saratoga Battlefield, 1989.

Few of you know that my grandfather five generations back was a Patriot. James Hawkins most likely played and went to school with Nathan Hale, as the Hawkins and Hale families had neighboring properties at Coventry, Conn. Both James's and Nathan's parents and their families are interred within a short distance of each other at Nathan Hale Cemetery at Coventry (Figure 18). His uncle, Joseph Hawkins, was a minuteman at the Lexington Alarm.

James Hawkins enlisted on May 26th, 1777 and served with the 4th Connecticut Regiment, which initially was led by Col. Benedict Arnold, after which it was commanded by Col. John Durkee. While Hawkins served, the regiment was engaged in action at Danbury, Sag Harbor, Brandywine, Germantown, Saratoga, Fort Mifflin, Whitmarsh and were with Washington at Valley Forge. In 1778 he was on the payroll of Captain Parmelee Allen (cousin to General Ethan Allen) where he was part of Col. Gideon Warren's Regiment of Militia in Vermont. He was one of 50 men assigned as a Company of Rangers to guard the frontier to the north. Following the end of the revolution he served as first Selectman of Montpelier, Vermont. In 1797 he came into possession of the famous horse Figure, which he acquired in trade for his farm. Figure, alias "The Justin Morgan Horse", was the founding stallion of the Morgan horse breed from which all Morgan horses evolve. Figure's whereabouts are recorded except for the period between 1797-1801 during the period that Hawkins owned him but we can only speculate that when Hawkins emigrated north to Port Hope, Upper Canada he took the stallion with him. In 1801 Figure was sold to a Mr. Robert Evans of Randolph, Vermont, after which our records show that Hawkins bought The Red Tavern, a mill, various properties and his farmland just north of town.



Figure 18. Visiting the graves of James and Sarah Hawkins at Nathan Hale Cemetery, Coventry Connecticut

James Hawkin's exploits during the War of Independence intrigued me and piqued an interest to collect items of that period. Most of these are English in origin; after all, the patriots were English subjects prior to the Declaration. For the past decade, we celebrate the Fourth of July commemorating our ancestor and the role he played in the Revolution by flying the Betsy Ross Flag and firing a cannon made by my father (Figure 19).

On a more fanciful note, on our way south from Canada to this ASAC meeting in 2018 with John Burgoyne and his wife Di, an extraordinary thought occurred to us.....who would ever have imagined the irony that 250 years later, the descendent of a Patriot, a Son of the American Revolution would be driving amicably to the Battlefields at Saratoga with a possible descendent of the British General John Burgoyne.

One of the highlights of my collecting life was the privilege of visiting Keith Neal for three days at his home in Guernsey (Figure 20). This opportunity was initiated at the recommendation of Claude Blair during a visit to our home. This noted author of many books on antique English and Spanish firearms, had spent over

70 years collecting and had formed the pre-eminent collection of antique firearms ever to be assembled. It was an extraordinary experience to be able to sit with him in his vast gunroom from sunrise until well after sunset discussing any item I cared to pick up, often taking it apart for a closer look.



Figure 19. A July 4th salute to my great, great, great, great, great grandfather James Hawkins



Figure 20. William Keith Neal in front of his home in Guernsey

Many of the items were incredibly rare and there were often stories of their acquisitions. He was very hospitable, a perfect gentleman and had a quick wit. Not only was he a very pleasant conversationalist but he also seemed genuinely interested in me and as a result, I told him of my wife, our four children and my life in Canada. He also shared stories about his life. When he was still in his pram, his mother told him that she often took him on long walks and that every time they passed by the cannons at the entrance to Deal Castle (Figure 21), he would put up such a fuss that she would have to stop in order for him to touch one.

He talked of the time when, as a young boy, he acquired a small caliber pistol in trade. He took it to school hidden in his pocket where it accidentally discharged, leaving him with a bullet lodged behind his kneecap where it remained for the rest of his life. He told me about his work for the Ministry for Economic Warfare during the Second World War where he worked to raise funds for the war effort by acquiring old guns from wealthy families to sell in America. He became associated with Robert Abels of New York and W. G. C. Kimball of Woburn, Mass. Invaluable contacts were

made in America and Britain, affording him opportunities in the future to visit these families again to buy for his own collection. He spoke of meeting an arrogant Herman Goering in 1937 at the International Hunting Exhibition held in Berlin, who presented him with a medal for the British Exhibit. A lasting impression was formed from his horrifying experience of being set adrift for two weeks in the mid-Atlantic after his ship was torpedoed during the war. As he put it, "One does not know of our fate and we must make use of the time we have." He shared many stories of collecting antique firearms over the years. "Can I shoot with it?" or "Does it fit?" were always the guidelines in considering a new purchase. Keith commonly hunted and shot with these fine pieces, something many modern collectors would never consider. He particularly told me about firing a turn off pistol and of his alarm at the recoil sending the pistol flying into the air and landing on the ground behind him, adding "the silver inlay can also give you a nasty jab in the hand!"



Figure 21. One of the cannons at the entrance to Deal Castle.

I thought that I'd died and gone to heaven when I was left on my own to fondle and salivate over his unbelievable treasures and I particularly appreciated the diversity of his collection (Figure 22). My focus was so extreme and my feelings of envy were overwhelming until late on the night before I was to leave, Mr. Neal asked me to call him Keith and in the same breath wanted to share with me the one thing that he had always wanted but could never have.....and I thought it must have been SOME gun....he paused, looked at me straight in the eye and announced that he always wanted four children. This left me dumbfounded. Here I had travelled all these miles to see what I could never have and I already had something that he could never have (Figure 23). I realized that while these are treasures, they are only objects and the most important thing in my life was my family.

One of the lasting impressions that Keith left with me was to believe in myself. To trust my judgement. Keith had an abundance of confidence about the guns that he collected. For him it was a mission in life and he truly believed that. For him it didn't matter what anybody else said about a gun. If he liked it and thought it was special, he bought it. He shared his frustrations about being bid up at auctions because of who he was....but it didn't stop him. He recognized that sometimes he spent too much on an item because of that. I expect he shared these things to help encourage me to trust my gut instincts.....to help lessen the turmoil, in particular, in making a decision about whether something is right or lessening the anxiety of spending too much on something that others deemed unworthy. I have to admit, though, that sometimes that turmoil still exists!



Figure 22. The interior of Keith's gun room



Figure 23. Me with my children at Fort George, Niagara on the Lake

Over the years, the pursuit of yet another treasure has taken Mary Ann and me to many wonderful places and we've been in the company of many great individuals (Figure 24)! I wholeheartedly agree with the comment Keith Neal made to me on that visit to Guernsey, "One of the greatest pleasures in collecting over the years has been the privilege of meeting so many people, many of whom are now my dearest friends." When I look back over the years of the many people that we have met, I recognize that it's not just their friendships that I value but also their willingness to share knowledge, experiences and passions. They have truly helped stoke the fire. Certainly, though, it was watching my father work on, repair, build and shoot muzzle loading arms that was the first stepping stone to a life spent dreaming about and eventually owning my own (Figure 25).



Figure 24. I'm sharing my latest purchase to an appreciative pair!

Who would have ever imagined how watching the firing of a cannon in 1958 could have such an impact on a six year old boy.

Who would have ever imagined that we would now have ten of our own as well as numerous models.

Who would have ever imagined that in the spring of 2008, exactly 50 years after I first saw it fire, that we would own that cannon, which now rests in our back yard as a very impressive backdrop for MaryAnn's garden (at least I think so) (Figure 26).



Figure 25. My father, Wilfred C. Ross.

Years ago, a friend called me up and said that she was at an outdoor antique show in Ontario and that there was a cannon there that I might be interested in and did I want her to buy it. Within minutes Mary Ann and I jumped into the car, drove two hours and found a genuine early 19th century deck gun....perfect. I am dragging this 250 lb. canon on its carriage through crowded muddy fields when I noticed a commotion and suddenly a space opened up. Out from the throngs of people came a toddler with a soother in his mouth, running determinedly over a distance of about 50 feet with outstretched arms towards me with a frantic mother in pursuit. Just before he reached me, his mother caught up to him trying anxiously to curb his approach. I realized then that this little fellow wanted desperately to touch the cannon and the memory of Keith Neal came to me. I stopped and immediately reassured his mother that there was no problem.....he could touch it....at which point he cradled the gun in his arms, sucking noisily and furiously on that soother as he looked up at me. I smiled and said to him "It's all right, one day you'll have one of these".

One can only imagine what the future will hold for that other little boy.



Figure 26. The North cannon in our garden

